

Melanie Counts has always loved school.

Counts traces her love for learning to her days as a student at Sylva-Bay Academy in Bay Springs. The small-school setting meant Counts had many of the same teachers in every subject from ninth through 12th grade. Whether her teachers were disciplinarians or motherlier in their interactions with students, Counts built connections with each one.

“My teachers were mentors for me,” Counts said. “My business law teacher (Rhonda Evans) still encourages me frequently.”

Counts relies on that mentoring every day as an English II teacher at Caledonia High School. The setting is a little bigger – and Counts deals with more students than her teachers did – but her goal is the same: Building relationships and connecting with students to improve the quality of learning.

Counts has succeeded in those areas for years. Earlier this school year, the Lowndes County School District named Counts its Teacher of the Year. On Tuesday, the Mississippi Department of Education selected Counts as the Congressional District 1 finalist for the 2024 Mississippi Teacher of the Year.

Counts is one of four teachers up for the annual award that recognizes exemplary teachers in the state who inspire students, demonstrate leadership in and out of the classroom and serve as active members of the community. The winner will receive a \$5,000 stipend, will share expertise through various presentations and activities and will represent Mississippi in the National Teacher of the Year competition.

“Mrs. Counts is an amazing teacher,” Caledonia High School Principal Gregory Elliott said. “Our English test scores have been very good. They were great last year. Melanie Counts and Misty Scott teach English II.

Our English II proficiency last year was 69% as compared to the state average of 46.6% and the district average of 55.7%. Our English II growth last year was 81.5% as compared to the state average of 64.3% and the district average of 69.4%.”

Counts earned a degree in secondary education (concentration in English) from Mississippi State University. She recently completed her master’s degree from Belhaven University. Counts said the time she spent reflecting while working on her National Boards about five years ago motivated her to get her master’s degree and to take a fresh look at how she did her job.

“I firmly believe in the value of being a life-long learner,” Counts said. “I want my children and my students to see my willingness to invest in ongoing learning opportunities as a model for them to follow.”

Counts said she tries to tie her lessons to contemporary themes by using different mediums (social media, movies, music) to help students relate to the topics. She said doing that helps her keep things fresh because there always is an angle she can take to engage the students.

Caledonia High English II teacher Misty Scott works with Counts and is familiar with her attention to detail and preparation. She said Counts is “one of the hardest working teachers” she knows and that she takes her job seriously and strives daily to make her students the best.

“Mrs. Counts is so wonderful at English II,” Scott said. “She has many great ideas, and she pushes me every day to teach better than I did the day before. I have grown as a teacher by working beside her and getting to see the day-to-day effort she puts into school. I wish I could truly describe the level of planning she does for each unit we put together. It is one of her many gifts as a teacher.”

Scott said Counts has implemented every technique she learned in completing the curriculum for her master's degree. For example, she said they realized last semester that their writing students weren't understanding the concepts after their first essay assignment. Scott said Counts figured out a strategy to work through those issues that involved creating stations to address the students' needs and then coordinated the plan with her and five other teachers.

"This was a major undertaking, but she pulled it off while I was out sick for two days," Scott said. "When I came back on the first day of the stations, everything was ready to roll. The students and the staff bragged over and over about how much they learned or enjoyed this activity. It was a huge endeavor, but it was amazing."

In addition to being a "great" teacher, Scott said Counts does all of the "extra stuff", including Tier paperwork and calling parents to update them on their child's progress.

"She constantly calls parents and fills out her paperwork in great detail," Scott said. "In fact, she has really been the one to train me on how to complete my Tier paperwork. She works hard to connect with her students on a teacher-student relationship, and she is always professional in how she handles her students and parents."

"Mrs. Counts is by far one of the best teachers we have in this building. She gives 110% to every day she is at school and her students are her top priority. Not only that, but she has such integrity in completing her job. She genuinely loves her job, and honestly, goes above and beyond more than others."

Counts credits the teachers she had growing up for caring for her in and out of school. She said things were a little different in a smaller setting in that all her teachers knew her parents very well, so her parents often knew the events of the school day even before she made it home. Still, though, she said the support she received helped her embrace the pressures and responsibilities that come with being a teacher. Counts said she tries to balance those duties while listening to her students and considering their needs. In doing so, Counts said she finds ways to “dig deeper every year” and tries every day to help her students appreciate the value of education and realize their potential.

“Although it is demanding, teaching is so rewarding. Every day is a fresh start and another chance to be a positive influence. Your level of commitment sets the tone, and the kids absorb the energy you put into it,” Counts said. “It never gets tiresome for me because I enjoy what I teach, but I am constantly looking for new, relevant material that is interesting to my students. At the end of the day, their engagement is what makes for a successful outcome.”

The recipients will be announced during a program set for 11 a.m. April 26, 2024, at the Jackson Convention Complex in Jackson.

For the MDE press release, go to:

<https://www.mdek12.org/news/2024/3/19/MDE-announces-state-finalists-for-2024-Administrator-of-the-Year-Teacher-of-the-Year>