

*Application submitted by*  
**2025 National Teacher of the Year  
FINALIST**



**Ashlie Crosson**

**PENNSYLVANIA**

**School:** Mifflin County High School

**Subject:** English

**Grade:** 10-12



**Ashlie Crosson** is an English teacher at Mifflin County High School. She teaches Advanced Placement language and composition, English 10 and Survival Stories, an elective that approaches global humanitarian crises from a youth perspective. She also advises the journalism program, which publishes the school newspaper and district magazine.

As a first-generation college student, Crosson found that teachers and counselors were essential to her success. Their support inspired her to become an educator so she could give to another generation what had been given to her. She earned her bachelor's degree in English education and a minor in journalism from Susquehanna University. In 2020, she returned to her hometown to pay it forward in the community that raised her.

Crosson received her master's degree in educational leadership at Penn State University and a gifted endorsement from Millersville University. In 2018, she became a Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms fellow. The fellowship transformed Crosson's pedagogy, helping her to reframe curricula around competencies that empower students' voices, emphasize "glocal" connections and foster their global citizenship. In class, her students can be found researching the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and building websites as often as they are reading novels and writing papers. As part of a statewide committee, Crosson helped add a global framework to Pennsylvania's Standards Aligned System.

Crosson also serves as the communications chair for her union's negotiation team, assists with the school's Positive Behavior Interventions and Support programming, leads the district's international student trips and cohosts The PL Playbook, a podcast dedicated to teachers' professional learning.

### **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.**

As a teacher of young global citizens, I strive to create learning experiences that resonate with my students, foster empathy, and build critical thinking. One unit that exemplifies this philosophy is the "Seeking Asylum" unit within my sophomore English course, Survival Stories. This memoir-based class examines global crises through young adult perspectives, focusing on how these issues specifically impact adolescents across the globe.



Teaching in a predominantly rural, white, conservative area presents challenges when addressing humanitarian topics. The “Seeking Asylum” unit connects my students to these vital narratives by highlighting how refugee crises and instability within a country affects teens and children, allowing them to see reflections of themselves in the stories. Starting our learning in Europe and the Middle East, then moving to South and Central America before concluding with cases in the United States helps temper the political sensitivities surrounding these discussions. This scaffolded journey enables students to empathize with their peers’ adversities, acknowledge their own biases, and challenge single-story perceptions.

The unit’s multimedia approach aligns our materials with students’ experiences of social media and visual storytelling and allows them to grapple with real-world texts rather than traditional, often-diluted textbooks. For example, we explore Hannah Drier’s Pulitzer-winning investigative report from the New York Times, which exposes working conditions for youth migrants in the U.S., along with a podcast episode from The Daily that recounts Venezuelan’s perilous journey through the Darién Gap. We also watch The Swimmers, a British Academy Award-nominated biopic about the Mardini sisters who fled the Syrian civil war in 2014.

My instructional choices in this unit are deeply rooted in my beliefs about teaching and learning. It’s my job to make curricular decisions that facilitate communication, empower students’ to problem-solve, and expand their worldview. These texts put a human face on issues that are sometimes politicized and dehumanized. The real-life stories help to illustrate how humanity “exists in the grey,” where life’s choices are complex and nuanced rather than easily categorized as right or wrong, lawful or illegal, selfish or selfless.

To maintain engagement with current issues, I update our materials regularly. While this approach demands more from me as an educator, it enriches my own learning, keeps discussions relevant, and introduces students to contemporary media and its related careers. That being said, a 12-page report can be challenging for sophomores of varied reading levels. In this instance, I begin by guiding students through the piece with structured annotation and discussion, gradually releasing support so they can identify key themes and articulate their insights independently by the end of the article.

