

2024 National Teacher of the Year



Missy Testerman
TENNESSEE

School: Rogersville City School
Subject: English as a Second Language (ESL)
Grade: K-8

Missy Testerman served as a first and second grade teacher at Rogersville City School in Rogersville, Tennessee, for three decades before taking advantage of Tennessee's progressive



Grow Your Own initiative and adding an English as a second language (ESL) endorsement. She currently serves as the district ESL specialist and ESL program director. Testerman coordinates the system's summer programs and is heavily involved in many programs, including being a mentor teacher and member of the teacher leadership team.

Testerman holds a Bachelor of Arts in elementary education and a Master of Arts in reading education from East Tennessee State University (ETSU). She added ESL licensure through Freed-Hardeman University, wanting to ensure that immigrant students and families had an advocate in their rural Appalachian area. Since her selection as Tennessee's Teacher of the Year, she has forged partnerships with ETSU and the University of Tennessee to encourage pre-service teachers and give authentic feedback to university leaders about their educator preparation programs.

A staunch advocate for students, teachers and families, Testerman considers her most important job to be making certain that her education students are prepared to advocate for their limited English proficiency families. She considers her greatest contribution to her profession to be the love and desire for learning that she has instilled in countless students over the past three decades. Seeing her former students succeed in life is the basis of Testerman's continued desire to educate the next generation and ensure they receive a broadened education while living in a rural setting.

Application Questions

- 1. Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning? Show how your deliberate instructional decisions create student learning and reveal your beliefs about teaching and learning.**

In my rural Appalachian school, we have families who have been nestled in these rolling, Smoky Mountain peaks for centuries, and we have immigrant families representing five distinct cultures from around the world who have recently been brought to this area by industrial expansion. While all of us in this area that we call "God's Country" are immigrants, the old Appalachian, Scotch-Irish immigrants sometimes forget this, resulting in tension between the "from here" and "not from around here" groups whose main difference is that some families arrived centuries ago, and some families arrived very recently.

The people of Appalachia are known for their amazing fortitude that, truthfully, could also be considered stubbornness. Their traditionally insular existence brings with it a strong sense of



belonging, and their tight-knit family groups take care of their own, showcasing a strong commitment to honest work and having an immeasurable work ethic as farmers or laborers in local factories.

While locals in this town that looks right out of the pages of Southern Living often say that no racial, ethnic, or religious divides exist, the truth is that anti- "anything different" rallies occur on our town square, complete with cursing, racial epithets, and the necessity for police to separate the two sides as they clash in the middle of town. My students witness this division of cultures and are torn by the conflict that arises from seeing their classmates' families rally against a group to which they belong.

I wanted my students to internalize that humans are more alike than different. I wanted to build a bridge between these cultures, so I devised a challenging curriculum that incorporated a study of Americans from diverse backgrounds. From this curriculum, the revered annual Second Grade American History Wax Museum was born. I deliberately selected an extensive list of Americans from various backgrounds and ethnicities from which students could choose, ensuring a myriad of diversity. Incorporating other cultures and backgrounds was a calculated, yet risky move that I was willing to take because of my deep-rooted teaching belief that exposure to new experiences and people outside of our own culture leads to growth and acceptance.

While I was excited about this project and intended to engage my students, I had no idea how captivated my students would become; their reactions astounded me. When it came time to pick characters, I was concerned that their choices could possibly highlight a lack of diversity rather than illustrate how unified humanity is. However, the students became obsessed with American history, making connections that I never expected, such as realizing that there has been inequity between people's lives throughout history.

I had a set of twins who chose to be Martha Washington and Sacagawea, discovering that these ladies lived at the same time. One sister loudly informed the other, "You were poor and had to listen to what all those men told you, but I got to boss around the first president of the United States." That inspired a class discussion about the lack of rights that women had in those days, but that women of means would have likely had more privileges than a Native American girl whose contributions were also pivotal to this country's expansion.

As part of their projects, students wrote one-minute speeches to read and completed academic tasks such as timelines. They used these artifacts to create a presentation board complete with America-themed cutout decorations. The excitement on the board assembly day was contagious as students spread their materials out on our classroom and hallway floors as they designed.



The Wax Museum project had resounding success. There were so many attendees that it was clear that we had outgrown the space for this event in its very first year. In subsequent years, we moved the Wax Museum outdoors to ensure enough room for our participants and our visitors. Seven years later, the annual Second Grade Famous American Wax Museum is still a premiere event at our school.

