

Wake County teacher named NCCAT 2026 Burroughs Wellcome Fund NC Beginning Teacher of the Year

The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT) proudly announces Molly Todd, a special education teacher at Panther Creek High School in Wake County Public Schools, as the NCCAT 2026 Burroughs Wellcome Fund NC Beginning Teacher of the Year. The award was presented at a recognition event held on March 12 at Brendle Recital Hall on the campus of Wake Forest University.

“Molly Todd proves that being a public school educator is not just a job — it is a calling,” State Superintendent Maurice “Mo” Green noted. “Great educators give students a grand vision of who they might become, challenge them to do their best and embrace them with unconditional support. All of this year’s finalists deserve to be celebrated, respected and revered for the incredible difference they make in the lives of their students, colleagues and communities.”

Now in its seventh year, this award honors promising beginning educators in North Carolina’s public and charter schools. Prior to the ceremony, finalists attended a week of professional development at the Truist Leadership Institute in Greensboro, NC.

Todd believes that leadership begins with caring for the people in your charge. She partners with teachers and students across the school campus so her students can learn alongside their peers. Todd is described as a “trailblazer in special education” who “empowers her students to lead fulfilling lives.” A colleague noted, “Ms. Todd is a passionate advocate for accessibility and inclusion.” Through her work, Todd has created a classroom where students are supported, encouraged, and believed in, and where students discover that they are capable of more than they imagined.

“At NCCAT, we believe that supporting and celebrating beginning teachers is essential to the future of education in North Carolina,” said NCCAT Executive Director Dr. M. Brock Womble. “The NCCAT 2026 Burroughs Wellcome Fund NC Beginning Teacher of the Year Award recognizes educators who bring passion, innovation, and excellence to their classrooms, making a positive impact on their students and communities. This year’s winner, Molly Todd, and all the finalists, exemplify the dedication and creativity that defines outstanding teaching.”

The Signature Sponsor for this year’s event is the Burroughs Wellcome Fund. “We believe that great teaching transforms lives. This award is not only a celebration of excellent beginning teachers, but also an investment in the future of education and the lasting impact across North Carolina,” said Alfred Mays, Chief Diversity Officer and Senior Program Officer at the Burroughs Wellcome Fund. “All of these individuals are outstanding educators and represent the innovation, resilience, and passion that define the profession.”

The runner-up for the NCCAT 2026 Burroughs Wellcome Fund NC Beginning Teacher of the Year is Sophia Foster from Pender County Schools.

Finalists for the NCCAT 2026 Burroughs Wellcome Fund NC Beginning Teacher of the Year Award are:

- o Anna Sophia Steinki, Alamance-Burlington Schools
- o Lindsay Annis, Beaufort County Schools
- o Sarah Hersee, Brevard Academy
- o Kennedy Elmore, Cabarrus County Schools
- o Georgia Juhnke, Caldwell County Schools
- o Zoe Couloumbis, Capitol Encore Academy
- o Amanda “Mandy” Rundgren, Carolina Charter Academy
- o Emma Poovey, Catawba County Schools
- o Arjge Brothers, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
- o Morgan Dudley, Cherokee County Schools
- o Amber Autry, Cumberland County Schools
- o Lydia Surprenant, Currituck County Schools
- o Kaitlyn Fletcher, Davie County Schools
- o Lena Dallas, Haywood County Schools
- o Sarah Schwartz, Henderson County Public Schools
- o Marquitta Lassiter, Hertford County Schools
- o Lily Hartsell, Lenoir County Public Schools
- o Caroline Beam, Lincoln County Schools
- o Erica Puente, Nash County Public Schools
- o Allison Hancock, New Hanover County Schools
- o Rebeckah Goras, Orange County Schools
- o Sophia Foster, Pender County Schools
- o Ashley Hutchins, Randolph County Schools
- o Rhyane Jacobs, Public Schools of Robeson County
- o Molly Todd, Wake County Schools
- o Hester Claire Linville, Watauga County Schools
- o Ellie McPherson, Whiteville City Schools

Awards and Recognition

The NCCAT Burroughs Wellcome Fund NC Beginning Teacher of the Year receives:

- o \$5,000 cash prize
- o Participation in a GoGlobal NC professional development trip in 2027
- o Instructional supply funds for their school

The Runner-Up receives:

- o \$2,000 cash prize

All Finalists receive:

- o Travel and substitute costs to attend the NCCAT professional development week

Sponsors

NCCAT extends its gratitude to the generous sponsors who make this program possible:

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Special Thanks

- o The Beginning Teacher of the Year Steering Committee
- o The Development Foundation of NCCAT, Inc. Board of Directors
- o The NCCAT Board of Trustees
- o Meal and lodging accommodations for the week of professional development were generously provided by the Truist Leadership Institute

About NCCAT

The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT) supports teachers and impacts students through exemplary professional development programs. By increasing teacher effectiveness, NCCAT strengthens public education across the state. NCCAT equips educators with innovative teaching methods, best practices, and resources to take back to their classrooms. To learn more about NCCAT's programs, visit www.nccat.org or call 828-293-5202.

About Burroughs Wellcome Fund

The Burroughs Wellcome Fund (BWF) is a private foundation dedicated to advancing biomedical sciences and supporting the next generation of scientific researchers and educators. With a strong commitment to fostering innovation and excellence in science, the Burroughs Wellcome Fund has made a significant investment in the realm of STEM education. In the past 25 years, BWF has invested more than \$100 million to support initiatives and networks in STEM education. In addition to funding, BWF provides opportunities for interactions with colleagues and engagement with the broader community of educators and grant recipients across other BWF education programs. BWF's focus on support of education highlights the belief in the pivotal role it plays in shaping the future of scientific discovery and addressing complex global challenges.