

Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award

GENERAL INFORMATION AND APPLICATION PROCEDURES

Application Due Date: Monday, October 13, 2025, by 4 p.m. EST

For additional information contact: Dr. Christine Harris at TeacheroftheYear@doe.virginia.gov

Overview

The **Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award** was established to formally acknowledge and honor the vital contributions of classified school employees who play indispensable roles in supporting student success and the smooth operation of schools nationwide. By highlighting the dedication, excellence, and leadership of these often-unsung heroes, the award seeks to elevate the status and visibility of classified staff, foster pride within their communities, and encourage continued commitment to educational excellence. Their daily acts of care and service shape the foundation of student success. The Virginia Department of Education, as part of its **#ElevateEducatorsVA** campaign, is proud to announce that **nominations are open** for the **2026 RISE Award**.

Virginia Superintendents or Head of Schools are invited to nominate one classified school employee from their school division using the online application program SurveyMonkey Apply (SMApply).

Qualifications

The RISE Award honors classified school employees at the state and on a national level who provide exemplary service to students. A **classified school employee is defined as** an employee of a state or any political subdivision of a state, or an employee of a nonprofit entity, who works in any grade from prekindergarten through high school in any of the following occupational specialties:

- Paraprofessionals / Instructional Aides
- Clerical and Administrative Services
- Transportation Services
- Food and Nutrition Services
- Custodial and Maintenance Services
- Security Services
- Health and Student Services
- Technical Services
- Skilled Trades

Examples include bus drivers, secretaries, cafeteria workers, school safety staff, health aides, technology staff, mechanics, crossing guards, and more.

Criteria

Nominees must demonstrate excellence in the following areas:

1. Work performance
2. School and community involvement
3. Leadership and commitment
4. Local support
5. Enhancement of the image of classified school employees
6. Student support.

Understanding the Criteria

- **Work Performance:** Reflects the nominee's ability to fulfill their role with exceptional skill, dedication, and reliability. It ensures recognition of classified employees whose daily work is essential to the functioning of schools.
- **School and Community Involvement:** Focuses on how nominees contribute to the broader school community, including volunteer efforts, participation in school activities, or engagement with families and local groups. This involvement often strengthens the school's culture and support network.
- **Leadership and Commitment:** Emphasizes the nominee's ability to inspire others, take initiative, and demonstrate a strong dedication to their role and school mission, regardless of formal leadership titles.

- **Enhancement of Classified Employees' Image:** Highlights efforts to positively influence public perception and understanding of classified employees' vital roles, helping to elevate the profession's visibility and value within the education system.
- **Student support:** Elevating their role in creating a welcoming, safe and healthy school environment for Virginia students to attend school.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are required from the supervisor, school Superintendent, and a minimum of three additional references (e.g. peers, community, parents, students, etc.).

Application Submission

Application Due Date: Monday, October 13, 2025, by 4 p.m. EST. Incomplete and late submissions will not be considered.

Virginia Superintendents or Head of Schools are invited to nominate *one individual* using the online application program SurveyMonkey Apply (SMAApply). The nominator (Superintendents/ Head of Schools or their designee) has the ability to collaborate in the SMAApply program with the school division's candidate by sharing the electronic application within the system.

Selection Process

Local school divisions are authorized to develop a selection process—aligned with required qualifications—for submitting one candidate's application to the Virginia Department of Education by October 13, 2025.

Anticipated Timeline:

- September 1 – Nomination Period Opens. The official online nomination system is open.
- October 13 – Nomination Due to VDOE. School division may nominate one candidate due by 4p.m. using SMAApply.
- November 1 – Nomination Deadline (Statutory)
- By May 31 – National Honoree and Finalists Announced

Process

A panel, assembled by VDOE, will review and evaluate the RISE candidate applications and two Virginia RISE recipients will be announced in late winter. The VDOE will share their stories on the webpage and social media to inspire excellence and innovative practices among classified school employees within schools and across the Commonwealth. The two Virginia RISE recipient names are then submitted to the U.S. Department of Education by November 1. The U.S. Secretary of Education will select and announce one national RISE Award honoree from among the state-submitted nominations. This individual will represent the nation's most inspiring classified school employees and will be honored in the Spring of 2026.

Legal Authority

The Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award is authorized by the Recognizing Achievement in Classified School Employees Act, Public Law No. 116-113, enacted in 2019. This federal statute mandates the establishment of the RISE Award to honor outstanding classified school employees nationwide and directs the U.S. Department of Education to oversee its implementation in partnership with states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and U.S. territories.

Eligibility Question

Incomplete

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied.

Form for "Eligibility Question"

Is this submission the sole nominee from your school division for the 2025–2026 Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award? *Note: Each school division may submit only one classified personnel as their nominee for RISE Award consideration.*

(No response)

Fill Out the Application

Incomplete

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied.

Form for "Fill Out the Application"

Due Date: October 13, 2025, by 4p.m.

