

# I Love My Librarian!

2017 Award

## **Rita Platt**

St. Croix Falls and Dresser Elementary Schools  
St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin

### **Nominator: Stacey Belisle**

**1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets them apart?**

Mrs. Platt is outstanding! Mrs. Platt is wonderful! Mrs. Platt is amazing! Actually, Mrs. Platt puts in the “zing” in amazing! She is tireless in her efforts to help every child (and teacher and parent) feel valued, supported, and enthusiastic about reading. The library is the “living room” of the school. It is always filled with students sitting on beanbags, on the couch, at tables, on the floor, in every nook and cranny reading, working on projects, and enjoying the atmosphere. I have NEVER worked with anyone, or felt the support of anyone, or seen the passion and dedication of anyone who compares to Mrs. Platt. She has helped our school to grow in many ways that have made an immeasurable positive difference in how we teach, how our students learn, and the connection and support families feel to our school community. Even though many days are way too busy in the libraries, and most folks would run away, she keeps going until every need is addressed. Honestly, in my opinion and that of all of our staff, Mrs. Platt is a teacher-librarian that exemplifies the spirit of the phrase “I Love My Librarian!” I have nominated Rita before and will continue! She truly deserves the recognition.

**2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?**

Mrs. Platt does not rest. She teaches library skills and technology to all students and voluntarily teaches reading groups in each grade during the school-wide RTI blocks. She collaborates with each teacher to model or co-teach units in reading, research, and writing. All collaborative projects are completely voluntary, but because she has worked hard to develop trusting relationships with teachers, every single one asks to collaborate with her on at least one project each year. In fact, most of us want more time with her.

She has helped the third grade team to develop and implement the “3rd Grade Writer’s Conference,” an all-day writing conference for kids where real authors lead sessions to help students become enthusiastic and confident writers. She has worked with the fourth grade team to help students write articles and produce multimedia presentations on their self-chosen research topics. Students in 2nd grade worked with her to add “selfies” to their online personal narratives. In 3rd grade she helped teachers work with students to

publish stories and allow the young authors to write text-dependent and inference-based questions that were added to the Accelerated Reader catalog! Other students are now able to check out student-authored books and take AR quizzes on them! Talk about excited! Last year a student-authored book became the most checked out text!

Mrs. Platt always serves as an informal mentor to new teachers who come to her for support. I watched her spend hours with one, reviewing video tapes of her classes so that she could help her adjust her classroom management system and increase student engagement.

Additionally, Mrs. Platt offers services from gathering and delivering books and media to teachers to meet their curriculum needs, providing a range of sample lesson plans, and developing an often-visited webpage with links to web-based teaching and professional development resources.

Personally, she has helped me in all of the ways listed above but she has helped me in other ways that are harder to quantify. We spend tons of time together being what she calls, “edudorks.” We read and talk about new ideas and educational innovations. She has supported me emotionally and with resources as I revision my class to make it more student-centered. I have been able to take risks that I don’t think I could have without her support.

I asked our principal, Jeff Benoy, for input and he said, “Mrs. Jennifer “Rita” Platt is not just an elementary school media specialist. She is a teacher, counselor, curriculum leader, computer tech, professional developer, and most importantly, she is a friend of every student in the St. Croix Falls and Dresser Elementary Schools. Perhaps her most distinguishing quality is how she treats others. Rita is the go to person in our building. She has a persona that actually attracts people to her. If I were to breakdown this persona, other than her experience and knowledge, I would say that she has a way of making people feel safe and welcomed. Rita is present at virtually every school event. In many cases she has been the creator of the activity. She is active in our parent advisory group, which has given that group a whole new identity. I have been an elementary administrator for 18 years and without question I have learned more from Rita in the last four years than any other individual. She is my go to teacher as well.”

Last year, Rita wrote and published several articles on best practices. She’s not only dedicated to the school but to the community of educators nation-wide. Please read the below samples of her work. All focus on social justice, community outreach, and literacy. These are the things she cares deeply about.

