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Application submitted by

**2026 National Teacher of the Year
FINALIST**



Rachel Kinsaul

GEORGIA

School: Morgan County High School

Subject: Agriculture

Grade: 9-12



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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.**

In 2019, my school counselor, Mrs. Murdock, came to us with a problem. She was getting married and needed to find a florist to complete the floral arrangements for her big day! She asked if our floral class would be interested in the job. My school had a new district-wide initiative — Project Based Learning (PBL) — and I saw this as the perfect opportunity for to use this new initiative to cover Standard AFNR-FDM-11: Describe the major components related to floral wedding work, and our Wedding PBL was born.

PBL engages students in real-world, meaningful projects that emphasize critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Students identify a problem, build skills, research solutions, create a product, and present their findings. This approach allows students to apply what they've learned through authentic experiences.

To begin the PBL unit, we brainstormed details that helped us understand the bride's vision. Then, the students compiled a list of consultation questions and conducted a bridal interview with Mrs. Murdock.

After the consultation, each group created a proposal that included inspiration photos, flower lists, and cost estimates; which required fidelity and attention to detail. I provided feedback continuously, helping students refine their ideas. The groups then presented their proposals to the bride, who chose one design team to lead the project.

The lead designers ordered flowers from our wholesaler and assigned wedding-day jobs to each classmate. With so many different arrangements needed—bouquets, boutonnieres, arches, and centerpieces—every student had a role and a chance to succeed based on their own unique strengths.

Because education thrives through collaboration, I invited other Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) pathways to participate. Culinary handled food, cosmetology managed hair and makeup, art provided a live painter, band supplied musicians, marketing designed programs and invitations, and audio-visual students



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produced a wedding video. Each pathway mirrored the same real-world model within its field, giving every student a role in a shared, authentic event.

True to PBL philosophy, this lesson encouraged students to make mistakes and problem-solve in the moment, but the business component was equally powerful. We discussed pricing, mark-up, and budgeting so students could understand the cost of running a floral business and the value of their work.

Mrs. Murdock's wedding was a huge success, inspiring other teachers and community members to hire our student floral designers. Since 2019, our class has completed floral installations for over 50 weddings in our community, maintaining an annual operating budget of \$60,000 and an average profit of \$1,500–\$2,000 per wedding. To date, 286 students have participated in our weddings and events enterprise, and four former students have since launched their own floral businesses. The class operates as a student-based enterprise, using funds from weddings, subscriptions, and community events to sustain itself. This allows students to experience entrepreneurship firsthand while ensuring our mock weddings are fully funded.

Beyond the financial and technical lessons, this unit shaped how my students and I serve others through our craft. One of my most profound experiences came when a former student, Joy, lost her brother to gun violence. The day after his death, she reached out to ask if she could make his casket spray using what she'd learned in class. In that moment, I realized this project was more than a lesson—it was a ministry. Since then, my students have used their floral skills to comfort classmates, teachers, and families in times of grief, creating arrangements that speak when words fall short.

Through this project, students see the impact their skills can have on others. They gain confidence, empathy, and purpose. They understand that their education is not confined to a classroom—it's something that touches real people in meaningful ways.

The Wedding PBL defines who I am as a teacher because it embodies my belief that education should be relevant, purposeful, and rooted in service. By engaging students of all backgrounds in authentic, hands-on experiences, I help them see themselves as capable, creative problem-solvers who contribute to their communities. Every deliberate instructional decision—from collaboration to reflection—centers on connecting students' skills to service.



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Ultimately, this unit reveals my core belief about teaching and learning: when students use their knowledge to serve others, education becomes transformational.

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?

When I first started teaching in Morgan County, I was asked a question that changed my educational philosophy. My principal came to the CTAE department and asked, “If we were to come to you tomorrow and tell you we were closing your program, who would fight for you?” They even asked us to write them down. At the moment, I wasn’t sure who would fight for me. But it made me really sit back and think about my program’s relevancy to the community.

