

## **Cocke County School Board Recognizes Teachers of the Year and Celebrates District Achievements**

On Thursday, January 9, 2025, the Cocke County School Board gathered to honor the exceptional educators chosen as the Teachers of the Year. The ceremony highlighted three outstanding teachers for their dedication and contributions to education in the community.

Caroline Marra, a 25-year veteran third-grade teacher at Edgemont Elementary, was named the PreK-4 Teacher of the Year. Mrs. Marra emphasized the importance of building relationships with students, fostering an environment where all learners can succeed, and setting high expectations for achievement. These principles, she said, form the foundation of her teaching approach.

Mark Tocholke, a 6-8 grade Science and Social Studies teacher at Grassy Fork Elementary, was honored as the 5-8 Teacher of the Year. With degrees in Respiratory Therapy, Geoscience, Education, and Epidemiology, Mr. Tocholke has spent the last 14 years inspiring his students to develop a love for science. He commutes over an hour each day to teach at Grassy Fork and expressed his deep appreciation for the school community, stating he couldn't imagine a better place to teach.

Randy West, a mathematics and Special Education teacher at Cocke County High School, was recognized as the 9-12 Teacher of the Year. With a career spanning more than three decades, Mr. West holds a Bachelor's in Secondary Education, a Master's in Exercise Science, an Educational Specialist degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and is currently pursuing his Doctorate at Carson-Newman University. His teaching philosophy is centered around the belief that, "No one is born a winner or loser; we are all born choosers, so make wise choices," a message he strives to instill in his students.

In addition to honoring these outstanding educators, Dr. Waits, Instructional Supervisor K-12 of Cocke County Schools, shared important district-wide updates with the school board. Notably, Cocke County has been designated an *Advancing District* by the Tennessee Department of Education. This new designation reflects improvements in several key areas, including graduation rates, student achievement, chronic absenteeism, and the success of diverse student groups, such as English Language Learners and students with disabilities. The district had previously been categorized as *Satisfactory*, making this designation a significant step forward.

Dr. Waits also shared that the Tennessee Department of Education recently released school letter grades based on a combination of factors, including achievement, growth, and the success of the bottom 25% of students. In Cocke County, of the 10 schools that qualified for a letter grade, six received an impressive A or B grade, a testament to the hard work and dedication of teachers, principals, staff, and students.

Two schools in Cocke County—Grassy Fork Elementary and Smoky Mountain Elementary—were also recognized as *Reward Schools* for their outstanding performance. These schools are ranked among the top schools in Tennessee based on achievement, absenteeism rates, and other metrics. Only 377 out of more than 1,700 public schools in Tennessee earned this distinction for

the 2023-2024 school year. Additionally, Centerview Elementary and Cocke County High School narrowly missed the *Reward School* designation, falling just tenths of a point short.

For more information on school performance data across Tennessee, visit <https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/>

The Cocke County School Board congratulates all of the teachers, students, and schools for their continued commitment to excellence in education.

Pictured below are the Cocke County Schools Teachers of the Year from left to right, Caroline Marra, Mark Tocholke, and Randy West.

