

Application submitted by
2026 National Teacher of the Year
FINALIST



LEON SMITH
PENNSYLVANIA

School: Haverford High School

Subject: Social Studies

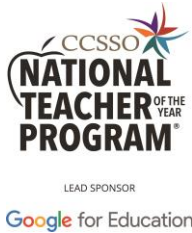
Grade: 9-12

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.

For 20 years, I was the only Black teacher in my building. When it came to creating authentic connections with students in my classes through personal connection, I experienced moments of hesitation. I worried that sharing too many stories of my life, often intertwined with Black History, would bring criticism from parents, administrators, or students. I eventually became more confident in my identity as a Black educator and realized that my perspective was an important part of my students' education. By sharing my experiences and infusing Black History into the curriculum, I inspire students to think critically, have moments of self-discovery, and positively contribute to society. Now, in my 25th year of teaching, I realize that God may have blessed me with a job at Haverford in order to share my perspective with students who may never have another Black teacher.

Every year, I teach my students to reexamine the historic Brown v. Board of Education decision from an often overlooked perspective: Black teachers. The most compelling and memorable class discussions often occur when I have students grapple with the paradox of progress — how a ruling that opened doors for some, closed them for others. This important component of my pedagogy encourages students to think critically and investigate the over 100,000 Black teachers and principals that were lost as schools desegregated. I begin this lesson by having my students listen to Malcom Gladwell's Revisionist History podcast; specifically the episode called "Miss Buchanan's Period of Adjustment." Students listen for homework and prepare for the next day's socratic seminar. Their reactions upon entering the classroom after hearing about the "cost of integration" are powerful as they move from surprise to shock to anger and finally anticipation to dive deeper during our socratic seminar. I begin by showing an image of a segregated classroom, highlighting one student at the center. After careful analysis, students realize this is a photo of Linda Brown, the plaintiff in the Brown case and the surprise voice revealed at the end of the podcast. I ask my students to describe the picture and make predictions about where and what is happening. Our discussion focuses on the integration process, the loss of highly qualified Black educators, and the



impact on the students. Despite my strong connection to this topic, I allow the class to organically engage in self-discovery and share their thoughts.

During one particularly powerful moment, an Asian American student reflected on her own feelings of sadness about not having an Asian teacher and established a goal to begin an Asian American history course. I was so proud of her; she went on to research and create a framework for an Asian American Studies course that she presented to the school board. She later told me that it was during the Socratic seminar where she received her inspiration to create the course.

After our Socratic seminar, I show the students how many school districts in Pennsylvania have no educators of color (in 2024, it was about 46%). We look at it through a macro-level lens: currently, less than 2% of all teachers in the United States are Black men. The students are often shocked and appalled. Despite their surprise, I guide them to understanding the deeper contextual knowledge of the problem connected to the aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education.

On the final day of school last year, a student wrote me a letter articulating that she felt more deeply connected to her Venezuelan roots as a result of this inspiring lesson that focused on telling the story of historically marginalized people and how it still impacts our world today. The knowledge and understanding that I've inspired so many of my students to connect with their identities is why this work is deeply important to me.

I often wrap up the lesson by sharing my own struggle with my identity as the only Black educator in a predominately white school and how it molded me into the educator I am today. My struggles fueled my passion for educational advocacy, incorporating my years of experience into conversations with policy makers to ensure all students have a highly-qualified teacher. High school is a challenging time, and my hope is that my students recognize this fundamental truth that has propelled me all these years: whatever feels like an obstacle today can be their North Star for tomorrow, creating change for those who follow after them.

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 2020, I was invited to collaborate in the creation of our district's next strategic plan as a teacher leader. For over a month, I worked with district leaders, community stakeholders, and other educators to develop strategic goals that would guide our district until this year. We examined and analyzed community survey data, met with parents and community leaders, and ultimately created three goals: preparing contemporary citizens, social and emotional learning, and diversity and inclusion. My work contributed to the development, language, and implementation of these goals district-wide. It was important for me to use this opportunity to uplift the voices of students and mentees who felt the school environment was unsafe and exclusionary. Discovering that district and community stakeholders also desired a school community based on inclusivity, dignity, and belonging was encouraging. Our next steps involved a school board presentation and the development of an implementation plan for the next five years. Recognizing my commitment to inclusion, a school board member invited me to emcee the 2025 Making a Difference Awards — a celebration honoring students, educators, and community partners who champion students with disabilities through advocacy, perseverance, and everyday actions that create welcoming school communities.

