

Sharing and Celebrating the Leadership of North Carolina's Teachers

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Across North Carolina, teachers and other school staff are stepping into leadership roles that extend beyond their classrooms, transforming education for their students and peers. This leadership takes many forms, from creating innovative peer observation systems to spearheading projects that address specific challenges in schools. These efforts not only improve educational outcomes but also inspire others to take on leadership roles of their own. As the 2024 Burroughs Wellcome Fund Southwest Region Teacher of the Year, I've had the privilege of observing these impactful practices firsthand and reflecting on how teachers can harness their potential as change agents.

Teacher Leadership Across North Carolina

In my role, I've been able to visit schools and witness the extraordinary work of teachers and staff throughout the Southwest region and the state of North Carolina. These experiences have underscored the creativity and resilience of educators who are finding solutions to complex problems. For example, at Lincolnton Middle School, the school social worker, Marsha Beattie, has created a mentoring program that focuses on real-world skills with a social-emotional component. The members of Team Beattie support one another in reaching academic and behavioral goals while learning life skills that help them give back to their school community, including cooking breakfast for the school staff during teacher appreciation week. At A.L. Brown

High School teachers are finding creative ways to incentivize reaching academic and attendance goals, which includes an in-house barber shop experience for students. Brandon Lane, the music teacher at Landis Elementary, has exponentially increased community involvement in curriculum night by tying it to a student-led contra dance.

There are many commonalities that tie NC's public schools together. At every school I've visited, I've seen staff who are extremely passionate about the profession and their students. But I am also seeing firsthand how each school, district, and region has its own unique personality and its own unique challenges. As a teacher in a large district, I never imagined the issues faced by schools like Ocracoke School, the Pre-K through 12 schools on Ocracoke Island. When touring the school, Principal Jeanie Owens opened my eyes to issues like taking the four-hour ferry to away basketball games, having the whole school go home for lunch each day, and meeting the curricular needs of all students with a small staff. On the other side of the state, I spoke to teachers and principals in Waynesville, Rutherfordton, Asheville, and Boone, who were pulling together to contact students and provide resources and shelter in the wake of Hurricane Helene. These school leaders face adversity head-on and are prime examples of how teachers step up to meet the needs of their students and communities.

My journey as a Regional Teacher of the Year has also deepened my understanding of how to advocate for my students and the teaching profession. I have been given opportunities to speak to and

encourage hundreds of high schoolers who are considering education as a profession. I have also gotten to speak with local civic groups, like the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, about the ways they can support local schools. This title allowed me to share my passion for relevance in middle-grade math instruction through NCDPI's Promising Practices Clearinghouse and a Lunch and Learn session at the AIM conference last fall.

My team is learning more about educational policy through our participation in the Educational Policy Fellowship Program. This experience has been transformative, equipping me with the tools to advocate for policies that support teachers and students alike. Engaging with stakeholders, analyzing policy impacts, and collaborating with other fellows have shown me how educators can play a pivotal role in shaping the systems that govern their work. In the coming year, I'll take this knowledge to Raleigh, NC and Washington, D.C., where I'll have the opportunity to speak directly with lawmakers about the realities of education in our state.

None of these incredible opportunities have been experienced alone. The NC Teacher of the Year process is unique to other states. While only one regional finalist is ultimately selected as the state Teacher of the Year (the incomparable Heather Smith from the Western Region was recognized with this title from my cohort), we get to serve together as a team for a year of service. The other regional finalists are visiting schools across their regions as well, and we are using these experiences to inform our advocacy during our year of service and beyond.

Emerging as a Leader

Take Informed Action

So, how can other teachers step into leadership roles and begin their own journeys? First, recognize that leadership doesn't require a formal title! You do not need a plaque or trophy to address issues in your school or community. Leadership begins with identifying a need and taking action, like the teachers and staff I mentioned above. As a teacher, you are uniquely positioned to lead because you understand your students and community better than anyone else. Start small—perhaps by leading a professional development session or organizing a school-wide initiative or incentive. Consider partnering with local organizations (businesses, civic groups, religious organizations) to enrich student learning or meet student needs. It is also important to remember that you do not have to lead alone. Find a colleague or team of colleagues that share your desire for change and work together to accomplish your goal.

Continue to Learn and Grow

Second, seek opportunities for professional growth. Programs like the Educational Policy Fellowship can provide the knowledge and networks needed to expand your impact, but that is not the only option. Teachers can learn how to advocate through professional development opportunities like workshops, conferences, online courses, joining teacher advocacy organizations, collaborating with colleagues, and actively participating in school committees. Teachers can also stay up to date on issues and educational policies by following the work of EdNC and the Public School Forum. Each step in the learning process will help you deepen your understanding of the issues, sharpen your focus, and build the confidence to advocate for yourself and your ideas.

Share Your Story

Finally, share your story. The first goal our Regional Teacher of the Year team set for ourselves was to use our voices to positively inform others about the great things happening in the public schools of North Carolina. We do that by sharing the stories of the teachers, schools, and districts we visit. One of the most powerful ways to inspire others to act is by sharing your

journey, successes, and lessons learned. By doing so, you open others' eyes to the needs of your students while inspiring them to advocate for their own students.

Teachers are the backbone of our education system, and their leadership has the power to drive meaningful change. By observing, learning, acting, and sharing, you can have an incredible impact on not just your students but on public education as a whole.

Sarah Lefebvre is a dedicated Curriculum Facilitator and Secondary Math Specialist in Union County Public Schools, from which she is a proud alumna. Sarah graduated from Monroe High School in 2001 and went on to earn a BS in Elementary Education and an MA in Special Education from Appalachian State University.

With 17 years of teaching experience, Sarah has been recognized for her outstanding contributions to education. She works to ignite a passion for mathematics and to foster growth mindsets among her students and fellow educators. She was honored as a 2023 NCCTM Outstanding Secondary Mathematics Teacher and named the 2023 Union County Public Schools Teacher of the Year. Currently, Sarah serves as the 2024 Burroughs Wellcome Fund North Carolina Southwest Region Teacher of the Year.

Beyond the classroom, Sarah enjoys spending quality time with her husband, daughter, and dog. They often bond over card games, road trips, and cheering on their favorite teams. To recharge, she loves doing all things crafty.

