

# New Jersey Herald

## SCARC recognizes 2 Vernon teachers for unique approach



Photo by Daniel Free/ New Jersey Herald - Cedar Mountain Elementary School first-grade teachers Mary Ollert, back left, and Kelly Talerico, back right, work with a group of their students on Monday in Vernon. The two have been selected by SCARC as the 2018 Teachers of the Year. [Buy Photo](#)

By Katie Moen New Jersey Herald  
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VERNON -- To see a group of first-graders, let alone ones with a variety of different learning styles, sitting captivated by a phonics lesson is an unusual sight, to say the least. At Cedar Mountain Primary School in Vernon, however, where two teachers are working to change common misconceptions about education, the scene is par for the course.

"When you walk into that classroom, you can tell right away that something really special is happening in there," Cedar Mountain Principal Rosemary Gebhardt said. "Inclusive classrooms have a number of benefits, both for students who have a disability and for those that don't, but they can be hard to manage. This is the first year that we have opted for a co-teaching model, and we couldn't be happier with the results."

Co-teachers Kelly Talerico and Mary Ollert float around the colorful classroom like two halves of the same brain working in tandem, checking in with each of their students in turn.

"The biggest shift that I have seen in special education is the ongoing transition from isolated classrooms to fully inclusive ones," said Ollert, who has been teaching in Vernon since 2010. "It's important because I think it better reflects the idea that people with disabilities are as much a part of our communities as anyone else, and that's a message that all of our students should learn early on."

In honor of the work that they have done to promote cooperation and collaboration between their students, Ollert and Talerico have been selected as SCARC's 2018 Teachers of the Year.

"We were very impressed by the efforts of these two teachers," said Richard Lecher, president and CEO of SCARC. "Several members of our awards decision committee, including myself, have backgrounds in special education. When we heard about the progressive, inclusive environment that these two teachers have been able to create, we were incredibly impressed."

Though the award is usually given to one educator each year, Lecher said this is not the first time that Vernon's schools have warranted an exception to the rule.

"A few years ago, we gave the award to an entire team of pre-school teachers in the same district," Lecher said. "The kind of real collaboration that we have seen from Vernon is pretty rare, but it's entirely possible that some of these students will carry the benefits of these types of strong early intervention services with them for the rest of our lives."

Lecher said a series of "passionate and heartfelt" letters of nomination from the staff and administration of Cedar Mountain School proved that the two teachers were well deserving of the honor.

"Mrs. Talerico and Mrs. Ollert make learning exciting while delivering multisensory lessons," Gebhardt wrote in her letter. "(They) have developed a teaching style that demonstrates their overreaching adaptability to the range of learning levels of the children in their charge."

Of the co-teaching model, Talerico, who has been teaching at Cedar Mountain for 10 years, said it affords "a very different type of flexibility."

"It's incredibly helpful to have someone else to bounce ideas off," she said. "This is a new program for all of us, so we're learning what works and what doesn't. The kids are really thriving, though, so it seems to be going well."

At any given moment, students in Talerico and Ollert's classroom could be helping each other navigate a math scavenger hunt, reading out loud to each other on the colorful rug or following along with a yoga pose video designed to help everyone regroup and clear their heads.

"People have known for a long time now that there's no right way to learn, so we try to change up the lessons as much as possible to give the kids the chance to figure out which method works best for them," Talerico said. "It's really important that they have the chance to explore their options now while they're still young enough to be open to new experiences."

Both Talerico and Ollert are dual-certified in regular and special education, making it easier for them to divide and conquer when it comes to classroom challenges.

Nicole Keane, a Cedar Mountain School counselor who was named the 2018 New Jersey Counselor of the Year, said that while Talerico and Ollert's classroom is "not without its challenges," the teachers are able to tailor behavioral plans to meet individual student needs.

"There are students in this classroom that exhibit difficult behaviors," Keane wrote in a letter of nomination for the two teachers. "(The teachers) show every child real compassion and do not allow challenging behavior to define a child in perpetuity."

Talerico and Ollert will be honored for their achievements at SCARC's annual awards dinner, scheduled to be held at 6:30 p.m. on June 14 at Perona Farms in Andover Township.

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