

2026 NEA Foundation Awards for Teaching Excellence Guidelines

Purpose The NEA Foundation Awards for Teaching Excellence recognize, reward, and promote both excellence in teaching and advocacy for the profession. The NEA Foundation (NEAF or the Foundation) and National Education Association (NEA) present the awards jointly.

Eligibility All current members of an NEA local affiliate or bargaining unit are eligible, including teachers, education support professionals, and higher education faculty and staff. NEA state affiliates, the Federal Education Association, and direct affiliates may each submit one nomination per year. Only nominations submitted and endorsed by one of these affiliates will be considered. Should a nominee's NEA membership be discontinued between the date of their nomination and the Salute to Excellence in Education Gala, hosted by The NEA Foundation, the nomination must be rescinded. In that instance, however, the state affiliate, Federal Education Association, or direct affiliate will have the opportunity to submit a new nomination. NEAF—like NEA—does not and shall not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion (creed), gender, gender expression, age, national origin (ancestry), disability, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations. NEAF encourages NEA state leaders to consider awardees who reflect the diversity among NEA members and who teach in schools representing the diversity of the student population.

Selection

AFFILIATE LEVEL

Each NEA affiliate determines its own best process for selecting its Awards for Teaching Excellence awardee and submits a single awardee's name and qualifications to the Foundation, consistent with the criteria described below. A state affiliate cannot nominate the same educator more than once. Please note that since state Teachers of the Year are chosen through a process designed by the State Superintendent and may not be union members, most state affiliates have developed their own process by which to identify their Awards for Teaching Excellence nominee.

NATIONAL LEVEL

A national selection panel chooses the five recipients of the Horace Mann Awards for Teaching Excellence from among the affiliate awardees. The President and CEO of the NEA Foundation and the NEA President appoint these panelists.

The Horace Mann awardees will interview with the national selection panel in August 2025 and based on these interviews, the NEA Member Benefits Award for Teaching Excellence recipient will be chosen.

- Benefits** All Awards for Teaching Excellence recipients receive expenses-paid travel to Washington, D.C. for The NEA Foundation’s Salute to Excellence in Education Gala; the 2026 gala will be held in February 2026. The five awardees selected for the Horace Mann Awards for Teaching Excellence receive \$10,000 in cash each plus expenses-paid travel to the Gala for themselves and 1 guest. The NEA Member Benefits Award for Teaching Excellence recipient, who is selected from the five Horace Mann awardees, receives \$25,000 in cash and a commemorative gift.
- Submission** All applications must be submitted via the online application system. The application period opens on January 6, 2025, and closes on April 14, 2025.
- Notification** Horace Mann awardees and their affiliate presidents will be notified in Summer 2025. The public announcement of the recipients of the 2026 Awards for Teaching Excellence and the 2026 Horace Mann awardees will be made by The NEA Foundation in Fall 2025.
- Criteria** Applications for the national awards are judged according to five criteria. Panelists rate state awardees on each criterion using the point value indicated below.

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: The awardee demonstrates expertise, creativity, and innovation in providing rich learning opportunities for students. The awardee uses a variety of strategies to effectively address students’ different learning styles and needs. **(15 points)**

ADVOCACY FOR THE PROFESSION: The awardee is a current, active member of the local, state, and/or national education association, and has assumed leadership roles at one or more of these levels. The awardee is an active member of other professional organizations and engages in activities that advance the profession and public education. The awardee is a strong, effective spokesperson for students, educators and the profession. **(15 points)**

COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION AND JUSTICE: The awardee works to provide a safe, supportive learning environment that meets the needs of all students, regardless of differences. The awardee recognizes and explicitly addresses the full array of values, cultures, and experiences represented in our diverse modern society, through interactions with students. **(10 points)**

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: The awardee actively engages families to support student learning and success. The awardee is intentional in engaging the community to enhance student learning and success. **(5 points)**

LEADERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: The awardee continually engages in experiences to improve his or her practice and to gain new skills and knowledge. The awardee shares this new learning with colleagues in effective ways. The awardee’s participation in and commitment to professional development has a visible impact on his or her students, institution and community. **(5 points)**

Contents of Nomination Nomination packages must include the five items listed below. Formatting instructions are noted in italics for each section.

NOMINATION LETTER

The nomination letter from the state, federal, or direct affiliate president explains why the awardee deserves a national award. Alternatively, a local president can write the official nomination letter outlining the awardee's qualifications. If this approach is used, the state president should attach an additional page with one sentence certifying the nomination. *Three pages maximum, double-spaced, 12-point or larger type.*

RESUME

The resume provides a brief, factual overview of the awardee's career, including positions held, degrees attained, honors received, etc. The resume may also describe personal achievements or activities that are not noted elsewhere. *Two pages maximum.*

AWARDEE'S STATEMENT

The awardee's statement must be written by the awardee, as a first-person narrative. The statement should include specific examples to illustrate all five of the award criteria. The questions below do not need to be copied verbatim in the text. However, state awardees are strongly encouraged to include headings or keywords related to the criteria to aid the panelists in their reading. *No more than 7 pages, single-spaced, 12 point font.*

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE:

- How have you grown as an educator throughout your career? Cite examples of ways you have developed your skills and/or adapted your practice over time. What strategies or methods do you use to support student learning and student success?
- Share a story about how your work has made a difference for a student or a group of students.

ADVOCACY FOR THE PROFESSION:

- How has your involvement in the National Education Association or NEA affiliate(s) contributed to your success as an educator? How would you persuade a new colleague to join or become more active in the association? In what other ways do you serve as an advocate for the profession and for public education? Please include examples and, if possible, links to videos of you speaking.

COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION AND JUSTICE:

- How do you address issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice in your interactions with students? What is the result of such efforts? How does your approach to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice affect your work? Please include examples.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

- How have you been intentional in engaging families and community members to support student learning and success? How do you build relationships with parents and community members? Please include examples.

LEADERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

- What experiences or activities have been most beneficial to your professional knowledge, skills, and practice? How have you contributed to the professional development of your colleagues? How has your professional growth made a difference for your students, school, and community? Please include examples.

ENDORSEMENT LETTERS

Letters of endorsement are written by the awardee's local affiliate president, colleagues, current or former students, parents, or community members. Letters should be signed, if possible, and the salutation should address the NEA Foundation's national selection panel. *Up to three letters, two pages maximum each, double-spacing preferred. Letters must be submitted with all other materials.*

DIGITAL PHOTO

A JPEG photo (at least 72 pixels per inch and 400KB) of the state awardee should be uploaded as part of online the application. By submitting this photo and application, the awardee consents to the unlimited use by the NEA Foundation and/or the National Education Association (NEA) of his/her image in any form, including but not limited to, digital media, film, audio recording or still photography, in connection with any Foundation and/or NEA publicity or communications effort. These efforts may include, among other things, publications, videos, and websites.

The awardee agrees that the NEA Foundation and/or NEA may have unlimited use of any program information or text from communications that they submit, in connection with any Foundation and/or NEA publicity or communications efforts, as described above.

The NEA Foundation and/or NEA shall be under no obligation to use the awardee's materials in any way. The awardee further agrees that neither the NEA Foundation nor the NEA will compensate them financially or otherwise for the consents granted above.