

Application submitted by
2026 National Teacher of the Year
FINALIST



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KENTUCKY

School: Spencer County Middle School

Subject: Math

Grade: 7

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.

Excitement filled the library as community members, professionals, and parents moved from table to table, pausing to examine intricate blueprints and detailed 3-D models. Students stood confidently beside their work, explaining design decisions, answering questions about scale, cost, and interior layouts, and demonstrating a level of understanding that went far beyond traditional classroom expectations. This is the Dream House Project—a teaching unit that began eight years ago as a simple exploration of area, perimeter, and scale, and has evolved into a signature project that not only defines me as a teacher, but has become an anchor event in our school. In the Dream House Project, students demonstrate proportional reasoning and geometry skills while applying our district values—problem solving, communication, empowerment, citizenship, and collaboration.

Every student, regardless of background or ability, owns their learning. Each follows a progress tracker to meet core expectations: completing lessons, practicing problems, creating scaled blueprints, and developing a slide deck, but students make decisions about the size, location, and design of their house, and whether they will create a physical or digital 3-D model. By sharing exemplars from previous years, I set high expectations while allowing students to innovate and exceed them. I intentionally collaborate with special education and gifted/talented teachers, provide concrete examples, and offer multiple modes for demonstrating learning so that all students, from those with learning disabilities to those with advanced mastery, can engage meaningfully and show deeper understanding. The project grows each year because students raise the bar for themselves and each other, deepening my classroom culture that values challenge, creativity, and perseverance.

About five years ago, I invited a contractor, a realtor, and teachers to provide feedback on student work. Observing my students respond to guidance from someone outside the classroom was transformative: they stood taller, spoke with confidence, and refined their explanations, demonstrating pride in their learning. Since then, the annual



Dream Homearama has become a highlight of the year, drawing nearly 100 community members into the library to explore student projects, ask questions, and provide feedback. The accountability is real, and students recognize that their work has purpose beyond a grade. They are engaging in a dialogue with professionals and community members who value their ideas.

The project also connects classroom learning to the real world in meaningful ways. A mortgage broker once visited to expand students' understanding of home ownership beyond basic calculations. She discussed credit scores, avoiding private mortgage insurance, and practical financial tips, giving students insight into concepts they will encounter in life. One student became fascinated with real estate, particularly house flipping, and is currently enrolled in a seven-figure flipping organization. These experiences demonstrate that when students see authentic connections between their work and real-world applications, they invest themselves fully in the learning process. As the project has grown, so has its impact on the community. By inviting professionals, hosting the showcase in the library, and creating opportunities for the public to engage with student work, the Dream House Project has transformed traditional learning into a shared experience. In 2025, the project attracted so much attention that we secured a local venue to host the 2026 Dream Homearama, allowing for an even larger community audience. Each year, I refine the project deliberately by introducing new challenges, expanding opportunities for student choice, and maintaining high expectations, so students see that their work is valued and meaningful.

Through the Dream House Project, I aim to show what I believe about teaching and learning: middle school students can accomplish complex, meaningful work when given purpose, choice, and guidance. It is a project that students come to my class excited about, and one student even said, "I get to do math in my own creative way." It challenges the common narrative that middle school students underperform, demonstrating that with intentional instruction and opportunities for engagement, students rise to high expectations. Each blueprint, model, and presentation represents not just mathematical understanding, but a story of creativity, growth, and perseverance.

Ultimately, the Dream House Project defines me because it embodies my belief that education should be rigorous, relevant, and empowering, showcasing that ALL students are mathematicians. By designing deliberate choices, scaffolding learning, and



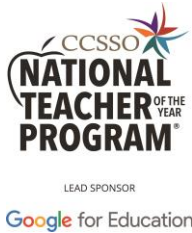
connecting students to real-world audiences, I create experiences where all learners can succeed. Through this project, students gain confidence, develop practical skills, and see the impact of their work proving that, when given challenge, support, and purpose, middle school students can truly do hard things

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?

Lights, Camera, Action! A few years ago, I volunteered to facilitate our school's broadcasting team. I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but I had old cameras, my iPhone, a tripod, a green screen, and four willing students. We met once a week after school and quickly realized that was not enough time for students to run a successful newscast. Two of the students wanted to be behind the scenes running cameras or editing, while the other two were willing to be on camera—one focused only on animals, a reflection of his ability to focus deeply and master details—a true superpower of his autism, and the other determined to tell jokes, which showcased his fun, quirky personality, though not always at the right time. We were quite the group, but my students and I learned so much that year about filming, editing, sound quality, and the difference between news and entertainment. More importantly, we learned to embrace each other's unique strengths, celebrate what made us different, and grow together as creators. Those early experiences shaped the inclusive, collaborative culture that has become the heart of The Grizzly News.