All of the reading and writing paid off with huge returns when students' benchmark scores rose to the highest levels they had ever been, with 84% of them scoring on or above grade-level at the end of the school year. Most importantly, my students were exposed to stories of Americans who did not look like them, allowing them to understand those cultures and their own by seeing that people are inherently the same, no matter the culture. We all have struggles and triumphs, and we all belong.

2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in that deliberately creates culture in your classroom or school. Describe how you build and use relationships to collaborate and to teach students of all backgrounds, abilities and identities. What is the status of the project today?

There is often a misconception in education that we can love kids into achievement. Make no mistake: loving and caring for our students is important, but it is not enough.

If we love them, we must teach them in a way that gives them the skills they need and allows them to meet high expectations and have a future.

My community is not affluent, and only 11% of our county's residents hold a bachelor's degree. The average household income hovers around \$45,000, with most wage earners toiling in local factories. Our school has a public housing project right outside our doors, but those doors have enabled us to help students change the trajectories of their lives.

Years ago, in efforts to encourage students in their academic journey, I realized that my 1st-4th grade students would benefit from an academic awards ceremony - a celebration of meeting high expectations. Invitations went home with students who had all A's/ B's, tried hard, were good citizens, or had a special talent. However, when we created the list of awardees, that list was shorter than I imagined simply because we did not have a lot of students who were earning high grades.

I am embarrassed to admit I realized that I had been doing an inadequate job of helping my students experience academic success. From day one, I was teaching all day, but I was not



growing my students' skills by arming them with tools to guide their own learning. This realization changed how I taught; I saw the importance of scaffolding skills that students needed to be successful. I began to build deliberate questioning into my schedule, teaching students how to dissect questions to understand them. I called the first six weeks of school Bootcamp Academy. Students were deliberately learning how to understand expectations so they could successfully complete rigorous assessments. I used games based on academic skills as we explored what questions were really asking.

Young students taking standardized tests often trip up on details. A question might ask how many men are on a train of 129 people that includes 48 women and 7 dogs, but students who do not conceptualize the question fail to understand what is being asked. Sometimes, our Bootcamp focused on making sure students understood which parts of the question were relevant to solve the equation. Often, that included mentally deleting the unnecessary parts of a question, such as the 7 dogs portion that often detracts students.

Until the Bootcamp began, I considered teaching this way to be "teaching to the test." I discovered that students knowing how to solve the problem actually showed that they were learning. My job was to teach them how to apply problem-solving strategies, no matter the problem type.

As lead teacher, I recruited my colleagues' participation by mentioning my students' improvements during casual conversations. I swapped student groups with a coworker who was a strong math teacher so students could reap the benefits of her skills. After the first year, all my grade level colleagues participated in Bootcamp Academy. Bootcamp grew us as professionals while we worked together to support our students. We built strong relationships with our students' families. My Academic Bootcamp directed my colleagues and students into next-level teaching and learning.

93% of our students were proficient on annual standardized testing that year. Students earned better grades as they guided their own learning, and the list of awards day invitees grew exponentially.

Our address is 116 Broadway Street, so we now call this The Academic Awards on Broadway. Scores of family members pour into our school each May. The first generation of honorees now attend the ceremony with their children. Our community thrives on this culture of excellence in this school that has supported families for 100+ years. Each year, love fills the room as parents, grandparents, families, and teachers support each child. This tradition inspires our students to succeed, and it all still begins with those first few weeks of school: the Bootcamp Academy.



Of the 23 students who participated in my first Bootcamp Academy, 19 became doctors, lawyers, nurses, architects, electricians, teachers, physical therapists, and more. I recently had a former bootcamp student, now a doctor, tell me that he wrote important college information in green ink because he learned that in my bootcamp. My bootcamp gave my learners the tools they needed to become critical thinkers that attack problems, not shy away from them. I loved my students enough to give them skills, not excuses.

3. Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. Show how these community connections dissolve classroom walls and are used to impact student learning and success.

"Wow, Mrs. Testerman! You mean anyone can get these books and read them for free?" my wide-eyed student asked as she incredulously surveyed the books at our local public library. By the time we left, she held her own library card in her hand, and I had introduced her mother to the librarians who pledged to help this family when they returned the next time.

My ESL students often lead a very sheltered life. They go to school and back to their homes or to their parents' workplaces. This limits their integration into our local community and stifles their entire family's assimilation into American life. I must deliberately connect them with our community to make sure that they are aware of the resources and opportunities in our small town. One of the things I enjoy most is being able to take students to the post office, a bank, a coffee shop, or the courthouse for the first time.