All sections of this application, portfolio, and signatures are required for consideration. Please make sure to review the qualifications and due date for this submission.

Questions: TeacheroftheYear@doe.virginia.gov

2026 Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award Application

School Division Name*

(No response)

Region*

If you are unsure of your division's region, please reference this link:
<https://www.doe.virginia.gov/about-vdoe/virginia-school-directories/virginia-public-school-listing-by-region>

(No response)

RISE Employee Nominee Information

Employee Nominated First Name*

(No response)

Employee Nominated Last Name*

(No response)

Preferred Name

(No response)

RISE Nominee's Current Role*

A classified school employee is defined as an employee of a state or any political subdivision of a state, or an employee of a nonprofit entity, who works in any grade from prekindergarten through high school. Please select one of the following:

(No response)

Position Title *

(No response)

Total Years of Experience*

(No response)

Years in Present Position*

(No response)

Email Address*

(No response)

Phone Number*

(No response)

Work Phone

(No response)

Name of Work Location/School*

(No response)

Work Street Address*

(No response)

City*

(No response)

State*

(No response)

Zip Code*

(No response)

Application Preview Only

Candidate's social media*

Include URL to page, or enter "none"

(No response)

Work Location Information

Entity's (school or division) Facebook Profile*

Include URL to profile, or enter "none"

(No response)

Entity's (school or division) Instagram Profile*

Include URL to profile, or enter "none"

(No response)

Entity's (school or division) X/Twitter Profile*

Include URL to profile, or enter "none"

(No response)

Demographics of School(s) Where Nominee Works:

School Division Information

Check ALL that apply:

No Responses Selected

Number of Students in School(s)*

(No response)

Number of Students Candidate Supports*

(No response)

Student Population by Category (Percent)

Percent of Free/Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible

(No response)

Percent of English Learners

(No response)

Percent of Students with Disabilities

(No response)

Percent of Students: Asian

(No response)

Percent of Students: Black

(No response)

Percent of Students: Hispanic

(No response)

Percent of Students: Multiple Races

(No response)

Percent of Students: White

(No response)

Nominator's Contact Information

First and Last Name of Nominator*

(No response)

Title*

(No response)

Division Contact's Email Address*

(No response)

Division Contact's Phone Number*

(No response)

Work Address*

(No response)

City*

(No response)

State*

(No response)

Zip Code*

(No response)

Request Principal or Supervisor's Confirmation and Reference Letter

Incomplete

Please be advised that your application cannot be submitted until all recommenders have completed their confirmation forms. This is confirmation that this is the correct school division candidate. Letters of recommendations are uploaded by the Principal this section.

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. **If you have any questions, please email TeacheroftheYear@doe.virginia.gov**

Recommenders

Request Superintendent or Head of School's Confirmation and Reference Letter

Incomplete

Please be advised that your application cannot be submitted until all recommenders have completed their confirmation forms. This is confirmation that this is the correct school division candidate. Letters of recommendations are uploaded by the Superintendent this section.

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. **If you have any questions, please email TeacheroftheYear@doe.virginia.gov**

Recommenders

Introduction: Nominee Overall Excellence and Impact

Incomplete

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. Each essay in this section must be limited to the maximum word limit indicated below, using a font size no smaller than 10. Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Please save this file using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Essay1. For example: Richmond_Smith_Essay1.

Introduce your candidate. Summarize why your nominee exemplifies the qualities deserving of recognition as a Virginia RISE Award recipient and considered for the National RISE Award. Focus on the ways they consistently go above and beyond in their role to provide outstanding service, leadership, and excellence within their school, students, and community. (Maximum 500 words)

Essay 1: Work Performance

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. Each essay in this section must be limited to the maximum word limit indicated below, using a font size no smaller than 10. Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Please save this file using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Essay1. For example: Richmond_Smith_Essay1.

Work Performance: Share how your nominee demonstrates excellence in the area of work performance. Describe the nominee's ability to fulfill their role with exceptional skill, dedication, and reliability. Give examples of how their daily work is essential to the functioning of schools. (Maximum 250 words)

Essay 2: School and Community Involvement

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. Each essay in this section must be limited to the maximum word limit indicated below, using a font size no smaller than 10. Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Please save this file using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Essay2. For example: Richmond_Smith_Essay2.

School and Community Involvement: Share how your nominee demonstrates excellence in the area of school and community involvement. Describe how your nominee contributes to the broader school community, including volunteer efforts, participation in school activities, or engagement with families and local groups. Give examples of how their involvement strengthens the school's support network. (Maximum 250 words)

Essay 3: Leadership & Commitment

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. Each essay in this section must be limited to the maximum word limit indicated below, using a font size no smaller than 10. Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Please save this file using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Essay3. For example: Richmond_Smith_Essay3.

