

Librarian co-builds movement for 'Young Teen Lit' category

In true librarian fashion, MEA member Christina Chatel had a nagging question and set about digging for an answer: ***"Where are the books written with the 13- to 15-year-old in mind?"***

As a middle school library media specialist in Troy, Chatel reads several dozen books a year and talks with hundreds of young people to learn their reading interests and tastes.

Lately she noticed an accelerating trend: Students were coming into the library looking for shorter, edgier, faster-moving books with appealing covers that don't look childish. "I started getting frustrated, not having a lot of options that were appealing to kids."

"Post-pandemic, it seemed like middle schoolers' tastes had changed — or maybe they were more vocal about what they wanted."

In summer 2024, Chatel wrote an open letter to book publishers which was posted on *Teen Librarian Toolbox* and took off on social media with more than 100,000 views and hundreds of likes, comments and shares.

In it, she urged publishers to produce books around 150-200 pages long with action and provocative themes, featuring diverse characters in eighth to tenth grade.

Right now, she says, "Every book has an 11- or 12-year-old character in middle grade, and then there's no other age until they get characters that are 17 or 18 — it's crazy!"

Soon Chatel learned a Georgia school librarian, Marcia Kochel, was advocating the same thing. The pair joined

forces and created a name for the book category they want: Young Teen Lit.

"They developed six criteria to distinguish their category from current ones that skew too young or too old — middle grade and young adult. "Young Teen" bridged the gap.

"Our first criteria says that these books should be edgy and complex. We are not looking for high-low titles. We are not 'clean teen.' We think our middle schoolers can handle tough topics, and that's what books really appropriate."

Next came a logo, website and social media to promote the idea along with existing books the two librarians consider examples and good reads. "We hope our army will buy these books, and that will show publishers there is a market; we desperately want to buy these books."

Chatel and Kochel have built a following at youngteenlit.com and Instagram at [@young_teenlit](https://www.instagram.com/young_teenlit). In May, they were named 2026 Movers & Shakers by the venerable *Library Journal*.

Chatel has worked at Boulan Park and Smith middle schools for 13 years. For a decade before that, she was a high school English teacher in the district while earning a master's degree in Library Science and school media specialist certification.



Find Christina Chatel on IG
[@young_teenlit](https://www.instagram.com/young_teenlit).

She calls it "the best job in the world," sparking kids' love of books; boosting skills in reading, information gathering and source citation; and developing digital literacy and citizenship.

Chatel is president-elect of the Michigan Association of School Librarians (MASL) and was named the 2025 School Librarian of the Year, among other awards and honors.

She and Kochel are trying to get major bookstores, such as Barnes & Noble, to create a Young Teen Lit section to better serve young readers. They lead the [#YoungTeenLit](https://www.instagram.com/youngteenlit) movement "on our own dime and on our own time, so it's definitely a passion project," Chatel said.

"We've heard from teachers, from parents, from booksellers who all feel the same way. Now there's some substance behind our movement, and I feel like we're finally starting to get somewhere." ■



