

The St. Mary's County Citizens' Advisory Committee for Special Education presented the 2015 "Rise Up" Award at the April 29 Board of Education meeting for St. Mary's County Public Schools. On hand to present the award was Elizabeth Snyder, Chair of CACSE. Assisting in the presentation was Melissa Charbonnet, SMCPs Director of Special Education and Leslie Popielarcheck, Vice-Chair.

Three awards were presented recognizing individuals and groups in the school system and in the greater community who have gone above and beyond the normal call of duty to support our students with disabilities in their educational endeavors. Ms. Snyder said these awards "recognize special educators who have truly gone to extraordinary efforts to contribute to the growth, happiness and general well-being of our children with disabilities." She said families wanted to honor the patience, determination, compassion and loving nature of educators and staff and they should be recognized for the change made in the lives of their children.

This year's recipients of a Certificate of Award, include the team of Judy Coleman-Kia, SAIL Program instructor; Cherise Blyler, paraeducator; Donna Heidelbach, paraeducator; and Carolyn Steiner, physical therapist, from Benjamin Banneker Elementary School. This team was nominated on behalf of supporting a fifth grade student who receives full support for daily functions and who has overcome great medical difficulties. The nominating family said the "love, care and support this child receives is phenomenal."



Holly Calabro, elementary physical education instructor at Chesapeake Public Charter School, also received an award. This educator supports a kindergarten student; the family reported that Ms. Calabro "always looked at their son for what he can do despite the delays and physical limitations of his disability," and that her enthusiasm and encouragement helped him to overcome his inhibitions in sports and achieve many goals.

Christine Nueslein, kindergarten teacher, and Lindsey Kitchen, special education teacher, at Leonardtown Elementary

School, also received an award. The nominating family said these educators helped to integrate a child with Down's syndrome into the general education classroom, and that she "has grown both socially and intellectually due to their dedication and positive attitude.



Each winning school also will have the opportunity to choose and receive a presentation of items from CACSE's new "Family Toolbox," a program CACSE is developing to provide educationally- and medically-oriented equipment and materials for parents and educators to check out and borrow under a new loan program CACSE is building through the St. Mary's County Public Library system.

The team of Rebecca Perosio, special education kindergarten teacher, and Coleen Singleton, speech/language pathologist, at Green Holly Elementary School, and Abirami Ramalingam, speech/language pathologist at Greenview Knolls Elementary School, received nominations as well and received a Certificate of Excellence.

This is the third year that this award has been given. Awardees are selected from nominations submitted by parents of children with disabilities, and reviewed by Ms. Popielarcheck, Mandy Greer, and Chuck Slade. All nominees received a certificate of recognition.

Ms. Snyder also presented Ms. Charbonnet with a bouquet of flowers in recognition for her service and support because she “resonates a true compassion for our families.” Scott Smith, Superintendent of St. Mary’s County Public Schools, said although it means a great deal when the school system recognizes educators, when parents and communities come out to recognize staff and tell the story of their success, it is a “beautiful thing.”

CACSE is taking this opportunity to recognize the dedicated individuals who work with our students and to thank them for the amazing jobs they do every day, including teachers, paraeducators, and therapists. Many thanks to this year’s recipients and nominees, the parents who shared the wonderful stories of their work, and the Director and Staff of the SMCPS Department of Special Education for their assistance.

CACSE acts as an advisory panel to the SMCPS Board of Education as part of Federal and state policy. It is made up of parents, educators, and community representatives from local and regional groups who support individuals with disabilities. More information about CACSE can be found at <http://smccacse.org>.

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuxQvNd_w8U, presentation begins at the 40:55 mark