I was honored when my district superintendent asked me to co-chair the district's diversity and inclusion goal with an elementary principal. Mirroring how I intentionally build community in my classroom before diving into content, we built a genuine personal connection prior to developing a district-wide plan. In determining our initial steps, we thought it critical to analyze key data from community members, families, and students. In an audit conducted of our district's social studies program, results indicated a strong interest in an African American Studies course. For years, students from all backgrounds approached me expressing their frustration about the limited perspectives and content in our course offerings connecting to African American history and culture. I was inspired to take the lead in creating an African American Studies course to honor their concerns and create a more inclusive curriculum for all learners. During the spring of 2021, the course was offered for the first time and I had the privilege of teaching it. It was an amazing experience to work with students from all backgrounds in an elective class where I know the students chose to be there because of their interest in the topic. In 2023, I was selected by the College Board to be an AP workshop consultant for the new AP African American Studies course. I was honored to work with educators from all over the country that were the original creators of this landmark course. However, at that moment, we only offered African American Studies as an elective; not an AP



course. For the rest of the 2022-2023 school year I worked with building and district leaders and the College Board to bring AP African American Studies to my district. Our efforts were successful, as during the 2024-2025 school year, I taught the first AP African American Studies class in history at Haverford. Similar to the elective course, the class was filled with students from a variety of backgrounds, students that regularly take AP courses and those taking it for the first time. A memorable moment occurred when I invited our principals to come and see our student research projects. The students were nervous at first, but I reminded them about all of the hard work they dedicated to the topic they selected. It was an amazing day; one that neither I nor they will forget anytime soon.

Another part of our diversity and inclusion goal to establish a culture of inclusivity, dignity, and belonging in our district was professional development focused on culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Each month, I worked with a team to develop the monthly programming. This collaboration extended outside of the meetings through a spirit of reflection where professionals shared book recommendations, podcasts, educational materials and strategies. One direct effect of this culture is our English department elevating student voice and choice by allowing students to select from diverse reading selections to meet curricular goals. I'm excited to say that our district diversity and inclusion goal was recently incorporated into its second strategic plan. Our monthly building meetings continue, and I work with a team of teachers and administrators to set the goals and agenda each month. Haverford School District set a course to meet the needs of all learners and educators throughout the district and I strive each day to meet that standard.

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.

During the 2024-2025 school year, I was honored to partner with the College Board to take a group of students to the Pennsylvania state capitol in Harrisburg as part of Advanced Placement (AP) Advocacy Day. The students met and interacted with high school AP scholars from all over the state; learning the basics of advocacy and the power of storytelling to build empathy and understanding. Throughout the day, students participated in meetings with their local legislators, heard from the House Education Chair, and toured the House floor. As the meetings progressed, I was so impressed by



their growing confidence in communicating the impact of AP courses on their lives with policymakers. One student's experience stands out based on the increased self-confidence she acquired during the Capitol visit. Prior to the trip, she often felt nervous speaking to adults and would often remain quiet in their presence. Her confidence grew noticeably during the legislative meetings, evident in her successful interviews this school year for a job and an internship. The light emanating from her is bright, and it shows me the power of providing students with the opportunity to find their voice.

