

EDITORIAL: Teachers of Distinction

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This year's Teacher of Distinction winners: front, Julie Mattox; front row from left, Jeni Chandler, Anita McGraw, Jamie Baker, Valerie Olson, Lanette Westbrook, Karen Barclay, back row from left Brenda Gilbert; , Courtney Wilemon, Donna Jones, Ruth Baker, Anita Buchanan and Melissa Coleman. (Thomas Wells)

The CREATE Foundation's annual honors day on Monday for teachers and assistant teachers in the Tupelo Public Schools affirmed exceptional community interest and pride in educational excellence, and it provided a tangible reward, \$11,500 in checks presented to the honorees chosen from among 52 nominees.

The program, Teachers of Distinction, is among the largest of its kind in a non-metropolitan public school district. Since the program started, \$106,000 has been awarded.

The setting for the annual awards each year is the Tupelo Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, which applauded the achievements of all the nominated teachers.

The winners were Karen Barclay, Anita Williams McGraw, Anita Buchanan, Jamie Baker, Courtney Wilemon, Donna Jones, Jeni Chandler, Brenda Gilbert, Ruth Baker and Julie Mattox. Winning assistants were Melissa Coleman, Valerie Olson and Lanette Westbrook.

CREATE made the awards from private funds designated for education and community enrichment.

The 10 teachers and three teaching assistant award winners all came from the pool of nominations made in an open public process that began in the 2008-2009 school year.

Nomination itself is an honor because the process allows people who know the teachers from

different perspectives to put their names forward. All the nominees clearly have made an exceptional impression on parents, students and other teachers.

Continuing recognition of effective teaching is especially important in times of challenge for schools. Mississippi's financial situation already has caused Gov. Barbour to impose cuts on public education. An outpouring of interest and support by Tupelo's school supporters maintains a high profile that cannot go unnoticed by legislators and the governor.

Harvard Professor Mark Warren describes the kind of community support evident in Tupelo as "social capital (that) can provide a useful framework for thinking about how to reconnect schools to their communities. When I talk about social capital, I am talking about the resources that are inherent in relationships of trust and cooperation among people. Relationships are important to making anything work, but particularly in places that lack human capital (e.g. education) or financial capital, social capital can play a very important role in bringing real resources into the community."

Tupelo's ability to attract good teachers to its system is sustained by the relationships Warren describes. Trust and cooperation define the history of the Tupelo schools and the community. Teachers want to work where they are valued and recognized – and rewards reinforce the bond.