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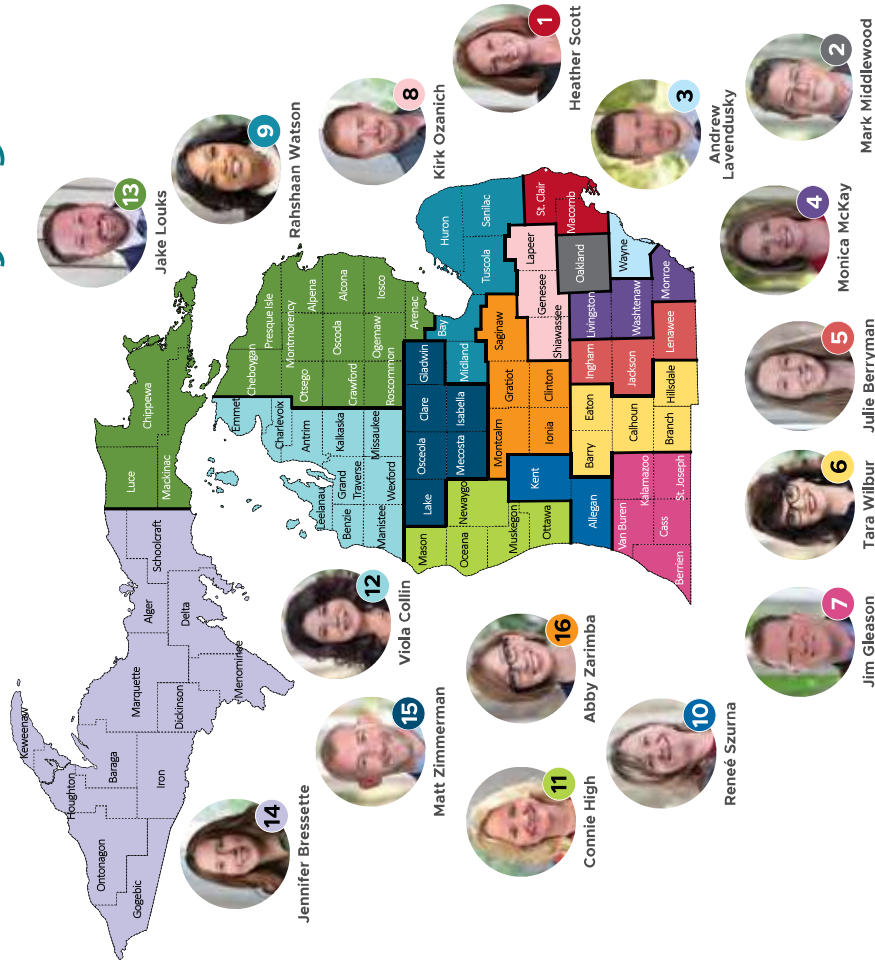
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Fraser educator wins MEA Art Show

A compelling charcoal drawing titled "Eyedentity," selected as Best in Show at this year's 62nd MEA/MAEA Art Acquisitions Purchase Exhibition, was inspired by a Social Security application, says the Fraser art teacher who won the top award.

MEA member Andrew Monroe said he created the artwork after filling out a form to get his newborn baby a Social Security card more than 20 years ago. Although his son is biracial, the form required one selection from a list of racial categories as identification, Monroe said.

"I was blown away — even in 2005 — that the federal government still had such an antiquated idea of racial identity," Monroe said. "In my personal work, I want to communicate things that conceptually have meaning. I would consider my artwork like social realism, drawing attention to issues of identity."

The winning piece considers "assigned identities and what box we are put into, but also the connotations of those and how we're viewed by others. Then there's the personal identities within us that have nothing to do with what we look like or our name, skin color, religion — any of that."

"Our individual identity is more of who we are and who we decide to be versus what we're told about who we are and who we're assigned to be."

Frank Juárez, the award-winning Wisconsin artist, art educator, and art curator who juried this year's exhibition, said he chose "Eyedentity" for the top

honor because the provocative imagery and the subject's powerful gaze prompt reflection about identity and humanity.

"This charcoal drawing is a reminder that we still have a lot of work to do as a society to not judge a book by its cover and to continue to be empathetic, understanding, and hopeful for a better tomorrow," Juárez said.

Pieces selected for the show feature a variety of processes, genres and subject matter. A reception and awards ceremony was held in July at MEA Headquarters.

An organizing committee of member-educators volunteer to plan the show each year. "We commend all artists for their creativity, dedication, and continues to inspire and elevate the role of the arts in education."

This was the first year entering for Monroe, the Best in Show winner, who's been teaching art for 20 years — currently at three elementary schools in Fraser. He aspired to teach art ever since he experienced a life-changing educator as a third grader in Charlotte Public Schools.

"When Mr. Jury came in on his little art cart fresh out of Michigan State University, my whole world changed. I wasn't very good at math or anything like that, but I was really good at art, and he recognized that in me and

A charcoal drawing by MEA member Andrew Monroe won Best in Show at this year's MEA/MAEA Art Acquisitions Purchase Exhibition.

encouraged me, and I just knew that was my calling."

Monroe's teaching philosophy is all about process — focusing on getting to know students and using humor to build rapport. He rewards effort and creativity over finished products.

"Everybody is born with the capacity to create art in some way. Of course, there are different levels of that, and my job isn't to try to force people to love art. But I want to provide an experience that people enjoy, not just in the creation of things, but our experience together."

Monroe holds bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts from Eastern Michigan University with K-12 art teaching certification.

View the online gallery of art and other award winners at mea.org/art.