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Application submitted by

**2026 National Teacher of the Year
FINALIST**



Katie Collins

ALABAMA

School: Bluff Park Elementary School

Subject: Elementary multi-subject

Grade: 1



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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.**

I believe that children are capable of solving big problems and that they learn the most when they can meaningfully interact. I aim to empower students to develop a sense of self-efficacy and autonomy. For my students to become motivated, self-directed learners, they must be given tangible opportunities to practice those skills, starting at a very young age.

My first-grade students were learning about the life cycle of plants interwoven with standards addressing non-fiction text features, geography, and distinguishing wants versus needs. During a timely professional development on Design Thinking, I started jotting ideas about how I could implement this in my classroom. My class had spent the last few months interacting with our hydroponics system, purchased with a grant I wrote. Design Thinking was exactly the instructional model I needed to facilitate a motivating, cross-curricular, real-world lesson to promote student learning in a classroom full of varying learning abilities and needs.

Students acquired background knowledge about our community as we mapped our classroom, extended our Google Earth view to our school, then viewed our street, and finally zoomed out. Mesmerized by our spherical, rotating planet Earth, we concurrently read non-fiction books with photographs portraying homes and lifestyles across the world much different from ours in Birmingham, Alabama.

My goal was to provide students with tangible interactions with maps and photographs so they could understand the role of non-fiction texts in acquiring critical contextual information. However, when students began to compare and contrast life around the globe, big questions naturally emerged. They asked about the photographs of homes built out of mud and sticks without electricity or running water. They noted the apparent food insecurity. While this reality seemed distant, it was not unknown to our school population, composed of multiple nationalities, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.



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Their questioning evoked empathy, a strategic goal of Design Thinking, and quickly shifted towards brainstorming various solutions.

"We must help them right now!" exclaimed Leslie.

"I know what we can do," shouted Joey. "We can let them have the hydroponics tower where we're growing vegetables."

"Yeah. We can fly the hydroponics tower over on a plane!" responded Leslie.

My teacher-heart exploded with joy, as the class erupted into discussions about solutions to complex global issues that often stump adults.

"Mrs. Collins, I like Leslie's idea, but I don't know where we are going to get a plane."

"Does anyone here own a plane?" I asked, trying (though failing) not to crack a smile.

As we re-read the caption on the photograph, Judah noticed that there was no electricity in the village. "I don't know if it would work because there are no plugs." Learning came easily for Judah, but social/emotional challenges made peer relationships difficult. Classroom culture encouraged his classmates to listen intently as he further explained that our machine could work if there were solar panels. My jaw dropped at the brilliance of his observation.

The class discussion - reinforcing wants versus needs - shifted into a goal to design a hydroponics prototype accessible from every location we had just viewed. Students determined which materials were readily available for various users, an important consideration for sustainability.

Lupita, a newcomer English Learner (EL) and class hydroponics manager, added to the collaborative design, displaying her schema that the wicking process was vital to the prototype. Our class relied on her to add water daily and check nutrient levels, thus contributing to her sense of belonging in the class community. Because she didn't have the same language proficiency as her classmates, she sketched the materials needed and then showed how they would be used to her partner - a native English speaker reading above grade level - who was labeling and creating a list of the items.

This unit reflects my intentionality in modeling myself as a learner with a growth mindset. When students see their teacher facing vulnerability by learning something



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new and courageously trying it, they also learn about authenticity and reflection in the learning process. I aim to normalize failing forward to inspire my students to courageously face a world that is incapable of fully fitting inside the four walls of our classroom.

When we completed the unit, my students had built and tested a prototype and refined their design of a simple hydroponics system that could be replicated globally, from refugee camps to classrooms, allowing sustainable farming to occur anywhere. Empathy. Engagement. Empowerment. Impact. These simple words, rooted deeply in my students, will grow a thriving generation of change makers that our world desperately needs.

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

In 2007, I shifted from teaching high school French to teaching elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) to have the opportunity to impact students earlier in their lives. As I became more familiar with my students and their families, I realized that I wanted to learn the predominant language that my school families spoke; therefore, I wrote and received a grant to study abroad in Guanajuato, Mexico.

My days were packed with learning Spanish and a new culture. I initially started a blog (www.katiesinmexico.blogspot.com) about my adventures to keep family and friends informed, but it quickly evolved into a powerful reflection tool. The platform helped me process the transformative experience of learning in a foreign country. As I wrote and reflected, I wondered how my school community could better serve our English Learner (EL) families as they navigated learning a new language, culture, and academic expectations in the United States.

