

Contact: Ashira Quabili
Marketing Manager
Freedom Federal Credit Union
410-612-2143
aquabili@freedomfcu.org



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Freedom Federal Credit Union awards grant funding to its 2026 Golden Apple Award recipients (L to R): Nicoletta Darita de la Brown, Michelle McGuire, Ashley Algard, Aimee Smith, Jessica Willson, Eugene Liebel, Chere Dawson, Linda Boschert, Nicole Pross, and Julie Ciotola

TEN EDUCATORS HONORED WITH FREEDOM FEDERAL CREDIT UNION'S 2026 GOLDEN APPLE AWARDS

Fifteenth Annual Program Supports Classroom Ideas that Inspire Creativity, Confidence, and Hands-On Learning

Bel Air, MD – Ten local educators were celebrated for ideas that will bring new energy, creativity, and hands-on learning into schools across the region during Freedom Federal

Credit Union's 15th Annual Golden Apple Awards reception, held at Mountain Branch in Joppa, Maryland on Tuesday, August 4. Established in 2011, the Golden Apple Awards provide grant funds to help educators bring innovative classroom and schoolwide initiatives to life and enhance student learning. This year's awards marked the program's 15th year of helping educators turn creative ideas into meaningful learning experiences. Freedom awarded ten grants totaling \$10,000, including two \$2,000 awards, four \$1,000 awards, and four \$500 awards. Each recipient was selected by a panel of judges made up of Freedom employees, board members, and community leaders who considered both the creativity of the idea and its potential impact on students.

This year's selected projects range from student-run business and life-skills programs to literacy, wellness, STEM, and outdoor learning initiatives.

The top two award recipients each received \$2,000 grants for projects that give students new ways to practice real-world skills, build independence, and experience learning beyond a traditional classroom setting. **Eugene Liebel** of North Harford High School will use his award to establish a student-run café, giving students hands-on experience in business operations, culinary arts, customer service, and workplace skills. **Jessica Willson** of Harford Academy will use her grant to expand opportunities for students with diverse abilities through the introduction of BlazePod technology, an interactive system designed to support movement, coordination, confidence, and independence.

At the \$1,000 level, Freedom is supporting educators using literacy, sensory support, STEM, sustainability, and life-skills programming to help students feel more engaged and supported at school. **Linda Boschert** of St. Stephen School plans to add Kindles to the classroom, increasing access to books and encouraging literacy. **Aimee Smith** of Hickory Elementary School will use her grant to create a sensory room that gives students with autism and diverse needs a supportive environment to reset, refocus, and return to learning. At North Harford Elementary School, **Chere' Dawson** is bringing hydroponic towers into the classroom so students can explore science, sustainability, and agriculture through hands-on learning. At Havre de Grace High School, **Ashley Algard** will establish the GRACE Lab to help students with cognitive disabilities build independent living, employment readiness, and community skills.

At the \$500 level, Golden Apple recipients are supporting literacy, wellness, creativity, and outdoor learning through projects designed to make learning more active and accessible. **Julie Ciotola** of Church Creek Elementary School will implement "Read, Move, Play!,"

combining literacy activities with movement and play to help build reading confidence. At Bel Air Middle School, **Nicole Pross** is using a new book collection to encourage reading, writing, and presentation skills through a project-based learning experience. **Nicoletta Daríta de la Brown** of Baltimore School for the Arts will launch the “Making As Medicine Lab,” creating a space where students and faculty can use art to reflect, recharge, and reconnect. And at Old Post Road Elementary School, **Michelle McGuire** will develop a Mobile Outdoor Classroom Kit, giving teachers a way to turn outdoor spaces into opportunities for exploration and hands-on discovery.

“Fifteen years ago, the Golden Apple Awards began with a simple belief: that educators have an extraordinary ability to see the potential in every student and imagine new ways to help that potential flourish,” said Mike MacPherson, President and CEO of Freedom Federal Credit Union. “Since then, we have been privileged to witness hundreds of educators turn innovative ideas into meaningful learning experiences that inspire curiosity, build confidence, and change lives. Their passion reminds us that some of the most powerful investments we can make are in those who shape the future every day in their classrooms. We are honored to continue supporting these remarkable educators and the lasting impact they have on our students, our schools, and our communities.”

The reception also featured opening remarks from Buck Hennigan, Acting Deputy Superintendent for Academics at Harford County Public Schools, and closing remarks from Councilman David Marks of Baltimore County, who emphasized the importance of collaboration among educators, families, schools, businesses, and the broader community. “Those of us in education realize it takes partnerships to get things done — relationships between teachers and families, and yes, between schools and businesses and the community. Freedom Federal Credit Union gets a gold star for advancing those types of relationships,” said Marks. Marks presented Freedom with an official commendation during the event.

Freedom also recognized key partners, including The Baltimore Sun, Comcast, and The Maryland Ad Network for helping to promote the program to schools and educators across the region.

In addition to the guest speakers, Freedom was honored to bring together many special guests including the awardees, their families, school administrators, representatives of local government, and education leaders from across the region.

The annual awards are open to Freedom Federal Credit Union members employed at a Harford County, Baltimore County, Baltimore City, or Carroll County school. Applicants submit an essay describing how their idea would benefit their students, class, school, or local community. To learn more about the Golden Apple Awards or other educator benefits offered by Freedom, visit freedomfcu.org/golden-apple/.

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About Freedom Federal Credit Union

Freedom Federal Credit Union is a community-chartered federal credit union offering business banking services and consumer financial services to those who live, work, volunteer, worship, attend school, or have family in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Carroll County, and Harford County. Freedom was founded in 1953 and currently has eight locations throughout Harford and Baltimore Counties. To learn more, visit freedomfcu.org.