EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD: Behind every college-bound student is a line of quality teachers

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On Aug. 22 at Governors State University’s opening convocation, students in our first freshman class, wearing braided cords in GSU’s primary colors, black and white, processed into our Center for Performing Arts. Each student was prepared for that moment by a long line of elementary, middle-school and secondary teachers.

We asked our freshmen to nominate teachers who taught them, inspired them and, made it possible for them to become college freshmen. At Convocation we selected three of the nominees and presented them with Educators’ Legacy Awards. We believe student success is the legacy of outstanding teachers.

Because teachers are so important to our society, we intend to present these awards every year at convocation. We read a lot — too much — about problems in the schools. I wish that those who criticize educators would realize teachers are the solution, not the problem. Classrooms, in fact, can be magic places where students’ lives are transformed.

We invited the teachers’ principals and superintendents to convocation because we believe great teachers excel in an environment of excellent leadership in their schools.

I will now quote from the nomination letters:

Taylor Gentry, class of 2018, nominated Lauren LaMaster, her psychology teacher at Alan B. Shepard High School, where the principal is Josh Barron and the superintendent is John Byrne:

“Lauren LaMaster has pushed me and believed in me since the day I walked into her classroom at the beginning of my senior year. I have never in my 12-plus years of schooling had a teacher who has pushed me to strive harder to excel. She was a ‘no days off’ teacher. Failure was not an option. Being average was not an option. Not only was she my teacher, she was my mentor, someone I could talk to about my problems...
beyond school. In all honesty, if it had not been for Lauren LaMaster I would not now be a college freshman at Governors State University."

Neimiah Booker, class of 2018, nominated Debra Taylor, her homebound teacher at Rich Central High School, where the principal is Venesa Woods and the superintendent is Carole Ayanlaja:

"As a result of a medical condition, I required home-schooling for most of my high school years. I could have felt pressured and discouraged. But luckily I had the pleasure of being surrounded by inspiring people, including my homebound teacher, Mrs. Debra Taylor. Mrs. Taylor encouraged and nourished my spirit throughout my high school years. Her words of encouragement and inspiration helped me to overcome challenging experiences. She went above and beyond by always being available to assist me. She provided the educational tools I needed most. I greatly attribute my success to her for being such a wonderful and empowering person."

Michaela Wascher-Disney, class of 2018, nominated Lindsay Beechy-Kociolek, coach and guidance counselor at Manteno High School where Roger Schnitzler is the principal and Lisa Harrod is the superintendent:

"During my junior year, I met Mrs. Kociolek (she was Ms. Beechy then). She was my cheerleading coach and guidance counselor. She always had a smile on her face at cheerleading practice, even though I knew that she had spent a long, hard day dealing with bratty teens. After practice, she was available, not just for me but for any student who needed an adult to talk with. When I was preparing for ACT/SATs, I was in Mrs. Kociolek's office every day talking about test preparation and what happens next — college. She taught me patience and gave me hope. She taught me to stay positive during my final years of high school and to anticipate bigger and better things to come."

The next time we read about the latest panacea for improving the schools — standardized testing or a trendy public policy promoted by people who have never taught — we would be well advised to remember the words of GSU's college freshmen. If we want an educated society and a more enlightened world, the best we can do is support talented, dedicated teachers and the principals and superintendents who create a positive environment for their work.