

Two win HISD teacher of the year

They're awarded \$5,000 prizes for notable contributions to students' learning

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Since coming from overseas to teach in the Houston Independent School District, Marie Relampagos and Hafedh Azaiez have left positive impressions on students, parents and colleagues.

On Wednesday, before a large crowd at the George R. Brown Convention Center, they were named the district's elementary and secondary teachers of the year, respectively.

Chosen from among 268 HISD educators nominated for awards, the two teachers received \$5,000 grand prizes.

"This is something that never crossed my mind," Relampagos said. "I'm just doing my job. So this is a bonus."

A native of the Philippines, Relampagos teaches second-graders in English-as-a-Second-Language classes at Blackshear and Briargrove elementary schools. She began teaching in 1989, moved to the United States in 2001 and joined the Houston district in 2003.

"She came to America ... to broaden her horizons and touch more lives," said Rebecca Suarez, a district spokeswoman.

Azaiez, a native of Tunisia, created HISD's only bioengineering and world health course. He began his teaching career in 2002 at Fonville Middle School and now teaches eighth-grade science, integrated physics and chemistry at Pin Oak Middle School.

"The feelings are unbelievable," Azaiez said after receiving his award. "I cannot even describe them."

Suarez said that Azaiez inherited his love of teaching from his father, who taught for more than 30 years.

When he's not teaching, Azaiez is the head coach for Pin Oak Middle School's soccer and cross-country teams. He also trains interns in HISD's Alternative Certification Program.

He said that because he believes students can best learn science through hands-on activities, he often uses fun labs to demonstrate textbook concepts.

"The kids rotate and do experiments themselves and discover things," he said. "I'm just a coach."

Relampagos was Blackshear's 2002 teacher of the year and HISD's 2003 ESL teacher of the year. Blackshear Principal Martin Garza said Relampagos is an effective teacher because she empathizes with students.

"She makes every child feel special," Garza said. "She teaches from the mind but also from the heart."

Suarez said Relampagos, who mentors aspiring teachers, teaches educators her strategies on classroom management and instruction.