



## 2026 NEA ESP OF THE YEAR AWARD OVERVIEW AND REQUIREMENTS

**NOMINATION DEADLINE: 11:59 p.m. ET on Tuesday, September 23, 2025**  
All award materials can be downloaded from [www.nea.org/espoty-nomination](http://www.nea.org/espoty-nomination).

### OVERVIEW

#### Purpose

The National Education Association (NEA) Education Support Professional (ESP) of the Year Award recognizes the contributions that education support professionals make toward their worksites, communities, and professions. The award is presented annually to an NEA member who demonstrates outstanding accomplishments and reflects the contributions of ESPs to public education and student success. The award is presented by the NEA and NEA Member Benefits.

#### Award

Each spring, one nominee is presented with the NEA ESP of the Year Award at the annual [NEA ESP National Conference](#). The 2026 NEA ESP of the Year will receive a \$10,000 personal cash prize courtesy of NEA Member Benefits and will be funded by NEA to attend the following year's NEA ESP National Conference. The winner may also be invited to address the NEA Representative Assembly and will serve as an ambassador for ESPs across the country, elevating the voice of ESPs at local, state, and national events.

#### Eligibility

**All active ESP members of an NEA local affiliate who have been NEA members for at least three years as of December 31, 2025, are eligible.** Retired members are not eligible for the award. Individuals must be nominated by their state affiliate through a state ESP award program or their local affiliate if a state program or nominee does not exist.

#### Nomination Types

**State Affiliate Nomination:** Each state affiliate may submit only **one nominee through its state ESP award program**. A state ESP award program solicits nominations from local affiliates and then selects one statewide award nominee. Criteria for the state award can mirror the NEA award criteria or be designed by the state affiliate, so long as it does not conflict with the NEA award's criteria and purpose. A submission by a state affiliate requires the acknowledgment of the state president.

**Local Affiliate Nomination:** If a state affiliate does not have an ESP award program or nominee, it may ask local affiliates to submit nominations (one per local) directly to NEA. Criteria for the local award can mirror the NEA award criteria or be designed by the state affiliate, so long as it does not conflict with the NEA award's criteria and purpose. A submission by a local affiliate requires the acknowledgment of the state and local president. Local affiliate nominations are only permissible if the state affiliate does not have an ESP award program or nominee.

#### Award Requirements At-A-Glance

**A complete nomination package includes the following award requirements:**

- Nomination Information
- Affiliate POC Information
- Nominee Personal Information
- Nominee Worksite/Career Information
- Nominee Personal Statement
- Nominee Resume Questionnaire
- State President Acknowledgment
- Three (3) Letters of Recommendation
- A high-resolution digital headshot of the nominee

#### Deadline

Nominations must be submitted **by 11:59 p.m. ET on Tuesday, September 23, 2025**. Nominations submitted after this date will not be considered for the award.

## Affiliate Points of Contact (POCs)

POCs are individuals appointed by the state affiliate executive director to liaise with NEA staff and coordinate the compilation and submission of their state's ESP of the Year nomination to NEA. POCs work directly with nominees to collect the award requirements and then enter them into the online nomination form on their behalf. Nominees cannot submit their nominations.

The state affiliate executive director should identify a POC unless the nomination is a local affiliate nomination, at which time the local affiliate would do so.

## Scoring/Selection Process & Award Criteria (same as last year)

The NEA ESP of the Year selection committee will review and score the nominations using the ESP of the Year award criteria outlined below.

- **Impact on students.** Describe specific actions you have taken and how those actions positively impacted student learning, social-emotional well-being, health and/or safety.
- **Impact on families and the community.** Describe specific actions you have taken and how those actions have positively impacted families and/or the local community.
- **Union engagement and activism, with a focus on ESP workforce issues.** Describe how your engagement and activism with the local or state union/association have positively impacted ESPs' professional stature (e.g., importance and reputation), stability (e.g., wages, benefits, and job security), and/or effectiveness (e.g., professional practice).
- **Impact on colleagues.** Describe specific actions you have taken and how those actions have positively impacted colleagues at your school campus, school district, or worksite.

To help the nominee better tell their story and focus on their impact (instead of simply submitting a list of accomplishments), each criterion follows the same cadence: "What action was taken, and what impact did that action have?"

