

2025 Outstanding School Support Employee of the Year

Exemplar Application: Mrs. Donella Wagner

Head Custodian — St. Mary Parish

Candidate's Bio:

Exemplar response: Provide a professional biography written in **third person** and **no more than 300 words**.

Donella Wagner is the Head Custodian at Raintree Elementary School in Baldwin, Louisiana, where she has dedicated more than 27 years to creating a safe, clean, and welcoming learning environment. Beginning her career as a substitute employee in 1997 at Franklin Senior High School, Wagner quickly earned a full-time position and went on to help open and reopen multiple schools in St. Mary Parish, including West St. Mary High School, Baldwin Elementary, and Thomas Gibbs Elementary.

Her leadership extends far beyond custodial responsibilities. Wagner serves as a trusted liaison between staff and administration, advocates for students and faculty, and steps forward wherever she is needed. She created a uniform closet to provide essential clothing to students in need and volunteers for bus duty and the Boys 'n Bow Ties program, where she mentors young boys through character-building, etiquette, and leadership activities that foster confidence, respect, and self-worth. Through these efforts, Wagner helps students feel supported, valued, and connected to their school community.

Beyond her school, Wagner is deeply committed to serving her community. She is a member of The Bahamas, a nonprofit supporting nursing home residents, and serves as Bible Study Coordinator at Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Jeanerette.

Through quiet, compassionate, and consistent leadership, Wagner has become a cornerstone of her school and community. Her service reflects a belief that every student deserves to feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. Wagner demonstrates that leadership does not always come with a title — it is built through integrity, service, and an unwavering commitment to others.

Written Reflection Questions:

In **500 words or less**, respond to each of the following prompts. Strong responses should include specific examples and evidence of impact. Focus not only on what you do, but on how your expertise, leadership, and actions have made a meaningful difference for students, families, colleagues, schools, and communities. Evidence may include outcomes, data, examples of change, stakeholder feedback, partnerships, or other indicators of impact.

1. Work performance and Expertise

Prompt: Describe how the candidate demonstrates excellence, expertise, and dedication in their role. Provide specific examples of how the candidate goes beyond expectations, applies their skills and knowledge, and contributes to a safe, effective, and supportive school environment. What impact does the candidate's work have on students, colleagues, or the school?

Exemplar Response:

Donella's journey to becoming Head Custodian at Raintree Elementary is a testament to dedication, growth, and pride in her work. After a decade as a seamstress at a local textile mill, she transitioned into education as a substitute food technician. Her strong work ethic quickly stood out, and she was personally invited by a respected custodian, now Mayor Pro Tempore Lester Levine, to join his custodial team. From substitute to full-time employee and ultimately Head Custodian, Donella earned increasing responsibility through consistent excellence.

Before most alarm clocks go off, Donella is already at Raintree Elementary by 5:45 a.m., ensuring every light is on, every area is secure, and every space — from classrooms and restrooms to the gym and front office — is clean and ready for the school day. She understands that effective custodial work requires more than completing a checklist; it requires knowing the building, anticipating needs, noticing details others may overlook, and taking pride in maintaining a safe and welcoming environment. Whether picking up a paperclip, wiping down windows, preparing spaces for students and staff, or addressing an issue before it becomes a larger problem, Donella consistently holds herself to a high standard.

Her expertise and reliability have earned the **confidence of school leaders**. She has been requested by name to assist with the opening and reopening of multiple schools, demonstrating the confidence others place in her ability to prepare and maintain a school environment to a high standard. Her work helps ensure that students and staff enter a building that is safe, orderly, clean, and ready for learning.

Donella's commitment extends beyond her assigned responsibilities. She volunteers for bus duty, greeting students with a smile and a kind word that sets a positive tone for the day. Through her attention to detail, professional pride, and willingness to serve, Donella demonstrates that excellence in a support role is not simply about completing assigned tasks — it is about understanding how the work contributes to the safety, well-being, and success of the entire school community.

2. School and Community Engagement

Prompt: Describe the exceptional ways the candidate contributes to their school and community. Provide specific examples of how the candidate builds relationships, responds to needs, participates in or leads initiatives, or provides service beyond the expectations of their role. What difference has the candidate's involvement made for students, colleagues, families, the school, or the community?

Exemplar Response:

Donella's involvement in her school and community is rooted in deep empathy and a commitment to serve. She believes every child deserves to learn with dignity and every elder deserves to experience connection, and she acts on that belief every day.