Upon return, my colleagues and I discussed ways we could better support the entire family unit to assimilate into life in the US and increase school engagement. We learned that a neighboring district housed the Toyota Family Literacy Program (TFLP), a \$350,000 grant aimed to increase basic language literacy skills among immigrant and language minority families while strengthening parent involvement in schools. Although the TFLP funds were not earmarked for our district, we were keen to learn more, so we



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met with the program director to discuss their research-based program and work towards collaboration to implement some of the same tenets in our district.

Dreaming big with others, despite a lack of funding, we started the Communities Family Literacy Program (CFLP) as a volunteer-run after-school program modeled after TFLP. We provided language acquisition for both parents and children. The demand was high, and we earned multiple grants to establish a sustainable stream of funding to meet broader family needs. It was a win-win; the funders were proud to support neighboring districts in a cross learning partnership that provided critical services, and the families loved the program. We eventually secured \$35,000, allowing us to hire a pre-school and adult EL teacher and integrate Parent and Child Together (PACT) time during the school day, where parents were routinely welcomed into their children's classroom to observe, and then followed up with the EL teacher to discuss.

The results were tangible: the program reduced multiple barriers. CFLP families became more involved in the mainstream school community, participating in Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings and school events. CFLP parents, such as Baldo and Marlene, often volunteered at the school with their time and talents including preparing Mexican food, building a stage and serving as DJs for the mock Quinceañera that the school hosted for International Day.

While our school had over 39 countries and many diverse languages represented, it was not always easy to break through cultural barriers. Relationships were the only key that would unite people whose access would normally have been difficult. For example, while I was the volunteer adult language instructor, I asked our Yemeni families for their guidance for our International Day's Middle Eastern Market. This simple act of seeking their expertise fostered trust and in turn, the CFLP was accepted into their community. When we learned that many Arabic speaking moms didn't drive, some established PTO moms volunteered to bring them, breaking barriers in the Yemeni community and establishing pathways of belonging among all community members.

Building connections with families has improved our teaching and our ability to welcome and support students in our diverse community. This program provided language acquisition for both parents and children, strengthened parent involvement, and forged pathways allowing EL students to receive increased support at home. Preschool siblings received pre-emergent literacy skills, which eased their transition to kindergarten. Meaningful relationships created a true academic partnership between



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school educators and EL families and the support of families strengthened as did our overall school community.

The CFLP continued for over ten years in my district, only halted in 2020 with the onset of the pandemic. However, the lessons learned and the relationships developed with immigrant and language minorities continue to this day. The district continues to honor the diversity in our school communities, planning collaborative events of

understanding and relationship building, such as school-wide International Days, awareness and celebrations of cultural holidays, and strategic educational events for EL families to build community and support for EL learners, all aligned with the spirit of the Communities Family Literacy Program.

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 deliberately impact student learning and success.

Each February, first graders learn about George Washington Carver and in his honor plant 750 seedlings of tomatoes, peppers and basil, never questioning “why so many plants?”

A few weeks later our principal presents a dilemma: due to funding constraints, the beloved hydroponics program must be discontinued. Passionate about the issue, students brainstorm solutions, quickly shifting fundraising ideas from selling their toys to creating a student-run, profitable farmer’s market where they will sell seedlings.

Over the next three-weeks, students plant, label, and care for over 3,000 seedlings, measure and record data, count money, and employ informational and persuasive writing skills—all deeply rooted in academic standards. Mr. Donald from Bluff Park Hardware discusses business strategy and customer care, Mrs. Kate from Fig and Fern Flowers talks about marketing and branding, and Mrs. Ramsey from Good Neighbor Baking teaches cost analysis and the importance of shopping locally. Students can be heard excitedly peppering the guests with endless questions relevant to the success of a profitable farmer’s market. Students gain valuable, real-world insights from local experts, which boosts their confidence that they too can be successful entrepreneurs.

Following the forum, students eagerly return to the classroom primed to engage in their Modern Classroom Project (MCP) lesson. MCP is a research-backed, mastery-based



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instructional model that allows students the autonomy to work at their own pace, allowing more individualized instruction from the teacher. The learning objective for this lesson is asynchronously taught through my MCP video to formulate an evidence-based persuasive piece. Students use a graphic organizer to independently identify three to four reasons why people in our community should shop at their market. Groups of children gather around the room: some collaborating and receiving feedback; some coming up with reasons and examples for community support of our market; some working individually; and some at my teacher table, reviewing before their mastery check. Once students demonstrate mastery, they record videos persuading the community to shop at their market. I can't help but giggle as I overhear them tell their viewers unique reasons to come, followed by "Be sure to like my video!" Early finishers proceed to the next lesson, creating flyers with QR codes linking to their videos.