I have worked to change the culture of our school—particularly within our agriculture program—by expanding course offerings to reach a more diverse population of students. Morgan County is a very socio-economically diverse county where not all of my students will go to college. Because of this, I also wanted the students to walk away with more skills that they could use right after high school to find a career. In 2017, I approached my CTAE director with an idea: to offer a Floral Design course. I knew adding this class as a general elective would attract students who might never consider enrolling in an agriculture course. It worked. In the 2016-2017 school year, my first year at Morgan County High School, the agriculture program was 72% male and 28% female. After adding the Floral Design course, in the 2018-2019 school year, the agriculture program was 56% male and 44% female. As a female agricultural educator, I see the importance of opening doors for other women in the industry.

The biggest barrier to starting the class was cost. Floral design is an expensive course to sustain, so I proposed a challenge: if the school could give me \$1,000 in seed money, I would make the class financially self-sufficient. That \$1,000 investment has since grown into a thriving student-based enterprise generating over \$60,000 annually. Our largest source of revenue comes from our monthly floral subscription program, which now serves 75 subscribers across our community.

With that success came a new challenge: delivery. That’s when another opportunity bloomed. Our special education department operates a life skills program through which



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students practice employability and communication skills in the community. I partnered with their teachers to create a delivery exchange—their students would deliver our floral subscriptions, and in return, my floral students would help them create arrangements for holidays and special events.

Each month, the delivery team picks up the floral designs and goes door to door, spreading joy through flowers and friendly conversation. The experience gives the students authentic practice in interpersonal communication, responsibility, and teamwork. For our subscribers, it's more than a delivery—it's a moment of connection and community pride. This partnership has created a culture of collaboration across programs, showing how different areas of the school can work together on a large-scale project that benefits everyone involved. The program not only provides meaningful, hands-on experience for our students with disabilities but has also generated tremendous excitement and support for the floral design program throughout the community.

My floral design students experience authentic, high-quality, hands-on instruction several times each week. But more importantly, they learn teamwork. Every project—whether a Derby Day headpiece, a Barbie-themed floral dress, a cartoon character funeral, or a full-scale wedding—requires creativity, communication, and collaboration.

Students identify team strengths, manage personalities, and work together toward a shared goal. This program has intentionally built a purposeful and inclusive culture both inside and outside the classroom. Our floral delivery partnership brings together general and special education students, collaborating together to fulfill 75 monthly deliveries. It has fostered mutual respect, shared purpose, and a sense of belonging, involving 94 students with special needs in serving more than 300 community partners—from private individuals to local industries—who eagerly anticipate the monthly visits from our delivery team.

The success of this initiative has inspired others as well. I've encouraged teachers to host community classes to showcase their programs' relevance, and now our primary school art teacher hosts family art nights. Other CTAE pathways are collaborating too—Marketing students manage the storefront, and special needs students help set up displays.

And now when I think about who would fight for my program, I have a list a mile long. Because today, the floral program continues to thrive as a model of collaboration, inclusion, and service-based learning. It engages students of all backgrounds and



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abilities in meaningful work, strengthens cross-department relationships, and connects our school deeply to our 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 deliberately impact student learning and success.

A classroom's true power isn't measured by test scores—it's measured by how well it prepares students to strengthen the place they call home. I believe the success of a person is tied to the success of their community. In 2019, as I was helping my students complete their FFA Degree applications, I realized most of them had almost no record of community service. That moment stopped me in my tracks. How could I expect them to value their community if they had never had a meaningful way to serve it?

That realization sparked the creation of "Sophomores Serve"—an initiative that breaks down classroom walls and connects students directly with the needs, strengths, and stories of their own hometown. This annual event builds a community-focused culture that highlights the incredible work being done by local organizations while helping students understand how they can be part of it.

Over the past five years, I have coordinated Sophomores Serve for every sophomore at our school—an average of 260 students annually. I partner with 18–20 local non-profits to create meaningful service placements. Volunteer opportunities include painting buildings for non-profits, walking dogs at the humane society, hosting activities at local nursing homes, planting flowers around town, clearing trails at our local state park, assisting at a special needs summer camp, and working in our community garden.

To encourage buy-in, students choose their preferred service site using a project selection form. Allowing them to select projects that align with their interests increases ownership and enthusiasm. Students look forward to serving alongside their friends and leave the day feeling proud of the impact they've made.

This initiative also engages the wider community. Each year, around 85 community volunteers join us to drive buses, deliver lunches, and work alongside students at service sites. The ripple effect is powerful — students serve their community, and the community, in turn, invests in them.