At Raintree Elementary, Donella noticed that many students lacked clean uniforms and basic necessities. In response, she created and manages the school's uniform closet, collecting donations, organizing inventory, and building partnerships with local donors. Through her efforts, students receive uniforms, shoes, socks, backpacks, and other essentials that help restore their confidence and readiness to learn. As one parent shared, "Mrs. Donella is a God-send. My child holds her head high wearing her new shoes and uniform. She's ready to learn."

Donella also mentors young boys through **Boys 'n Bow Ties**, a school program that encourages honor, self-respect, and leadership. She teaches students to dress for success and carry themselves with confidence. Her influence is evident in students who were once known for fighting and now demonstrate greater confidence and a willingness to choose kindness over conflict.

In the wider community, Donella is a vital member of **The Bahamas**, a women's nonprofit that brings joy to local nursing home residents through weekly visits. She provides companionship, games, toiletries, and crafts, helping residents experience connection, dignity, and care.

Donella does not seek recognition; she seeks opportunities to help. Through her willingness to notice needs, build relationships, and take action, she strengthens her school and community and demonstrates how service beyond one's assigned role can make a meaningful difference.

3. Leadership and commitment:

Prompt: Describe how the candidate demonstrates leadership, initiative, and commitment to their school and community. Provide specific examples of how the candidate takes initiative, solves problems, supports others, leads by example, or creates opportunities that positively impact students, colleagues, or the school community. How has the candidate's leadership influenced others or contributed to positive change?

Exemplar Response:

Donella's leadership is grounded in initiative, accountability, and a willingness to step forward when others need support. At Raintree Elementary, she serves as a trusted link between the custodial team and administration, helping ensure that concerns are communicated, expectations are understood, and problems are addressed. When challenges arise, Donella does not wait for someone else to solve them. She identifies what needs to be done, brings potential solutions to administration, and follows through until the work is complete. She also advocates

for her team while holding herself and others accountable to high standards. Through her example, she demonstrates that leadership means taking responsibility for the success of the entire school, not simply completing the tasks within one's job description.

Her leadership is also evident in the way she steps forward to support students and strengthen the school community. Whether volunteering for bus duty, helping with student programs, or responding when additional support is needed, Donella consistently looks for ways to contribute. Her willingness to serve in these roles demonstrates a commitment to students and reinforces the importance of shared responsibility for their well-being and success.

Donella carries the same commitment to service into her community. At Mount Calvary Baptist Church, she coordinates and teaches Bible Study for youth, creating opportunities for young people to learn, participate, and grow. She also serves in the senior choir and prepares meals for individuals in need. In each setting, she leads by being present, dependable, and willing to serve.

Donella demonstrates that leadership is not defined by a title. It is demonstrated through initiative, accountability, and consistent action. **Her example influences** colleagues, students, and community members to contribute, care for others, and take pride in the role they play.

4. Positive Relationships and Support for Others

Prompt: Describe how the candidate builds positive relationships and provides meaningful support to students, colleagues, administrators, families, and/or community members. Provide specific examples, observations, or testimonials that demonstrate how the candidate earns trust, supports others, and makes those around them feel valued and respected. How do others describe or experience the candidate's impact?

Exemplar Response:

Donella Wagner builds relationships through consistency, kindness, and a genuine commitment to serving others. Across more than 27 years in St. Mary Parish schools, she has earned the trust of administrators, teachers, students, and families by being someone others can depend on. Her reputation for reliability is reflected in the fact that she has been requested by name to assist with the opening and reopening of several schools, including West St. Mary High School, Baldwin Elementary, Thomas Gibbs Elementary, and Raintree Elementary.

Donella's relationships with colleagues are grounded in respect and dependability. Teachers often say, "You can tell Mrs. Donella has been here," describing the sense of order and care they experience because of her work. Her presence provides more than a clean school environment; it gives teachers and staff confidence that their surroundings are cared for and ready for students. Raintree Elementary Principal Marie Cole shares, "When Mrs. Wagner is involved, I have complete peace of mind. I know the work will be done with excellence and heart."

Her connection with students is equally meaningful. Donella takes time to greet students, learn their names, encourage them, and notice when they may need additional support. Her presence on bus duty gives students a familiar and welcoming face at the beginning of the day, while her involvement in programs such as Boys 'n Bow Ties allows her to build relationships beyond her custodial responsibilities. Students know they can count on her kindness and encouragement, and her consistent presence helps them feel seen, valued, and supported.

