

Michigan Alternative Education Organization

Award Winners 2026



MAEO Mission

The mission of the Michigan Alternative Education Organization is to advocate for exemplary practices in alternative education, to provide a network of support for alternative educators and students and to promote awareness of alternative education at the local and state levels.



www.maeo.org

Michigan Alternative Education Organization

**Nominate
The Best of the Best**

OUTSTANDING PROGRAM COMPONENT \$250

OUTSTANDING ADMINISTRATOR \$250

OUTSTANDING TEACHER \$250

SCHOOL OF THE YEAR \$500

OUTSTANDING SUPPORT/ADVOCATE \$250

To NOMINATE
<https://form.jotform.com/252366097484164>
Nominations close March 1, 2026

Awards announced & presented at the annual conference on May 1

Award Categories:

- School of the Year
- Outstanding Administrator
- Outstanding Teacher
- Outstanding Program Component
- Outstanding Support/Advocate

School of the Year

The selected school should represent the pinnacle of many/all of the “Exemplary Practices – THE NATIONAL ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION.”

- vision & mission
- leadership
- climate & culture
- staffing and PD
- curriculum and instruction
- student assessment
- transition planning and support
- family engagement
- collaboration
- program evaluation
- school counseling and social work
- policies and procedures
- personalization and digital learning

This school stands as a model for others to aspire to.

The nominees for School of the Year are:

1. ACE Rochester



Highlights

- ★ we reinforce joy in learning, no matter what environment.
- ★ Our school has not only grown in size but has evolved into a premier model of what alternative education should be: a place where mental health, academic innovation, and school spirit intersect to grow student lives.
- ★ "student-first" philosophy, "world as a classroom", "Bulldog Brag", "whole child"

2. Davison Alternative Ed



Highlights

- ★ safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment where individual needs are honored, potential is nurtured, and success is redefined
- ★ unified cell phone policy, and the results speak for themselves
- ★ “encouragement over enforcement”, “believe in students”, “family-like atmosphere”, “ABCs of DAE”

3. Farmington Central High School



Highlights

- ★ Master the Morning, Own the Afternoon, and Support the Whole Student
- ★ PRIDE board, PLUS class, team teaching, Work Based Learning, relevant, real-world learning experiences
- ★ peaceful environment, input, effort, and support of this amazing staff

4. Flint ALA



Highlights

- ★ inclusive, innovative, and deeply supportive learning environment
- ★ Readers as Leaders-“learning to read” to “reading to learn,” Capturing Kids’ Hearts National Showcase School
- ★ whole-child support - through extensive partnerships; care, structure, and high expectations

5. Quest NBAS



Highlights

- ★ service projects, sense of identity and a place to belong
- ★ Thumb Alternative Sports League (TASL)
- ★ living and thriving, new friends, home away from home

6. Relevant Academy



Highlights

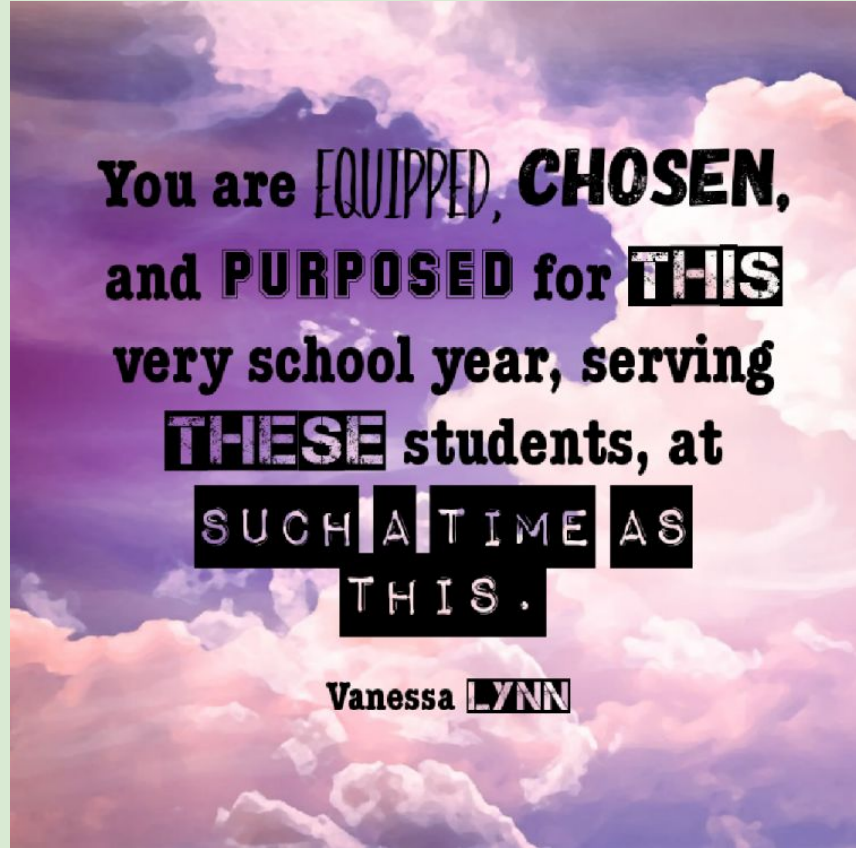
- ★ “The island of misfit toys, think outside the box, Profile of a Graduate
- ★ restoring trust where education once wounded, showing students who once felt invisible that they matter
- ★ perseverance, adaptability, commitment, and resilience our staff

