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Revolutionary War Balloon Battles and Math Scavenger Hunts: Havre de Grace Fifth-Grade Teacher Thomas Dennison Earns \$25,000 Milken Educator Award

Dennison from Havre de Grace Elementary receives Award during surprise all-school assembly

Santa Monica, Calif. (December 1, 2016)—Grade school education isn't rocket science—except when it is. That's just one of the out-of-the-box lessons fifth-graders learn in Thomas Dennison's classroom. But Dennison had his own instructional surprise today during a school assembly at Havre de Grace Elementary in Harford County Public Schools, Maryland, after he was presented with the prestigious [Milken Educator Award](#). Dennison was recognized for his commitment to students, colleagues, and the community as the newest recipient of the \$25,000 cash award, hailed by *Teacher* magazine as the "Oscars of Teaching."

Milken Family Foundation Co-Founder Mike Milken presented Dennison with the Award, joined by Maryland State Superintendent Dr. Karen Salmon and Harford County Public Schools Superintendent Barbara P. Canavan.

"The earlier an investment is made into a child's education, the greater an impact it will have," said Mike Milken. "Teachers who help elementary school students – particularly those battling learning disabilities, poverty and other challenges – can change the course of individual lives and communities. That's why we're so pleased to recognize Thomas Dennison for his extraordinary efforts to engage all students and help them find meaning and pride in their work."

"Thomas Dennison is a classroom scientist, taking the time and doing the research necessary to understand how best to connect with his students and ensure their academic success," said Salmon. "His work is a joyful and creative mission, and the beneficiaries are the students and the community at Havre de Grace Elementary."

"Mr. Dennison's commitment and dedication to the students at Havre de Grace Elementary is apparent from the moment you walk into his classroom," said Canavan. "Students are engaged and there is an actual 'buzz' in the room; the excitement is contagious and you know that you are experiencing the commitment and dedication of a truly special teacher. I am thrilled that Mr. Dennison is receiving this well-deserved recognition."

In Thomas Dennison's class at Havre de Grace Elementary School, students learn to tap into their most powerful resource: their imagination. They may learn Revolutionary War history by reenacting the battles of Lexington and Concord with water balloons in the schoolyard. That is when they're not exploring rocketry on the playground or collaborating with other classes in massive math-oriented scavenger hunts.

Celebrating the student body while simultaneously spurring class involvement, Dennison once staged a celebrity-themed event on the first day of school, in which he hired a news crew and interviewed each student who strolled the red carpet he had unrolled outside the school's front doors. Inside Dennison's class, however, learning and decorum are the true superstars, where the teacher sets high expectations for both. Students greet visitors at the door with a handshake, small groups debate and analyze the day's reading while others solve problems on chalkboard-covered tabletops as Dennison floats among groups as a facilitator, empowering students to develop their interpersonal skills through active involvement.

Dennison believes in transformation and welcomes all students into his class. Using an energetic, positive atmosphere to inspire learning, he uses music during transitions or to boost student excitement. Throughout the day, kids high-five, clap, and bang drums when classmates offer correct answers, showing their appreciation for each other and recognizing their peers' successes.

The approach garners impressive results. Last year, Dennison's class scored in the proficient or advanced range on Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) assessments—and Havre de Grace Elementary ranks in the top 1% for reading and top 10% for math among Maryland's Title I schools. Dennison also encourages qualitative measures of success in his students: persistence, curiosity, compassion, creativity, motivation, leadership and courage.

Teachers and administrators from around the state visit Dennison's classroom to observe how the emphasis he places on student engagement motivates colleagues while also improving student behavior and achievement.

A fixture in the Havre de Grace community, Dennison, who has four children of his own, goes to students' sporting events, sees them at the park, and attends church with many of them. Parents often request that their children be placed in Dennison's class, and because he has taught multiple grades, he has had many students more than once. He visits each student's home at the start of the year and holds homework help nights for both students and parents. Former students have described Dennison as the teacher who changed their lives.

Unflaggingly positive, Dennison praises students and reminds them that they are unique, special and a gift to the world.

Dennison earned a Bachelor of Education in early childhood in 2002 and a Master of Education in computer technology in 2003 from Ohio University.

To learn more about Dennison and to view photos and a video from today's award assembly, visit <http://www.milkeneducatorawards.org/educators/view/thomas-dennison>.

The 2016-17 season marks the 30th year of the Milken Educator Awards. Milken Educators are selected in early to mid-career for what they have achieved and for the promise of what they will accomplish. In addition to the \$25,000 prize and public recognition, Dennison's honor includes membership in the national Milken Educator Network, a group of more than 2,700 top teachers, principals and specialists dedicated to strengthening education.

In addition to participation in the Milken Educator Network, 2016-17 recipients will attend a Milken Educator Forum this spring in New Orleans. Educators will have the opportunity to network with their new colleagues and hear from state and federal officials about the importance of maximizing their leadership roles to advance educator effectiveness.

More than \$138 million in funding, including \$68 million in individual \$25,000 awards, has been devoted to the overall Awards program, which includes powerful professional development opportunities throughout recipients' careers. Many have gone on to earn advanced degrees and be placed in prominent posts and on state and national education committees.

The Awards alternate yearly between elementary and secondary educators. Unlike most teacher recognition programs, the Milken Educator Awards has no formal nomination or application process. Candidates are sourced through a confidential selection process and then reviewed by blue ribbon panels appointed by state departments of education. Those most exceptional are recommended for the Award, with final approval by the Milken Family Foundation.

Past recipients have used their Awards to fund their children's education or to further their own professional development. Others have financed dream field trips, established scholarships and even funded the adoption of children.

Regular updates on the surprise Milken Educator Award events are shared on MFF social media profiles at www.facebook.com/milkeneducatorawards, www.twitter.com/milken, www.youtube.com/milkenaward, and <http://instagram.com/milkenfamilyfdn> using the #MilkenAward hashtag. Details are also available on the Awards homepage at www.MilkenEducatorAwards.org or can be obtained by calling MFF at (310) 570-4772.

About the Milken Educator Awards

The Milken Educator Awards, created by the Milken Family Foundation, is in its 30th year. The Awards provide public recognition and individual financial rewards of \$25,000 to elementary and secondary school teachers, principals and specialists from around the country who are furthering excellence in education. Recipients are heralded in early to mid-career for what they have achieved and for the promise of what they will accomplish.

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