

Application submitted by
2025 National Teacher of the Year
FINALIST



Jazzmyne Townsend
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

School: Stanton Elementary School
Subject: English Language Arts
Grade: K-5



Jazzmyne Townsend has dedicated 16 years to positively impacting learning for children, making her a cornerstone of her community's educational landscape. A bachelor's degree in business administration from Howard University, a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from the American College of Education (ACE) and her current pursuit of a doctorate from ACE have equipped her with the skills, knowledge and acumen to cultivate academic success in urban schools. Her commitment to equity has been the driving force behind her unwavering pursuit of student success.

Townsend's second and third grade special education classroom at Stanton Elementary in Washington, D.C., is a model for joy, rigor, engagement and inclusion. She utilizes research-based and developmentally appropriate strategies to meet the diverse needs of all learners. Her proficiency in integrating culturally responsive pedagogy has increased academic achievement and fostered a sense of belonging among her students. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by students in urban settings, Townsend has been a steadfast advocate for resources that support the development of the whole child.

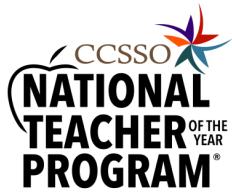
Throughout her career, Townsend has been a mentor teacher, sharing her extensive knowledge and passion for education. She has led professional development workshops and has been a collaborative thought partner to her colleagues, sharing insights on classroom management and data-driven instruction.

In her free time, she enjoys creative projects and quality time spent with her family and friends. Her legacy is one of inspiration and impact, embodying the profound effect a dedicated educator can have on urban education.

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.**

My years as a Kindergarten teacher created a variety of notable memories, but none more meaningful than the time I spent each year teaching our Conservation Unit. This study, anchored by Dr. Seuss's "The Lorax", artfully demonstrates the pivotal role I played as a teacher and my efforts to develop the whole child by planting seeds of knowledge, curiosity, and compassion in my students.



Throughout this unit, we had the opportunity to explore the human impact on Earth and discuss our responsibilities as citizens to care for our planet—not just for ourselves, but for future generations. As we read each page in the anchor text, the students observed how the natural resources were being depleted because of one person's actions, and how the once thriving environment quickly became barren and uninhabitable. This unit took a rather abstract concept for young learners and made it something palatable that they could easily understand. While we were learning about conservation through reuse and recycling, we also came to understand why these efforts mattered. Students learned valuable lessons that engaged their humanity and their social-emotional connection to others and the world around them.

This unit fostered real-world inquiry as we placed ourselves within the pages of "The Lorax" through hands on investigations. Much like the brown barbaloots, swomee swans and humming fish, the students in my classroom had different needs and we intentionally created activities that would allow each student to access the learning. For example, we used our classroom snack time to encourage discourse related to ways we could grow a variety of food options in our communities. Students created graphs and voted for the food items they'd like to grow, wrote opinion pieces on the best snack to replace the Truffula fruits and used drawings to reimagine what the land could look like in the future. We explored cause and effect through science experiments that allowed us to see what it would be like to live in polluted communities like the humming fish and swomee swans. Finally, we explored the power of positive human impact by planting our own seeds, watching them grow and discussing their benefit to the environment. These seeds, nurtured through dedication and curiosity demonstrated how we as citizens of our communities can make a difference and lay the foundation for a brighter future.

My instructional decisions were thoughtfully planned and executed with my students in mind. I was able to consider the diverse needs and learning modalities of my students and plan collaborative and differentiated lessons that were aligned to the goals of the curriculum. I challenged my students to think critically and provided opportunities for real-world problem solving through simulations and investigations. Lastly, we created a supportive learning environment for all learners to take risks, explore their own interests and play an active role in our classroom community.

I am reminded of the Once-Ler's words to Ted after gifting him with the last Truffula seed; "unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better, its' not". This statement echoes my sentiments and beliefs about teaching and learning. Every student deserves a teacher who is passionate about their growth and development, and it is my job to use every day as a chance to water and nourish the seeds they come with, and through learning, plant new seeds that will create positive change in their individual lives and entire communities.



The Conservation unit mirrors the profound impact and responsibility given to teachers; protecting, cultivating and inspiring the minds and hearts of the next generation.

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?