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In a culture that often asks, "What can you do for me?" I encourage my students to reframe the question to, "What can I do for you?" Sophomores Serve not only teaches students to put others first but also sends a powerful message that our school values and supports the people who make our community thrive. We live out the motto, "One Morgan." In March 2025, we celebrated our fifth successful Sophomore Serve event—an enduring reminder of the difference one idea can make. Since the program's inception in 2019, over 1,250 students have participated in Sophomores Serve, logging over 2,500 hours of combined service to our community.

What began as a way to get students out of the classroom soon revealed something deeper: service is a form of learning. As students volunteered, I noticed how naturally they developed employability skills—punctuality, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and adaptability. That realization reshaped my perspective on workforce development as an extension of community connection. Through each partnership, I strive to align my agricultural education program with the needs of our local economy, ensuring that students not only serve their community but are prepared to one day sustain it.

Building on the success of Sophomores Serve, I am expanding this concept statewide as Georgia's Teacher of the Year through the creation of Georgia's Public Education Day of Service: Connecting Classrooms and Communities. This initiative, in partnership with the Georgia Department of Education, will launch in spring 2026, encouraging over 2,300 Georgia public schools to engage in meaningful service-learning projects on the same day, showcasing the collective power of public education. I am currently developing planning guides that will help districts tailor the event to their local needs, providing step-by-step guidance and reflection tools for teachers and students alike.

Imagine the power of public education if every student in Georgia spent one day serving their community—one day learning through empathy, teamwork, and purpose.

Connecting my students with the community by staying rooted in service has become a cornerstone of my teaching philosophy. These connections dissolve classroom walls, transform students into active citizens, and create deliberate opportunities for learning and growth. By engaging students in authentic community experiences, I help them understand that success isn't just about individual achievement, it's about using what you've learned to make your community stronger.



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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.

In agriculture, the phrase “getting outside your fencerows” reminds us of the importance of stepping beyond our own fields—or in my case, my classroom—to advocate for a cause we believe in. My students and I have spent countless hours doing just that: attending county commission meetings, board discussions, and even visiting our state and nation’s capitals to advocate for an issue close to our hearts and community—the preservation of farmland.

It’s a powerful thing to witness real, tangible change unfold as the result of our advocacy. Over the past three years, my students and I have been part of that change in Morgan County.

As a member of the Madison-Morgan Conservancy Board of Directors, I was tasked with addressing a major challenge in our county: disappearing farmland due to rapid development. Working alongside the Georgia Conservation Fund, I helped pilot The Working Farms Fund—a revolving fund that purchases land at fair market value, places it under a conservation easement to remove development rights and resells it to farmers at a discounted price. This program creates a win-win for all involved: landowners receive a fair price, and farmland remains in production for future generations.

In my role as Chairman of our local Working Farms Fund board, I served as the “connector.” I identified and recruited farmers from across the state who were interested in participating. My service on the Georgia Farm Bureau State Board gave me the relationships and perspective needed to help make this initiative a success.

To connect my students to this real-world issue, I proposed it as the focus for our Agricultural Issues Forum Leadership Development Event (LDE). This contest allows students to research a current agricultural issue, develop an informed presentation, and deliver it to multiple audiences across the county and state. Each year, my students present to more than 200 community members, sharing both the pros and cons of complex topics and fielding questions with confidence and professionalism.

During their research, students discovered that the most recent Cost of Community Services Study for Morgan County dated back to 2008. Recognizing the need for updated data, they worked with the Conservancy to advocate before the County Commissioners for a new study—which was approved and completed in 2023. They



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didn't stop there. My students also pushed for the inclusion of a local budget line item dedicated to farmland conservation. In 2024, their efforts paid off: Morgan County allocated \$200,000 to create the Morgan County Farmland Protection Program. I was later appointed to the board overseeing these funds. Today, Morgan County stands as only the third county in Georgia to financially support farmland conservation—a milestone my students helped make possible.