The following three questions will be applied to each of the criteria during scoring:

1. What is the **degree of impact?** (Was the impact transactional or transformational? Were systems changed? What was the breadth and/or depth of impact?)
2. How did the actions advance **racial and social justice** in education? (Did the actions address issues of inequity? If yes, how? How were the actions inclusive and/or responsive to marginalized communities?)
3. To what degree did the nominee **collaborate or partner** with others? (e.g., individuals, organizations, etc.?)

A **strong nomination package** will demonstrate how the nominee meets and/or exceeds each criterion. It will demonstrate the nominee's accomplishments and impact in each criterion area by describing what action was taken and what impact the action had. Strong nominations tell how the nominee has effected change using specific examples. Nominees should ask themselves, "What is the story I want to tell about my work, accomplishments, and impact in each of the criterion areas?" A strong nomination is more than simply a list of accomplishments. It is the story of how those accomplishments impacted students, families/community, colleagues, and the union.

The selection committee will review and score the nominations using the above award criteria. The committee will review and score the nominee's Personal Statement, Resume Questionnaire, and Letters of Recommendation.

The selection committee does not score the Nomination Information, Affiliate POC Information, Nominee Personal Information, Nominee Worksite/Career Information, and State President Acknowledgment sections. They do review segments of the Nomination Information (e.g., type of nomination, state affiliate), Nominee Personal Information (e.g., name), and Nominee Worksite/Career Information (e.g., local affiliate, job title, NEA career family, career experience, worksite level, school/worksite, school district/university, school community type, Title I status) sections to gather additional context for each nomination. The committee does not view the digital headshot.

When the scoring and selection process is complete, the committee will forward its recommendation to the NEA president, who will present it to the NEA Executive Committee for consideration and action.

## Announcement of Semi-finalists and Top Recipient

Semi-finalists will be announced before the [2026 NEA ESP National Conference](#) (date TBD). The NEA ESP of the Year top recipient will remain confidential until announced at the [2026 NEA ESP National Conference](#).

## CHANGES TO THE 2026 NOMINATION PROCESS & FORM

### New Nomination Submission Platform

Nominations will now be submitted through an online nomination form (Smartsheet). We no longer use Blackbaud (the system through which NEA affiliates apply for grants) to accept nominations. We believe this change will streamline the process, making it easier for POCs to submit nominations.

With the new online nomination form:

- POCs **no longer** need to register or have an Applicant ID and password to submit a nomination and **will be emailed a link to the nomination form**. The link is no longer provided in this document or accessible on the ESPOTY webpage.
- **IMPORTANT!** POCs **can no longer start, save, and come back to finish** a nomination at a later time. Be sure you have all of the requested information from your nominee **before** completing the form.

### Nomination Form Question Changes

Minor changes were made to questions in the Nomination Information, Affiliate POC Information, Nominee Personal Information (formerly the Data Sheet), Nominee Worksite/Career Information, Resume Questionnaire, and State President Acknowledgement sections.

- **To view a sample of the nomination form, click [HERE](#)**. It highlights where questions were added or revised. These changes are also highlighted in the appropriate sections below.

Additional changes related to the new online form are highlighted throughout this document.

## AWARD REQUIREMENT DETAILS

### Affiliate POC and Nomination Information Sections

POCs will complete the Affiliate POC Information (e.g., name, job title, phone number, e-mail address) and Nomination Information sections of the form (e.g., nomination type, state affiliate).

#### **NEW!**

- POCs will be asked to attest that the information in the nomination has been reviewed, is deemed complete, and is true to the best of their knowledge, in the Affiliate POC Information section.
- POCs will be asked when their nominee was notified that they had been selected as their state's ESPOTY and how they were informed (for example, at a conference or other event, through social media, etc.), in the Nomination Information section.

### Nominee Personal Information Section

Nominees must provide contact and demographic information for this section of the form (e.g., name, mailing address, e-mail address, phone number, age range, race, pronouns, etc.). Once completed, POCs will copy and paste (or type) the nominee's responses into the form on the nominee's behalf.

#### **NEW!**

- If a nominee provides a P.O. Box as their primary address, they will be asked to provide an address where they can receive UPS packages.
- Nominees are now asked to provide their social media handles (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) if applicable.

### Nominee Worksite/Career Information Section

Nominees must provide worksite/career information for this section of the form (e.g., local affiliate, local president, NEA member ID, UniServ Director, job title, career family, etc.) Once completed, POCs will copy and paste (or type) the nominee's responses into the online form on the nominee's behalf.

