

Three WEAC members recognized for ‘helping students see differently’

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Three WEAC members are being recognized by the Department of Public Instruction for having “a colossal impact” by helping students “see school in different and important ways.” Frank Juarez of Sheboygan (WEAC Region 3), **Joanna Rizzotto of South Milwaukee (WEAC Region 7)** and Mark Nepper of Madison (Madison Teachers Inc.) are among teachers featured in a special issue of the [ConnectEd](#) newsletter.

Joanna Rizzotto has never cared much for labeling students. As a REAL Academy teacher for the South Milwaukee High School alternative learning community, she aims to offer an asset-based philosophy and program. “I don’t view my students as a bunch of weaknesses,” Rizzotto says.

“My students see school in a different and important way because I see them in a different and important way.”

The REAL Academy is a student-based program that focuses on healthy adolescent development. Their vision as an alternative program is to provide students equal access to education by addressing barriers to success through a personalized educational program. Rizzotto is trained in trauma-informed care and uses this background to teach students about how their minds and bodies work together. Through an inquiry-based learning model, students explore self-identified areas of interest related to adolescence or their own personal development.



Joanna Rizzotto in the REAL Academy classroom

Rizzotto and her co-teacher, Hallie Schmeling (also a WEAC 7 member), emphasize productive-worker traits, open communication, and relationship-building. “We tell the kids it’s a 24-hour commitment — what they do in the program and outside of school.” Outside of the REAL Academy, parents report that their children seem happier, more productive, and enjoy going to school.

Their work goes beyond individual research and volunteer placements. Self-assessment and reflection are also major components of the work students do. They have their own entrance, check themselves in, put their phones away, order food, and participate in their community circle each day. They work on being healthy and developing an awareness of their thoughts and patterns in order to better hear and see others.

Rizzotto is proud of the fact that REAL Academy was designed within the current system using existing resources. More than 30 educators at South Milwaukee High School participate in a student-needs network, where Rizzotto and Schmeling rely on them as resources to present REAL Academy as a positive option for students.

In this intentional design and space, students reveal how disengaged they were. Some were issued truancy citations, and now have perfect attendance for the school year. Rizzotto states, “they bring their whole selves, and do very brave work that many adults would find very challenging because it’s about getting honest with yourself.”

Outside of the REAL Academy, Rizzotto’s students are happy and productive. “It’s hard for people to know what it was like for them when they weren’t in REAL,” she says. Part of the success is having two team teachers so that students are not getting bounced among the principal, counselors, and teachers. This makes school accessible for students and their parents because it’s a one-stop shop.

Some students stay with REAL Academy all the way, while for others, it is a brief leg of their journey. However long they choose to participate, educators like Rizzotto support kids with a unique approach to re-engage in school.