

2025 Hidden Heroes Awardees Announced

Illuminating Top Difference-Makers in Georgia K12 Education

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-- Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement ([GLISI](#)), a statewide education leadership nonprofit, celebrates the nine top vote-getters of its sixth annual [Hidden Heroes](#) campaign, illuminating difference makers in education and uplifting the education profession.



When the two-month campaign closed, a record-breaking 187 education professionals from across Georgia were nominated by the general public. More than 58,000 votes were cast, illuminating the future-focused work that education professionals do each day for the next generation of thinkers, learners and leaders. Nominees included school social workers, teachers, family service coordinators, district leaders, receptionists, coaches, principals, custodians and superintendents. They were nominated by students and their parents, colleagues, neighbors, and community members for their everyday acts of service, professional excellence, and deep care for igniting learning for all.

"What's magic about Hidden Heroes is it sparks a virtuous cycle of appreciation, giving the broader public a view into the life-changing work of this noble profession so not only do the nominees get recognized, but people are reminded what a meaningful, worthy, life-affirming profession this is to pursue and encourage their children to pursue," said Leslie Hazle Bussey, Ph.D., CEO and Executive Director of GLISI.

The top three Hidden Heroes in each region comprise the nine honorees:

Northern Region

- Michelle Caldwell, Chief Officer of Assessment, Accountability, & Technology, Whitfield County School District
- David Diaz, Receptionist and After School Program Coordinator at Johnnie Lay Burks Elementary, Clarke County School District
- Tamara Whidby-Benton, Family Service Coordinator at Jasper County Preschool, Jasper County Charter System

Central/Metro Region

- Marcia Payton-Edwards, Principal at Michelle Obama STEM Elementary Academy, Clayton County Public Schools
- Charles King, Teacher Residency Manager, KIPP Atlanta
- Dr. Letunya Walker, Deputy Superintendent for Georgia Preparatory Academy, Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice

South Region

- Mary Lou Anderson, 4th Grade Teacher at JM Odom Elementary School, Colquitt County Schools
- Paxton Crosby, Teacher at Colquitt County High School, Colquitt County Schools
- Austin Lee Futch, Teacher at Cross Creek Elementary, Thomas County Schools

Each of these nominees, along with their nominators, will receive cash prizes. GLISI's 2025 Hidden Heroes awardees will also be celebrated at the Georgia Chamber of Commerce's Eggs and Issues breakfast on Jan. 14, 2026. The nominators, who made this campaign a success, shared inspiring stories of impact, joy and gratitude for our education professionals. Read all of the nominees' stories on our Hidden Heroes page.

Hidden Heroes is an opportunity for GLISI to uplift the education profession and is done with the support of business partners and sponsors, including Hidden Heroes title sponsor, Kennesaw State University - Bagwell College of Education, and additional sponsors, Georgia Power and Parker Poe, with a special thanks to Georgia Chamber of Commerce.

To learn more about GLISI, visit glisi.org

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