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Golden Apple Scholars Improve Illinois Teaching Retention for 30 Years

BY JULIA PEREZ | MAY 08, 2024

NEWS

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Nine future educators at Illinois Wesleyan University are committing their classroom careers to improving the lives of children in high-need schools as Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois, which is celebrating 30 years as a campus program.

The [Golden Apple Scholars Program in Illinois](#) awards scholarship funding to high school seniors and first- and second-year teacher candidates who are committed to teach in Illinois schools-of-need.

Associate Professor and Chair of [Educational Studies](#) Leah Nillas is the Illinois Wesleyan liaison for Golden Apple Scholars. She said the current cohort of scholars is the largest number IWU has seen at one time from all grade levels [since the program was established on campus in 1994](#), joining 27 past scholars who completed the program.

"If we can prepare and develop teachers who are committed to teach in high-need schools, then we're not only serving the needs of students but the community where IWU students live and work," she said.

A school is designated by Golden Apple as a school-of-need by meeting one of the following two criteria as reported by the State Board of Education: having a student enrollment of 30% or more from families with low income, or if the combined percentage of its students who approached, met or exceeded state learning standards is less than or equal to 60%.

According to Golden Apple, there are currently more than 3,400 schools-of-need in Illinois.

"The retention of teachers is very low in those high need schools," said Nillas. "When children experience a high turnover of teachers, it can be disruptive to their education."

That's where Golden Apple Scholars step in to provide stability and support.

Students in the program participate in four-year residential summer institutes, are mentored by Golden Apple teachers and benefit from networks of support throughout their professional teaching career. The future educators learn how to leverage community resources and secure grants to equip their classrooms. An example of a resource for Bloomington-Normal educators is the [Beyond the Books Educational Foundation](#), said Nillas, where [teachers can apply for grants for innovative classroom projects](#) or engaging resources for the entire school. Golden Apple Scholars then agree to teach for five years in a school-of-need in Illinois within seven years of obtaining an undergraduate degree and acquiring an Illinois Initial Teaching Certificate.

Illinois Wesleyan Golden Apple Scholars named in 2023-24 are Natalie Anderson '24, Maya Black '24, Eileen Conklin '26, Brandon Chavez-Jimenez '24, Marissa Hagler '25, Emma McGrath '25, Samantha Perez '25, Jasmine Reyes '25 and Sawyer White '26.

Jasmine Reyes, of Chicago, is studying elementary education with a math minor. She hopes to teach middle school math for Chicago Public Schools while attending graduate school to study administration and eventually become a principal. Reyes has had the opportunity to student teach at schools in Bloomington and Heyworth.

"I have been exposed to many different opportunities and experiences that have genuinely inspired me to become an exceptional teacher. In my field placements through school, I feel much more prepared and I can go into my classroom with confidence in myself as a teacher," she said. "I know that I have been chosen to be a leader and change-maker within education."

As a Latina in the field of STEM, Reyes said she hopes to foster a supportive classroom environment that rejects stereotypes and stigmas.

"There is a shortage of STEM teachers, especially in those schools of need. Students aren't given the resources to succeed and are in desperate need of teachers that care for their future. Therefore, I want to take on that role and make a difference," said Reyes. "I hope to inspire not only more students of color, but also women, to pursue a STEM career. I want to empower other students to pursue their STEM careers with a heart of perseverance as my teachers did for me."

Students chose to establish a registered student organization for Golden Apple Scholars this school year, with Reyes serving as co-president alongside Marissa Hagler of Bloomington. The RSO earned an award at the [2024 Do Well & Do Good Involvement Awards](#) for educational program of the year through a Schools of Need event hosted in March, which was presented by Golden Apple



Participants of the Golden Apple Scholars Program at IWU presented information to campus about their work in area schools at a Schools of Need event in March.

Foundation Director of Undergraduate Scholar Support Services Jordan K. Lanfair. The event served as an opportunity to inform the campus community about the history of high-need schools and how Golden Apple Scholars can help fill the need across the country.

Hagler plans to remain in Bloomington-Normal to teach after graduation, where she hopes to create a "safe place for students to learn and make mistakes." She has completed student teaching at schools in Bloomington-Normal and Chicago's south suburbs.

"I have learned new classroom management skills, how to implement diversity into the curriculum and I've made amazing new friends and connections through this program. They take care of us and do their best to make us feel like we are doing something better for education in Illinois," she said.

In the last 10 years, Nillas said she has been pleasantly surprised to see an increase in educational studies alumni returning to the Bloomington-Normal area to teach, as scholars often choose to work in their hometown. Now, teacher education alumni from Illinois Wesleyan are planted at many schools throughout the Twin Cities, working as coaches, teachers, cooperating teachers and principals — and Nillas said these alumni are mentoring the next generation of teachers.

"We're seeing a positive transformation in the schools and districts where these alumni are teaching. They choose to continue to collaborate and become leaders in their districts," said Nillas. "Navigating the liberal arts experience equips them to do well and do good in their communities as classroom teachers."