I interviewed students to find out what they wanted to see on our school's Grizzly News and recruited four more students who were able to help cast a vision. We started creating storyboards, checked out Kentucky Educational Television resources, and began to develop a routine. Early segments, like "In the Halls," highlighted students and their achievements. Anchors found their rhythm, editors refined transitions, and the team began to function as a cohesive unit.

Fast forward to this past year, and Grizzly News has become an integral part of our school culture. Students across the school watch each broadcast, participate in interviews and polls, and see their peers' achievements celebrated weekly. We've hosted a school-wide scavenger hunt, an acts-of-kindness project, and showcased many amazing things happening in our school. To challenge our students further, I



asked them to submit a clip for the state's Student Technology Leadership Program (STLP) competition. Although we didn't advance, the feedback was invaluable: we learned we needed our own intro and improved sound and video quality. Seeing the dedication of our students, I wanted to make sure they had the resources to grow. I applied for and was awarded a \$2,500 community grant to purchase professional editing software, microphones, and a teleprompter. Additionally, our after-school program (21st Century Grant) partnered with us to provide podcast microphones, further improving sound quality.

With these resources, production quality has increased, and interest in Grizzly News continues to grow. Each Friday, students across our school look forward to watching Grizzly News. Over 30 students are actively involved, with many more featured. The program allows us to celebrate the diversity of our students while spotlighting school and community events. We've begun a segment highlighting students' small businesses. My student with autism began leading "Zoo World," receiving positive feedback and showcasing his remarkable depth of knowledge about animals. I connected him with a staff member at the Louisville Zoo, giving him the opportunity to expand his expertise even further. Using feedback from students, we have segments that highlight sports, academics, arts, clubs, and the Grizzly House System, based on the Ron Clark Academy. Students are not only producing content but are shaping the culture of our school through participation, representation, and engagement.

This past spring, our students submitted another STLP clip and were proud to see their scores improve. They are now taking the feedback to make next year's broadcast even stronger, adding trivia, enhanced graphics, and music. This year's news team has conducted in-depth interviews with staff members and have continued to improve the "In the Halls" segments and added weekly polls to involve even more students. We have added a few students who are gifted in creating videos. One already had his own YouTube channel with several followers and is excited to use his talent doing voiceovers. Even more special, my son, new to middle school this year, has joined the Grizzly News, and is challenging himself and others to make the production even better. Watching Grizzly News evolve and become part of school culture has been a joy. I love seeing students push and challenge themselves, but most importantly, I love seeing students from all backgrounds and abilities collaborate to promote a positive, inclusive school environment. Through Grizzly News, students gain ownership, develop leadership skills, and contribute to a school-wide culture that celebrates achievement, diversity, and 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.

Learning doesn't happen in isolation—it happens in the world, among people, experiences, and opportunities. That belief guides every connection I make between my students and the community. One of the most powerful ways I bring this philosophy to life is by showing students that the skills they develop in my classroom, especially in math and problem-solving, have real-world applications and open doors to meaningful careers. To do this, I bring the community to my students, and my students to the community, through field trips, guest speakers, mentorships, and hands-on projects that allow them to experience learning in authentic contexts.

One way I connect students to the community is by inviting former students to share their experiences. Faithe, who pursued welding, spoke about vocational opportunities and the Women Who Weld initiative, inspiring students who had never considered this career path. That same year, Savanna shared her experiences at Gatton Academy, a residential STEM program at Western Kentucky University, generating excitement among students—some of whom are now applying to Gatton themselves. This year, I've expanded these efforts by partnering with our district's Director of Transition, Workforce, and Innovation to create even more connections across multiple career pathways.

In recent years, I've invited students like Nick and Branden to discuss careers outside Kentucky. Nick, formerly a strategic account developer at Salesforce and now at Cisco in Chicago, and Branden, who transitioned from managing for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to the New York Jets, shared their journeys to careers that allowed them to travel and grow professionally. This year, I am connecting students with Lilli, who worked with the Japanese Exchange & Teaching Program and is now pursuing her MA in Comparative Education in London. Through video chats, Lilli will inspire students to consider global opportunities, expanding the reach of the Dream House Project beyond the U.S.