Because this course is part of our sophomore curriculum, I also incorporate preparation for state standardized exams. I don’t want to “teach to the test,” but I do want my students to feel prepared for an exam that impacts their graduation, so throughout the year, I create constructed response prompts and analysis-based multiple-choice questions that align with the texts we are using. I utilize released materials to shape my wording, and students receive both a “correct” score and a completion score which allows us to value their effort as much as their



competency. This low-stakes exposure strengthens their confidence without detracting from the themes and big ideas of the "Seeking Asylum" unit.

For our culminating assignment, students have the opportunity to shift from analyzing complex non-fiction to demonstrating their understanding through creative expression. Originally conceived as a mind map, the project has evolved into a "Survival Sleeve," akin to a tattoo sleeve. Changing this project from a small poster that hangs in our classroom to a more authentic application of art allows students to tangibly reflect on how life experiences become integral to one's identity. The tattoo sleeve, which they can hand-draw or use graphic design technology to create, encourages them to consider the lasting impact of displacement while justifying each symbol, quote, and design aesthetic they choose. By intertwining creativity with reflective decisions, students don't just take ownership of their learning, they become storytellers themselves.

"Seeking Asylum" truly encapsulates my strongest beliefs as an educator: the importance of empathy, the use of authentic materials, and the need for students to engage deeply with complex ideas and issues. By fostering connections to real-world narratives and ensuring appropriate structure for students' abilities, I strive to create a classroom environment where all students can thrive. This unit not only defines me as a teacher but also embodies my commitment to cultivating informed, compassionate individuals who are prepared to navigate the complexities of our global society.

**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?**

I teach in a school where a "culture for learning"... or more simply a "culture of community" has long been a challenge. Here's what you'll find when Googling my county: we're under-privileged and under-funded; most of our residents have minimal post-secondary education; we struggle with an opioid epidemic, an aging workforce, and narrow-minded politics. Despite these hurdles, our students persevere to become entrepreneurs, skilled laborers, military cadets, and Ivy-leaguers, proving that small towns throughout rural America really can cultivate success. But understandably, these grads almost all become part of our "brain drain," leaving for greener paychecks and greater prospects. That's the Mifflin County you'll find on the internet- a self-fulfilling prophecy our kids often internalize.



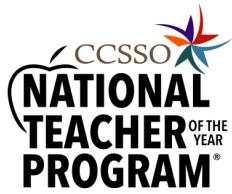
I moved to this community in fifth grade, graduated in 2007, and came back in 2020. As a student, teacher, and taxpayer, I understand firsthand why this perception persists and how detrimental it can be to our school culture and to students' mindsets. My desire to rewrite this story is why I chose to teach in Mifflin County. My greatest opportunity to help "be the change" came one year after I returned.

In 2021, I took over MCHS's near-defunct journalism program. Our school hadn't consistently published a newspaper in more than a decade. The class lacked a curriculum, and the staff was inexperienced. Journalism had become a "filler elective"; the roster included a myriad of skills and backgrounds, and many students were already products of the negative narrative I wanted to revise. Still, I viewed the newspaper as an untapped resource to tell our school's stories and celebrate our students. This was my chance to help turn the tide.

In the first year, our staff doubled. With instruction in fundamentals, writing and design workshops, and team-building exercises, my Journalism I students eagerly changed their schedules to return for Journalism II in the spring. Our newspaper evolved into a 16-page, full-color issue published every marking period, complemented by Instagram and Facebook accounts that extended our reach beyond school walls. We launched the Dawg Blog for students to share their opinions and added traditions like a senior class photo and Decision Day, where seniors announced their post-grad plans. The Tyrian transformed from an unrecognizable title to a vibrant megaphone for our Life Skills' Caring Closet, our Wildlife and Fisheries eel hatchery, our athletes' hard-fought seasons, our MiniTHON fundraising, our youth pilots, our Governor's School awardees.

The following year, "journalism internships" were added, and my staff sought permission to launch a TikTok account. My limited experience made me hesitant, but I trusted my editors- and they proved me right. Our first TikTok video had 10,000 views in one weekend. It was a tour of our building; the kids produced it specifically to show off MCHS on a platform they knew their peers at rival schools would watch.