**NEW!** Nominees are now asked how they would like their job title to appear in digital and printed promotional materials (e.g., ESPOTY webpage, ESP conference slideshow, signage, program).

### Nominee Personal Statement and Resume Questionnaire Sections

Nominees are required to complete and submit a Personal Statement and Resume Questionnaire. Once completed, POCs will copy and paste (or type) the nominee's responses into the form on the nominee's behalf.

## NEW!

- There is now a **4,000-character limit (including spaces)** for all open-ended questions, including each criterion area in the Personal Statement and each question in the Resume Questionnaire. Previously, there was a 750-word limit for these responses.
- In addition, the new form **WILL NOT flag for the POC if a response exceeds the 4,000-character (including spaces) limit**. Any text over the character count limit will not be captured but cut off. **After copying and pasting each response, it's important to check that the entire response was captured.**

**NEW! Character Count Tools:** In Microsoft Word, you can use the built-in word count feature. Word's status bar displays the word count by default, but you can click it to reveal character counts (with and without spaces) and other statistics. Online tools like [WordCounter.net](#), [CharacterCounter.COM](#), and [QuillBot](#) offer real-time character counting and can be helpful for specific character limit requirements.

**Personal Statement:** Nominees will demonstrate how they have met or exceeded the four criterion areas in the Personal Statement by providing specific examples of accomplishments and impact. Nominees may respond with up to **4,000 characters (including spaces) per criterion area**. No changes were made to the award criteria.

**Resume Questionnaire:** Nominees will further demonstrate their accomplishments and impact related to the award criteria through the Resume Questionnaire. Nominees will outline past and present professional/work experience, school/district roles and appointments, education/training/certificates, external organization/stakeholder group positions, achievements/honors/awards, and local/state affiliate positions and appointments. Nominees can respond in bullets or paragraphs with up to **4,000 characters (including spaces) per question**.

**NEW!** Under Professional/Work Experience, nominees will be asked to list their current worksite position/job/career **and** describe a typical day at work. This is a slight revision to the question asked in the previous nomination forms.

**REMINDER! The nominee MUST write the Personal Statement and Resume Questionnaire.** These sections cannot be written by another individual (i.e., an individual who nominated the member as part of the affiliate's process). Nominations submitted with sections written by someone other than the nominee (i.e., from a third-person point of view) will not be accepted, and the nominee will be required to revise and resubmit these sections.

### **Helpful Resource! 2026 ESPOTY Nominee Template**

An optional template to help POCs collect the nominee's responses for the **Personal Information, Worksite/Career Information, Personal Statement, and Resume Questionnaire** sections is available. The template is a Microsoft Word fillable form that reflects what is requested in these sections. Once the nominee completes the template, the POC will copy and paste (or type) the responses into the nomination form on their behalf.

**Note:** Long answer text fields in the template will not flag for the nominee if responses exceed the 4,000-character limit (including spaces). Nominees are encouraged to type their responses for these sections in a blank Word document, check the number of characters (including spaces), and copy and paste them into the template.

Download the **2026 ESPOTY Nominee Template** [HERE](#).

## State President Acknowledgement

POCs must complete the State President Acknowledgement section of the form on behalf of the State President. If the nomination is a local affiliate nomination, the local and state presidents must approve and acknowledge the nomination.

Before completing it, the POC should share this section with the State President (and Local President if it is a local nomination), obtain the appropriate approvals, and then complete it on their behalf.

**NEW!** The form asks the POC to attest to the following on behalf of the State President and type in the State President's Name. This is a slight revision to the language in previous nomination forms.

By checking a box, the POC attests that:

- They have permission from the State President to electronically sign and submit this nomination on their behalf, and
- The State President recognizes the individual outlined in this nomination as their affiliate's nominee.

## Letters of Recommendation

Paired with the Personal Statement and Resume Questionnaire, letters of recommendation should further demonstrate the nominee's accomplishments and impact related to the award criteria.

**Three (3) Letters of Recommendation (no more, no less)** must be submitted. If less than three (3) are submitted, an additional letter must be provided. If more than three (3) are submitted, only three (3) will be reviewed by the selection committee. All others will be discarded.