Working with an immigrant population means that there is not one certain need that my students or their families have, but I am passionate about helping bridge the divide between my students' families and those who may view them with suspicion. Simple gestures such as sitting with my students' families at high school graduation or a school play goes a long way in helping them find acceptance in our rural area since I have belonged to this community for decades and others trust my lead. I take this role as ambassador seriously, and I am thankful for the opportunity to connect these groups.

Sometimes, my role as ambassador leads to opportunities allowing me to support families in accomplishing errands or tasks that seem obvious or easy to most of us. One day, one of my students worriedly explained that his mother received a notice stating she needed a new car tag. She had money for the car tag, but she did not know how to acquire the tag. The courthouse office was less than a block from our school. I texted his mother through a communication app and arranged for her to meet us at the courthouse after school. My student used his English skills in the Court Clerk's office to communicate using both his languages,



lowering his mother's stress level while allowing him to practice his translation skills in a real-life situation, a skill my ESL students must often use because they are the only ones in their family who have adequate English skills. In addition, I was able to show employees in that office ways to communicate with our community's non-English speakers by sharing some apps that make translation and interpretation possible for almost any language.

Connecting my students with the community can sometimes be more urgent. I received a frantic call from a teacher after one of my newly arrived students took a pill at school. Unsure what the student ingested, I contacted his mom and learned that the pill was epilepsy medication. While discussing medication protocol, she shared that he was almost out of medicine, and she could not afford for him to see a doctor. Being familiar with our local resources, I was able to make an appointment for him with our rural health medical providers.

Our school is in rural East Tennessee, so the chance of a medical facility having a translator available for limited English proficiency patients is almost non-existent. Because people in our community are sometimes distrustful of immigrants and can even be unkind to them, I asked the mother if she would like me to attend the appointment. She was grateful for that offer, and my student was able to access the medical care he needed as well as have his prescription refilled. As a bonus, we saw the mother of one of my student's classmates at the appointment; she and my student's mother swapped phone numbers to arrange a playdate.

It is imperative that my ESL students' education includes real-life skills. Two skills that I make certain that they have are how to communicate on the telephone and how to fill out routine paperwork. Very often, due to their English proficiency, my students must be prepared to be their family's voice to access the services that they need. If I can do anything for my students in addition to delivering academic content, it will always be making their lives easier by giving them skills that allow them to know they belong here and are able to successfully go out into the world.

4. Describe a time when you grew as a teacher leader and life-long learner as a result of being an advocate in your school, state or beyond. Describe your advocacy, how it helped you grow and how it impacted students.

Dolly Parton once said, "I never, ever get involved in politics. With politics, you are not allowed to be honest. I don't have time to deal with that. I would rather work with kids." While I revere Dolly, knowing that my students deserved decent learning conditions inspired me to ignore her advice and stand in the gap for my school's students. I am not a politician, but I have a strong



voice that I used to create a powerful movement that advocated for the needs of my school's students.

When teachers complain about working conditions, non-educators often do not understand that teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions. Our school had a plumbing issue that caused an entire wing of our building to smell of sewer gas after the cafeteria ran the garbage disposal. The odor was untenable, and teachers and students began to experience nausea, vomiting, and headaches due to the noxious fumes. While our district leadership claimed to be investigating the cause of the odor, no action occurred, and our students continued to detect this unknown stench on a daily basis.

My colleagues and I were firm believers of enforcing handwashing, but students complained that washing their hands was painful because the water was cold. Further investigation revealed the cause of this: we had no hot water. Despite a multi-million-dollar gymnasium and classroom addition, the original portion of our building had no hot water. When we explained that our students needed hot water to wash their hands, we experienced the same type of response as we did with the previous issues: being told that our administration was aware, but no action actually occurring.

It became evident that we were going to have to do more if we wanted our students' learning conditions to change. I had spoken with every school board member to no avail. I was the president of our local National Education Association affiliate, the Rogersville Education Association. A quick call to our state association office led to our answer, and what an answer it was.

In order to force our school board to hear and act on our concerns, we needed 50% of our school's teachers to join our association to begin the process to negotiate with our school board. This would require the fine art of bridging and connecting people to get them to work together to do what was best for students. Under my association leadership, our membership increased from 36% of our teachers being REA members to 88% in a 24-hour period. The next step was to have over half our teachers vote in favor of beginning the collective bargaining process. Since these issues were our students' learning conditions, we forged ahead, winning the election with 99% affirmation.