In January 2023, I successfully self-published my first children's book, *Hattie Leads The Way*. Earlier during the school year as we worked through our Kindergarten unit on Story Elements, we dedicated a large amount of time to understanding the role of an Author, and how if we could think it, we could write it! When I shared with my students that I too was an author, they were enamored with the idea! As I noticed their interest was piqued, I decided to share the writing experience with them and launch a Class Book Writing Project.

This initiative served as a powerful tool for creating a positive classroom culture. The process began with a brainstorming session where students shared ideas and collaborated on themes, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. After much deliberation, the students were enthralled with the idea of magic and landed on writing pieces that answered the question, if you had magic powers, what would they be? We spent the next several weeks discussing every step in the writing process and developing our skills. Each student was provided with a journal to capture all their work, which also served as a tool for reflection at each step in the process. As students drafted and revised their work, they engaged in peer review and practiced offering feedback and encouragement which helped to build trust and respect among the students.

Trust and respect are key elements in establishing positive relationships, and cultivating a classroom culture where students feel safe, valued, included, and are active participants. To ensure the students remained engaged in our writing task, I planned opportunities that were embedded in our daily routines and authentic learning experiences. For example, during our class opening group, students shared their morning greetings, good news, and responses to questions of the day, by writing on white boards or sticky notes. Each day, the students engaged with a different peer, providing opportunities for every student to receive positive reinforcement, praise, and encouragement. Next, we used role play to practice social interactions, model appropriate language, and build empathy; each student took on the role of author or editor and participated in turn and talk activities, giving feedback to their peers.



Finally, we established an “Author’s Chair” classroom tradition, which gave space for all students to be in the spotlight and share a piece of writing they were proud of, with their peers.

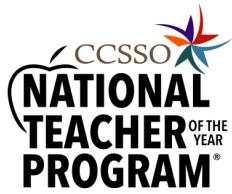
In May of 2023, we celebrated our hard work with a class publishing party. The students had written and illustrated personal narratives that had been beautifully complied into a class book that we shared with our families and school community. Our book project not only enhanced their literacy and writing skills, but it instilled pride, boosted their self-esteem and reinforced the values of hard work and cooperation. As of today, we have successfully written and published 2 books through Student Treasures Publishing, “I am Magic” and “Magical Me”. Through this collaborative endeavor, students learned that each person’s voice and story is valuable to the collective and helps to make our classroom community a more beautiful place. The book project created opportunities for students to celebrate their differences, allowed for student choice and taught the resilience needed to see the project through, ultimately building a thriving community of writers and friends.

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.

Connecting students with the communities in which they live, learn and play is essential to developing informed, well rounded, and empathetic citizens who are invested in civic engagement. Fostering real-world learning through experiences outside of the classroom is a way to forge authentic and mutually beneficial relationships between students and their communities. These experiences can be actualized through: Service-Learning Projects, Field Trips and Explorations, Guest Speakers, and Collaborative Projects with Local Businesses.

Understanding the needs of the community we serve is vital to creating Service-Learning projects, like the Food Drive held at Stanton Elementary in September 2023. In Ward 8, food insecurity is a harsh reality for some students and their families, so creating a school-based food pantry was an ideal way to meet the needs of our students and their families, while eliminating the barriers that are sometimes associated with public assistance programs. For this project, the students designed flyers, collected, and sorted donations and wrote Thank You notes to contributors.

Making connections to learning that is happening inside the classroom is another way to amplify the curriculum and engage students in real-world inquiry. In February 2024, my second-grade students were learning about Activism in ELA. What better way to make the academic content



come to life than to visit the National Museum of American History to see the Greensboro Lunch Counter and write personal reflections on the character traits of an activist. Field Trips and Explorations like this help students to discover their communities as sources of rich history and understand how this history impacted the past, influences the present and shapes the future.

Doctors, Police Officers, Barbers, Firefighters and Mail Couriers are the stakeholders who keep our communities informed, healthy and safe; providing students with opportunities to interact with these individuals is a way for them to build networks and relationships with positive role models. The Career Day event we held this year exposed students to a variety of career industries including cosmetology, entrepreneurship, and health and wellness. This event exposed students to diverse career paths and allowed them to obtain insights from professionals who grew up in similar neighborhoods, further dismantling the notion that your options are limited because of the communities in which you live.