Nominees should seek letters of recommendation from individuals who can cite specific examples of how the nominee has impacted one or more of the four criterion areas. Letter writers should be from the nominee's school/worksites (e.g., fellow ESPs, teachers or other colleagues; principals, superintendents), local/state affiliate/union (e.g., elected leaders, fellow members, staff), and community (e.g., current or former students; parents/families/guardians of students; representatives of charitable, faith-based, non-profit or other community-based organizations) as these capacities align with the award criteria.

Letters should note how long the writer has known the nominee and describe the capacity (e.g., school/worksites, local/state affiliate/union, community) through which the writer is commenting on the nominee's accomplishments and impact. Letters can be addressed to the selection committee or "to whom it may concern," but it is not required. Letters should include the writer's signature (typed or handwritten), first and last name, title/position, and phone number or email address if we have questions.

## **Formatting Requirements**

- Letters must be **typed, one page maximum**, with **one-inch margins** and a **minimum 11-point font**. No pictures of letters, please.
- **NEW!** Letters of Recommendation can now be uploaded as **PDFs or Word documents**.

## **NEW! Instructions for Uploading Letters**

1. Double-check the formatting of each letter to ensure it is **typed, one-page maximum, with one-inch margins and a minimum 11-point font**.
2. Change the filename of each letter to include the nominee's name and state.
3. Upload each letter by clicking "browse files", navigating to where the file is saved on your computer/device, selecting the file, and then clicking "upload." You can also drag and drop the files into the upload field.

### **2026 ESPOTY Letters of Recommendation Requirements – Resource for Letter Writers!**

This document summarizes the requirements for letters of recommendation. POCs or nominees should share this with letter writers to help ensure that all requirements are met.

Download the *2026 ESPOTY Letter of Recommendation Requirements* [\*\*HERE\*\*](#).

## Digital Headshot

Nominees must also submit a **high-resolution digital headshot**. **IMPORTANT!** The headshot will be used in digital and printed promotional materials, including the ESPOTY webpage and ESP Conference slideshow, signage, and program.

**Please consider this before submitting a photo.**

- The photo must be **1200 x 1200 pixels or 1.4 MB in size and 300 dpi**.
- **NEW!** Photos can now be submitted as **JPG, PNG, or GIF** files. The online form does not accept other file types.
- Photos taken with a smartphone or professional-quality photos taken by affiliate staff are recommended.
- Professional or business casual attire is recommended.
- Please do not submit selfies, pictures of pictures, or screenshots from social media platforms.

**Tips:** A high-quality photo will have good lighting and headroom. Photos can be taken indoors or outdoors, but should be taken with the light pointing toward the nominee's face. The shot should be framed so there is ample space around the nominee's head.



## Headshot Examples



### **NEW! Instructions for Uploading the Headshot**

1. Change the filename of the headshot to include the nominee's name and state.
2. Upload the headshot by clicking "browse files", navigating to where the file is saved on your computer/device, selecting the file, and then clicking "upload." You can also drag and drop the file into the upload field.

### **NEW! BEFORE SUBMITTING A NOMINATION**

- Be sure you have all of the requested information from your nominee **before** completing the form. You **can no longer start, save, and come back to finish** a nomination at a later time.
- The new form **does not** have automatic **spell checking**. Please check for spelling before completing the form.
- Be sure to check "**send me a copy of my responses**" before you check "**submit**" to receive a copy of the nomination. **We strongly encourage you to do this, so you can review the nomination and promptly flag any errors for ESP Quality staff.**
- Use the **2026 ESPOTY Nomination Submission Checklist** to ensure all award requirements have been met. The checklist can be printed or used as a Microsoft Word fillable form. Click [HERE](#) to download the checklist.

### **NEW! AFTER SUBMITTING A NOMINATION**

1. After you check "submit," a confirmation message will appear on the screen.
2. ESP Quality staff will send the POC a confirmation email and review the nomination to ensure all eligibility and submission requirements are met. If anything needs attention, the POC will be notified.
3. If nothing needs attention, a copy of the nomination will be sent to the nominee, who will have a short turnaround time to review it and respond with any final changes.

## **ACCESSING THE 2026 NOMINATION FORM**

POCs will be emailed a link to the nomination form **on or before Friday, June 27**. They no longer need to register or have an Applicant ID and password to submit a nomination. If you are the POC for your affiliate and have not yet received the link **as of Monday, June 30**, please e-mail Jennie Young at [jyoung@nea.org](mailto:jyoung@nea.org).

**Questions?** Contact Jennie Young at [jyoung@nea.org](mailto:jyoung@nea.org).

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