Leadership and Commitment: Share how your nominee demonstrates excellence in the area of leadership and commitment. Provide specific examples of the nominee's ability to inspire others, take initiative, and demonstrate a strong dedication to their role and school mission, regardless of formal leadership titles. (Maximum 250 words)

Essay 4: Local Support

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. Each essay in this section must be limited to the maximum word limit indicated below, using a font size no smaller than 10. Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Please save this file using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Essay4. For example: Richmond_Smith_Essay4.

Local Support: Share how your nominee demonstrates excellence in the area of local support. Describe how the nominee demonstrates being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator both in and outside of the classroom walls. Provide examples and/or quotes from co-workers, school administrators, community members, etc., who speak to the nominee's exemplary work providing local support. (Maximum 250 words)

Essay 5: Enhancement of Classified School Employees' Image

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. Each essay in this section must be limited to the maximum word limit indicated below, using a font size no smaller than 10. Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Please save this file using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Essay5. For example: Richmond_Smith_Essay5.

Enhancement of Classified School Employees' Image: Share how your nominee demonstrates excellence in the area of Enhancement of classified school employees' image in the community and schools. Describe how this nominee enhances the classified school employees' image in the community and schools and include examples. (Maximum 250 words)

Essay 6: Support for Students

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied. Each essay in this section must be limited to the maximum word limit indicated below, using a font size no smaller than 10. Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Please save this file using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Essay1. For example: Richmond_Smith_Essay1.

Support for Students: Share how your nominee demonstrates excellence in the area of support for students. Describe how this nominee specifically helps to create an excellent school environment encouraging Virginia students to attend school every day. (Maximum 250 words)

Letters of Support

Letters of Support: Upload letters of support in this section. A minimum of **three (3) individual uploads (not one file)**. The three letters of support for the application packet may be from coworkers, administrator, students, parents, or community members. **These letters must be uploaded here in the online portal. Do not send letters of support separately.**

An effective letter of support contains evidence of personal knowledge of the candidate and an indication of the qualities that would qualify the candidate to be the Virginia RISE Award recipient.

This section should not include the reference from the direct supervisor and superintendent (see prior sections).

Required: Minimum 3 letters in this section.

Optional additional letters-a total of 6 letters in this section may be included.

Uploads are limited to PDF files only. Upload individually not all in one file. Please save these files using the following naming convention: Division_LastName_Letter#. For example you would upload:

RoanokeCounty_Harris_Letter1.pdf

RoanokeCounty_Harris_Letter2.pdf

RoanokeCounty_Harris_Letter3.pdf

Limit each letter to one typed page. Letters may be single-spaced with a font size no smaller than 10 points.

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied.

Nominator's Certification and Permission

Nominator's Certification and Permission

This RISE Award application represents my work and/or with collaboration from the RISE nominee. It was written without content generated by artificial intelligence tools. Appropriate citation is used when referencing, summarizing or paraphrasing the work of others.

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied.

Certification and Permission"

This is my form.

PARTICIPATION CONFIRMATION

I understand that if my nominee is selected as one of the Virginia honorees, I will be required to submit additional information for the U.S. Department of Education application. This may include, but is not limited to, confirmation of eligibility and application details, supplementary candidate information, and submission of a clear headshot or school photo.

Responses Selected

CERTIFICATION AND PERMISSION

By my signature, I certify that the information on this application is accurate and complete. I hereby give my permission that any of the attached materials may be shared with persons interested in promoting the Virginia Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award.

Signature of Nominator

(click and drag in box to record signature)



Date of Signature

Legal Disclosures

Once "Mark as Complete" is selected, no further edits may be applied.
If you have any questions or have marked "YES" to a question, please email TeacheroftheYear@doe.virginia.gov

Form for "Legal Disclosures"

PLEASE RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

To the best of your knowledge, is the candidate currently the subject of any review, inquiry, investigation, or appeal of alleged misconduct that could warrant discipline or termination by a school division or other education-related employer or an adverse action against a teaching, administrator, pupil personnel services, or other education-related license or certificate? Please note: This includes any open investigation. *

To the best of your knowledge, has the candidate ever been convicted of, or entered a plea of guilty or no contest to, a felony? *

To the best of your knowledge, has the candidate ever been the subject of a founded complaint of child abuse or neglect by a child protection agency? *

(No response)

RISE Certification *

Please review and certify the RISE required information below:

- 1. The school has some configuration that includes grades early learning to grade 12.**
- 2. Neither the nominated public school nor its public school district is refusing the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district wide compliance review.**
- 3. OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the public school district concluding that the nominated public school or the public school district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil right statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan to remedy the violation.**
- 4. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the public school or the public school district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution's equal protection clause.**
- 5. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the public school or public school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or public school district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.**

Please provide the following information:

First and Last Name of the Certifying Individual

Position/Title of Certifying Individual (Principal, Superintendent, or appropriate second level supervisor)

[Redacted area]

Email and Phone Number of Certifying Individual

[Redacted area]

Application Preview Only