



2018-19 Michigan Teacher of the Year (MTOY) Application Part B

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I. Teaching Excellence

As a teacher in the Van Dyke Public School system I have spent my career working in a high poverty, urban district which has presented a myriad of difficult situations. However, as the director of bands in Lincoln Middle School over the course of my first 4 years, I was able to isolate many of the issues and break down barriers while fostering relationships with students much easier due to the nature of my classes being structured by grade level.

In 2016, this all changed as the district began downsizing efforts. As a result of the district only retaining one music instructor, my high school band was to meet all in one class. This proved to be the most challenging situation of my career thus far. Placing 77 students from 4 grade levels into a single class created both instructional and non-instructional issues.

On a musical level, the students varied in skill level due to their prior experience in my classes. While many of the seniors had been playing for 8 years, some of the freshmen had only 1 prior year of experience. This ability level disparity was due to my belief that students interested in music and the arts should have the opportunity to participate regardless of the grade level they begin in. This made curriculum mapping extremely difficult as I juggled finding music that would provide adequate challenges to the best players, while not completely overwhelming the novice & beginner musicians. From an age standpoint, having students ranging in age from 14 to 18 also provided communication issues. The maturity level of some combined with the immaturity level of others created many barriers between the students as well as a power struggle between certain student leaders. I needed quickly to find a way to unite the masses for the sake of both the students as well as the music program.

My greatest learning moments as a teacher came from choosing an effective mentor to utilize as a constant sounding board as I grew as a teacher. With this in mind I created a leadership team of the students who I saw with the highest musical potential and the most personal character. After a three-day band leadership summit, we collectively placed every student into a pair - one upperclassmen & one underclassmen. The pairs were responsible for holding each other accountable academically (adhering to the academic rigor 3.0 GPA

requirement to stay off academic probation), musically (learning practice habits and how to work through difficult music), and personally (when life issues arise). The leadership teams' job was to check in with the mentee students to ensure progress and report any issues back to me. Students began to self-motivate and looked forward to helping each other deal with their struggles finding that many of them shared similar family issues or history. What began as 40 students on academic probation, has now dropped to under 10. The band continues to fervently help our struggling students both inside and outside of the classroom and we have created a culture where it is ok to struggle and even more ok to be perfectly imperfect. This system has created a strong family for many students who do not have much of a support system outside of school.

As the director of bands, I've utilized music as a vehicle for teaching life skills. Some of the main lessons include working together with different people regardless of background, respect of self and others, and most importantly having a sense of pride, patience and understanding. We play music very well, which was reflected in our 1st division – superior rating at state band and orchestra festival last year, which was the first in nearly 30 years. However, what we are accomplishing daily transcends any music or ratings we could ever achieve.

According to the Top 10 in 10 Michigan Education Plan, we must recognize that Poverty Matters – not to be used as an excuse, but as a purpose to design a Michigan system of education that motivates and excites *all* children about learning, keeps them in school, and provides them with hope and knowledge for a successful future. It is crucial that as we navigate through this process we understand this point! I articulate this fact to my students daily. I will not let the circumstance that they have been born into define who they are or their futures. Through hard work, perseverance, commitment and the willingness to accept as well as give help when needed anything can be achieved.

II. Educational Leadership and Outreach

Teaching in a high poverty area just outside of Detroit is difficult. The high rental community creates much transiency within the student population. This transiency makes our profession very difficult due to the disparity in skill level between the students in a single class. For this reason, teachers within my district are always looking for professional development that will help them better serve their students, however due to substantial substitute teacher shortages, we worry about being away from our students in fear of what will happen in our absence. Through conversations with teachers from more affluent schools, I have discovered this issue is not regional, but statewide.

As a young teacher I realized that the preparation training I received in college only scratched the surface of what it truly meant to be an educator in the state of Michigan. Through hardship and risk-taking in my formative years, I decided to accept what it was that I didn't know and to network with others who were more experienced to create a community of learning. Over the course of the last six years, while working with my mentor, I have grown exponentially as an educator while continuing to focus on my own development and learning every day! As a result of my own process of growth, I have developed into a very hands-on leader offering up my classroom and students for others within my community of learning to help give insight into great practices in hopes that they too will flourish.

As a leader working with other teachers in a mentorship capacity, I take the time to listen and hear about what they are experiencing. I want to know them, their story, and to feel like I have seen into their classroom before offering any advice or opinion. As teachers, we encourage our students to ask questions throughout the learning process and then to reflect on their experience in hopes of gaining a better understanding of what and how they learn. When working with teachers as a mentor, this same process should be utilized and is a pivotal part of both my teaching process and leadership style. As a hands-on leader both inside and outside of my district, I always listen first before providing insight or direction. Far too often successful people in leadership roles are quick to speak and slow to listen.

