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Watertown First Grade Teacher Surprised with \$25,000 Milken Educator Award

McKinley Elementary's Abby Turbak marks first recipient for the district, among up to 40 educators nationwide honored for excellence in education

For full bio, photos and video, visit:

<https://www.milkeneducatorawards.org/educators/view/abby-turbak>

Note: The pronunciation of "Turbak" sounds like "Tur-back."

Watertown, S.D., (December 2, 2022) — One first grade teacher received the surprise of a lifetime today when she was awarded the first-ever [Milken Educator Award](#) for the Watertown School District at a schoolwide assembly of cheering students, colleagues, local and state dignitaries, and the media. Abby Turbak of McKinley Elementary School received the recognition by the [Milken Family Foundation](#), which comes with a \$25,000 cash prize that Turbak can use however she chooses.

Milken Family Foundation Senior Program Director Greg Gallagher and South Dakota Secretary of Education Tiffany Sanderson presented the Award. Turbak joins the Milken Educator Network of more than 2,900 outstanding educators and leaders from across the country dedicated to strengthening K-12 education.

"I am thrilled to welcome Abby Turbak to this vast and talented group of Milken Educators that spans the country," said Gallagher. "Today we honor Abby and celebrate her unwavering dedication to excellence in education, which is evident through her innovative teaching methods, devotion to her students' needs and demonstrated leadership in her school and district."

Hailed as the "Oscars of Teaching," Milken Educator Awards inspire and uplift with the unique stories of educators making a profound difference for students, colleagues and communities. The specific states and schools on this year's winners' list remain a closely guarded secret until each Award is announced.

Over the past 35 years, more than \$140 million in funding, including more than \$73 million in individual Awards, has been devoted to the overall Milken Awards initiative, which includes powerful professional development opportunities throughout recipients' careers.

"South Dakota's teachers make a tremendous impact on the lives of our young people. Abby Turbak has proven that when we focus on student growth and challenge them to succeed, they will rise to the occasion," said Secretary Sanderson. "Students thanked Abby today with cheers and excitement – and that illustrates the power strong teaching has on student learning, motivation and confidence. Congratulations to Abby, and thank you to our teachers throughout the state."

More About Abby Turbak

A Tailored Approach: First grade students in Abby Turbak's class thrive thanks to her high expectations and focus on growth. She differentiates instruction in all subject areas by breaking students up into small groups for math, reading, writing and phonics while creating Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) to identify goals and measure growth. Always adapting her instruction methods, Turbak researches and develops the most effective teaching practices to help students excel, and understands that every class is different.

Innovation Through Technology and Leadership: Turbak is an expert on integrating technology into curriculum and implemented a ViewSonic board in her classroom. She then trained her school's and district's instructional coaches on best practices for utilizing the boards in elementary classrooms. When the pandemic closed the school building in 2020, she helped colleagues create their Google Classrooms to ensure students received high-quality instruction while learning at home. In addition to being a leader at McKinley where she served on the Response to Intervention team, Turbak is a leader throughout the district where she has served on its progress and curriculum committees. When Watertown School District adopted new math curriculum, she helped develop materials that aligned with district and state standards. She represents McKinley staff in the PTO and leads summer professional development sessions for district teachers on math grouping strategies, classroom management, technology, parent communication and time management. Student teachers under her tutelage benefit from her expertise long after they finish in her classroom as she develops lasting relationships with them, as well as opens her classroom to teachers from across the state for learning through observation. Passionate about professional development, Turbak attended the Aspiring School Leaders Retreat hosted by the Midwest Alliance for Professional Learning and Leadership (MAPLE), as well as technology conferences in South Dakota and Nebraska.

Education: Turbak is a graduate of the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, earning a bachelor's in elementary education in 2010 and a master's in elementary and early childhood education in 2011.

More About the Milken Educator Awards: *"The future belongs to the educated."*

Along with the financial prize, recipients join the national Milken Educator Network, a group of more than 2,900 top teachers, principals and specialists. The network serves as a rich resource for fellow educators, legislators, school boards and others dedicated to excellence in education.

- The honorees will also attend an all-expenses-paid Milken Educator Awards Forum in Los Angeles in April 2023, where they will network with their new colleagues as well as veteran Milken Educators and other education leaders about how to increase their impact on K-12 education.
- In addition, they will learn about how to become involved in the Milken Friends Forever (MFF) mentoring program, in which new Milken Educators receive personalized coaching and support from a Milken Educator veteran on ways to elevate their instructional practice and take an active role in educational leadership, policy and practice.
- Veteran Milken Educators demonstrate a wide range of leadership roles at state, national and international levels.
- “We find you. You don’t find us!” Unlike most teacher recognition programs, the Milken Educator Awards initiative has no formal nomination or application process. Candidates are sourced through a confidential selection process and then reviewed by blue ribbon panels in each state. The most exceptional candidates are recommended for the Award, with final selection made by the Milken Family Foundation.
- The \$25,000 cash Award is unrestricted. Recipients have used the money in diverse ways. For instance, some have spent the funds on their children’s or their own continuing education, financing dream field trips, establishing scholarships, and even adopting children.

To receive regular updates on the surprise Milken Educator Award events or to watch the Award events unfold, follow and use the #MilkenAward hashtag on [Facebook](#) (@MilkenEducatorAwards), [Twitter](#) (@Milken), [YouTube](#) (/MilkenAward), [Instagram](#) (MilkenFamilyFdn), and [TikTok](#) (@MilkenAward).

For more information, visit [MilkenEducatorAwards.org](#) or call the Milken Family Foundation at (310) 570-4772.

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About the Milken Educator Awards

The first Milken Educator Awards were presented by the Milken Family Foundation in 1987. The Awards provide public recognition and individual financial rewards of \$25,000 to elementary and secondary school teachers, principals and specialists from around the country who are furthering excellence in education. Recipients are heralded in early to mid-career for what they have achieved and for the promise of what they will accomplish. The initiative was created by the Milken Family Foundation, which celebrates 40 years of elevating education in America and around the world. Learn more at [MFF.org](#)