Our Agricultural Issues Team has earned top honors in the process. In 2023, they placed first in Georgia and advanced to the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis, where they reached the Top 16 nationally with their presentation, "Can Conservation Easements Help with the Rapid Loss of Farmland?" Although my students have been advocating for land conservation for our county, I also wanted them to have the experience of working the land themselves. That's what led to the vision for our \$2.7 million Agricultural Education Complex and barn—a dream that became reality through deep community collaboration. By building strong relationships and earning buy-in from stakeholders, I helped secure \$1,145,728.35 in corporate and private donations for the Morgan Agricultural Learning Lab, or "the MALL." The MALL stands as a symbol of what's possible when schools, industries, and communities come together. The MALL has truly leveled the playing field for our students—proving that community investment can remove barriers and expand opportunities.

This experience has been transformative for both my students and me. It's shown that teacher leadership isn't about a title, it's about empowering students to lead, advocate, and engage beyond the classroom. Through this work, I've learned to weave civic engagement, policy, and communication into agricultural education, while my students have gained confidence, critical thinking, and leadership skills that will last a lifetime. They've learned their voices matter—how to research, speak with confidence, and turn knowledge into action. Watching them become informed advocates for agriculture has been one of the greatest rewards of my career. I'll continue preparing students for this competition because it perfectly reflects my belief that leadership and learning go hand in hand—growing through service and inspiring students to create meaningful change in their world.

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?



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Early in my career, I was asked a question that has impacted the way I work to serve my community. My Principal and CTAE director came to us and asked, “If we were to come to you tomorrow and tell you that we were closing your program, who in the community would fight for you?” They asked us to write them down. It wasn’t a threat, but instead a call for reflection on the impact we were making in our community.

It’s a question that every teacher, future teacher, and community stakeholder needs to ask themselves- how do we fight for public education? According to the National Center for Education, total enrollment in public schools is projected to decrease by 5% between the fall of 2022 and the fall of 2031. With a drop in enrollment in public schools, it’s more important than ever for teachers to invite the community in and show relevance in what they’re teaching.

I’m a Georgia Agricultural educator at Morgan County High School, and no two days are ever the same. One moment, I’m doctoring a sick show pig; the next, I’m installing wedding flowers or cheering on students at the State Capitol. But my goal is always the same: to help students become productive, engaged members of their communities by staying rooted in service.

When I first came to Morgan County, I started in Ag Mechanics — but I wanted to reach every student. So I proposed something new: a Floral Design program. I promised my CTAE director that if she gave me \$1,000 in seed money, I’d never ask for another dime. Today, that program generates more than \$60,000 a year and is entirely community-funded.

But real success isn’t the number — it’s the people. Our Floral Design students create arrangements for our monthly subscription service, and our special education students deliver them across town, learning communication and job skills along the way. What began as a classroom project has grown into a thriving bridge between our school and community.

And more importantly, my students are learning skills for life — problem-solving, collaboration, punctuality, adaptability, initiative, and pride in their work. Not every student who takes my class will become a florist, but they will leave knowing how to show up on time, do hard things, and serve others with excellence. That’s what education should do: give students both competence and purpose.

One student, Jake, hated sitting still but came alive in the shop. The first time he welded a perfect bead, his pride was unmistakable. After graduation, he went straight into the



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workforce, bought a house at 19, and earns more than I do. When he got married, his only request was that I do his wedding flowers. That's what happens when students are given meaningful opportunities to discover their value and their place in the world.

And Joy, who called me to ask for help making her big brother's casket spray. In a time of grief, Joy chose to use the skills she learned in class to help her family deal with a tragedy. She chose to use her skills to serve others.

These stories remind me that teaching and leadership are acts of service. Every time we help students find their gifts and use them to help others — through a project, a skill, or a business idea — we show them that work isn't just about earning; it's about impacting. We each have a role in connecting what people love, what they're good at, and where they're needed.

And my list, it's a mile long. I now know who would fight for me and my program. Every person we have influenced through the connections my students have been able to make in the community would be there to fight for us.

That's what it means to be Rooted in Service: connecting classrooms and communities, turning learning into purpose, and excitement into opportunity.

So here's my challenge to you — be the one. Be the one who takes a minute to ask a student what they love to do. Be the one who sees a spark of talent and helps fan it into a flame. Be the one who opens doors and builds bridges.

Because somewhere out there is a student waiting for someone to notice their potential and help them find their fit. And when we all do that — when we stay Rooted in Service — classrooms connect to communities, education becomes the most powerful force for good.