Mentorship is another avenue for connection. High school students have joined my classroom to complete mentorship hours, providing support while exploring teaching as a potential career. Anna, for example, discovered a passion for teaching while mentoring and is now pursuing a degree in middle school math and English at the



University of Kentucky. These experiences benefit both mentors and mentees and reinforce the value of community involvement in learning.

In addition to former students, I invite local professionals to engage with my students' Dream Homearama projects. Last year, over 50 professionals, along with more than 100 elementary students, provided feedback on the designs. Architects, realtors, contractors, plumbers, interior designers, and mortgage brokers contributed insights, helping students understand the multiple facets of a single project—from blueprint variations to financing. These interactions deepen student learning and showcase creativity to the community. Elevated Studios, an educational group focused on transformational learning, featured our project in defining the state's vision for Vibrant Learning, and a video highlighting our work was shared by our Education Commissioner.

Last year, I became an educational ambassador in Kentucky through GoTeachKY, an elite group of teachers selected to promote the profession and inspire others to consider careers in education. I used this opportunity to invite UPS representatives to speak with 7th and 8th graders about work programs and career pathways, exposing students to future options and gaining insight into how organizations recruit and retain workers.

Field trips have also been essential. I have taken students to the Science Center for Engineering Days and Newton's Attic, where they see the engineering process come to life. These experiences give students a tangible understanding of how math and engineering concepts apply in the real world and inspire them to consider careers they may not have previously imagined.

By intentionally weaving community engagement into my classroom, I have seen students not only understand the relevance of their work but also grow as confident problem-solvers, collaborators, and thinkers ready to explore diverse paths. Field trips, guest speakers, mentorships, and collaborative projects do more than teach content, they ignite curiosity, broaden horizons, and help students envision futures they may not have considered. These experiences have also strengthened our school culture, creating a space where students' unique strengths are celebrated as they are connecting to the world around them. Bringing the community to my students, and my students to the community, has transformed my classroom into a hub of authentic learning, and it is a practice I will continue to prioritize, knowing it equips students to be successful.

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.

You have been accepted. In 2015, I was one of only 20 middle and high school teachers accepted into a statistics network focused on Statistics is FUNdamental! This professional learning experience allowed teachers to engage with hands-on activities centered on Common Core topics such as center, variation, distribution, regression, and informal inference, while also gathering resources to teach statistics effectively. I have always loved data, but I wanted my students to feel that same excitement—to see themselves not just learning statistics, but using it to ask meaningful questions about the world around them. Honored to be accepted in this network, I couldn't imagine at the time how much this work would impact my students and me. As part of this partnership with the Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative and the University of Louisville, I collaborated with Dr. Susan Peters on a statistical research project in my classroom. My students chose their own topics, posed statistical questions, identified two or more populations, developed claims, and created statistical models to test those claims. They even wrote research papers analyzing their results. Watching seventh graders handle authentic, open-ended problems enlightened me about what middle school students could actually accomplish, and the results were remarkable.

Dr. Peters and I realized that the work my students were doing needed to be shared more broadly. In 2017, we cowrote an article, "Project-Based Statistics: Capitalizing on Students' Interests," published in *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School* (NCTM, April 2019). Writing the article was transformative. It pushed me to articulate not only what my students were doing but why it mattered. I received feedback from teachers nationwide who were eager to start similar projects, which reinforced my belief that middle school students can engage deeply with statistical reasoning. Knowing that my classroom work could inspire and inform other educators strengthened my voice as a teacher leader and gave me a renewed sense of purpose.

In 2018, Dr. Peters and I presented our work at the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics annual conference in Washington, DC. I led a session with over 100 educators, demonstrating how my students use the statistical inquiry process—posing questions, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting results—to think critically, support claims with evidence, and connect mathematics to real-world situations. After the presentation, teachers asked questions about project design, assessment, and



student engagement. Many shared their own experiences and challenges, creating a network of educators invested in advancing statistical thinking for middle school students.

The reach of this work has extended beyond my classroom. A math professor from the University of Southern Maine reached out to request my project rubric and examples, adapting them for a college course. Dr. Peters recently invited me to support her work with prospective teachers at Penn State, showing future educators what questions middle school students are capable of generating and solving. These connections have allowed my students' work to serve as a model for others, demonstrating that even young learners can tackle complex, realworld problems when given authentic opportunities.

