

For the first time in the 24-year history of Georgia's Pre-K Program, DECAL and the Naserian Foundation named two outstanding educators as Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year for 2016-2017. First Lady Sandra Deal, Naserian Foundation CEO Stephanie Blank, and Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs joined together to announce that Bethlehem Elementary School teacher Connie Ellington was named as a Georgia Pre-K Teacher of the Year.

While honoring Mrs. Ellington, Commissioner Jacobs stated that Mrs. Ellington has, "demonstrated an excellence in teaching and a passion for early learning. You have laid a solid foundation for the students you have taught."

When speaking to Georgia's Pre-K Program and Education Issues, Ms. Ellington states, "Our Georgia Pre-K program has recently been applauded for its effectiveness among all learners. The Georgia Pre-K Program has been researched, developed, and implemented by Bright From The Start and Georgia State University, and is perfect example of how to improve education comprehensively. It covers all aspects of a child's development including literacy skills, mathematical thinking, personal and social development, scientific thinking, social studies, physical development and the arts. It requires classrooms to be arranged and managed to foster learning through engaging, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate activities. Teachers diagnose where a child's progress lies within an area using portfolio evidence of photographs, work samples, anecdotal records, and matrices. Lessons are then developed and implemented based on need. Teachers are expected to use many open-ended activities so that learning is student-directed and critical thinking skills are utilized. Open-ended activities allow a teacher to assess the sophistication in thinking that children are demonstrating."

Ms. Ellington goes on to say, "Child centered classroom instruction is a balance of individual, small group, whole group, teacher-directed and student directed instruction. Each child is one-of-a-kind, so it is important that my instruction is focused, and my classroom environment organized to meet the individual needs of unique learners. My ultimate goal is to foster a love for learning and discovery, while setting a foundation for an education that will reach well beyond my classroom walls."

Mrs. Ellington believes her "primary role as a Pre-K teacher is to ensure that our newest Georgia students begin their formal schooling with a holistic education and passion and love for learning. The classroom is filled with encouragement and love, a safe place to take risks for learning, and developmentally appropriate practices with teachers utilizing purposeful reflection and action for each individual student."

She goes on to say, "Children who feel protected, valued and empowered with confidence are self-motivated learners. The beauty of teaching four and five year olds is that they believe they can do almost anything, and my assistant teacher and I take that attitude and run with it."

"This is the first year for the state award, and Mrs. Ellington has set the bar high. We value not only her leadership at her school, but the leadership she has shown throughout the entire Pre-K program has been exceptional. Mrs. Ellington is a remarkable educator," remarked Barrow County School Superintendent Dr. Chris McMichael.

Mrs. Ellington went on to say, "I am honored and humbled to represent the many wonderful Pre-K teachers and assistant teachers who work selflessly and tirelessly for some of Georgia's youngest school children. I am excited to expand my advocacy for both the program and its children in my role as a Georgia Pre-K Teacher of the Year."

Speaking directly to Mrs. Ellington, Bethlehem Elementary School Principal Mindy Reid said, "Connie, what you are able to do with our students every day is incredible; you make magic happen. Our students benefit from your wisdom, your guidance, and your love. This recognition comes as no surprise to those of us who know Connie and get to see the amazing things she does with students each day. She is truly one of the most genuine and dedicated educators in our great state."