

Chippewa Valley teacher receives Excellence in Education award

- By Nicole Tuttle For MediaNews Group
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Chippewa Valley Schools teacher Molly DeBono learned in early December 2020 that she had received the Excellence in Education Award through the Michigan Lottery. DeBono will be featured on WXYZ-TV Detroit for her win on Jan. 21, 2021.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOLLY DEBONO

Chippewa Valley Schools teacher Molly DeBono didn't play any lucky numbers, but she still managed to win \$1,500 in cash and a \$500 grant from the Michigan Lottery.

"I am beyond blessed to be a teacher right now. It is definitely not what I had ever envisioned experiencing in my career, but I am grateful I get to be there to help each one of my families during this difficult time," DeBono said.

DeBono was selected to receive an Excellence in Education award from the Michigan Lottery in early December. The Michigan Lottery established the Excellence in Education awards in 2014 to recognize outstanding public school educators in the state. Each week during the school year, the Michigan Lottery chooses an outstanding educator to receive the award. The award includes a \$1,500 cash prize and a \$500 grant to the educator's classroom, school or school district. Winners also receive a plaque and a news segment, viewable locally on WXYZ-TV Detroit.

DeBono is a first grade teacher at Erie Elementary School, located on Romeo Plank Road, south of Cass Avenue in Clinton Township.

"Teachers are doing double the amount of work we usually are, but it is all worth it to keep these students engaged and to try to close this gap that COVID has created in learning," DeBono said.

DeBono was nominated for the award by the Zwicker family, which included a student she had in her class during the 2019-20 school year.

"Stacey Zwicker and her son Dominic – who I taught last year – sent in a beautiful video nomination to WXYZ. They spoke about how I kept the class connected through the pandemic," DeBono said. "I created a class Facebook page, read nightly bedtime stories, visited each student's home to leave them a flower pinwheel for their lawn and sent them all letters."

On Oct. 1, 2020 the Chippewa Valley Schools Board of Education voted to offer an in-person education option for grades K-5 and specialized groups. Students began Oct. 12, 2020. The plan involved a hybrid model for K-5 students, and a traditional five day per week model for Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and K-12 Creative Learning Program (CLP) students. The board voted on Nov. 16, 2020 to return students in K-5, and other specialized groups of students, to remote learning. Administration recommended to return to remote learning for students in grades K-5, the K-12 CLP, Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) and ECSE program, effective Nov. 23 2020. The motion included a targeted return date of Jan. 20, 2021 for in-person hybrid instruction for those students who are not part of the Chippewa Valley Virtual Academy. The board reconfirmed the current extended COVID-19 learning plan on Dec. 7, 2020.

To keep students engaged in virtual learning this year, DeBono does scavenger hunts, brain breaks and other interactive methods, particularly those that get students moving.

“This is not the ideal environment to be teaching first graders,” DeBono said. “This is such a fundamental year for these six and seven-year-olds. I have learned how to be flexible.”



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She also frequently poses questions in ways that allow students to use thumbs up or thumbs down to respond, reducing the need for everyone to unmute microphones to speak.

“They have been so incredible with adjusting to this style of teaching and they amaze me each day,” DeBono said.

Marissa Wasmund, a student-teacher from Oakland University, has been working with DeBono this year and provided needed skills in the new learning environment created by COVID-19 and related restrictions.

“She was incredible with figuring out this new virtual learning with me,” DeBono said. “Some days I have everything planned out for the day, and after the first 15 minutes I’m having to change it up and realize that some things just don’t work through technology like they would face to face.”

Virtual learning has not changed the nature of first graders, however, who are still eager to share aspects of their day and new experiences such as losing baby teeth with their teacher.

“The social/emotional health of my students comes first,” DeBono said. “This is something we work on each and every day.”

Greater collaboration with parents has also become a key element of DeBono's job.

"Parent communication has always been important to me, but now more than ever I am communicating with parents every day through multiple platforms," DeBono said. "We use a website called Schoology to post assignments. I speak to parents and caregivers through here."

DeBono also uses Remind 101 texting site, weekly emails and daily reminders.

"It is hard because some students are at daycare, some are at grandparents' houses, and some have parents there, but they are working from home. They don't always have an adult available, so I am really promoting independence," DeBono said.

As of Dec. 21, 2020, DeBono was teaching a class of 22 students daily via technology. When the hybrid model resumes, these students will return to DeBono's classroom. Eleven will attend in-person on Mondays and Wednesdays, and eleven on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Fridays the two groups alternate. On days when these students are not in-person, they receive online assignments.

"If it is hybrid, half will come on two days, the other half will come on two days, and then they will alternate Fridays. This happened already for about six weeks starting early October," DeBono said. "The CVVA (Chippewa Valley Virtual Academy) students are in a class of their own and will stay virtual all year unless they choose to switch at the trimester end."

In-person teaching also has its challenges in a COVID-19 world, such as when student partner work requires remaining six feet apart and providing equipment such as game boards for every student rather than sharing. Masks are required all day except at lunch or recess, DeBono said.

"The students just love being back in the classroom, so the changes don't seem to phase them," DeBono said.

DeBono was notified that she had been nominated for, and won, the Excellence in Education award via email on Dec. 2.

"I had no idea and was blown away and extremely humbled by this honor," DeBono said.

Due to COVID-19 and related restrictions, DeBono received the award checks in the mail, as well as a plaque. She did a Zoom interview with WXYZ on Dec. 9, 2020. It was on this date that she first saw

the video nomination, learned who nominated her and why. The segment is set to air on Jan. 21, 2021 at 5 p.m. DeBono is still deciding how she will utilize the \$1,500 cash prize, but has a specific idea in mind for the \$500 classroom grant.

“I have been talking with my first-grade team about a great resource we could use called Math Stackers,” DeBono said. “They are math block manipulatives that will help make teaching small math groups more engaging. I also will be speaking with my principal, Dr. Jerry Evanski, about what the school could use this year.”

At the end of the school year, the Michigan Lottery selects one weekly winner to receive the Lottery’s Educator of the Year award and a \$10,000 cash prize.