



The
National Forum
Advancing Excellence in the Middle Grades



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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National Forum to Recognize 2026 Schools to Watch Teacher and Administrator of the Year

Washington, D.C. — The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform has announced the recipients of the 2026 National Schools to Watch Teacher of the Year and Administrator of the Year, recognizing two exceptional educators who exemplify excellence in middle-level education. These honorees were selected from a competitive pool of nominations submitted by schools across the 22 states in the Schools to Watch network.

Dr. Ashley Dawson of Georgia has been named the 2026 National Schools to Watch Teacher of the Year. A teacher at Blake Bass Middle School, Dr. Dawson is recognized for her outstanding commitment to developmentally responsive teaching and for creating engaging, student-centered learning environments. Her instructional approach emphasizes strong relationships, interdisciplinary learning, and real-world application, ensuring students experience both academic rigor and meaningful connection to their work.

Dr. Dawson's leadership extends beyond the classroom through programs such as Beta Club and the Chick-fil-A Leader Academy, where she fosters student leadership, service, and a strong sense of belonging. Her innovative audio/video broadcast and film program provides students with authentic learning experiences that build critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. Through her work, Dr. Dawson consistently empowers students to see themselves as capable learners, leaders, and contributors to their community.

Christina Rather of Texas has been named the 2026 National Schools to Watch Administrator of the Year. As Principal of Briscoe Middle School, Mrs. Rather is recognized for her visionary leadership and deep understanding of the unique developmental needs of young adolescents. Over her tenure, she has cultivated a school culture that prioritizes belonging, student agency, and academic growth.

Mrs. Rather has implemented innovative systems, such as flexible intervention and enrichment structures that support diverse learning needs and has created a wide range of student-led clubs and programs that encourage exploration and identity development. Her leadership has also strengthened social-emotional supports through initiatives like peer mentoring, transition

programs, and a nationally recognized counseling program. These efforts ensure that every student feels supported, connected, and empowered to succeed during the critical middle school years.

Both Dr. Dawson and Mrs. Rather embody the core principles of the Schools to Watch framework, demonstrating excellence in academic achievement, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and effective organizational practices. Their work reflects a deep commitment to meeting the needs of the whole child and preparing students for success in school and beyond.

Dr. Dawson and Mrs. Rather will be formally recognized at the 2026 National Schools to Watch Conference in Washington, D.C., this June, where educators from across the country will gather to celebrate and learn from exemplary middle-grades practices.

About the National Forum

The National Forum Schools to Watch Program is dedicated to improving schools for young adolescents by identifying and supporting middle schools that are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and well-organized. The Schools to Watch program highlights schools and educators who are leading the way in middle grades education nationwide.

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