7. Troy Career & College



Highlights

- ★ effort, energy, empathy and kindness
- ★ relationships, flexibility, and personalized learning
- ★ unique, interest-based courses, therapeutic supports and creative outlets



AND THE 2026 School of the Year IS...



- ACE Rochester
- Davison Alternative Education
- Farmington Central
- Flint ALA
- Quest NBAS
- Relevant
- Troy College & Career



CONGRATULATIONS!!!

Flint ALA

Outstanding Administrator

This school leader is distinguished by their service to their school community. Their accomplishments serve to better not only themselves but also the staff, students, families and others touched by their work.

The nominees for Outstanding Administrator are:

1. Lauren Blakely



Highlights

- ★ Superintendent Relevant Academy since 2022
- ★ more than doubled the size of the Academy in four short years
- ★ safe, secure, successful, and relevant learning experience for all students
- ★ diagnosed with Cancer, led meetings from home and the hospital, **BEAT CANCER** and returned to work

2. Carrie Rugenstein



Highlights

- ★ Superintendent Lincoln Alternative High School
- ★ leadership, compassion, and unwavering commitment
- ★ stability, consistency, and strong leadership during a time of transition; students and staff continued to feel supported and valued
- ★ lasting impact on our school community and the students within it

3. Nick Kunnen



Highlights

- ★ director of the Innovative Learning Center
- ★ selfless, kind, patient, understanding, and genuine
- ★ each day is a new day; don't need to carry on the mistakes from yesterday into the next.
- ★ individuality; empowering students to take charge of their life through self-discovery

4. Rob Barrett



Highlights

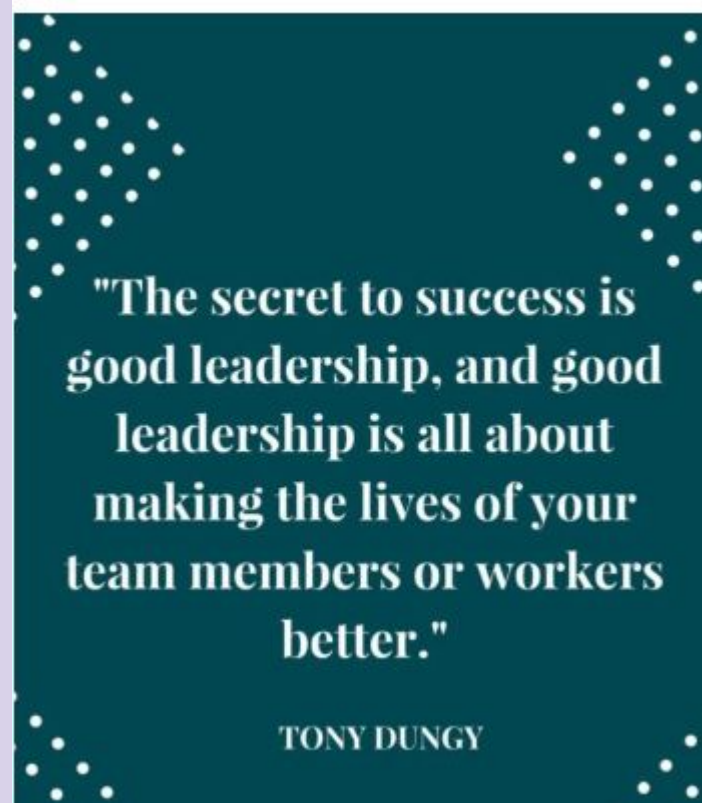
- ★ Director of Programs at Asher Alternative and Adult Education
- ★ ensures everyone's voice is heard and their opinions matter in the decision making process
- ★ strongest advocate for students and staff alike
- ★ ensures everyone's voice is heard and their opinions matter

