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# Middletown's 'Señor' Dana E. Ramey named R.I. teacher of the year

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Middletown High School Spanish teacher Dana E. Ramey is led to the podium by Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist after he was revealed to be teacher of the year.

The Providence Journal / Frieda Squires

MIDDLETOWN — It was billed as a celebration of dramatic improvements in the test scores at Middletown High School.

After all, science scores jumped from 16 percent proficiency to 39 percent proficiency — double the state average — in just one year. But that's not what Wednesday's hoopla — a school-wide assembly complete with marching band and choir performance — was all about.

[Governor Carcieri](#), Education Commissioner [Deborah A. Gist](#) and nearly all of the town's elected officials were on hand to surprise Rhode Island's 2010 Teacher of the Year: Señor Dana E. Ramey.

The high school Spanish teacher didn't seem to have a clue, even when he saw his wife, Maggie, and daughter, Lily, sitting in the bleachers. In a whisper, he asked them if they were playing hooky to see the commissioner and governor in person.

"Middletown is leading the way," Gist said at the start of the test-score ruse. "Those kinds of improvements can only come when you have excellent educators."

Ramey, 57, a Newport resident and Fall River native, and his colleagues smiled with pride.

Carcieri also praised the "great staff" and "tremendous school."

"But that's not why I came," the governor said.

Maggie, a Newport teacher, checked to make sure her digital camera was on and ready.

Señor Ramey, as he's known, finally put the pieces together and said, "Is it getting hot in here?"

Within moments, Gist had him up to the podium for a speech.

"It's a total and complete honor that I accept humbly," he said. Then Ramey, who is of Lebanese descent, turned his unplanned speech into a lesson: "... All of us come from somewhere, and most of us [in the United States] come from somewhere else, so embrace diversity."

The National Teacher of the Year program began in 1952, and all of the state winners also vie for the national designation that is announced each April by the president of the United States.

Ramey's colleagues told the judges he has "the ability to engage the most-reluctant learner." And a student remarked for the application, "Without señor, I don't know what my life would be like."

Said Principal Steven S. Ruscito, "Dana doesn't make learning a world language such a stale academics event. ... He embraces the entire culture."

While learning a Romance language, his students are also taught how to cook paella, dance Latin ballroom steps and appreciate the myths behind Spanish traditions. There's also a salsa cook-off his second-year students compete in every year. They have to come up with their own recipes and explain how they would market them before the tasty dips are judged during the school's foreign-language fair.

Ramey started this signature event in 1996, the year he began at Middletown High. He has also taught in the Newport, Cranston, Little Compton and Tiverton school districts, as well as in Mexico, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

"Everything's hands on," said Lisa Clark, an English teacher and colleague. "He has a good balance of instructional strategies."

Said Ramey, "I do anything to get them motivated... With every bit of my being and fiber, I am here to inspire."

**SEÑOR RAMEY'S TIPS** What makes a great teacher?

**PATIENCE:** Don't let outside pressures get you down, and stay cool when you are working with young

people.

**UNDERSTAND THE CLIENTELE:** Try hard to remember what it was like when you were young, and empathize with your students' changeable moods.

**BE AN EXPERT:** Don't stop learning about the subject you teach, and reach beyond the skills you already have.

**BIO** Dana E. Ramey

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's degree from Southeastern Massachusetts University (now UMASS Dartmouth), major in Spanish, minor in education, 1974. Master's degree in education, University of Rhode Island, 1998.

**EXPERIENCE:** Did student teaching in a village near Bilbao, Spain. Taught in Mexico in 2003 under a Fulbright Teacher Exchange Fellowship. Led Middletown High School students on language and cultural journeys to Spain and Central America.

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** In 2003, first teacher in Rhode Island to earn National Board of Professional Teaching Standards certification in world languages. In 2007, named Fulbright Alumnus of the Year for continued work with the Mexican school where he taught.

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