The staff's ownership of their student-produced media inspired me to take my own leap of faith. After just one successful year, I approached my superintendent with an ambitious proposal: allow the journalism class to take control of our district's public relations. After several administrative meetings, we received approval to create The PawPrint, our district magazine published in print and online three times a year, covering all ten of our schools. It's sent to local businesses, government agencies, and families, celebrating Mifflin County students' journeys from kindergarten to graduation. The PawPrint shares success stories and initiatives buried beneath that Google search; it illustrates the heart of our schools and



community.

Advising the journalism program has allowed me to positively influence the culture of my school and district. The pride I feel for our publications is coupled with my students' success. In the past three years, students who at times struggled to find belonging, had weak attendance, and sometimes even failed to graduate with their class, have become editors for college media, interns at television stations, and writers for regional newspapers. They've found careers they're passionate about while discovering their voice and reframing the view of our hometown.

Last year, my superintendent told me that The PawPrint is his proudest accomplishment of his tenure. I can't express how joyful I am that my students have given him and our whole county this gift. I believe that a teacher's impact on a single student can change the course of his or her life; my efforts as journalism advisor have shown me that when students are given the opportunity to harness their strengths and pursue their passions, an educator's influence can improve an entire community.

**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.**

By dissolving classroom walls and creating real-world connections, schools help students to invest in their personal growth, develop career and college readiness skills, and become stewards for their communities. For some, this is easily done through extracurricular activities and field trips, but not every student can access those avenues. To ensure that all children reap the benefits of authentic learning opportunities, I try to embed these experiences directly into the courses I teach.

In Survival Stories, students' research unit centers on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This project provides a deeper dive into the humanitarian issues depicted in the memoirs we read while focusing on actionable solutions at both individual and governmental levels. While the course is globally-driven, the SDG project encourages students to connect worldwide issues directly to their own community by creating digital resource guides that educate their peers on each goal. Their websites include educational videos, student-made infographics, and a "glocal connections" page which highlights the relevance of their SDG to central Pennsylvania. Students include information from their research as well as links to local businesses and organizations working to enhance global sustainability. For many, it's their first



time hearing about the extension office, the water authority, the food bank, etc., and I'll never forget the group that pointed to pollution of favorite fishing spots when their classmates argued, "Clean water isn't a problem here." That's exactly the kind of student growth I aim to foster. Realizing that the issues they consider "third world problems" may also impact their neighborhood not only helps to develop students' capacity for empathy, it strengthens their ability to utilize community resources in their own lives, value their role as a global citizen, and advocate for a better tomorrow for all of us.

Every year, my AP Language students collaborate with East End, a locally-owned coffee shop, to create a winter tradition that our county has come to love. This project is part of a larger unit that uses food to explore definitions of family and identity. We draw inspiration from episodes of Taste the Nation which showcases communities' cultural celebrations like Lunar New Year and Nochebuena and through our visual analysis of Starbucks' annual holiday cup designs. After reflecting on themes and local traditions, students partner with East End to design coffee cups and sleeves that artistically combine the festive season, our local traditions, and the company's ethos. Their designs are conceptualized in our school Makerspace, mass-produced by students in our Product Development class, and then debuted in the shop's window display at our town's annual Festival of Ice. Throughhuot the month, customers eagerly collect the various sleeves, which celebrate local landmarks and events like Stone Arch Bridge and Goose Day. I am proud of the ways this project has simultaneously given my students a career-based application of rhetoric through marketing while enabling them to become a unique part of an interconnected community.

