

2017 Patricia Gilcrest-Frazier Award Presentation

June 14, 2017

This annual award recognizes the outstanding service and leadership in the role of a local district special education director. The candidate of this award must be an approved Director of Special Education as determined by MDE, and must be employed or function as such in a local district. The candidate must have a track record of implementing innovative programming that contributes to the field of special education. Criteria for this award also include organizational involvement, volunteerism, and years of service.

The candidate for the Patricia Gilcrest-Frazier award must demonstrate qualities in five domains, which are service, leadership, vision, collaboration, and lifelong learning. I will now describe this year's winner in each of these five domains.

Service

This year's winner has proved that leading with service first -- the notion that it begins with a natural feeling and desire to serve -- is essential for emulating trust, integrity, honesty, and compassion. Those qualities were acted out instinctively as a natural presentation of who Patricia was, and as such, are indicative of the behaviors that are in the very fiber of the life and professional career of this year's winner.

This person has dedicated their entire career of nearly 40 years to serving persons with disabilities. The hallmark of this person's career and focus is filled with numerous illustrations and demonstrations of exemplary leadership qualities. As a leader, and as a person, they personify honesty, trustworthiness, compassion, integrity, and ethics. These qualities not only espouse the criteria of this award, they also embody and honor the life, professional career, and memory of Patricia Gilcrest-Frazier.

Examples of this person's service are best illustrated by involvement in local, county, and state-wide memberships and associations. This person has been an active and involved member of MAASE for nearly 20 years, serving on and chairing numerous committees. This person has been equally as involved with CEC and CASE and their work with these organizations has led to initiatives for improved outcomes of collaboration, compliance, operations, and educational programming.

Leadership

Accomplishing extraordinary things in an organization is hard and challenging work, especially in the size of this person's district. This person assumes the best in everyone and recognizes the contributions that all individuals make. This person often has staff share in the rewards of their efforts and involvement, and celebrates their accomplishments so that everyone feels like a hero for what they do to make a difference in the lives of students and families. While being led, this person's staff become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and are more likely to become servants themselves.

This person focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the "top of the pyramid", this person's style is very different. This person shares power, puts the needs of others first, and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. This person mentors, coaches, provides professional learning opportunities, develops guidance documents and handbooks, and contributes to the health and well-being of special education each and every day.

This person consistently demonstrates not only the highest moral quality, but also possesses the skills paramount to exemplary leadership. With this person's unique and special qualities, this person gives our students of greatest need the opportunities that every parent wants for their child.

Vision

This person sets a clear vision, is an innovator to watch, and believes in systems thinking. This person unravels bureaucracy when it impedes action, puts up signposts and provides direction, including serving as a "personal escort" when people are unsure of where to go or how to get there. This person continually looks for innovative ways to improve educational outcomes for staff, students, and families.

This person is a risk taker, and those risks can sometimes come with mistakes and failures, yet this person accepts and welcomes the inevitable disappointments as opportunities. To keep hope and determination alive, this person continually displays the qualities necessary of a servant leader, inspiring greatness and a willingness to step right in and take the lead.

Complex change can be overwhelming for people, yet this person continually approaches change by encouraging people to listen to each other, to understand the position of others, and to delineate clear and attainable goals.

Collaboration

This person is the consummate collaborator and inspires spirited teams. This person actively involves others in all aspects of the decision making process. This person knows and understands that mutual respect is what sustains extraordinary efforts, and they do this by creating an atmosphere of trust and human dignity. This person can be found facilitating teams during times of critical and challenging decision making, while getting all involved to reach consensus in a way that feels comfortable and victorious, rather than compromising on an "I can live with this" outcome.

As a special education director, this person can often be found bringing two opposing sides together for the greater good. Put simply, this person's collaborative leadership style is the type of leadership required to get results across internal and external boundaries. This person values differences in culture, experiences, and skills that lie in the foundational presentations that sit on either side of those boundaries. This person invests the time necessary to build relationships and stands ready to handle conflict in a constructive manner. Most important of all, this person is able to share control and accomplishes this through mediation, influencing, engagement, agility, patience, and empathy.

Life-Long Learning

This person is a self-professed "PD Junkie" -- wanting to attend and participate in everything they find interesting and intriguing. Not only does this person seek out new learning and actively participate in the learning, this person works hard to integrate it into the scope and sequence of their practice and the practice of others. This person can always be seen as a model of active engagement at the MAASE Professional Learning and Developing Leaders sessions. This person is an active learner and leader on several MAASE CoPs. Further, this person supports their own personal and professional growth and development through collective responsibility for political, leadership, and instructional partnerships.

Committed to the development of themselves and others, this person is an experienced presenter. Among their many presentations, this person has designed, developed, and fostered life-long learning opportunities at the local and ISD levels in the areas of: Writing Legally Compliant IEPs, Michigan Merit High School Personal Curriculum, State Performance Plan Overviews, Response to Intervention, Instructional Consultation Teams, Writing Measurable Standards Based IEPs, Curriculum Based Measurement, Legal Updates, Special Education 101 for Principals, CIMS on-going training, PAC Parent Trainings, and Transition Planning.

In closing, I would like to share some summative comments written about this person:

When confronted with a decision making dilemma, people find themselves seeking this person's counsel or contemplating the proverbial question -- "what would this person do" -- knowing the "right and just" resolution will emerge. This person is unique who will always place the needs of others before themselves, and using the famous words of Steven Covey, "seeks first to understand, then to be understood."

This person would be extremely humbled to know about the work going on behind the scenes to be nominated for this prestigious award, and would be quick to redirect the nomination to someone else. Yet, this person sees nothing special about the way they have chosen to live their life - It is just the way this person is. That alone is an astonishing accomplishment, a model of excellence, inspiration and compassion, and a "student" of the Patricia Gilcrest-Frazier way of life.

The greatest career accomplishment of this person is rising to the responsibility they have for the vast array of programs and services for the 3,500 students with disabilities and their families in this person's district. However, all of this is secondary to this person's truly greatest accomplishment of all -- that those who know Deb are better people because of it.

I am honored to present the 2017 Patricia Gilcrest Frazier award to the Executive Director of Special Services for Utica Community Schools, **Deb Koepke**.