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Freedom Federal Credit Union awards grant funds to its 2020 Golden Apple Annual Education Award recipients (L to R): Heather Morris, Jessica Merlette, Sandra Waltemire, and Olivia Hartlaub.  
*Photo Credit: Freedom Federal Credit Union*

## **FREEDOM FEDERAL CREDIT UNION SELECTS FOUR HARFORD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS TO WIN GOLDEN APPLE AWARDS**

***Recipients Were Honored Virtually on August 5***

**Bel Air, MD**—At a virtual reception on Wednesday, August 5<sup>th</sup>, Freedom Federal Credit Union honored Heather Morris, as the grand prize recipient of the Credit Union’s 2020 Golden Apple Annual Educator Award grant competition. Ms. Morris, who is a Reading Specialist at Roye-Williams Elementary School, won the top \$2,000 grant for her plans to engage the entire student body in a 6-week-long Reader’s Rise

initiative. The Reader's Rise Program was created by Harford County Public Schools as a way to unite and motivate students to read quality literature that celebrates diversity and culture and focuses on current texts. With Reader's Rise, students read recently published books and vote for their favorites. In the end, one book per bracket will earn the coveted title of "2020 Reader's Rise Best Book." The Reader's Rise Program is a creative way to encourage students to read exceptional literature. Thanks to the Golden Apple Award, Roye-Williams will be able to provide an entire set of books for every classroom.

After a record number of submissions were received last year, Freedom's leadership decided to add an additional \$1,000 award category for 2020. Ms. Sandra Waltemire, Special Educator at North Harford Middle School was named the recipient of this award category. Her application detailed the school's Life Skills Program, which helps students with significant intellectual disabilities develop the skills they need to be more independent. The grant funds will be used to enhance opportunities for the students to cook, conduct meaningful science experiments, work with a variety of new task boxes, and access reusable materials to help hone necessary life skills.

Additionally, two other recipients were awarded grants: Olivia Hartlaub, Vocal Music Teacher at Church Creek Elementary School, and Jessica Merlette, Kindergarten Teacher at Ring Factory Elementary School. Both Ms. Hartlaub and Ms. Merlette will receive \$500 each to fund initiatives at their respective schools.

Ms. Hartlaub plans to use the grant fund to purchase a set of 13 ukuleles for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students of Church Creek Elementary. Ukuleles are small, manageable string instruments which 4<sup>th</sup> graders would be able to learn. Students will be able to play some familiar songs with just two simple chords, giving the children early successes and a sense of accomplishment after just a class or two. The Ukulele Program will provide a special instrument for 4<sup>th</sup> grade students to learn for years to come, while also encouraging skillsets that translate to other areas of learning.

As a Kindergarten Teacher at Ring Factory Elementary School, Ms. Jessica Merlette recognizes that for many, Kindergarten is the first academic experience for children. It is a year of adventure, excitement, and curiosity. Ms. Merlette will be using her grant funds to enrich her classroom's Centers, where her students explore stations that incite curiosity while developing social, emotional, physical, and academic skills. Merlette's Library/ABC Center, Math Center, Construction Center, Science and Discovery Center, and Creation Station get changed regularly to align with the current topics and units of study.

Like most teachers, Ms. Merlette usually funds a good portion of the supplies herself. With the help of parent donations, and now extra support from Freedom, Ms. Merlette is looking forward to exploring new and creative ways for her students to enjoy their time at Centers once she can welcome her students back into her classroom.

Mike MacPherson, President and CEO of Freedom Federal Credit Union, who hosted the virtual reception, congratulated recipients while acknowledging the impact of the pandemic on their plans for the upcoming school year. "As longtime supporters of Harford County Public Schools, it is hard to see outstanding educators, like the ones we are honoring today, close their classrooms to their students. We have no doubt that our honorees will rise to the challenges of the year ahead, and when the time is

right, welcome back their students with open arms. We are grateful for the real and actionable differences they make for Harford County youth, and it is our honor to play a part in supporting them in their ongoing initiatives.”

Dr. Sean Bulson, Superintendent for Harford County Public Schools (HCPS), was also in attendance and addressed the attendees. “As we move into what will be an unusual school year, these teachers remind me that we are up to the challenges ahead. It is my honor to recognize their passion to engage students in new and meaningful ways. Congratulations to each of you and thank you, Freedom Federal Credit Union, for continuing to be dedicated HCPS partners who support our mission to inspire and prepare our youth,” stated Bulson.

The annual awards are intended to support Freedom Federal Credit Union members who are employed at a Harford County school and have a creative vision for education that can only be met with community support. All applicants were asked to submit an essay demonstrating how their idea would serve their students, class, school and the Harford County community. Entries were judged by a panel of Freedom employees, board members, and community leaders.

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#### **About Freedom Federal Credit Union**

Freedom Federal Credit Union is a community-chartered federal credit union offering consumer financial services to those who live, work, volunteer, worship, attend school, or have family in Harford and Baltimore Counties. Additionally, Freedom offers a full-line of banking services for all businesses, associations, and other organizations that are based in Harford or Baltimore Counties. Freedom has been in business since 1953 and has five locations throughout Harford County. To learn more, visit [freedomfcu.org](http://freedomfcu.org)

#### **About Harford County Public Schools**

The mission of Harford County Public Schools is that each student will attain academic and personal success in a safe and caring environment that honors the diversity of our students and staff. The vision of the Board of Education of Harford County is to inspire and prepare each student to achieve success in college and career.