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Laureles Elementary teacher wins prestigious Milken Award

LAURELES COMMUNITY – In a surprise school assembly today, Laureles Elementary third-grade teacher Zulema Williams-Santa Ana was presented the Milken Family Foundation’s National Educator Award.

The coveted recognition carries with it a \$25,000 cash prize, which Williams-Santa Ana can spend on anything she wishes.

Williams-Santa Ana is one of about 80 educators nationwide being recognized this year with the Milken Educator Award, which is designed to honor and reward exemplary teachers. This is the 22nd year that Milken Family Foundation representatives have crisscrossed the country to name, during surprise notification ceremonies, recipients of the awards.

Dubbed the “Oscars of Teaching” by *Teacher Magazine*, the Milken National Educator Awards were created in 1987 to reward, retain and attract the highest caliber professionals to our nation’s schools. This year, Texas has three recipients. The other two, who were honored Oct. 17, are Joanna Bacon, a kindergarten teacher in North East ISD in San Antonio, and Claudia Pena, a second-grade teacher in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD.

“Some people are born to be teachers and it is apparent that Zulema Williams-Santa Ana is one of them,” said Robert Scott, Commissioner of Education. “Not only did she volunteer to move from the first to third grade where she could prepare her students for the first state assessment tests of their school careers, she then did an outstanding job of helping her students excel. She is an educator who is changing students’ lives every day – a great representative for so many of her colleagues.”

A former actress in Mexico, Williams-Santa Ana is known for bringing enthusiasm and high energy to her classroom. Her gift for teaching has helped her students in Los Fresnos CISD markedly improve their skills in reading and math. In fact, she asked if her third graders could take a released Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills exam for fifth grade, and 70 percent of them passed.

“Nothing in America’s K-12 schools has more influence on student learning than the quality of the classroom teacher,” said Lowell Milken, chairman of the Milken Family Foundation. “Highly effective teachers are the bedrock in constructing a world-class education system that meets our challenges and opportunities in this 21st century. It

is a national imperative that we attract, retain and motivate people of talent to the profession. America's prosperity depends on it.”

Since its inception, the Milken Educator Awards have recognized more than 2,300 educators and presented them with more than \$60 million in cash awards. The 2008 recipients will receive their \$25,000 checks during the Milken National Education Conference in Los Angeles in April 2009. The recipients also attend an all-expense paid professional development conference while in California.

Milken Educator Award recipients are selected based on effective instructional practices and student learning results, exemplary educational accomplishments beyond the classroom, strong long-range potential for professional and policy leadership, and serving as a motivational role model for students, colleagues and the community.