Collaborative Projects with local businesses are another way to impact student learning and success, and benefit both the organization and the students. Leaning on the relationships I built with parents and families, I was able to organize and lead Stanton's "Loads of Literacy" event with 809 Laundromat; a minority woman owned business operated by a parent of a student I taught in 2012. In our community, having access to clean clothes is a hurdle that many of our students face daily; we partnered with this local business to provide free laundry services to Stanton families as well as give out free books and school supplies to start the school year successfully. We know that having clean clothes reduces social stigma related to hygiene, boosts confidence, encourages regular school attendance and gives children the positive self-image needed to thrive in school.

In addition to this project, our students also had the opportunity to work alongside Amazon Inc. and design artwork that would be installed on delivery lockers in Wards 7 & 8. In their drawings, the students shared what they loved most about living in Washington D.C and created illustrations that included DC landmarks like The Washington Monument, Ben's Chili Bowl, Howard University and The Big Chair. For their efforts, Amazon not only created beautiful displays of their artwork which they students can see in their neighborhoods, but also made a financial contribution to promote continued arts education programming in our school.

Connecting students with their communities is vital for creating a well-rounded educational experience. It enriches student academic learning, fosters personal and social growth, prepares them for future careers, and builds a stronger, more inclusive society. These connections help



eliminate the barriers between school and the real world, making education a more dynamic and impactful journey.

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.

For years, researchers have studied the school experiences of African American students, with an overwhelming emphasis on the black male student. While a worthy investigation, the experiences of black girls have been overlooked, misunderstood, and disregarded. Growing up as a young black girl, I vividly remember experiences of being excluded, feeling disconnected from my peers, and not having any trusted adults I felt comfortable enough to share with. Navigating adolescence without a sense of community in my school was challenging. As an adult woman, I found the safety of sisterhood and a sense of belonging in professional and personal groups dedicated to nurturing women. As an educator, I saw the value in this practice and aimed at providing this same experience for young girls by founding the "My Sister's Keeper (MSK)" mentorship initiative at Randle Highlands Elementary.

Many of our female students were grappling with challenges both inside and outside the classroom and MSK served as a sanctuary for the girls to form friendships, ask questions, be vulnerable, and develop as young women. Challenges like combating low self-esteem, addressing academic underperformance, and understanding puberty were prevalent issues for our girls who often struggled to see their own potential and envision a bright future.

The idea of starting a girls' mentoring program grew from my personal reflections on the village of women who poured into me throughout my lifetime. I shared my concerns with colleagues who saw the potential impact the initiative could have and began the process of bringing the idea to fruition.

The first step was to collaborate with internal and external stakeholders to clearly articulate a vision for the program and identify the highest leverage supports our students would need. Our research and planning process included informal interviews and observations that provided valuable data to support our decision-making. Next, I began advocating for the program within the school. I presented my proposal to the administration, highlighting the potential benefits for our students. I also connected with parents as leveraging their support would be pivotal in shaping and sustaining the program. Launching with the backing of trusted adults provided the girls with a village of individuals dedicated to their personal growth.



Together, we built community in our twice-weekly meetings where we explored topics such as: developing friendships, self-care, hygiene, etiquette, mental health, and social media. The program gained momentum, and the positive changes in our students were palpable. Girls who had been quiet and withdrawn started to participate more actively in class, showing increased confidence and ambition. Girls who struggled with conflict resolution became problem solvers through courageous conversations. Most importantly, our girls saw themselves as belonging to a community that celebrated their individuality, cultivated their intelligence, and affirmed their resilience.

This experience was transformative. I developed new skills in project management, resource allocation, communication, and community building. Leading the program required me to step out of my comfort zone, advocate for resources, engage with stakeholders and navigate the complexities of organizing and maintaining an initiative of this scale. Additionally, the mentoring program deepened my understanding of the unique challenges faced by our students, fostering a greater sense of empathy and commitment to equity. I learned to listen more intently, not just to our students, but to my colleagues and the community, recognizing that effective leadership often involves amplifying the voices of others. The success of the program also reinforced the importance of continuous learning and adaptation. Feedback we received from the girls was crucial to thoughtfully refining and improving the program. This iterative process taught me the value of flexibility and responsiveness in leadership.