1. I SAW IT ON FACEBOOK! FOCUSING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES ON LITERACY WITH SOCIAL MEDIA <http://blog.cue.org/saw-facebook-focusing-school-communities-literacy-social-media/>

2. From her MiddleWeb blog, Heart of the School, EIGHT WAYS TEACHERS CAN FIGHT HATE <https://www.middleweb.com/35576/eight-ways-teachers-can-fight-hate/>
3. From Edutopia, BRINGING AUTHORS INTO YOUR CLASSROOM: VIRTUAL AUTHOR VISITS <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/bringing-authors-classroom-rita-platt>

**3. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.**

I asked active parent and community leader, Melissa Ward this question. She said, “Truly our school climate has changed 110% for the better since Rita was hired in 2008. Everyone knows Ms. Platt and everyone feels welcome to engage in conversation with her. It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor, smart and or on the lower end, everyone feels welcome in her world. Because students love her, they’re willing to work even harder and are prideful of their accomplishments. I’ve witnessed it with my own eyes. She makes home visits to read with kids in their environments. Her commitment to kids is incredible. Kids and their families are all welcome to her home, as well. In this day- in-age you just don’t find educators who are willing to rise to this level.”

One very specific way she has made the school better is by raising the culture of achievement and love of reading. Mrs. Platt does not have an office. She used to, but she turned it into a free book store for students. Her “Book Boutique” is an entire room filled with donated books and books she has purchased that students can earn for their hard work. Students read, read, read, to earn “money” to shop. Thousands of books have been added to students’ homes this way. Readers can compile “book bucks” and use them to spend an entire school day in the library with Ms. Platt. You can bet they are ALL about that! Did I mention students LOVE her and want to be with her? She’s got a magnetic personality.

In order to keep costs down but still be sure that there is a wide variety of new books, Mrs. Platt scours thrift stores to find quality used books. Last year she added over 1,500 books to the selves that way! In times of deep budget cuts, this is an amazing accomplishment.

She has worked with 4th grade students and their teachers on the state Battle of the Books competition, raising our school’s state standings each year. Last year, 30 students competed and the school won 3rd place in the state! This is a major accomplishment. Mrs. Platt celebrated by having all 30 fourth graders come to a sleepover party in the library! The pictures of students in sleeping bags among the stacks tells the story of how she has cultivated the love of reading and of libraries.

Mrs. Platt capitalizes on the NEA “Big Read” by having a yearly “Little BIG Read” where students and community members read the same book and come together to talk about it. Last year, over 80 students and adults discussed a book over a picnic lunch. The year before, the author of the “Little BIG Read” Skyped in to meet with students. 60 young readers met via with their favorite author, Jonathan Rand! All were giddy with

excitement! The sense of community that comes from these types of activities cannot be overestimated.

Truly, she makes the school a better place for all of the reasons above but also for simpler reasons. She laughs and jokes with students, makes them feel loved and valued, she knows their families, she eats with them in the lunchroom, and listens to them read. She constantly helps teachers and makes it known that she wants to help us even more. She knows our kids, she buys us little gifts, she makes us feel loved and valued too. Mrs. Platt's motto is, "People are not interruptions to our work, they are our work." She lives that motto with a smile.

**4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?**

Mrs. Platt's passion is student learning and making that happen, in whatever way is necessary and works! We are "growing our brains" is one of her frequent reminders to students who may try to take the easy road. She is a data-engaged teacher and advisor. She is constantly collecting data, reading research to confirm or disregard it, and using the data to help teachers differentiate instruction to help every child make maximum progress.

Mrs. Platt is not an old-fashioned school librarian. In addition to weekly lessons, she allows students to check out book daily. She has taught an army of older students and all of the teachers to use the library checkout system so that every child can get a new book whenever s/he needs it! Second grade teacher, Mrs. Bonneville put it this way, "Most of my students exchange books every day and read more than any other of my 40 years teaching." All of this reading has had a profound impact on our test scores. Again, we have exceeded state expectations for several years.

After seeing how effective the students were at helping her keep the library running, she recruited and trained more fourth graders to serve as reading mentors to first graders during our intervention block. These students freely give up recess time to work in each of our five first grade classrooms. Mrs. Platt taught them how to work one-on-one with their mentees using a 30 minute tutoring plan that she devised.

Mrs. Platt has a personal goal of contacting at least three families a week by phone, text, Facebook, or email. She supports busy teachers by initiating parent contacts to report and discuss their child's progress throughout the school year. She suggests actions that families can take to support their child's reading growth and to help their child become a more independent and responsible reader. She is not afraid to say what needs to be said to whomever is involved in that child's success. Recently, she made forty phone calls to homes to personally explain the opportunity these neediest children have for a structured free summer reading program offered in our county.