Students also design prototypes, run into challenges, and develop the perseverance to go back to the drawing board. They are empowered to try again, fail again, try again, and come out with a deeper understanding from which they started. Students apply their learning in real world situations in order to understand the connection of the standards to the world around them.

When asked "What do you remember about Mrs. Collins' class?" I hope that students would share about "the time when we tried to grow squash hydroponically indoors, learning that we had to pollinate the female flower's stigma manually, because bees were not allowed in school," or "the time we thought we were collecting caterpillars to watch them turn into butterflies, but later learned they were invasive armyworms, eating our school's grass." They may even tell you about the time that seven-year-old Nylah asked point blank why our class had not "celebrated" Black History Month—meaning she wanted a literal party! Thus, she inaugurated and planned the first annual "PopUp Black History Month Party." Now a 5th grader, Nylah continues to return as the guest speaker to encourage others to take initiative, just as she has. The party is now a part of our class culture, planned entirely by students every February. At the last "Pop Up" students decided to write and deliver speeches highlighting historical Alabamians, and later expanded in a class published book entitled Alabama African American Heroes Who Changed Our State and World.

Finally, they will end with the story of their effective work to save the hydroponic program at our school, as their First-Grade Farmer's Market brought the entire community together, eager to purchase their garden seedlings and raise thousands of dollars. They will tell you that Mr. Donald, Mrs. Kate and Mrs. Ramsey proudly showed



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up, bringing along the mayor. Every penny earned went toward the Farm 2 School fund, created to support the continued real-world initiatives at our school, because they will tell you: they are real-life world changers.

4. Describe a time when you demonstrated teacher leadership and lifelong learning through your work in your school, state or beyond. Describe your work, how it helped you grow and how it meaningfully impacted students.

It was the third day of school for the 2019-2020 year, and I found myself frustrated and confused. My student Caleb was being defiant, yelling and even throwing chairs. I asked the counselor, "How can I build a safe classroom community with these behaviors?" Her response: "Give him independence within your classroom. Let him wander or play with sensory sand. Let him control one thing in his life." Swallowing my pride, I tried her advice, and my journey into learning about trauma began.

I joined a professional learning community and dove into learning trauma's physical effects on the brain, regulation strategies, and ways to optimize the learning environment. I recognized Caleb's initial behaviors had to do with things his eyes had witnessed and the resulting trauma he held deep in his body. He lived in survival mode, a state common among traumatized individuals. Learning more instilled empathy for my student. Instead of asking "What's wrong with him?" I asked, "What happened to him and how did he adapt?"

Recognizing his strengths in the classroom, such as his skill of resolving technical problems, counteracted his negative self-concept. When the bubble machine broke at recess, the class cheered loudly as he repaired it, and a new confidence manifested within him. Through safety, trust, and acceptance, he began participating and developed peer relationships. The boy who had boycotted everything began reading.

The school year ended abruptly in 2020. Post-pandemic, even more students displayed signs of trauma. Because of my growth, I was equipped to share trauma-informed practices in conversations with colleagues and led a Professional Development at my school.

I am now more attuned to the mental health epidemic in schools. In the United States, 19% of children aged 2-8 have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder (Meng). My own mental well-being has declined, along with fellow, dedicated educators, who are constantly regulating even more dysregulated children. I read *The Anxious Generation*,



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recognizing that while anxiety and depression is high, there is an antidote: independence. Independence builds resiliency and capability, quieting fear.

With this in mind, in January 2025, I piloted the Let Grow Experience in my classroom, a free resource to build capacity for student independence. In class, we discussed monthly themes related to independence and students chose a homework assignment - to try something new - all by themselves - with their parents' permission. First graders excitedly came back to school announcing "I made sweet potatoes in the air fryer" or "I vacuumed the downstairs ALL BY MYSELF." Students reflected on their independent experiences, metacognitively noting struggles and successes, and adding an independence leaf to our student-made Let GROW tree. Parents, amazed at what their students were doing on their own, began their own journey towards a paradigm-shift of entrusting their kids with independence, which started spreading throughout the community and school.

As Alabama's Teacher of the Year, I am taking my own learning and growth to the 55,000 educators across Alabama. While the state is big and the need for mental health awareness is even bigger, I have fostered work in building relationships with educators, and speaking to school faculties, administrators, counselors, and staff statewide. Meeting with those serving Alabama students motivates me to forge pathways between the educators who may feel siloed in lonely trenches. Aubrey Bennett, Alabama's Secondary Teacher of the Year, and I have joined forces, creating a united social media page for all Alabama educators, holding in-person events, and building relationships with educators through virtual PD sessions— the most recent being Creepin' It Real: Conversations around Mental Health in Schools. We are also inviting educators to physically hop in the Apple Car, a vehicle with a large apple decal on it, to record episodes of our podcast titled "Driving Education." Through this avenue, we are providing a rolling PD for teachers, uniting diverse communities and schools, and centering conversations on real time issues that impact this profession.

