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Freedom Federal Credit Union awards grant funds to its 2024 Golden Apple Annual Education Award recipients (L to R): Sara Shoemaker, Lauren Byrd, Sue Nickerson, Jen Olkowski, Savannah Yoder, Lisa Shipley, and Janet Bond. Not pictured: Christopher Hedges

FREEDOM FEDERAL CREDIT UNION SELECTS EIGHT EDUCATORS AS THEIR 2024 GOLDEN APPLE AWARDS RECIPIENTS

Educators from across Harford and Baltimore Counties Were Honored on August 13

Bel Air, MD – At a reception held at Mountain Branch in Joppa on Tuesday, August 13, 2024, Freedom Federal Credit Union honored Ms. Sue Nickerson and Ms. Jen Olkowski, as the grand award recipients of the Credit Union’s 2024 Golden Apple Annual Educator Awards. The program, now in its thirteenth year, offers eight annual educator awards of \$2,000, \$1,000, \$500 and \$500, four each to Harford and

Baltimore County education employees who may be a deserving teacher, school administrator or school support employee. Golden Apple Award applications are evaluated by a panel of judges made up of Freedom employees, directors, and community leaders from both counties.

The two top grant awards both went to educators who envisioned ways to creatively utilize the outdoor spaces of their respective schools.

Ms. Sue Nickerson, a 1st grade teacher at Fountain Green Elementary School in Bel Air, is using her \$2,000 grant award to build a kinesthetic sensory path around the school. This intentionally designed “Warrior Challenge” obstacle course will support learning experiences by helping young students relieve stress caused by school anxiety, increase their sense of balance, refine their gross motor skills, and help develop their ability to focus as they learn to persevere during the challenges.

Like Ms. Nickerson, Ms. Jen Olkowski, also recognized the importance of making the most of natural spaces, and applied for a grant that would extend the walls of their classrooms. Ms. Olkowski, accepted the \$2000 award on behalf of St. Stephen School to create a Montessori/STEM style outdoor learning center for their elementary students. Featuring opportunities for hands on experiments and simulations for project-based learning that aren’t easily accomplished in a traditional classroom space, students will have an accessible outdoor space that contains materials to build, engineer, design, tinker, mimic and solve real-life problems.

Freedom’s Golden Apple Award judges elected to present \$1,000 awards to Ms. Savannah Yoder of Perry Hall High School in Baltimore County and Ms. Lauren Byrd of Hickory Elementary School in Harford County. Ms. Yoder is using her award to fund calming boxes to provide students experiencing difficult emotions with an outlet along with additional mental health events at Perry Hall Middle and High Schools. Ms. Byrd is also thinking “inside the box”, as she is investing in classroom transformation tubs, filled with most of what teachers would need to transform their rooms according to several themes at Hickory Elementary.

Four additional recipients were awarded \$500 grants. In Baltimore County, Lisa Shipley, Career Navigator for Dundalk High School, is using her grant to expand service projects undertaken by the school’s Leader Academy. Meanwhile, Ms. Janet Bond, who works exclusively with deaf and hard-of-hearing students at White Oak School, is aiming to enrich her classroom and library with inclusive resources that better represent the disabilities of her students.

In Harford County, \$500 grants were awarded to Mr. Chris Hedges, 1st Grade Teacher at Havre de Grace Elementary School, along with Sara Shoemaker, a Spanish Teacher at Emmorton Elementary School. Mr. Hedges, who was represented at the awards reception by his colleague, Ms. Eileen Friel, has plans to create a native pollinator garden so that students can learn about pollination and the importance of insects to the foods we grow. Ms. Shoemaker is the county’s first ever Kindergarten Spanish Immersion Teacher, piloting a new program designed to teach Spanish to the school’s youngest learners. She is looking to use her grant award to create an immersive play experience for her students, pulling inspiration from Disney’s Encanto and Hispanic culture.

Carmen David Mirabile, Senior Vice President of Growth Strategies for Freedom Federal Credit Union, hosted and emceed the reception. “Today, we’ve come together to recognize and celebrate eight educators who are not only dreaming big but also turning those dreams into reality. These educators are trailblazing new paths with their innovative ideas and initiatives and helping to redefine what it means to teach in 2024 and beyond. I am extremely honored for Freedom to be able to support these initiatives, and help bring them to reality,” stated Mirabile.

Ben Richardson, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources at Harford County Public Schools (HCPS), offered opening remarks to the attendees. “First and foremost, a special thank you and appreciation to our community partner, Freedom Federal Credit Union. The innovation and sheer dedication from this year’s recipients are truly amazing and I wish to congratulate all the 2024 Golden Apple awardees on behalf of Harford County Public Schools,” stated Richardson.

Dr. Racquel Jones, Chief of Schools for Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS), was also in attendance and offered closing remarks to the attendees. “I know in Baltimore County – and I’m sure in Harford County schools as well – we’re in the thick of back-to-school plans. We have a big year ahead of us all. Best wishes to everyone, congratulations to our Golden Apple recipients this afternoon, and good luck for a bold, successful, and rewarding new school year,” said Jones.

In addition to the guest speakers, Freedom was honored to bring together many special guests including the awardees, their families, school administrators, HCPS Superintendent Dr. Sean Bulson, HCPS Principal of the Year Ron Wooden, and HCPS Teacher of the Year, Erica Richardson, and several members of local government.

The annual awards are intended to support Freedom Federal Credit Union members who are employed at a Harford County or Baltimore 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, or their local community.

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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 six locations throughout Harford and Baltimore Counties. To learn more, visit freedomfcu.org.

About Baltimore County Public Schools

[Baltimore County Public Schools](https://www.bcps.edu), the nation’s 22nd largest school system, is focused on raising the bar and closing gaps to prepare our students for the future. Thanks to innovative and talented leaders, teachers, staff, and students, BCPS celebrates [many honors](#).

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.