Donella extends that same care to families. When families need assistance, she responds with compassion and without judgment, helping connect students with resources such as clothing and other necessities. Her willingness to help preserve students' dignity while strengthening the trust families place in her and in their school.

Donella's impact is reflected not only in what she does, but in how people experience her presence. She provides confidence for administrators, support for colleagues, connection for students, and reassurance for families. After more than two decades of service, the relationships she has built are among her most lasting contributions to the school communities she has served.

5. Contribution to School Success and Culture

Prompt: Describe how the candidate provides a positive image and contributes to the success of their school, school system, and/or community. Provide specific examples of how the candidate's actions strengthen the school environment, improve experiences or outcomes, foster a sense of belonging and support, or contribute to the success of others. What lasting impact has the candidate made?

Exemplar Response:

Donella Wagner contributes to the success of her school by helping create an environment where students and staff feel cared for, supported, and proud of their school. She understands that a clean, orderly, and welcoming school communicates that the learning environment matters. Her meticulous attention to every classroom, hallway, restroom, and common area helps ensure that Raintree Elementary is a place where students and staff can learn and work in a safe, positive environment.

Her impact extends beyond maintaining the building. Donella looks for ways to remove barriers that can affect a student's experience at school. When she recognized that some students lacked clean uniforms and basic necessities, she created and continues to manage a school uniform closet. Through donations and careful organization, students receive uniforms, shoes, socks, backpacks, and other items they need. By responding to a need she saw firsthand, Donella helps students arrive at school feeling prepared, confident, and ready to participate while ensuring that families can access support with dignity.

Donella also contributes to a strong sense of belonging throughout the school. She greets students by name, encourages them as they arrive, and makes herself available wherever she is needed. Her presence on bus duty and involvement in student programs give students additional opportunities to experience her encouragement and care beyond the classroom. Staff likewise know that Donella takes ownership of the school and treats its success as a shared responsibility.

Her influence extends across the schools she has served. Having been requested by name to help open and reopen multiple schools, Donella has contributed to establishing environments characterized by care, pride, and high expectations. Her lasting impact is evident not only in the physical spaces she helps maintain, but in the students who feel welcomed, the staff who feel supported, and the school communities that know they can depend on her.

Donella demonstrates that every role contributes to school success. Through the environment she creates, the needs she addresses, and the care she brings to others, she helps make school a place where students feel valued, supported, and ready to thrive.

6. Exceptional Service and Impact

Prompt: Provide additional evidence that demonstrates the significance, reach, or lasting impact of the candidate's service. Consider examples that illustrate how the candidate has transformed an experience, addressed an important need, inspired others, or made a meaningful difference that extends beyond their assigned role.

Exemplar Response:

For more than 27 years, Donella Wagner has consistently extended her service beyond the expectations of her role, creating a lasting impact on the students, educators, families, and communities she has served. From her beginnings as a substitute employee to her current role as Head Custodian at Raintree Elementary, Donella has helped open and reopen multiple schools, supported schools through challenging circumstances, and built relationships that have endured across generations of students and educators.

Her impact is reflected in the people who have worked alongside her. Raintree Elementary Principal Marie Cole praised Donella for “never shirking responsibilities” and for helping her “be a better administrator.” Former principal Hollis Wilson called her “the heart of our school” and highlighted the ways she goes above and beyond, including creating a student uniform room and helping make the school a welcoming place. Curriculum Facilitator Lisa Rodriguez described her as “dedicated, caring, compassionate, and selfless.”

Donella's service reaches beyond the schoolhouse. At Mount Calvary Baptist Church, she supports youth through Bible Study, serves through music, and provides meals to those in need. Through her volunteer work with The Bahamas, she regularly visits residents at Maison Teche Nursing Center, bringing companionship, activities, and joy. Dayna Provost, RN, observed that Donella “brings joy” to the residents she visits.

The breadth of Donella's service demonstrates its lasting reach. She has influenced students, supported educators and administrators, strengthened school communities, served families, mentored young people, and brought connection to elderly residents. As Assistant Superintendent Trey Folse noted, “For over 27 years, she has served with grace, grit, and an unwavering devotion to our children.”

Donella's greatest impact is the legacy she leaves wherever she serves. Her career demonstrates how one person's commitment to service can extend far beyond a job description, touching people across schools, generations, and communities. Through her consistency, compassion, and willingness to serve, Donella has made a lasting difference in the lives of those fortunate enough to know her.