

Education

Montgomery physics teacher is among educators earning presidential honor

By **Donna St. George** July 10

James Schafer teaches physics. It is not the easiest subject to master at [Montgomery Blair High School](#), but Schafer largely steers clear of classroom lectures, instead urging his students to explore the material, collaborate, pose questions.

“It’s more about having a conversation with the students and walking them through the development of the ideas, instead of just stating facts,” he said.

The teacher’s talents have been honored before in Montgomery County, where in 2010 he was named teacher of the year. But now he has earned national recognition, with a 2015 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching.

Schafer, 35, was among 108 educators tapped for the honor, including two others in the region: Aris Pangilinan, who teaches at the Francis L. Cardozo Education Campus in the District, and Florentia Spires, a master educator in D.C. school system.

“These teachers are shaping America’s success through their passion for math and science,” President [Obama said in a statement](#) when the awards were announced this month. “Their leadership and commitment empower our children to think critically and creatively about science, technology, engineering, and math. The work these teachers are doing in our classrooms today will help ensure that America stays on the cutting edge tomorrow.”

At the Silver Spring school, Schafer teaches a range of physics courses, including AP physics, quantum physics, mathematical physics and a physics class for freshmen in the school’s math, science and computer science magnet program.

When a Blair student recently emerged as [a winner this year](#) in the prestigious Intel Science Talent Search competition, Schafer’s name came up.

[\[Blair leads nation in Intel science finalists since 1999\]](#)

“One of the best teachers in the universe,” said Michael Hofmann Winer, then a Blair student, in an interview after he took home a first-place medal for innovation in the Intel event. One thing that makes Schafer so successful is his deep knowledge of his subject, Winer said this week. “He understands these concepts several different ways, and he can explain it to you several different ways.”

[Physics phenom wins national award]

Blair Principal Renay Johnson said Schafer takes the time to get to know his students and is exceptional at connecting with them. “The material can be hard for young minds to comprehend, but he makes it engaging,” she said.

Schafer has taken the praise in stride, Johnson said. “He wears it well,” she said. “He is very modest. He continues to do what he does because he loves teaching and learning.”

Thirteen years into his career, Schafer — at Blair since the beginning — is sponsor of the school’s physics and quiz bowl teams. Members of his physics team have competed nationally and internationally, while his quiz bowl teams have been in the “It’s Academic” finals numerous times and have won the Washington-area championship once. His quiz bowl team this year ranked seventh and 13th in other national competitions.

Schafer said he takes particular pride in being one of the founders of Puzzlepalooza, an annual team-based multiday puzzle competition at Blair. “It’s a game to them, but we see so many real-world skills that they are developing,” he said.

When Schafer heard he had won the award, he said he was “a little overwhelmed, very honored, very humbled.” Each honoree receives \$10,000 from the National Science Foundation, which administers the program for the White House’s Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Schafer said there are many other teachers who are equally deserving.

“It’s always a big honor to be recognized for what you do, and it’s extremely humbling,” he said. “But I think it’s really a reflection of the wonderful students I get to teach and the people I get to work with every day.”

Donna St. George writes about education, with an emphasis on Montgomery County schools.