5. Jennifer Wickersham



Highlights

- ★ Principal Academy 21
- ★ committed and caring leader; all-enduring perseverance
- ★ Safety and trust to try new things, be creative, and make mistakes
- ★ constructivist approach to leadership and problem solving; whole child approach to helping students succeed



AND THE 2026 Outstanding Administrator IS...

Lauren Blakely
Carrie Rugenstein
Nick Kunnen
Rob Barrett
Jennifer Wickersham



CONGRATULATIONS!!!

Nick Kunnen



Outstanding Teacher

This teacher is an exceptionally passionate, committed, creative and respected educator. They go above and beyond to see their students succeed and to deliver excellent content and/or enriching programs to their school.

The nominees for Outstanding Teacher are:

1. Melissa Koronka



Highlights

- ★ science teacher at the Accelerated Learning Academy (ALA) in Flint
- ★ Teacher of the Year-Women Rock Award & Excellence in Technology Integration
- ★ highest standards of the teaching profession; dedication to students, innovative instructional strategies, and passion for fostering academic growth and personal development
- ★ mentors new teachers, and participates in professional development initiatives

2. Tonya Lackey



Highlights

- ★ Student Council Advisor, School Store Advisor, MAEO Advisor, Prom Coordinator, & National Honor Society Advisor Asher High School
- ★ cares about the students and they for her.; the Joy that needs to be present in any learning institution
- ★ organized and carried out the events that make school a social experience

3. Michael MacQueen



Highlights

- ★ Teacher-Plainwell Community Schools for 33 years, the last six at Renaissance High School.
- ★ Goneboarding project-based learning opportunity for students.
- ★ Kind, caring personality and fierce advocate for students
- ★ Developed structures to improve GED program & personalized GED curriculum for students

4. Alyssia Proulx



Highlights

- ★ Teacher Mentor at Alternative Educational Academy, Ogemaw
- ★ Unique superpower for solving any challenge academic, behavioral, emotional, or logistical, both students and staff
- ★ Serves as MAEO Stars Advisor, Running Club Coach, and Art Club Coach
- ★ Rare ability to connect with students, advocate for their needs, and guide them through challenges with patience, empathy, and unwavering commitment.

5. Forest Tate



Highlights

- ★ Teacher of English, History of Sports, Art & Writing, Mythology, and Speech-Lincoln Alternative High School, Owosso
- ★ engaging instruction, authentic relationships, welcoming and dynamic classroom -young people feel seen, respected, and valued
- ★ unwavering dedication to his career, our students, and his colleagues
- ★ actively seeks to be part of the solution for any problem-the teacher who will always go the extra mile

6. Kris Wager



Highlights

- ★ Academic and Career Education Academy for the past 9 years
- ★ example for young staff to follow, sets high expectations for students and herself; has withstood the many changes in education
- ★ positive, caring, and dedicated to helping students learn math
- ★ students and staff succeed at ACEA because of Kris Wager
- ★

7. Fawn Wood



Highlights

- ★ First year at Lincoln Alternative High School
- ★ Establishes strong, clear boundaries; consistency creates a safe and predictable learning environment, balances accountability with empathy, ensuring students feel supported while still being held to high expectations.
- ★ Classroom is engaging, collaborative, and thoughtfully designed
- ★ Brings fresh ideas that energize seasoned staff members and inspire us to reflect on and refine our own practices

“
*The best teachers are
those who inspire us to
be our best selves.
Thank you for being a
constant source of
inspiration.*

AND THE 2026 Outstanding Teacher IS...

Melissa Koronka
Tonya Lackey
Michael MacQueen
Alyssia Proulx
Forest Tate
Kris Wager
Fawn Wood



Alyssia Proulx

CONGRATULATIONS!!!