As part of my fellowship with Teach Plus, I build relationships with legislators at the local, state, and national level to support policies that benefit students and teachers. I was so inspired by the real world experiences my students gained during Capitol Day that I reached out to our local State House Representative and asked if he would visit our class. His staffer agreed which provided an opportunity for all of my students to engage in dialogue with a legislator. The students asked questions about his job responsibilities on a typical day and topics connected to the role of government in their lives. It was such an important opportunity for all my students, not just the AP students, to realize that their voice matters in a democracy and that legislators are there to serve them. As part of Pennsylvania graduation requirements, students must pass a locally developed civics assessment. At Haverford, part of the assessment is to participate in an activity, such as attending a school board meeting or, in this case, meeting with legislators. Several students were excited to inform their government teacher about connections they made between their classroom learning and the experiences throughout the day.

For the last four years, I have taught AP US History to ninth-graders in a year-long course. Building classroom community is a key component to establishing conditions for success in this challenging class. Consequently, I partnered with the other AP U.S. History teacher in my school to lead a joint field trip to Tyler Arboretum, bringing

our study of transcendentalism to life. The 650-acre landscape dates back to the 1600s and Pennsylvania founder William Penn. While there, students learned about Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson in experiential ways through guided tours of a replica of Thoreau's cabin near Walden Pond and self-exploration in nature walks where they engaged in journaling activities. During class, it can be challenging to ensure that all students are actively engaged, but not on this trip. Students willingly and happily participated in journaling and self-reflection activities. Additionally, students learned about the property's original proprietors and the local connections to the transcendentalist era. Despite the New England roots and male perspective offered by



the writings of Thoreau and Emerson, the themes of self-knowledge, anti-materialism, individualism, and nature were also evident in the works of African American and women transcendentalists like Martin Delany and Margaret Fuller, who applied these ideas to abolition, social justice, women's rights, and education. Students learned of all these perspectives while engaging in self-reflection geared towards finding wisdom that they could apply to their own lives. The joy, laughter, and camaraderie among the students was powerful to witness. The day together with their classmates did an amazing job of building community in my classes, something that often takes more time to develop. As a teacher of a course with high expectations like APUSH, my increased knowledge of students and the strong bonds that now exist in my classroom will positively impact my ability to facilitate student success. Furthermore, the engagement of all 5 senses while at the Tyler Arboretum aligns with learning studies that link sensory learning to stronger connections in the brain and deeper emotional relationships.

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.

Being the only Black male educator at my school for over 20 years motivated me to deepen my learning on the state of the teaching profession and advocate for greater educator diversity at both the state and federal levels. That passion has led me to leadership roles while still in the classroom. Since the 2022-2023 school year, I have engaged with Teach Plus through the Pennsylvania Policy Fellowship to address Pennsylvania teacher shortage at the state level and to serve on the National Teacher Policy Cabinet to address federal education policy. In recognition of my work as a teacher leader, I have been invited to deliver a speech on the steps of the state Capitol to advocate for solutions to address the teacher shortage, meet with U.S. Members of Congress and their staff, and deliver keynote addresses at conferences. Collectively, these experiences have not only equipped me with the necessary policy, advocacy and communication skills needed to engage in this advocacy, but also have created meaningful impact for students in Pennsylvania and across the country.

When I served as a Senior Policy Fellow with the Pennsylvania Teach Plus fellowship during the 2023-2024 school year, I guided a team of 8 fellows from across the Commonwealth. Together, we identified and implemented strategies to recruit, support, and retain a diverse educator workforce and presented our findings to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Consequently, we created a policy memo with



recommendations for PDE to increase the visibility, utilization, and effectiveness of the new Career and Technical Education (CTE) teaching pathway program in general education. Our ultimate recommendation was to leverage this program to expand and diversify the teacher pipeline.

As a result of our effort, we were invited to present to the Chief Talent Officer and the Committee for Education Talent Recruitment several times over Zoom and in person at the state capitol. During this visit, I led my team in legislative meetings with policymakers, where we advocated for the same solutions to address the teacher shortage. Regardless of political ideology, my team and I walked into legislative offices with one goal: to support the success of all students.

My experience as a senior policy fellow and public speaker supported my understanding of civics and the legislative process in ways that far surpassed my previous educational experience. Throughout my two-year fellowship, I constantly returned to my classroom with learnings about government that I was excited to share with my students: storytelling as a way to connect with someone through our shared humanity. Policy makers also have stories and experiences that brought them into their work, and a way to facilitate productive discussion is to connect with them. Because of this new learning and my advocacy efforts, more students across the Commonwealth will have access to teacher preparation programs in high school, increasing the number of prospective educators in PA.

