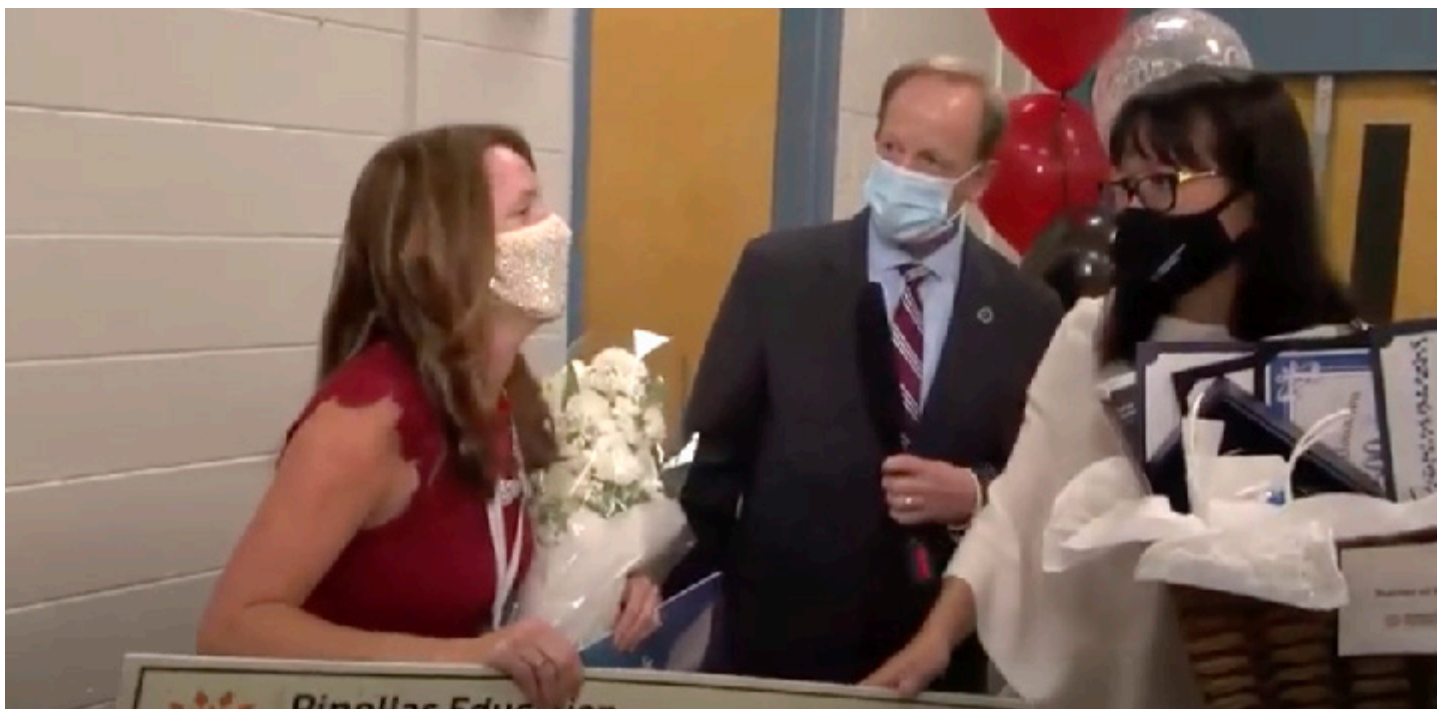




2021 EVENING OF *Excellence*

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A Virtual Smash: 2021 Evening of Excellence Soars Online as Sarah Painter Named Teacher of the Year



Eisenhower Elementary's Sarah Painter is surprised by PCS Superintendent Dr. Michael Grego and Pinellas Education Foundation CEO Stacy Baier

The 2021 Evening of Excellence may have had to go virtual this year but, as the show concluded, emotion poured forth with a moment as memorable as any live event could hope to offer.

Inside Eisenhower Elementary's multi-purpose room, the school's Top 10 Teacher of the Year finalist, Sarah Painter, looked intently at her laptop as the big reveal approached: the naming of Pinellas County Schools' Teacher of the Year. The room – filled with her students, school staff and family members – was abuzz with excited guests. They fixed their eyes on a projection screen as the annual event Thursday night, January 21, presented by Aetna, neared its dramatic conclusion.

