

Teacher of the Year finalists named



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St. Lucie County Schools Superintendent Michael Lannon (left) surprises Southport Middle School teacher Cristina Veresan with the announcement that she is one of three finalists for the St. Lucie County's 2012 Teacher of the Year award during a visit to her classroom in Port St. Lucie at the start of school Thursday. "It feels invigorating. I can't wait to start teaching today," Veresan said.

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ST. LUCIE COUNTY— These three young teachers have a lot in common.

Their students credit the two math teachers and one science instructor for making education fun. The three, who are all under 32, have spent their short teaching careers in St. Lucie County public schools.

And on Thursday, with an entourage of administrators and school board members, Schools Superintendent Michael Lannon surprised Jeremy Szaichler, a Treasure Coast High math teacher, Cristina Veresan, a science teacher at Southport Middle, and Liz Pruitt, a math instructor at Forest Grove Middle School when he visited their classrooms Thursday and told them they were finalists for the district honor.

"There are about 2,200 teachers in St. Lucie County and we're down to three," Lannon said during the visit to Pruitt's class. "That's how special this is. All three are fabulous teachers and wonderful people who just have kids at heart in everything they do."

The three finalists were picked by a committee of former Teacher of the Year award winners, principals and district administrators. The 2012 Teacher of the Year will be



Southport Middle School teacher Cristina Veresan



Treasure Coast High School teacher Jeremy Szaichler



Forest Grove Middle School teacher Liz Pruitt

announced Feb. 26 at the annual Night of the Stars awards ceremony at Fort Pierce Central High.

The St. Lucie County Education Foundation and district co-sponsor the event where the best non-teaching employee, distinguished minority educator and outstanding first-year teacher are also recognized. Each year's best teacher and non-teacher advance to statewide competition hosted by the Florida Department of Education.

This is the second time Pruitt, 30, has been a district finalist. She was a finalist in 2007 when she was a third-grade teacher at Fairlawn Elementary, where she worked for five years before moving to Forest Grove. She has worked

there for three years teaching math to sixth and eighth-graders.

The other math finalist, Szaichler, 27, tries to make learning easier for his ninth- and 10th-grade students by making up words to help students memorize complicated formulas.

"I'm very excited and determined to show the district what goes on in my classroom so that other teachers can use those resources on their own," said Szaichler, who has taught at Treasure Coast High since 2007 and coaches junior varsity girls basketball.

In addition to teaching her seventh-grade students about science, Veresan, 31, teaches her peers about teaching, is a scientist herself and Forest Grove's science department chair. She integrates the local ecology into her lessons.

"I really think that especially science learning should be rooted in the local ecology and I think students should get a sense of local environmental issues as a way to understand the larger global issues," Veresan said.

But just because they celebrated the announcements with their teachers, didn't mean students got a pass.

"You guys work really hard and if I didn't have great students, I wouldn't have this ability," Pruitt said as she dismissed students to their next class. "You guys have homework tonight."

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