Indianapolis Public Schools names Ann Mennonno 'Teacher of the Year'

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The Teacher of the Year's classroom is a zoo. Hens cluck outside, crayfish swim in water and a tadpole has turned into a frog.

Ann Mennonno’s first- and second-graders cradle crayfish and Madagascar hissing cockroaches. They care for a bearded dragon named Cinderella.

In this classroom, learning comes to life.

“It’s more than reading about it,” said Mennonno, who was chosen Friday as Indianapolis Public Schools’ Teacher of the Year. “It’s seeing it, feeling it and being responsible for it — and that’s when you don’t forget.”

A 13-year educator at IPS, Mennonno takes the title for the second time. She was Teacher of the Year in 2004.

Praised for her innovative teaching style, Mennonno integrates reading, writing and math in her social studies and science lessons in her multi-age classroom for Grades 1 and 2 at the Center for Inquiry at IPS 27 on the Near-Northside.

For a unit on life cycles, which led to the classroom zoo, she took her class to the real zoo to pick animals to write about in nonfiction books. They also read “Magic School Bus: Expedition Down Under.”

Books, after all, are Mennonno’s specialty. She has a book for everything: When her students misbehaved recently, she read “Miss Nelson is Missing!” — a Jekyll-and-Hyde tale of a kind teacher who disguises herself as a strict substitute teacher to calm a rowdy classroom.

“This is where the kids are going to fall in love with reading, fall in love with school and fall in love with teachers,” she said. “So if I can lay...
that foundation, then the rest is going to fall into place."

Among the hundreds of books in her classroom are Nook e-readers, purchased through grants, because she says that’s the way this generation will read.

She teaches independence by letting her 6-, 7- and 8-year-old students choose where to sit — on chairs, on a couch, on cushions or on the floor. She teaches curiosity by expecting them to approach learning like scientists, authors and mathematicians.

“You’re little people with great big questions,” Mennonno tells her class.

They learned about the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and read a book about a girl in Afghanistan not allowed to go to school. They researched international organizations that help children and collected school supplies, which Mennonno will take to Honduras this summer through the Heart in Education Teacher Outreach.

That will come after her summer trip to China to teach inquiry-based learning models.

“She brings the world into the classroom,” said Principal Jamilyn Bertsch.

Mennonno, 44, Plainfield, will represent IPS in the statewide Teacher of the Year competition.

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