Having been a student journalist myself, I knew if I could pull the right resources and make the right connections, our journalism classes could become a wellspring of student-community connections. In last year's PawPrint, the staff wrote and designed a two-part series titled "It Takes a Village." The first installment focused on how our schools were fostering family involvement through evening programming and increased communication. In the second, they shared students' philanthropic endeavors and the donations, assemblies, and extracurricular experiences provided for our schools by our emergency service personnel, tech companies, and agricultural industry. Their goal was to illustrate the symbiotic relationship a district shares with its community in an effort to foster continual collaboration. Writers also contribute to the Living Section of our regional newspaper every fifth Saturday, sharing perspectives on local issues that matter to young adults. They've covered topics such as the benefits of our new athletics complex and the community impact of the district's solar array panel. Through this partnership, students gain a voice for their generation and professional journalism experience, and some have even secured summer internships at the newspaper before college. These career-building experiences are enhanced by visits from Mifflin County graduates in the communications field



as well as by interviews with local photographers, authors, and graphic designers.

Through these initiatives, I aim to foster an environment where students thrive and contribute meaningfully to the world around them because I know doing so is best for all of us. When the walls between classroom and community recede, the connections between school and student success rise.

**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.**

My growth as a teacher leader and lifelong learner has been permanently influenced by my participation in the Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms (TGC) program. This fellowship transformed my pedagogy, helping me to develop students' global competencies so they may become informed, culturally responsive citizens.

I applied for TGC in my first year of eligibility and was among the youngest fellows in my cohort. My interest in TGC stemmed from my student demographics' lack of cultural diversity, and I wanted to find ways to make their educational experience more reflective of the world they live in. Through coursework, collaborative dialogue, and a field experience in Morocco, the fellowship equipped me to redesign my instruction and redefine my role as a teacher leader.

I began small by redesigning units. My ninth-grade English classes engaged in memoir-based book clubs, while my AP students explored definitions of feminism around the world. These efforts evolved into developing a whole course, *Survival Stories*, which introduces students to real-world humanitarian issues through a youth perspective.

My work in the classroom has been mirrored by my professional outreach. I led multiple professional learning sessions in my district to help peers incorporate global competencies into their lesson planning. I also applied and received a grant from the Pennsylvania Council for International Education, served on a committee for our state's education department, and recently facilitated another session for early-career educators at the leadership institute for our state teachers' union.

While I'm proud of expanding our network of globally-focused educators, the most impactful outcome of my TGC experience is our high school's international travel program. For more than a decade, our district had suspended international travel due to safety concerns and student behavior. However, I was determined to advocate for our students' learning opportunities. I



approached our superintendent, leveraging my fellowship as my qualifications to chaperone international travel. I argued that for many of our students from socio-economically challenged backgrounds this travel opportunity could be their only chance for first-hand global learning.

With the superintendent's support, I presented to the school board and gained their approval to launch MC Goes Global. Recruitment for our first trip began with information sessions and parent meetings, and on the evening of sign-ups, our forty-three student spots filled within 20 minutes. This overwhelming response reaffirmed to my administration and to our school board the undeniable need to bring these opportunities to our community.

Over the next two years, I led fundraising efforts and pre-departure sessions to help families with costs and ensure that students felt safe, confident, and prepared. The training I completed with our tour company proved essential during our travels.

On our first day in London, a student lost her passport, and we quickly learned that even if we secured an emergency passport, her admittance to our next country was unlikely. Our tour company gave us heartbreakingly advice: send her home. I couldn't imagine a worse outcome, and so after everyone went to bed, another chaperone and I spent the entire night contacting our lieutenant governor, state representatives, and union leaders. After numerous phone calls, emails, and a carefully timed trip to the embassy, our perseverance paid off, and customs cleared our whole group for entry. This experience not only taught me about the intricate web of support in educational governance, it showed me how far I would go to help my students fulfill their dreams.

The success of last summer has laid the groundwork for future travel in Mifflin County. We have trips planned for 2025 and 2026 with eight other teachers helping to chaperone. Although financial challenges remain, families see that what was once a fantasy is becoming a reality, and they are now saving for their children's futures starting in middle school.