Advocating for deeper-level statistics education has also shaped my growth as a lifelong learner. Seeing students thrive through authentic data projects inspired me to bring the same level of engagement to other areas of mathematics. This spark led to the creation of the Dream House project in Geometry, where students design, calculate, and problem-solve in a real-world context. These experiences empower students to see mathematics as meaningful and relevant, not just procedural. They develop confidence, curiosity, and resilience, knowing that their ideas have value and can impact their peers and community.

Ultimately, my work demonstrates that teacher leadership and lifelong learning are interconnected. By sharing my students' achievements with colleagues at the school, state, and national levels, I've not only expanded my own practice but also created opportunities for my students to be seen, heard, and celebrated. They leave my classroom not just with skills, but with a sense of agency: that their questions matter, their reasoning is valued, and their learning can inspire others. That impact of transformation from student to empowered learner is the most meaningful measure of my teaching.

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?

I'm Michelle Gross, the National Teacher of the Year—but I wear the titles of wife, mom, and math teacher just as proudly.



My story is rooted in my belief in Creating Community in the Classroom. I believe in the power of connection, belonging, and giving students a purpose for learning that goes beyond a grade.

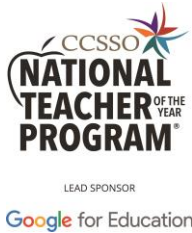
I grew up in Harlan County, Kentucky, a coal town where community runs deep. Like many families in our region, poverty and substance abuse were part of my story. Those challenges didn't define me. What shaped me were teachers who noticed, believed, and gave me a reason to learn. That feeling became my why. It taught me that education isn't just about mastering content; it's about creating a place where every student feels valued and capable. That's the kind of classroom community I've spent my career building.

My high school Geometry teacher asked me to become a math peer tutor, and that after-school job changed everything. One student was at risk of not graduating. I watched him walk across the stage in 1999, quietly proud to have played a small part in his success. Later, I realized there were teachers behind both of us—connecting, guiding, encouraging. It was then I understood that creating community in the classroom isn't just about helping students learn; it's about helping them believe they can.

That pride sent me to Cumberland College to pursue teaching, where I served students inside and outside the classroom. Through a children's ministry group, I saw how powerful it is when a community wraps around children, meeting both physical and emotional needs. When students feel they belong, they thrive.

That belief in connection lives in my classroom at Spencer County Middle School. One of my favorite experiences is our Dream House Project. Students research homes they'd like to build for their future selves. They browse Zillow, calculate scale, design blueprints, and create models—some with cardboard and popsicle sticks, others using digital tools like Minecraft or Floor Planner. But what transforms this from an assignment into something meaningful is the community around it. We invite local professionals to give feedback, offer advice, and share their own journeys.

In those moments, students stop asking, "What's my grade?" and start asking, "What's my future?" Regardless of their background, they begin to see themselves as future homeowners—proof that hard work and collaboration open doors. We even host an annual Dream Homearama, where top projects are showcased. Through projects like this, students connect with one another, with professionals, and with a sense of



purpose. That's what creating community looks like in practice: connection turning into confidence, and confidence turning into purpose.

Creating community in the classroom is about more than learning together—it's about belonging together. When students feel seen, valued, and connected, they find the courage to take risks, share ideas, and grow in ways they never thought possible. A strong classroom community turns learning into a shared journey where everyone lifts each other up. It reminds us that education isn't just about what we know, it's about who we become together. But students aren't the only ones who need community. Teachers do, too.

Across the nation, schools are working to address teacher shortages. While better pay is important, what truly sustains teachers is a sense of purpose and belonging.

As an education ambassador, I've seen the importance of fostering connections and supporting future educators. I help promote the profession through outreach and mentoring students in Educators Rising programs. I'm also exploring recruitment and retention strategies nationally, learning from organizations like UPS to understand how purposeful, connected systems keep great people in their work.

Districts across Kentucky are now investing in those same ideas, creating cohorts of homegrown teachers through scholarships and support. And why will they return? Because they feel connected. They belong. They have a purpose.

But recruiting great teachers is only half the battle. We must also reach the ones who feel unseen or uncertain that what they do still matters. We must create schools where teachers feel valued, supported, and part of something larger than themselves. Because when teachers find community, they rediscover the reason they started in the first place.

And when teachers thrive, students do, too.

So I'll leave you with this: Where in your life do you feel that deep sense of community? And more importantly, how can we create that feeling for our students and fellow educators?

That's the culture of learning we must build—one rooted in community. One that lasts.