



Media Release

Three Missouri High School Skilled Trades Teachers Among 61 Finalists for 2021 Harbor Freight Tools for Schools Prize for Teaching Excellence

The Missouri finalists teach in Chillicothe, Independence and Thayer

For Immediate Release:
July 14, 2021

Contact: Lee Condon
lcondon@hftforschools.org
c: 424.299.2320

LOS ANGELES – High school skilled trades teachers and their programs are often overlooked and underfunded. As the United States faces a critical shortage of skilled trades workers, Harbor Freight Tools for Schools is shining a spotlight on excellent public high school skilled trades programs with its annual Prize for Teaching Excellence.

Today, the program announced that three public high school teachers from Missouri have been named as finalists for the prize. The finalists were chosen by an independent panel of judges from among a field of more than 700 skilled trades teachers who applied for the prize. The 61 finalists are from 30 states and specialize in trades including advanced manufacturing, welding, construction, automotive and agriculture mechanics.

The winners will be announced in late October. More than \$1 million in cash prizes will be shared by 18 teachers and their skilled trades programs.

“Despite the dramatic need for a new generation of workers, research has shown that most U.S. high school students do not have access to high-quality skilled trades programs. The goal of the prize is to highlight some of the most outstanding programs

nationwide and to celebrate teachers who are making a big difference in the lives of students,” said Danny Corwin, executive director of Harbor Freight Tools for Schools. “Our hope is that the stories of these dedicated teachers will inspire other communities to create similar programs for their own high school students. All high school students who want to learn a skilled trade and have a talent for working with their hands should have the same opportunity.”

These are the three finalists from Missouri.

John Amos teaches construction at William Chrisman High School in Independence, Missouri. Having grown up in a family of construction workers, it was a foregone conclusion that Amos would end up in the industry. In the course of his twenty-year career as a construction project manager, Amos found himself drawn towards working with summer interns—a job most other PM’s weren’t interested in. The knack for teaching, along with several other volunteer experiences, led him to make a career change at age 38 as he went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in education, a master’s degree in curriculum & instruction, and then a CTE certification. His program works closely with Habitat for Humanity, and his students regularly assist in building houses for the needy in the school’s surrounding neighborhood. Amos works with the local Carpenters Union and attends workshops for local skilled trades teachers to keep his own skills sharp. He is currently working toward a commercial driver’s license so he can drive students in a school bus to various job sites and get first-hand experience on large commercial projects as part of their paid internship partnerships. Since Amos’s construction trades pathway was added to his district’s pathways program seven years ago, graduation rates have risen from 79 percent to 94 percent.

Jackie (Lee) Caughron teaches industrial welding at Grand River Technical School in Chillicothe, Missouri. Throughout his industry career as a welder, Caughron was always inspired by his wife’s experience as a business teacher and how students responded to her teaching style. While working at a structural steel company, Caughron trained new personnel and felt great satisfaction when he could help employees improve their skills. He picked up further teaching style ideas and sharpened his own welding skills while taking night courses at GRTS, and ended up taking over the position when his instructor retired in the summer of 2001. Now twenty years on at the school, Caughron’s program has expanded enough to require additional instructors—including one of his former students. He sets students up for success and career-readiness by taking them on industry tours, bringing in guest speakers, and incorporating youth apprenticeships for real world experience related to their training. Many of his projects fabricate items for community members, businesses and organizations, including trailers, benches,

intruder safety latches for the school district, signage, and more, bringing the outcomes of their real-world skills into the local community.

Teanna Simpson teaches agricultural mechanics at Thayer High School in Thayer, Missouri. Simpson's youth on a cattle ranch and time spent in a machine shop with her father encouraged her pursuit of a career in agriculture and mechanics education. Just two years on at her school, Simpson is already passionate about picking up new skills and experiences with equipment in order to expand her program. In her time already spent teaching, she has seen students grow in confidence in her shop, and had six students graduate with honors in Agriculture Education through the district's CTE Honors Program. Current juniors in her program partner with community professionals to work in fields including auto body, welding, well drilling and pump service, and more. Other opportunities for real world experience and application of Simpson's imparted skills include designing and manufacturing fire pits for sale, building large scale livestock shelters, and reconstructing a local house. Students who join Simpson's program know they are joining an organization that pushes them to exceed their expectations, encourages them to surpass their goals, and showcases their hard work, knowledge and talent.

The complete list of finalists is available [here](#).

There is rare bipartisan support for increased investment in skilled trades education in high school. More than 76 percent of Republicans, Democrats and Independents said they favor increased public funding for skilled trades education and think that offering skilled trades classes in high school should be a priority, according to polling by NORC at the University of Chicago. The poll was commissioned by Harbor Freight Tools for Schools.

Eric Smidt, the owner and founder of Harbor Freight Tools, said high school skilled trades programs provide a pathway not just to a good job, but also to a meaningful career and a good life.

"High school skilled trades teachers are heroes," Smidt said. "Our teachers and their programs are an essential part of meeting the national challenge of educating the next generation of skilled trades workers."

Winners join a nationwide network of outstanding trades teachers who convene throughout the year and in a three-day summer institute to share best practices and brainstorm ways to improve high school skilled trades programs.

The 2021 finalists now advance to a second round of competition, where they will be asked to respond to online expert-led learning modules designed to solicit their insights and creative ideas about teaching practices. The finalists will be asked how ideas from the modules might be used to inspire students to achieve excellence in the skilled trades. Two rounds of judging, each by separate independent panels of reviewers, will narrow the field to 18 winners and, finally, name the three Grand Prize winners and 15 additional prize winners.

Grand Prize winners will each receive \$100,000, with \$70,000 going to their public high school skilled trades program and \$30,000 to the skilled trades teacher behind the winning program. The 15 additional winners will each be awarded \$50,000, with \$35,000 going to their public high school program and \$15,000 to the teacher. Winners whose school, district and/or state policy prohibits receipt of the individual portion of prize award were eligible to apply on behalf of their school's skilled trades program. If they win, the entire share of the prize will be awarded to the school.

Winners will be announced in late October.

About Harbor Freight Tools for Schools

Harbor Freight Tools for Schools is a program of The Smidt Foundation, established by Harbor Freight Tools owner and founder Eric Smidt, to advance excellent skilled trades education in U.S. public high schools. With a deep respect for the dignity of these fields and for the intelligence and creativity of people who work with their hands, Harbor Freight Tools for Schools aims to drive a greater understanding of and investment in skilled trades education, believing that access to quality skilled trades education gives high school students pathways to graduation, opportunity, good jobs, and a workforce our country needs. Harbor Freight Tools is a major supporter of the Harbor Freight Tools for Schools program. For more information, visit: harborfreighttoolsforschools.org

#####