

Mohawk Trail Regional School librarian earns Excellence in Teaching Award

By BELLA LEVAVI, Staff Writer, Published: 3/10/2023 1:27:22 PM

BUCKLAND — Mohawk Trail Regional School Librarian Emily Willis was honored with a Pioneer Valley Excellence in Teaching Award for her work creating an innovative curriculum, curating a diverse and student-centered book collection, and crafting a welcoming space for students.

“Emily is an outstanding educator and consistently goes the extra mile for students, families and colleagues alike,” Principal Chris Buckland wrote in an email. “Her compassion, empathy, expertise and dedication to MTRS students makes her a tremendous asset to and beyond the school community.”

The Pioneer Valley Excellence in Teaching Awards, given since 2003 thanks to the Harold Grinspoon Charitable Foundation in partnership with the Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation, recognize educators in Franklin, Hampshire and Hampden counties. Winners are nominated by their colleagues.

Grinspoon award winners will be honored at a banquet at the Log Cabin in Holyoke on April 26. Recipients of the award will receive an engraved plaque and a \$250 check, as well as tuition incentives offered by seven colleges in western Massachusetts.

Unlike many award winners who focus on academic learning, Willis focuses on the social-emotional learning that can sometimes be forgotten about in the classroom.

“What is most important about teaching is creating space where students feel safe and seen,” said Willis, who has 18 years of experience as a librarian. “For students to be fully formed adults and take care of themselves, they need a good amount of social and emotional learning.”

The school library may be the perfect place for this kind of learning, according to Willis. The space is a respite from the instructional classroom. It is often used productively to do homework, work on projects, and meet with prospective colleges and employers. However, it is also a place for “playing a game of chess, socializing or drinking a cup of tea,” Willis said.

One way Willis said she fosters an alternative learning environment is through building individual connections.

“Connecting on some level with all the students is important,” she said.

Willis does this by greeting everyone who comes into the library. She prioritizes individual conversations with visitors to learn how to “meet them where they are at” and accommodate individual needs.

This style of instruction, she said, “allows students to blaze their own trail.” The connections she makes help her to set up internships for work-focused students and research opportunities for more academic-focused high schoolers.

Willis first started as a school librarian 18 years ago after she attended the University of Massachusetts Amherst for her undergraduate degree and Simmons University for her graduate studies. She explained she always knew she wanted to become a school librarian and completed the necessary education to reach that goal.

During the early days of the pandemic, Willis' position shifted to that of an instructional technology support aid for teachers across the Mohawk Trail Regional School District.

“COVID has opened the minds of some people who didn't realize what librarians' roles are,” Willis explained. She explained many people now see librarians as experts in digital literacy, digital citizenship and technology support. “This is something we have always done but people were less aware of it.”

Willis is now gearing up for Mohawk Trail Regional School's annual “Celebration of Learning” on March 29. This event will include curriculum presentations, an art show, musical performances and a dinner provided by the Mary Lyon Foundation.

Speaking from her years of experience, Willis said the advice she has for fellow educators is to remember, “You make a difference every day even if you don't realize it.”

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