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TO: Members of the State Board of Education
FROM: Karen B. Salmon, Ph.D.
DATE: June 27, 2017
SUBJECT: Recognition of Maryland's 2016-2017 Milken National Educator

BACKGROUND:

On Thursday, December 1, 2017, Dr. Karen Salmon joined Michael Milken, President and Co-Founder of the Milken Family Foundation, as he announced, to a surprised teacher at Havre de Grace Elementary School in Harford County, that this teacher had been selected as a winner of the prestigious Milken National Educator Award. The announcement took place at an assembly with the entire student body and staff, and included State Board Members Stephanie Iszard, Madhu Sidhu and local leaders, including the Superintendent of Harford County Public Schools.

Maryland has had a partnership with the Milken Family Foundation for twenty-four years, and has successfully identified sixty-one Maryland educators who have won the Milken National Educator Award, a non-restricted cash prize of \$25,000. With this year's honoree, the Milken Foundation will have contributed \$1,525,000 to Maryland educators who have won this prestigious award. Each year, the Maryland State Board of Education honors the newly selected educator.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This year's recipient is **Thomas Dennison**, a 5th grade teacher at Havre de Grace Elementary School in Harford County. (See Bio Attached.) He will be accompanied by his principal – Ronald Wooden, Superintendent Barbara Canavan, and family members.

The recipient will be introduced and a brief video shown capturing the excitement of the surprise announcement. Mr. Wooden and Mrs. Canavan will commend Thomas, who will then say a few words about the personal and professional significance of this recognition.

ACTION:

Dr. Darla Strouse, State Director of the Milken National Educator Awards Program, will introduce Mr. Dennison and Dr. Salmon and Mr. Smarick will present him with the Milken National Educator crystal obelisk and an MSDE/State Board Citation. Commemorative photos will be taken. State Board members will have an opportunity to congratulate the winner.

Attachment

Name: Thomas Dennison
Grade/s taught: 5th grade
School: Havre de Grace Elementary School
District: Harford County Public Schools
City, State: Havre de Grace, MD

In Thomas Dennison's class at Havre de Grace Elementary School, students learn to tap into their most powerful resource: their imaginations. They learn about the Revolutionary War by reenacting the battle of Lexington and Concord with water balloons in the school's backyard. It's not uncommon to find Dennison's fifth-graders outside learning about rockets or collaborating with other classes for massive math-oriented scavenger hunts. Inside the classroom, Dennison has high expectations for both learning and conduct. Students greet visitors at the door with a handshake. Small groups debate and analyze the day's reading while others solve problems on chalkboard-covered tabletops, as Dennison floats among groups as a facilitator.

Dennison has taught several grades at the Title I preK-5 school, and many of his students have battled learning disabilities, abuse and poverty. But that only motivates Dennison more to provide them with the passion, confidence and tools they need to overcome obstacles, become tomorrow's problem-solvers, and succeed in school and in life. And succeed they do: Last year, Dennison's entire class scored in the proficient or advanced range on Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) assessments, and 95% reached that level on tests used to measure math gains. Havre de Grace ranks in the top 1% for reading and 10% for math among Maryland's Title I schools. Dennison, though, looks for additional measures of success in his students: persistence, curiosity, compassion, creativity, sense of wonder, motivation, leadership and courage.

When Dennison visited the Ron Clark Academy to learn about creating a culture of student engagement, he returned to Havre de Grace energized. He became a contributing founder of the school's Houses Initiative, which split the school community into smaller groups to make it feel more like a family. Dennison leads one of the houses and develops curriculum, provides professional development, mentors students, and plans schoolwide celebrations, including a celebrity-themed event on the first day of school, when he hired a news crew and interviewed each student who walked down the red carpet that led to the school's front doors.

Dennison believes in transformation and welcomes students with behavior problems into his class; he puts them in the front row and turns them into leaders who believe in themselves and put their best foot forward. He creates an atmosphere of celebration in his class, playing music during transitions or to build students' excitement. All day long, students high-five, clap, and bang drums when classmates offer correct answers, showing their appreciation for each other and recognizing their peers' successes.

Teachers and administrators from around the state have visited Dennison's classroom, and the emphasis he has placed on student engagement has motivated colleagues and improved both students' behavior and their achievement. Dennison serves as the fifth-grade level chair, mentors interns from nearby universities, and sits on the school's Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) team. His background in educational technology led to his role as Havre de Grace's unofficial go-to techie; he helped the school create a second computer lab and integrate Promethean boards, ActivInspire, iPods and other tools into classrooms.

A fixture in the Havre de Grace community, Dennison, who has four children of his own, goes to students' sporting events, sees them at the park, and attends church with them. He visits each student's home at the beginning of the year and holds homework help nights for both students and parents. He works with his church to make sure students' physical needs are met and never misses the opportunity to praise students and remind them that they are unique, special, and a gift to the world. Parents often ask to have their children placed in Dennison's class, and because he has taught multiple grades, he has had many students more than once. Former students often describe Dennison as the teacher who changed their lives.

Dennison earned a bachelor's degree in early childhood education in 2002 and a master's in computer technology in 2003 from Ohio State University.