In reflection, starting the mentoring program was a proud moment in my career. It was a testament to the power of advocacy and the impact of providing students with the support they need to blossom. The program not only empowered our girls but also fostered a culture of belonging within the school. As a teacher leader, I grew in my ability to inspire and mobilize others, to see beyond immediate challenges, and to pursue a vision that benefits the entire school community. As a lifelong learner, I embraced new knowledge and experiences, continually seeking ways to improve and expand the impact of my efforts.

This journey affirmed my belief that education is not just about teaching subjects but about nurturing the whole child, advocating for their needs, and creating opportunities for their growth. It reminded me that as educators, we have the power to initiate change and inspire hope, one student at a time.

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.]

Good morning, everyone!

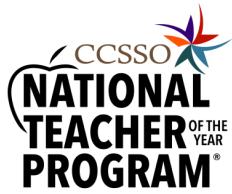
It's an absolute honor to stand before you today. As I look out at this room filled with new and veteran teachers alike, I'm filled with hope for the future of our education system. You are embarking on a journey that is not just about imparting academic knowledge but about shaping lives and transforming communities through education. Today, I want to talk to you about two things: my love for Brussel sprouts and ensuring equity for all students. I'm sure you weren't expecting to hear about cruciferous vegetables this morning, but trust me, I'm going somewhere with it! So please, grab your reusable shopping bag and come with me on a trip to the produce section.

Growing up in California as one of three children being raised by a single mother, I learned very early on that resources were sometimes scarce. I had no idea of the profound challenges my mother faced in providing a stable, healthy, and happy home for my siblings and me. Despite the myriad of obstacles she faced, she always made sure that we had everything that we needed to thrive.

As a child, we took weekly visits to the grocery store, grabbing the essentials to make meals that would stretch to feed a family of 4. As you can imagine, Brussel sprouts didn't exactly fit into this category. I was the only one who liked them, and they were undoubtedly more expensive than a can of mixed vegetables. Knowing this, my mother still allowed me to pick, bag and weigh those little green orbs of goodness and she'd scrape together just enough money to add to the government benefits she received to pay for it all. Lack prevailed, yet my mother made sure my brother had Macaroni & Cheese when he wanted, and my sister enjoyed a festive thanksgiving spread every fall. To the best of her abilities, my mother made sure that each of our individual needs were met, and here was my first lesson in equity.

Every student who comes through our doors comes to us with their own unique background, set of abilities, needs and hunger for learning; our job as educators is to prepare a meal that will satisfy their appetites. Equity in education means giving each child what they need to succeed, rather than giving every child the same thing. It's about understanding the systemic barriers that some students face and working tirelessly to dismantle those barriers. It's about creating an inclusive environment where all students know they will be fed, valued, and supported.

Equity is more than a buzzword. It's more than a Professional Development topic that gets



covered during pre-service week and then forgotten. We must strive toward Equity in our daily actions, habits, policies, decisions, and interactions with students. A key to actualizing this reality is understanding the context in which our students live. Many of our students face challenges outside of school that impact their ability to learn. Poverty, violence, instability at home, and lack of access to basic needs can create significant obstacles. As teachers, we must be empathetic and proactive in addressing these challenges. This might mean connecting families with community resources, advocating for school policies that support students in need, or simply being a stable, caring presence in our students' lives.

Dr. Harold Gray Sr. was a caring presence in mine. My Howard University mentor gave us a simple charge during freshman orientation, "Get Your Groceries," and I'm here to place that same responsibility in your hands. As educators, it is our duty to ensure that our students receive exactly what they need to be prepared for what's next in life. Our students come to us daily with an appetite that seeks to be filled; we owe them a meal at Equity's table. Every child deserves a teacher, a school community, and an education system that stocks its shelves with opportunities for real-world inquiry, rigorous knowledge building and equity centered learning experiences.

As you prepare to stock the shelves on your classroom aisles, I would like to leave you with these thoughts. Nothing about this work is going to be easy; there will be challenges that are seemingly insurmountable. You will encounter students who will stretch your budgets as they seek to receive their groceries. However, every effort you make toward equity is a step toward a better future for our students and our society. Let's make a difference, one bag of groceries at a time.