

A message from the
Massachusetts Department of
Elementary and Secondary Education

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Contents

1. [The Buzz: Application Period Open for Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, Sontag Prize](#)
2. [Teacher Reflection: Using Student Curiosity to Inspire Inquiry](#)
3. [New Resource: The Great Fight for Disability Rights](#)

1. The Buzz: Application Period Open for Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, Sontag Prize

The nomination and application forms for the [Sontag Prize in Education](#) and the [2021 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year](#) are now available!

The [Sontag Prize in Education](#) is an annual award that recognizes and celebrates outstanding educators for their teaching excellence. Recipients can come from inside

or outside Massachusetts. First-time Sontag Prize recipients receive a \$3,000 honorarium, an invitation to an awards dinner gala, and professional development from leading education practitioners and researchers.

Educators who are selected for and accept the Sontag Prize expand their impact by committing to teach in an Acceleration Academy, a week-long academic program designed to accelerate student learning through engaging, standards-aligned lessons. The Acceleration Academies take place during Massachusetts' February and April school vacations, with a focus on English language arts in February and math and science in April.

[Applications](#) for the Sontag Prize are due by **11:59 p.m. November 30**, and we **anticipate recognizing dozens of teachers.**

Applications are also open for 2021 [Massachusetts Teacher of the Year](#). Anyone can [nominate](#) a teacher for Massachusetts Teacher of the Year, and educators can [apply](#) regardless of whether they have been nominated. The Commonwealth is full of strong public school teachers (just look at the [#aMAzingeducators](#) submissions we received and published on social media), and DESE hopes to receive at least one nomination from every district.

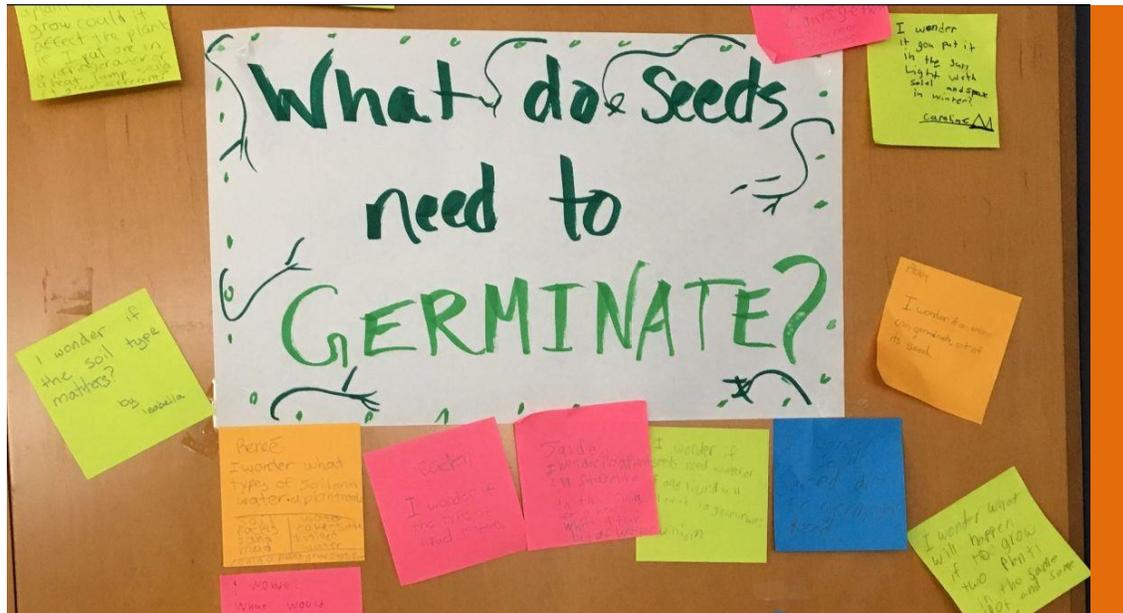
Nominations will be accepted online only and are due **February 3, 2020.**

Applications must be completed by **February 14.** Before completing an application, teachers are asked to download and read the [Massachusetts Teacher of the Year Overview](#).

Anyone with questions about either award or about Acceleration Academies can email educatorrecognition@doe.mass.edu for more information. Please include the name of the award in the subject line of the email.

2. Teacher Reflection: Using Student Curiosity to Inspire Inquiry

Jennifer Ryan is a literacy coach at Pine Hill Elementary School in Sherborn, part of the Dover-Sherborn Public Schools. She taught grades 3-5 from 2004-2019 and was a semifinalist for 2020 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year.



Students' questions about what seeds might need in order to germinate included, "I wonder if soil type matters" and "I wonder what would happen if I planted a dissected seed". (Photo courtesy of Jennifer Ryan)

Anyone who has observed a 3-year-old has probably noticed their incessant questioning and natural curiosity. I have always wondered why this sense of joyful learning often drops when children start elementary school, so several years ago, I began to research ways to incorporate children's instinctive curiosity into my teaching. As my own classroom became more inquiry-based, I realized that it was possible to still adhere to standards while using student-directed inquiry activated by curiosity.

As we work to bring inquiry-based practices to all of the classrooms in my school, teachers often ask, "How will I have time, when I already have so much to teach?" Student inquiry is not an additional thing – it is a shift in approach. In fact, as classrooms increase the amount of inquiry, students become learning powerhouses who get more done each day.

Any lesson can be turned into an inquiry-based experience if teachers simply begin with questions like, "What have you always wondered about _____?" In my classroom,

the beginning of the year includes practice asking open and researchable questions.

Curiosity Notebooks and [Wonder Walls](#) are simple and motivational ways to start promoting natural inquiry cycles (see “The Curious Classroom” by Harvey Daniels). If you can carve five minutes out of each day, students can use Curiosity Notebooks to record their fierce wonderings about anything or in response to prompts like a photo of a scientific phenomenon that they are about to study. I encourage students to post their questions on the Wonder Wall. The questions, in turn, become fuel for non-fiction literacy units, science investigations, or social studies research. The use of Curiosity Notebooks is like spreading throughout my school, as students bring their notebooks to specials and are encouraged to pursue their passions.

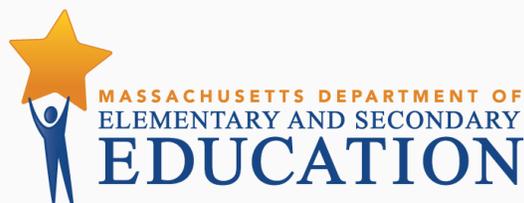
As my students become better at asking questions and finding answers, they are inspired to take their learning outside of school and return to school excited to see what can be discovered next. When I shifted to an inquiry-based model, not only did academic achievement increase, but my students appeared to be happier and have greater empathy and stronger relationships, because they were engaged in creativity and collaboration.

Inquiry-based units cycle through content immersion, investigation, coalescence, and sharing new learning with an audience. When students design research, they are at the center, and their teacher moves to the periphery. I think of myself as a coach. Instead of providing answers, I confer with students, not an incidental role. There are opportunities for teachers to direct, confirm new learning, redirect misconceptions, and actively wonder in order to encourage new lines of thought.

To learn more about inquiry-based teaching, check out “The Curious Classroom”, follow me on Twitter [@jryan5151](#), make a space to bank student questions for future investigations, launch a classroom Wonder Wall, find time to host a [Genius Hour](#) in your room, or model living a curious life for your students by following your own fierce wonderings!

3. New Resource: The Great Fight for Disability Rights

A new resource is now available among the [model curriculum units](#) on the DESE website. [The Great Fight for Disability Rights Video](#) was added recently and can fit well within high school students' studies of activist movements since 1970.



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