



Lillian M. Lowery, Ed.D.  
State Superintendent of Schools

200 West Baltimore Street • Baltimore, MD 21201 • 410-767-0100 • 410-333-6442 TTY/TDD • MarylandPublicSchools.org

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**TO:** Members of the State Board of Education  
**FROM:** Lillian M. Lowery, Ed.D. *Lillian M. Lowery*  
**DATE:** February 26, 2013  
**SUBJECT:** Good News – Commendations for Rhonda Blankenship, 2013 Maryland Teacher of the Year Selected as a National Finalist

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**PURPOSE:**

The State Board will commend Rhonda Blankenship, our 2013 Maryland Teacher of the Year, who was recently selected as one of only four finalists for the title of National Teacher of the Year. Rhonda is an English/Language Arts Teacher at Rising Sun High School in Cecil County. She will comment on the importance of this honor in showcasing excellence in teaching and learning.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Maryland is honored once again to be in the national Teacher of the Year spotlight with our 2013 Maryland Teacher of the Year who was selected as one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. In 2011, Michelle Shearer, an AP Chemistry teacher from Frederick County, achieved celebrity status when she was selected as the National Teacher. In 2006, we also celebrated with Kimberly Oliver Burnim, then a kindergarten teacher from Montgomery County, who was selected as America's National Teacher. Rhonda has a great story of personal and professional achievement and credits several of her high school teachers with helping transform her from a girl considering dropping out of school to a girl contemplating college. She says that her *"greatest contributions have been in helping her students bridge the gap between their working class backgrounds and their college and career aspirations."* (Please see her biography which is attached.)

Rhonda will join the other 2013 National Finalists in Washington DC March 3-5, 2013 for an intensive set of interviews and presentations used to determine who will be selected as the next National Teacher of the Year. The other finalists are from Florida, New Hampshire, and the state of Washington. The national announcement will be made by President Obama at the White House in late April. If selected as America's national teacher spokesperson, Ms. Blankenship would spend this coming year presenting an education message to thousands of people across America and the world. She would be visiting an average of 3 US cities per week plus touring China, Japan, and Singapore. Rhonda's message relates to the importance of teachers as "school family members" who can motivate and encourage students to see education as the difference between an ordinary life and an extraordinary life.

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**ACTION:**

The State Board will commend Ms. Blankenship and wish her “good luck” as she moves forward in the competition.

Attachment

**RHONDA BLANKENSHIP**  
**2013 MARYLAND TEACHER OF THE YEAR**  
**2013 NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINALIST**

Rhonda Blankenship, an English/Language Arts teacher at Rising Sun High School in Cecil County, is from a large, working class family, a family for whom economic and academic successes were elusive. Although she showed promise as a young student, by high school she became mired in the same kind of troubles that plague many teenagers today, and her grades plummeted. Rhonda attributes her



transformation from a girl considering dropping out of school to a girl contemplating college to her teachers, women who helped her see that an education, “the road less traveled,” could be the one that would make all the difference. Although she graduated from North East High School in Cecil County without distinction, Rhonda was able to work toward a better future by taking classes at Cecil Community College, eventually graduating from Towson University in 1995 Summa Cum Laude, becoming her family’s first college graduate. She went on to earn a Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction from McDaniel College in 2005.

Today, Mrs. Blankenship teaches for the same school district from which she graduated in 1991. Her greatest contributions have been in helping her students bridge the gap between their working class backgrounds and their college and career aspirations. Even though she does not teach Advanced Placement (AP) English, she participated in the 2008 AP Summer Institute because she wants to teach in a way that prepares ALL of her students for college. By

fostering literacy that is transformative and scalable, she is helping her students learn more efficiently in all of their classes and develop the critical thinking skills that they will need to compete in a global economy.

A life-long learner committed to her own growth, Mrs. Blankenship achieved National Board Certification in 2010 as a first-year candidate. This process invigorated her practice as she took an honest inventory of the texts she selected, the instruction she designed, and the strategies she incorporated to meet the needs of her students. She learned to evaluate her students’ reading and writing more reliably over the course of a semester, and the focus of her planning shifted from “covering units” to “planning for growth.” Later, Mrs. Blankenship considered the principles of the National Board Certification program as she collaborated with colleagues to write student learning outcomes for Cecil County’s new teacher evaluation model.

Throughout her career, Mrs. Blankenship has sought opportunities to remain abreast of trends in education and share this information with her colleagues. Understanding the ubiquitous presence of technology and its importance in student life, Mrs. Blankenship strives to make technology, like the SMART Board, an integral part of her instruction, and she shares her work with other teachers. Furthermore, Mrs. Blankenship writes county curriculum, is a member of the School Improvement Team, participates in professional learning communities, facilitates school and county professional development, and mentors student teachers.

In her eighteenth year of teaching, Mrs. Blankenship’s mission is to help her students see education as the difference between an aimless, ordinary life and a purposeful, extraordinary life. In March 2012, Mrs. Blankenship was selected as Cecil County Teacher of the year, and in October of that same year, she was named 2013 Maryland State Teacher of the Year. Today, Rhonda lives in Cecil County, where she grew up and where she returned to teach. She and her husband of seventeen years, Kenny Blankenship, have two children, Cameron and Olivia.