Principal, Jeff Benoy says, "Before Rita came to our school our students did not truly understand what goals were, not to mention a plan as to how to achieve them. That has all changed. Now students are required to create reading goals for their learning, even at the

first grade level. These goals are then revisited throughout the school year. Rita has instilled in our students the importance of being responsible for their own learning, and yes, once again, even at the first grade level. Rita understands that children must feel good about themselves if they are going to achieve to their highest potential. She teaches that the practice of goal setting is not just helpful; it is a prerequisite for happiness.” Last year over 90% of our students met their rigorous reading goals and Mrs. Platt is at the center of that success.

Another area where she has deeply impacted the school is in her work to bring the community into the building. Not only does she facilitate the collaboration between the above-mentioned “Reading Friends” but she also plans, facilitates, and hosts at least five family nights per year. Some favorites have been Science Night, Game Night, Movie Night, Cuddle Up and Read Night, Parent Academy (where parents learned about the school’s curriculum), and Art Night. These family nights are very well attended, often upwards of 200 people come. She also runs two community book fairs a year that are equally well attended. These efforts help students to see learning as a part of the community and not just the school. They also help parents feel welcome and that translates to good feelings about the school, which carries over to the children we serve.

**5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?**

Mrs. Platt is the very definition of a “teacher leader.” She led our school’s work in developing school-wide reading, writing, behavior, and RTI programs. All get strong results. In fact, for the last four years our school has exceeded state expectations on all measures! Even more, our scores continue to rise even as our poverty levels do too. Mrs. Platt has been central to this success. She even published a paper in Educational Leadership (<http://www.educationallleadership-digital.com/educationallleadership/2015summerfree?pg=45#pg45>) on her work and has spoken at conferences all over the nation to help other schools succeed. She is not content with just helping us, she wants to help everyone to better serve students!

In that pursuit, she often writes and publishes on education issues. I read all of her articles on We Teach We Learn (<http://www.weteachwelearn.org/author/ritaplatt/>), her book reviews on MiddleWeb (<http://www.middleweb.com/tag/rita-platt/>), her contributions to Education Weekly’s Q & A with Larry Ferlazzo, and her any other publications. She has supported me as a writer as well and I worked with her to publish on making collaborative classroom rules. I would not have done it without Mrs. Platt’s support.

As our district takes first steps with Twitter, we rely on Mrs. Platt’s leadership there too. She was recently named one of “100 Wisconsin Educators to Follow.”

She has been central to my professional growth plan and those of most other teachers. She has inserviced staff on the writing workshop method, the Common Core State Standards, and RTI. She writes and receives many grants. Recently she earned a \$5,000 grant to pay for 9 teachers, including me, to take an online graduate course in reading instruction. Another grant was from The Patterson Foundation for \$3,000 to buy gently used books for the Book Boutique (see above.) Other grants she earned brought SMART

boards, spinning book shelves, comfortable furniture for classroom reading corners, hands-on science kits, a document camera for every teacher in grades kindergarten through fourth, and even a supply closet full of pencils so that no child in our school would go without. Additionally, she has helped a dozen other teachers write grants. She helped me write one for two standing desks that my students love.

For two years running Mrs. Platt received the “Standing Up for Rural Schools” award. The first in collaboration with the local public librarian. Each quarter they met, along with others including the middle/high school librarian and the coordinator of a community literacy initiative, to plan for ways to engage the community. Through these meetings they developed a community-wide summer reading program, a tutoring program, and various fun family reading-related activities. The second award was won, in collaboration with senior citizens who volunteer as “Reading Friends” to help some of our students who struggle learn to love reading. Last year she was recognized as a Wisconsin Kohl Fellow for teaching excellence based, in part, on her work with the community.

She is also an active member in the Parents of the Elementary Saints group who provides support and funds to our staff. Ms. Platt is a liaison between the group and the school. Her leadership has helped POES to do some incredible things for our students and staff—including funding 25 pairs of snowshoes and two additional Promethean Boards. When Mrs. Platt hears a teacher has a need, she adds it to a list and POES fulfills those needs as quickly as they can.