As my excitement about policy work grew, I naturally began to share my experiences and pictures with my students. They began to see me not just as their teacher, but as a leader who was advocating for them outside of the classroom. I realized I was teaching more than content; I was teaching my students how to hope and dream about becoming future leaders themselves.

I was humbled and honored to receive letters from students at the end of the school year thanking me, but I was surprised to see them referencing the policy advocacy and speech as inspiring for them. I believe they listened to my advice more because my new experiences brought meaning to the world outside of the classroom. Because they trusted me, they were able to learn more about the complexities of government and leadership. This entire experience reinforced one of my core goals as an educator: to inspire students to reach their highest potential.

The speech on the Capitol steps increased my confidence in speaking to crowds, which has supported my 2025 journey as PA Teacher of the Year and has prepared me to



speak with Members of Congress. These experiences have uplifted the voices of teachers like me and enabled me to become the teacher leader I am today.

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?

It is a tremendous honor to be here with you today as we celebrate your hard work and entrance into the field of education. I want to welcome you to our great profession. As I look out at this amazing group of future educators and mentors, the importance of this moment is not lost on me. I feel an immense sense of gratitude to have this opportunity, but also a tremendous sense of purpose. As Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

I stand before you with a message of inspiration and purpose. As educators and future educators, we play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation. There are students in our classrooms every day that will change the world! How can we create classrooms and schools that meet the needs of ALL learners now and in the future? Take a moment to dream with me and close your eyes.

If you could reimagine school and education for when you enter the classroom, what would it look like? How would it work? What currently exists to support your vision?

Thank you for dreaming with me. But guess what; it does not have to be a dream! Be the teacher that you needed or that inspired you the most! We need excitement and joy in our schools. Public education is one of the oldest systems in our country dating back to the late 1800s! Life was very different then; including who had access to education, the needs of our students, and pedagogical best practices. If you can dream it, make it a reality in your classroom!

I think of a student named Marcus I met a few years ago. Every time I saw him, he had such charisma and all the students gravitated towards him; I had never seen anything like it. He was always the center of attention in every setting! With each interaction, I saw why. Marcus was not a straight "A" student and had made some mistakes in judgement during his freshman year. However, I saw a powerful light within him. I knew that he would be an amazing teacher. I asked him if he ever thought about being a teacher and at first he seemed surprised that I would ask him; it was not on his radar. But as we talked and discussed the power of educators to change the world, I could tell



he was intrigued. I also knew that his educational experience in our school was not always positive. During our conversations, he mentioned that he would like to be a teacher so he could create a classroom where students like himself could thrive. I said yes! Be the teacher you wish you had! This young man is now a rising senior and is still interested in becoming a teacher. He recently wrote his philosophy of education and is part of our Future Educators Academy. I'm excited to see the educator he becomes. His story, personality, and intelligence will allow him to connect with students in profound ways. Your future students like Marcus are waiting for you!

In the days ahead, you will experience joy, a sense of purpose, and gratitude for the lives you positively impact. There's nothing like seeing a student gain confidence in themselves after receiving words of encouragement from you. As teachers we often see things in our students that they do not see in themselves. That is part of our superpower. However, as Uncle Ben said in Spiderman, "with great power comes great responsibility." You must take care of yourselves. As educators, there will be countless ways that you will want to support your students both in and out of the classroom. We see this with the presence of your mentors at this event. The support of mentors, colleagues and friends throughout your career will play a key role in sustaining you in this profession. Build a network of people that you can turn to for advice and support. In order to help someone else, you need to help yourself first.

Teaching is a journey where one discovers their voice in the classroom and who they are as an educator along the way. Through a growth mindset, reflection and introspection, you will discover what makes you unique and your classroom special. Remember the teacher you needed as a student. As you prepare to enter the classroom, remember that you are who your students need.