They had no idea that hiding outside the multi-purpose room door was PCS Superintendent Dr. Michael Grego and Pinellas Education Foundation CEO Stacy Baier, preparing to pull off a surprise entrance worthy of Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes. Somewhere, Ed McMahon was smiling.

Only moments earlier, Dr. Grego had appeared on digital screens – along with master of ceremonies and former TV news anchor Al Ruechel – giving a final tribute to all of the district's teachers for their Herculean efforts during a pandemic.



Emcee Al Ruechel kept the show moving smoothly

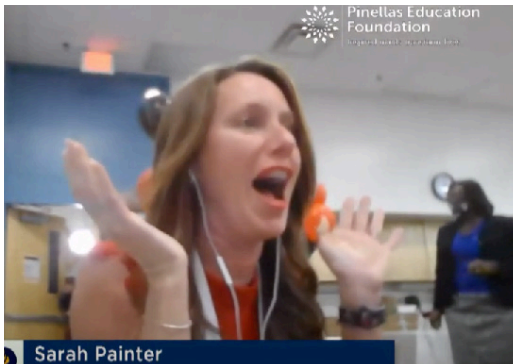
Nobody suspected that his portion was actually pre-taped, allowing him, Baier and a live camera operator – to move sneakily into position inside the Clearwater elementary school.

All of a sudden, here he was in a hallway, speaking in a hushed tone: “And now it is time to name the district’s Teacher of the Year, but instead of coming on stage, I’m live on location where the Teacher of the Year is watching. This teacher does not know we’re here or that they’ve been selected. But be ready ...”

Then, having sufficiently drawn out the suspense, Dr. Grego announced Painter’s name, and a new camera angle from inside the classroom cut to the stunned fifth-grade teacher, clasping her hands over her face in disbelief.



Dr. Grego seconds before the big announcement



The winning reaction

An instant later, she looked over her shoulder to see Dr. Grego entering the room trailed by a cameraman. “I won!” was all she managed to blurt out amid screams and a booming, “Congratulationssssss!!!” from the Superintendent.

As cheers, screams and music echoed throughout the room, Painter accepted a bouquet of flowers and a big hug from principal Antonette Wilson, and took the microphone from Dr. Grego to address those in the room and watching online.

“As they say, it takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a district to raise a teacher,” she said, following with thanks to her school administration past and present, co-workers and friends, Eisenhower school family, her students (“who have taught me more than I could ever learn”) and, of course, her husband and six children, ages 4 to 14, for all their sacrifices.



A jubilant class selfie with their new Teacher of the Year

But she saved the best for last, sharing a little story that summed up the challenges of simultaneously teaching in-class and online.

“When I first started ... we had a lot of technical problems,” she said. “And I found myself constantly groaning and moaning, every time the sound went out or I would lose a student. My students said, ‘Did you realize that you’re doing that?’ So I told them to hold me accountable. And so every time the sound went out, we would say, ‘find joy!’” Her students in the multi-purpose room happily called out those two words in unison with her.

“And it was a daily reminder,” Painter continued, “that your perspective and your mindset changes everything. Instead of being disappointed, we found joy in every moment. So my message to you is that in a year where everything feels so uncertain, *find joy*. Be more. Look for the good, because it’s always there.”

The celebration spilled into the next morning as Eisenhower Elementary teachers and staff and Painter’s students gathered outside the school to cheer and clap for the arrival of a large, black limo carrying the new Teacher of the Year. Painter emerged with her children, walking on a red carpet in her honor and waving to her elated school family.

Now in her 18th year of teaching, she is known for her classroom mantra of “Once a Painter, always a Painter” – underscoring a message that she and her students will always be connected throughout their life journeys. Painters, she tells them, have a reputation to uphold for persistence, resilience and kindness.

“She loves this place and she loves her kids,” said her principal with a smile. “Once a Painter, always a Painter.”



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Duggan Cooley &
David Martinez-Cooley

2021 Evening of Excellence Photo Gallery



Greg Stewart
East Lake Middle Academy of Engineering



Karen Collier of Leila Davis Elementary – and colleagues!



Delivering prizes to finalists during the day – with a stop at Jennifer Riddick's class



Allison Jurado
Oakhurst Elementary
Teacher of the Year Finalist



Students from the Tarpon Springs High School Leadership Conservatory for the Arts provided top-tier entertainment



Sandra Lozada of Presenting Sponsor Aetna



2020 Winner David Martinez-Cooley



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