

NOVEMBER 2025 TEACHERS of EXCELLENCE®

Recognizing Excellence in Teaching Through Dedication, Compassion & Knowledge

PROFILE

LAKE COUNTY

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Jessica Schouten's education career took root when she volunteered in her youngest child's kindergarten classroom. "I started as a paraprofessional in a kindergarten classroom in 2022," Schouten says. "I had finished my bachelor's degree in psychology but truly wanted to be a teacher, so I enrolled in Ball State's Transition to Teaching program. I obtained my teaching license in March 2023. I now have my master's degree in elementary education. I have spent all my teaching career with kindergartners and love seeing that spark in them when they master a skill that they have been struggling with."

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

"One of my favorite things as a teacher is when students are truly excited to come to school and continue learning." Schouten earned her bachelor's degree in general psychology with a specialization in applied behavior analysis from Capella University. She earned her Transition to Teaching and master's degree from Ball State University and is working on a licensure program in early childhood.

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Richard Baez treasures belonging to a school system that feels like family. "We are a part of the River Forest Community School Corporation." He earned his bachelor's degree from Indiana University Northwest. Baez has been teaching for 32 years.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

"What I love about teaching is seeing the happy faces when my little ones learn something new," Baez says. "My favorite memory is being honored by a family. I was the first teacher for all their children. That nice honor is on my wall in my home, and I see it every day."

PORTER COUNTY

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

"I love watching the joy that a student gets when they tackle and conquer something challenging," Maddisen Brennecke says. "Math can be a hard subject for some of my students. My goal is to ensure that students walk out of my classroom feeling more confident and capable than they did before coming to my class. When they achieve more than they believed they were capable of, it makes me immensely proud. I also particularly like the silly moments in my classes when we're able to laugh together or talk about something funny going on. Even though I teach high school, they are still just big kids and it's great to have those hilarious moments." A Valparaiso High School graduate, Brennecke earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Notre Dame and her master's degree from University of Portland. This is her sixth year of teaching at Valparaiso High School.

FAVORITE PART OF TEACHING:

Brennecke says the small moments are the ones that matter most. "The conversations with a past student in the hall, the pep talk before a test, the laughter from an off-topic moment or the time a normally quiet student shares weekend plans are all stand-out moments to me," she says. "I hold those memories dear because teaching can be a challenging job, and those quick interactions are often the most impactful and memorable. A bad day can easily be turned around by a positive interaction with a student. I cherish the connections I've made with my students, and I enjoy hearing from them years after I've had them in class."

WHY TEACHING IS MORE THAN A DAY JOB:

Jennifer Butler loves seeing her students grasp a new language and make cultural connections. "When I was observing other teachers as a college student, one teacher told me that if you're bored as a teacher, the kids are definitely bored. This stuck out to me because it is easy at times to get stuck in a routine, but I try to apply that to my teaching philosophy. Teaching grammar is an inevitable part of Spanish, but I try to come up with activities that help kids understand it in a more hands-on, less painful way. I strive to create a safe environment for kids to make mistakes, which are inevitable when learning a new language, and grow as Spanish students and people. As we live in a society with Spanish-speaking people everywhere, I really try to get the kids speaking as much as possible. I love when they come back and tell me how they used what we learned in class somewhere outside of school." Butler earned her degrees in secondary education and Spanish from Butler University. She earned her master's degree in education from Western Governor's University. She taught at an Indianapolis high school and at Valparaiso High School before joining Washington Township. Butler teaches all levels of Spanish, including dual credit through Ivy Tech Community College, coaches the high school Spell Bowl team and is the Washington Township Vice President in the local teachers' union. Butler and her husband, Andrew, enjoy life with their son and three cats.

FAVORITE TEACHING MEMORY:

"My students have said and done so many hilarious things over the years, like getting crazy competitive over games in class or creative skits and with projects they've come up with for me," Butler says. "One of my favorite memories here at Washington Township is when one of my Spell Bowl teams made state at Purdue University a few years ago. Not only was that a memory in and of itself, but the whole high school lined the halls to cheer and clap for us and wish us luck. Washington Township is such a special school, and the amount of support teachers and students show each other is awesome."

PROFILE



**MADDISEN
BRENECKE,**
Math
Valparaiso High
School, Valparaiso

PROFILE



**JENNIFER
BUTLER,**
Spanish
Washington Township
Middle/High
School, Valparaiso



**JESSICA
SCHOUTEN,**
Longfellow
Elementary
School, Gary



**RICHARD
BAEZ,**
First Grade
Henry S. Evans
Elementary School,
Lake Station



"Teachers provide a foundation for life as we know it. Without them there would be no doctors, police officers, authors, scientists, engineers ... virtually every vocation. We appreciate and acknowledge their commitment to making our world a better place."

Best Regards,
Kenneth J. Allen



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