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Michael Wilson named 2019 Special Services Teacher of the Year

St. Croix Falls educator to receive \$3,000 from Herb Kohl Educational Foundation

MADISON — In a surprise ceremony at his school today, Michael Wilson, a school counselor at St. Croix Falls High School, was named Wisconsin's 2019 Special Services Teacher of the Year.

State Superintendent Tony Evers made the announcement during an all-school assembly. As part of the Teacher of the Year honor, Wilson will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation.

"Our teachers wear many hats, yet their dedication to children is constant," said State Superintendent Tony Evers. "From the classroom to the conference room to the community, they focus on our kids and their education. It is an honor to recognize educators who do so much for Wisconsin's students and our public schools."

Herb Kohl, philanthropist, businessman, and co-sponsor of the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his educational foundation, said he supports the program because "I want to help teachers pursue their unrealized goals for their classroom, their school, or their professional development."

A self-described champion for mental health awareness and reducing stigma around the topic, Wilson pioneered a Bandana Project for students to show support for mental health issues. The initial 100 white bandanas were intended as a visible message that mental health is important and that the bearers will either ask for or offer help when needed. Displayed on jackets, backpacks, and computer bags, about two-thirds of the high school population sport the bandanas. "Research shows that students typically go to someone their age for help in a time of need," Wilson said. The bandanas, signs of support from one student to another, are a project of the Students Offering Support (SOS) group, which he leads.

Wilson has streamlined some components of the BARR (Building Assets Reducing Risks) program to provide real-time, shared data that improved efficiency and effectiveness. With staff focused on the whole child and acting quickly to intervene, St. Croix Falls has reduced the percentage of ninth-grade students who fail a class from a high of 34.2 percent in 2014-15 to 11.25 percent for the 2016-17 school year. Wilson's

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leadership brought mental health screening to first-year high school students to ensure their needs can be met on multiple levels. Additionally, he assisted area counselors in securing office space in the school so students can receive counseling services confidentially, without leaving school. He stresses that students' lives outside of school directly affect their performance. "Students in crisis or students who are dealing with serious situations need more than just a friendly ear. They need guidance, assistance, and a coach to help them through the tough times," he said. In a letter of recommendation, Wilson is recognized as "a dedicated professional educator who forms meaningful bonds with his students as he helps them transition from adolescence to early adulthood."

Wilson created Career Day, which brings community members in to teach students about a variety of professions. With 40 percent of parents having a high school diploma or less, Wilson recognizes that "first generation college students need extra support." From increasing access to college campus visits to individual and parent meetings held throughout the year, Wilson makes sure students get the attention and information they need to think beyond high school and apply for college and financial aid.

Outside of school, Wilson has coached or been assistant coach for 20 plus baseball teams, sometimes multiple age groups in the same year. He serves as the St. Croix Falls Baseball Association President, helping the community-based organization raise money and improve the youth baseball program in St. Croix Falls. In the summer of 2017, more than 200 youth played baseball from tee-ball to eighth-grade traveling teams. Explaining the reason for his efforts coaching baseball, basketball, or football or leading an association meeting, Wilson said, "Our school is the center of our community and students' connection to school through involvement fosters positive results in the classroom."

Prior to working at St. Croix Falls High School, Wilson was a grade six to 12 counselor at Clear Lake Junior and Senior High School. He holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and master's degree in guidance and counseling from the University of Wisconsin-Stout and a Master of Science in Education from UW-River Falls.

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