

Edith Bowen Laboratory School Teacher Joseph Kozlowski Finalist for Utah's 2026 Teacher of the Year

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Kozlowski and his second-grade class spot birds at Cache Valley's Benson Marina.

Joseph Kozlowski, second-grade teacher at USU's Edith Bowen Laboratory School (EBLS), was one of five finalists in the selection for the 2026 Utah Teacher of the Year award. The candidate pool encompassed more than 30,000 K-12 public and charter schoolteachers in the state of Utah. A committee that included representatives from the Utah State Board of Education, Utah Education Association, and other educational stakeholder groups, ultimately selected the top five. This is the first time a charter schoolteacher has been a finalist for the statewide recognition.

"These finalists exemplify the heart and soul of education in Utah," said Katie Jones, Utah Teacher of the Year coordinator. "They are master teachers who not only deliver exceptional instruction but also create learning environments where every student feels seen, valued, and empowered to succeed. Their work transforms lives and strengthens the future of our state."

Nate Justis, principal at EBLS, says Kozlowski is a true example of a dedicated and innovative teacher. "Joey lives and breathes teaching, and he devotes every bit of his energy to helping his students thrive. In the five years I have known him, Joey has exemplified hard work, creativity, passion, and ingenuity in all he does, and his students and colleagues love him for it. I have worked with

hundreds of teachers in Utah and cannot think of a more eligible candidate for this prestigious award."

Kozlowski first became involved with EBLS while he was pursuing his doctoral degree in mathematics education and leadership at USU in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services. Because of his extensive work in math instruction, the sixth-grade teachers approached him about collaborating with them, specifically in their response to intervention. This was the beginning of a years-long partnership that included directly supporting the educators and visiting their classrooms to engage in small-group lessons to fine-tune instruction time. Returning to the classroom amidst his doctoral studies, even in this limited capacity, was a boon to Kozlowski both professionally and personally.

"Just being back with the kids and putting all that knowledge to work became possibly the best time of my four-year doctoral program," he said. "I loved it."



Joey Kozlowski

In 2021, Kozlowski, who is known affectionately as "Dr. Koz" to students, parents, and colleagues, joined the second-grade teaching team at EBLS. He previously taught third grade for four years at Tongue River Elementary School in Wyoming before coming to USU in 2018 to pursue his Ph.D. Kozlowski earned his undergraduate degree in elementary education with a minor in early childhood development and a master's degree in math education from the University of Wyoming.

In addition to elementary education, Kozlowski's interests in math and child development positioned him to

implement into his second-grade classroom philosophies about education and children he had internalized over the years. He is passionate about providing students rich experiences—outdoor, technological, social, and physical—which are a fundamental component of his instruction style, and he believes they support deep future connections for learning.

As a director of the Adventure Club at the elementary school where he first taught, Kozlowski accompanied busloads of students for day or overnight excursions around Wyoming. “We would take them to Devil’s Tower, cross-country skiing, and to important historical places in the area like the Battle of the Little Bighorn site,” recalled Kozlowski. “It really inspired a passion in me for that kind of connected element of learning, where kids learn things in school and then apply them in real life.”

He brought that real-world learning to his classroom at EBLs, where he uses birding in the Rocky Mountain Birding Curriculum he developed as an integrated topic to teach all the academic subjects. The class tracks migratory patterns, builds bird models, and completes a weekly field guide where they draw birds, learn birdsongs and facts, and read and discuss fictional bird stories. Kozlowski defines it as “true integrated learning.”

For field experiences, Kozlowski has been awarded multiple grants that have provided his students with high-quality learning tools, including a classroom set of Vortex binoculars and a telephoto lens and camera for capturing birds the students spot. In just the first month of this academic year, he has received over 100 voluntary submissions of photos of birds his students discover outside of school hours.

“His second-grade learners and their families have passionately embraced his immersive exploration of birds throughout the curriculum,” said Shannon Rhodes, colleague and first-grade teacher at EBLs. “Dr. Koz champions the wonder of serendipitous exploration as he leads groups of learners outside at least once a week, and within the walls of the classroom students are equally engaged in projects that reveal high levels of learning.”

This academic year, Kozlowski has also removed the rows of student desks from his classroom and replaced them with desk-top sized whiteboards the children can access from a drawer when the learning requires paper and pencil. “They spread all around the room or sit at a table if they want to sit up, and boom, they’ve got their personalized space,” he explained. Similarly, group work is done by spreading large whiteboards on the floor that the children gather around in small groups. “It’s the power

of being able to get kids around a big, shared learning space on the floor,” he explained. “It’s easy for them to work together.”

In addition to the benefit of having a large open space in his classroom, Kozlowski is aiming to give his students ample opportunity to wiggle and move. Because early childhood physical and motor development caps at around age eight, Kozlowski wants to create a physical environment in his classroom that is stimulating, purposeful, and engaging for his students.

“It seems like one of the important priorities is to help them develop fully with high levels of engagement, high levels of movement, high levels of kids doing not teacher doing,” he explained. “I’m focusing on things like cross-body coordination activities and building core strength. Being able to slide yourself by your belly to pull yourself along, and to go from your belly to your knees to standing up is engaging lots of different muscles in your body.”

Because the techniques employed by Kozlowski are supported by developmental and educational research, he doesn’t get pushback from administration or parents for his methods. In fact, they are embraced wholeheartedly. “I think the families in the school might trust me and say, ‘Sounds like Dr. Koz is doing something a little wild, let’s see how it goes,’” he said. “One of the things that makes this school so great is we have the autonomy to take our different passions for teaching and fulfill them in our classrooms. If teachers are excited about what they’re doing, then nothing can stop them and that radiates to the kids.”

“Dr. Koz’s classroom is filled with discovery and a contagious love of learning,” said Jill Skousen, a parent of three of Kozlowski’s former students. “He has had a profound and lasting impact on our children, shaping not only their academic success but also their confidence and love of learning.” Skousen adds that her son is now an “avid birdwatcher” thanks to Kozlowski’s influence.

Kozlowski puts his whole heart into his work because he truly loves the kids and wants to help them succeed. “You have to love them,” he said. “You have to appreciate them. You have to smile at them, greet them, and play with them with a sincere heart. You have to love the kids before anything else.”

In early September, Kozlowski was honored at a celebratory banquet with the four other state finalists at the Little America Hotel in Salt Lake City and received a \$2,000 prize.