Outstanding Support/Advocate of the Year

The support personnel or advocate that receives this award is one who goes above the norm to assist students, schools or programs in alternative education. This person is known to believe in alternative education and assist by enlightening others.

The nominees for Outstanding Support/Advocate are:

1. Gizelle Ross



Highlights

- ★ Paraprofessional Lincoln Alternative High School and President of the Support Staff Union
- ★ invests herself fully in the well-being and success of every student she encounters
- ★ Tireless advocacy, steadfast leadership, unwavering commitment to students' success; strong work ethic, professionalism, and a deep commitment
- ★ problem solving skills, empathy relating with the students, helping us all during our roughest times, and being our friend through it all

2. Leah Warner



Highlights

- ★ Academic Navigator Relevant Academy
- ★ keeps all of the Relevant Academy plates spinning, keeper of how to's and the knower of all things
- ★ Outstanding efficiency, thoughtfulness and kindness, calm, patient, and supportive
- ★ Fully present, capable, solutions-focused, welcoming & responsive learning environment
- ★ Displays warmth amongst neutrality, keeping the scales of administration in balance

3. Diane Fournier



Highlights

- ★ 1.5 years Starkweather MTSS Academic Interventionist; School Improvement Team
- ★ Emotional and academic heartbeat, unwavering patience/high accountability “warmly strict”
- ★ 90% of her students meeting or exceeding goals
- ★ Innovation is a daily practice not a buzzword; crucial bridge between academic intervention and systemic change

4. Kenzie Bissell



Highlights

- ★ Dean of Students - Academic and Career Education Academy
- ★ Kind, caring, compassionate. dedicated, advocate
- ★ Experience, knowledge & impact
- ★ makes time to meet with students, support them and guide them in their educational experience.

AND THE 2026 Outstanding Support/Advocate of the Year IS...

Gizelle Ross
Leah Warner
Diane Fournier
Kenzie Bissell



Gizelle Ross

CONGRATULATIONS!!!



Outstanding Program Component

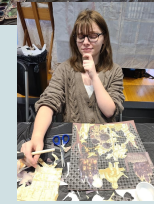
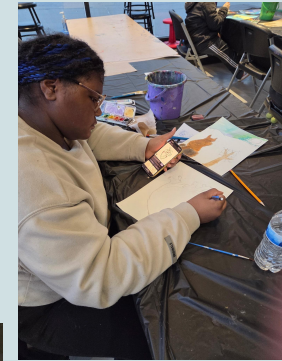
This activity or event is an innovative and inspiring way to bring learning, growth or inspiration in addition to a school's regular curriculum/programming. By participating in this activity or event, students or staff at the school are equipped in a special and surprising way.

The nominees for Outstanding Program Component are:

1. Bay-Arenac Community High School-POD Fridays

Highlights

- ★ One Friday each month from 8:00-11:00 is dedicated to POD Fridays—a structured, community-based learning experience designed to provide hands-on Physical Education and Art instruction
- ★ Strong community partnerships with United Way (funding support), Metro Bus (transportation), the YMCA, and Studio 23
- ★ Students engage in real physical activity, complete multiple art projects, and gain hands-on experience that would otherwise be unavailable to them
- ★ Students who meet the required attendance threshold are awarded a Physical Education credit for YMCA participation or an Art credit for Studio 23 participation which has been approved by MDE



2. Lincoln Street Senior Seminar



Highlights

- ★ “Adulting 101,” Senior Seminar equips students with the essential skills they need to transition successfully into adulthood
- ★ Capstone: comprehensive real-life budgeting project, grounded in each student’s own career research
- ★ Hands-on experiences build confidence, readiness, and a sense of empowerment
- ★ Essential skills in career exploration, financial literacy, communication, and healthy relationships; opportunity to earn additional credit

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No school without
spectacular eccentrics
and crazy hearts is
worth attending.

SAUL BELLOW

AND THE 2026 Outstanding Program Component IS...

Bay-Arenac
Community High
School-POD Fridays

Lincoln Street Senior
Seminar



CONGRATULATIONS!!!

Lincoln Street Senior Seminar



Thank you to our MACAE partners for voting and making this process possible!!!



**To all of our winners, nominees, schools, staff,
and students on another successful year of
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION!!!**