Suddenly, I catapulted into a role that one simply does not want to be in while living in rural, ultraconservative Appalachia: that of a union president. Our tenacious local newspapers covered this event with an enormous amount of publicity, leading with a headline that said: RCS Teachers Form Union and Want Changes. More than once, I wondered if we had made a mistake in poking the proverbial bear. The average rural Appalachian citizen has disparaging



thoughts about unions and union members, and it did not take long to hear the whispers and comments from people at the grocery store, my church, and even in my own extended family.

I grew up in a working-class family and was the first person in my family to graduate college. The news that I was leading a teachers' union was met with animosity and disgust. I had purposely not told my Vietnam War veteran, salt of the earth, blue collar factory worker dad about this situation because I dreaded his reaction. The phone conversation that day started with him gruffly saying, "I just read how you've done gone and started a union" but ended with, "Baby, lots has changed since I was young. I'm proud of you for taking care of those kids."

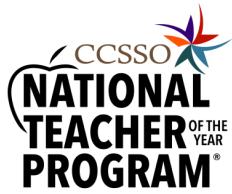
After more than two years of negotiations and compromises, the students in my school had the benefit of hot water to wash hands and clean, remodeled restrooms that were free of sewer odors. Ironically, the media coverage that I had initially feared actually enabled our community to chronicle the story of our mission to improve our students' learning conditions. Instead of people being negative or resentful, they were appreciative that we cared enough about our students' well-being to become tireless advocates for change.

5. As the National Teacher of the Year, serving as the ambassador of education for the United States, you have been asked to give a speech to a large audience of teachers. This speech is being recorded and will be shared broadly with a larger audience. What is your message? What is the talk you give? [You may indicate a specific audience. For example, a "back to school" talk.]

One of the hardest moments in my career came as I sat outside a courtroom, feet away from a judge and a jury who would decide the fate of my student's abuser. I did not want to testify, but my student deserved my advocacy. I was present when she fitfully told an investigator how she suffered vile abuse. Because of this, I had to be the one to relay what I heard and witnessed. As I sat trembling with dread, the child services advocate opened the door and simply said, "It's time."

"It's time." Two words that called me to rise and stand up for justice for my sweet girl. Two words that dried my tears and calmed my racing heart as my grievous rage turned into focused words that even the fiery defense attorney did not question. I am here today to say those same two words to you: It's time.

For legislators to be our allies, we need them to comprehend our real problems. That starts with openness and honesty. It's time that we start letting others outside our doors know what our reality is.



At times, it feels as though state legislatures across this country are passing laws that do not address actual problems. I do not know of one teacher plotting how to infuse CRT into lessons, but I see countless students who are suffering from mental health issues that our schools cannot handle. Schools had to hire someone to scan every book in the building under the guise that pornography is lurking in a kindergarten classroom, yet we do not have funding to hire a behaviorist to help with the kindergarteners who are disrupting classrooms every day. Part of this dilemma is our fault. It is time that we educate those who make policies that affect our students. It is time that we ask for adequate funding that will allow us to educate and support all students. We cannot expect to solve these problems if we do not articulate that we have them.

American schools are grappling with student mental health. Students are arriving at our doors unable to learn due to various behavioral and emotional issues. These issues cause disruptions in classrooms across this country daily, and yet, ESSR funding that allowed schools to hire additional guidance counselors and behavioral specialists is going away when we know that 44% of American students report having poor mental health quality.

Tennessee recently discussed rejecting \$1.8 billion dollars in federal funding due to the federal government's "excessive overreach" as to how the monies are spent. Every educator that I spoke with was up in arms over the unprecedented prospect of turning away funding in a state where we rank 46th in the country for educational funding. Yet, when I contacted the Tennessee Senate Education Committee chair, he said I was the only person who had reached out to express my displeasure. The only person – yet everywhere I go as Tennessee's Teacher of the Year, this is everyone's main concern? That means that no one else took the time to make a phone call or send an email.

It's time that we remember that our greatest role is one that lies in tandem with delivering rigorous content to students, and that's advocacy. It's not enough to focus only on what goes on inside our classrooms because our students live in the real world. As educators, we have the power to influence the decision-makers. We are voting constituents at local, state, and federal levels. It is time that we leverage our powerful voices by taking the time to send an email, write a letter, or make a phone call to impact what happens to our profession and our students.

The famed poet Maya Angelou said, "I learned a long time ago the wisest thing I can do is be on my own side, be an advocate for myself and others like me." As teachers, we have a clear lens into societal ills. No one knows the struggles that America's families face more than we do because we see them, and we watch as our students struggle to survive them. It is time that teachers begin to articulate the problems that we witness. To be effective professionals, we



must ask for help. To receive help, we must be honest in showing what our struggles are and what we need to ease them. We are the only ones who can do that, and, it's time.