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WEST HARTFORD — Hall High School band director John Mastroianni is Connecticut's 2014 Teacher of the Year, state education Commissioner Stefan Pryor announced Tuesday morning.

Hundreds of Mastroianni's music students gathered in the gymnasium under the guise of welcoming visiting German students to the school. They erupted into applause and cheers when they heard the news about their beloved teacher.

Among the Teacher of the Year finalists, Mastroianni "rose to the top with a truly exemplary application and performance on his part," Pryor said in his introduction.

Mastroianni, a 53-year-old professional saxophonist, has taught at Hall for 15 years. He leads Hall's famed annual "Pops 'N Jazz" show and has been honored with many jazz educator accolades.

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He said Tuesday he was thrilled that the ceremony had finally come, for a few reasons.

"I'm honored and humbled beyond what any words can describe. And secondly, because for seven days straight I have been lying through my teeth," said Mastroianni, who knew of the award in advance.

Many of the speakers – which included Gov. **Dannel Malloy**, Mayor Scott Slifka, school board Chairman Bruce Putterman, Hall Student Association President Ethan Swain and Nancy DePalma, an assistant superintendent – talked about Mastroianni's modest, warm nature.

"Sincerest thanks, John, for all the beautiful hearts that you have helped create. Sincerest thanks for every day sharing the gift of your amazing talent with us," DePalma said. "Most of all, sincerest thanks for being the most genuinely humble person that I've ever met in my 65 years on this planet."

"Here in **West Hartford** we also encourage a culture of engaging in deep and meaningful relationships with all of our students," Putterman said. "And John, that is where you are truly exceptional."

Swain, who has had "Mr. M" as a teacher for his entire high school career, praised Mastroianni's ceaseless positive attitude.

"His enthusiasm and positive energy is intoxicating and a rare gift," Swain said. "For the students, the greatest part about his happiness is knowing that it's not a façade. Sometimes during jazz band rehearsal, he'll tell us that he's the luckiest guy in the world.

" 'What's better than getting up every morning knowing you're doing what you love with great people,' he'll say. And from the bottom of his heart, he means it," Swain said.

In fact, Mastroianni had said that very thing in his speech, calling himself – as he has many times before – "the biggest spoiled brat on the planet" for being able to teach and play music for a living and then come home to "the greatest family."

"Mr. M has the ability to make every student feel like he or she is worth something," Swain said. "It doesn't matter your talent, your capacity for music, or even if you're a Red Sox fan, Mr. M will treat you with respect, kindness and compassion.

"You have not only taught us to be better musicians, Mr. Mastroianni, but you have taught us to be better people," he said.

"It's great for Hall, West Hartford public schools and our state to recognize a teacher who develops extraordinary capacity in our students without standardized tests," Superintendent Karen List, who could not be at the ceremony, said in an email. "He changes student lives and futures, while being one of the most humble and gracious people I know. I treasure him."