As the National Teacher of the Year, I will broaden my footprint to collectively unite even more voices. I will raise awareness about the mental health crisis and amplify the message that educators truly hold the key to changing the landscape—through the transformational power of education.

My former student Caleb, our class "handyman," continues to keep in touch with me. Though he still experiences the effects of his past, it's evident that cultivating an understanding within myself produced empathy that amended the soil, allowing him



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safety and belonging. From there, engagement and independence sprouted, strengthening his roots of resiliency and impact.

https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2024/24_0126.htm

5. As the National Teacher of the Year, you will serve as an ambassador of education for the United States for a year. You have been asked to deliver remarks at an event for aspiring teachers and their mentors. What is your message?

Posted outside my classroom door hangs a quote that states “To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.” To me, this quote represents the crux of why we as educators do what we do each and every day.

Regardless of your journey, whether you’ve labored for many years or are eager to begin plowing, know that I am referring to educators as metaphorical gardeners who believe that our nation’s greatest harvest is currently housed in classrooms that we’re cultivating. As gardeners, we believe our work in every moment while tending our gardens matters, and is vital to the growth of what is to come.

So, we watch for the child who needs a little extra fertilizer, we wipe away tears when one of our students begins to wilt, we notice when a child lacks nutrients, and we make sure that they’re well watered and ready to withstand a full day in the sun. We pray for rain, we pray for sun, we pray for the garden we believe in, even when it resembles a plot of arid dirt.

As gardeners, we show up, weathering harsh conditions and adversities. The weeds keep coming, yet we never once stop believing that this garden will bear fruit; and with that, we dream of the harvest and how it’ll nourish our community and fuel the future.

We watch. We wait. We hope. We believe. We celebrate the sprouting, even when we must look closely to see it. We learn from mistakes, understanding true growth only comes from pruning and refining our practice. We eagerly share tips and tricks with other gardeners, motivating each other to keep planting.

We reflect and recognize the climate has changed in a short span, as societal conditions outside of our control manifest. There’s a draught of human connection, yet windstorms of virtual connections ensue. We remember times when students thrived in the wide open, interacting daily with the outside world, digging deep to address problems at their roots. The current landscape offers little opportunity for childhood play,



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imagination, and independence, elements vital to student growth, resiliency, and well-being. The mental health of students has withered and, in response, greenhouses have been constructed. The seedlings sprouting in these meticulously controlled environments seem to grow well, but once transplanted outdoors, they shrivel—requiring interventions to adapt beyond the greenhouse walls. We have conversations, collectively wondering how to make this life-giving profession sustainable, as many are burned-out yet, simultaneously called to tend the terrain. We are the gardeners, and we believe in the sacred work of our profession. We remember fellow gardener, George Washington Carver, who said “When you do the common things in life, in an uncommon way, you will command the attention of the world.” Our students may not yet know the inherent value of the common things in life, like playing outside, running barefoot, and face-to-face conversations; to many of the children that we teach, these things are uncommon. As gardeners, it is up to us to keep believing in tomorrow and to command their attention with joy in learning through hands-on, real-world, and meaningful learning opportunities. We expose students to the reality that the physical world is bigger than the world-wide web, and they are meant to experience it.

We acknowledge that adversity can lead to resiliency: the peony plant produces more buds only after the cold comes along. We must remind ourselves that the great redwood trees can stand over 350 feet tall, thriving for thousands of years, only because their root systems are so intricately woven and overlapped with the roots of other redwoods in the community. These truths must guide our practice: resiliency brings forth growth and we gardeners must stand stronger, collectively rooted together.

Finally, gardeners, as you continue this important work, be mindful that your impact is not limited to only one seasonal life cycle. For we ourselves stand in the shade of trees that others have planted. The seeds of empathy and empowerment sown, cultivate the Nylahs, the Calebs, the Lupitas, the Judahs, the Baldos to bloom exactly where they are planted, fully engaged to display the individualized beauty and purpose for which each was uniquely created. This garden, tended today, has the potential to grow and re-seed thousands of times over. Who knows where the wind will blow and carry the impact we cultivate to other plots, continuing the cycle that deeply enriches our world. Fearlessly keep plowing. Keep planting. Keep cultivating. We are the gardeners, and we believe in tomorrow.