MC Goes Global started as a passion project borne out of my fellowship, but it has evolved into an integral part of our school culture. While our teachers always strive to make learning tangible and authentic, the chance to navigate the world and engage with different cultures is invaluable.

This advocacy journey has enhanced my professional growth and positively impacted our students. By championing their right to global learning opportunities, I've witnessed how students' exposure to diverse perspectives can ignite their curiosity, foster empathy, and empower them to think critically about their roles in an interconnected world. It has reaffirmed



a vital truth I'll carry with me for the rest of my career: successful classrooms aren't only found in schools; some lessons are best learned through living.

**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.]**

It's hard to craft a message for this response. I teach a course specifically about rhetoric, and students quickly learn that a "broad audience" is a tricky room. How do you resonate when the crowd has no collective race, age, location, education, religion, politics, or life experiences? The easiest answer is "say nothing of consequence." That's how you avoid alienating someone. But when my students analyze powerful messages delivered to millions, they come to realize there is another approach. Whoever has the mic must speak with authenticity. It's what makes the things we say, the stories we tell, come alive.

So I took a dose of my own instructional medicine. I simply aimed to be sincere, and in a true life-imitates-art fashion, it is an address to teachers world-wide about the importance of their own authenticity. Below is a pseudo-transcript.

How many times has each of us heard, "The careers we're preparing students for don't even exist yet"?

Yea... thought so. I remember hearing it even as a student myself. The point of that declaration is to remind our education system how essential it is that we cultivate within students the skills necessary for them to be the next generation of entrepreneurs, problem-solvers, and globetrotters.

But if that's the case for students... doesn't it kind of mean that we're preparing to teach in classrooms that don't exist yet, too? Think about what school looked like a decade ago. Think about what it looks like now. Noticeable differences, clearly.

I bet the person who gave a speech like this 10 years ago didn't talk about Zooming into students' living rooms. And I bet no one would have believed them if they said "10 years from now a free website will literally write the paper for you." 10 years ago I was still getting my sea legs in this job, and looking back, I was pretty delusional about the future of teaching.



Despite all its stability, this profession sure can be unpredictable. So, how can we best prepare for education's unknowns?

Well, if the world is always changing, then we must do the same. Our success is found in our ability to collaborate, reflect... maybe make some mistakes... and then try again tomorrow. We didn't predict a pandemic, we don't know what to do with AI, and there are plenty of other issues pressing against our school doors, too. But the solutions never lie in stagnation, they're found in innovation.

So, adaptability... wow, what a novel concept. But there's a second part to that advice that is just as important yet rarely relayed. While we are changing, we must also remember to stay the same. The most valuable thing we possess isn't our shiny new lesson plan or our fancy Smartboard or our Instagramable classroom- it's our authenticity.

The best English teacher I ever had basically never smiled. My best math teacher came in early and stayed late every. single. day. My best writing teacher FAILED us for having a single personal pronoun in our final draft. And my favorite teacher ever? She captivated us with little more than her words and a black board.

But I can't do any of those things. Not with any sincerity. Not with any success.

Chances are, all of us can rattle off dozen teachers who inspired us to enter this profession, and I bet we all have a colleague whose genius turns us green with envy. But while imitation may be the highest form of flattery, it isn't the greatest approach to educating. We must admire the talent of others...but embrace our personal identity.

That English teacher I had- I absolutely cannot keep a straight face, but her presence taught me how to command a room. My math teacher? He taught me to help students learn through their failures. The writing teacher showed me that with the proper approach, students will rise to the high standards you set. And my favorite teacher? She showed me passion. She proved that when we invest in our students- their interests, goals, and lives, and share with them our own excitement for learning- that's when the magic happens. For all of us.

So whether you're launching a unit, remediating a skill, calling home, or going to the game- I remind you simply to do it in earnest. If you teach with ambition AND authenticity, students today, tomorrow, and 10 years from now will always show up for us... just as we have always shown up for them.