Over the last five years I have spent a considerable amount of time at conferences around the state where I have been provided the opportunity to network with many teachers. Additionally, I have presented on “Effective Grant Writing” at the Michigan Music Conference in 2017 to nearly 100 teachers – as a result of being personally responsible for over \$250,000 in funding for my program. Through my presenting, my hope is that I will have provided resources and opportunities for students from all over our fine state. In 2015, I was invited to, and participated in the ECET2 Educational Leadership Conference where I was provided the opportunity to collaborate with some of the best teachers in our state and to learn about and discuss education policy with some of the stakeholders, including Lieutenant Governor Calley.

If provided the opportunity to work alongside education stakeholders, I intend to tell the stories of teachers and students I’ve met while working and networking within our public school system who feel left behind, overwhelmed or forgotten. As a clinician over the last 3 years for the Madison Heights Band program I have invested time in the training of two band directors and their wonderful students. I look forward to future encounters with those kids and hope that something within the culture of their school changes causing their current director to stick around for a while. The constant teacher turnover has decimated a once strong program. I believe that stakeholders are already aware of the turnover and burnout rates for teachers in our state, and with that in mind I would hope to have the opportunity to continue to have dialogue about our profession to make teaching in Michigan as alluring as it once was!

According to the Top 10 in 10 Michigan Education Plan, we need to have a system that is focused on what is best for children and their learning. With this in mind, our system for teachers needs to allow us the opportunity to teach children as the strong-willed individuals that they are. Society today seems very fragile and broken, from gun violence to racial and gender profiling, and in my district students are coming into the building with so much baggage that learning is truly a difficult task. Teachers must embrace the students as individuals and need to cross the street in order to meet learners where they are. In order to achieve this heightened learning for children, we must also acknowledge what is best for teachers in the same manner.

III. Educational Issues and Trends

In Michigan, our public schools cater to more than 1.5 million students Kindergarten through 12th grade. As a teacher in Van Dyke Public Schools I can personally attest to the disparity level that exists within a class of 35, therefore can only imagine how spread out the ability levels of our students are across the state. The issue at hand is not whether all students are in the same place within their learning process, but that the quality of education that students are provided is not equitable from school to school, let alone district to district.

Horace Mann created our public school system with the intent of creating “social harmony” and has been quoted as saying it was to be the “great equalizer of men”. One does not need to look very far outside of their own classroom to see that this is simply not true. Socio-economics, school funding, school resources, infrastructure, and parent/guardian involvement create immense learning gaps in our schools. As a teacher in a high poverty district, I have witnessed firsthand the struggles of at-risk students. Additionally, I’ve also seen the added pressures placed on teachers in this environment as they push to fulfill state mandated standards in preparation for standardized testing. While the Michigan Top 10 in 10 plan addresses the fact that poverty matters, it will be the implementation of supports and systems combined with the proper funding for the continued use of much needed resources that will begin to close the achievement gap that exists within our public schools.

Schools that are based in lower socio-economical areas statistically have higher percentages of students that carry after school jobs in order to assist their guardians with paying the bills at home. In my high school band program, I can personally attest to at least ten students in this position. While the attendance of these amazing kids is excellent, they are frequently behind others within their classes due to their lack of practice outside of school. Without the additional work time, they will continue to have a very difficult time achieving mastery. Fortunately for my students, my academic expectations and peer tutoring have helped them to make up for their loss of time, but this is not a common practice in most schools. I fervently believe that all students can achieve and that all students matter which is why I work

so hard on the non-musical aspects of my students. Our state needs excellent teachers willing to go above and beyond because they see the potential in every student.

The Equity Project in New York City was founded in 2009 by a former teacher who was not pleased with the systems in place within public education. While I am usually not an advocate for charter schools, this one is very unique. Through use of a lottery system, while giving preference to underserved students, the middle school has grown to a fifty-member staff who not only teach, but share in administrative duties for the building resulting in an environment where everyone is owning the climate and culture within their school. Additionally, they offer some of the highest teacher salaries in the country to attract and retain the best of the best.

In Michigan, our teaching profession is under attack. The education system in place is antiquated and not evolving along with society. Teachers who were once responsible for simply educating students in their content area are now also responsible for raising the students to understand right vs. wrong as well as how to act in social situations, assuming the role of teacher and parent. State testing is utilized to determine student learning when in reality it only demonstrates a student's ability to regurgitate information. Impoverished schools are facing transiency of students constantly coming and going resulting in teacher burnout, or teachers opting for a career change. In my conversations with many successful, new teachers I am finding that most are very eager to work, but finding their hopes crushed quickly as they enter the profession and see both themselves and their students without the support systems and infrastructure they need to be successful.

If selected, I would make it my mission to initiate difficult conversations with students, teachers, administrators, and parents from a wide variety of places as well as educational stakeholders to help provide insight into what our schools could and should be! Horace Mann's mission of equity for all is not a pipe dream and could absolutely become a reality. As a teacher, I have had a myriad of obstacles thrown my way and I've faced them all head on. If presented the option, I would consider it an honor to fight for educational equity for all students!

IV. Video Component

<https://youtu.be/YtuF6vS5pzg>