



## 2021 National Teacher of the Year FINALIST



**Alejandro  
Diasgranados**

District of Columbia

School: Aiton Elementary School

Subjects: English Language Arts  
and Social Studies

Grades: 4,5



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**Alejandro Diasgranados** is a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher at Aiton Elementary School, located in Ward 7 of the District of Columbia. He grew up in Prince George’s County, Maryland, where he attended High Point High School. In 2010, Diasgranados enrolled at Virginia State University, where he played football and received his Bachelor of Science in health science, then moved to Massachusetts and began physical therapy graduate school. During Diasgranados’ time in Massachusetts, a brief stint as a substitute teacher in Holyoke Public Schools ignited his passion for education, equity, and leveraging the strengths of a culturally wealthy community like Holyoke to reach his students. This prompted Diasgranados to change course and apply to Teach for America (TFA). In 2015, Diasgranados returned home to embark on his teaching career in DC, while simultaneously pursuing his Master of Science in education from Johns Hopkins University. His students took note of his enthusiasm and commitment to higher education, so it came as no surprise to Aiton leadership when all 40 of Diasgranados’ students found a way to attend his JHU graduation ceremony in the spring of 2018. As a TFA alum and teacher-leader, Diasgranados has provided his community with various access points, including a grant from the Washington Redskins for a school laundry center and a coat drive hosted with the Washington Capitals Stanley Cup Champion, Devante Smith-Pelly. Most recently, his school received 265 laptops to close the digital divide during COVID-19, due Diasgranados’ advocacy on the Drew Barrymore Show.

### **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? How did that learning influence your students? How are your beliefs about teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit?**

The bell rang: a wave of second graders paraded around the room, with clipboards in hand they explored the anchor charts on our wall that were set up like an art gallery. The words inequity, advocacy, and activism, and their definitions were posted, and students were sharing examples of these words in action. I crouched down next to Tyreze, who was sharing a story about a recent soccer match against a school across town. Tyreze explained that it was inequitable for one school to have a turf field while other schools didn’t. I also listened to Kinaya, who activated prior knowledge by sharing that Alia, the main character in the Librarian of Basra, showed political activism by going against the governor and moving library books from the war-threatened town of Basra to her house. While I recorded their answers, I explained that our next text would focus on the social and political activism of four students in Greensboro, North Carolina, who took action against segregation by sitting down at a “whites-only” lunch counter. After reading the text, we participated in a kinesthetic activity where I acted as a server and distributed two different colored candies to my students as they improvised eating lunch. When students attempted to sit at a table that did not correspond with their candy, they were refused service and were directed to sit at their corresponding table. Students were given the option to document their reflections or discuss how this experience was an example of inequity, and this information was added to our anchor chart.

The following week, I was able to secure tickets to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), and my students were among the first to visit. Not only were they able to see exclusive artifacts from the 1960 Greensboro Sit-in, but they also learned how the students' activism and bravery against racism and segregation ignited a spark for civil rights that spread throughout communities in the South.

Upon returning to class, we read an article about twelve-year-old Marley Dias: a student advocate who, after feeling underrepresented in literature, started a campaign to collect and donate children's books that feature Black girls as protagonists. Tyreze and his classmates referred back to our anchor chart and began making connections between the inequities in the stories we just read and society today. As agents of change, they hoped to challenge inequity of opportunity by creating and distributing information-rich pamphlets that explained how educational inequity impacts our community. They also wrote letters to our District's leaders which include, the Mayor of Washington D.C., the Chairperson of the Education Committee, and the incoming Chancellor.

Their advocacy work did not conclude following this unit. After learning that 91% of students in our class achieved our literacy goal and grew three or more levels, my students advocated for me to loop with them to our school leaders. They also advocated on local news stations and raised \$2,000 to allow all 40 of my students to attend my graduation from Johns Hopkins University.

Their leadership growth and advocacy skills have permeated throughout the Aiton community, and their success has set precedent for future classes. Each year during our Activism unit, students identify what their advocacy work will focus on. One group of students participated in a discussion about activism with CNN political contributor and Washington Post journalist Wesley Lowery. Another group focused on local Washington Capitals hockey player Devante Smith-Pelly, who spoke out against racial taunts that were used against him during a match. During our writing unit, several students composed letters and shared their support; in turn we received a surprise visit, which included a donation of over 150 coats to our school community.

Tyreze and Kinaya, who are now in my fifth-grade class, wanted to ensure that their advocacy work continued after their departure from Aiton, prompting them to establish a journalism club. Students are able to contribute to our school newspaper, learn photography, or anchor our school announcements. Tyreze expressed plans to return to the Deanwood community as a journalist after college to further advocate for his neighborhood.

I've had the opportunity to share the classroom with students from around the world and DC Natives, and the cultural wealth that they contribute to our community guides my instruction each day. As a truly transformational teacher, I must be reactive to the needs of each individual student, and actively integrate students' culture, background and abilities into every lesson.

**2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in which contributed to the improvement of overall school culture. What was your role, how did you collaborate with others, and what is the status of this project today? Please include evidence of student impact.**

A truly transformational teacher must effectively collaborate with parents, students, teachers, and community stakeholders and must not only focus on academic success, but school culture as well. During the summer of 2018, I collaborated with our academic leadership team in order to develop a comprehensive school plan. The purpose of this plan was to collect and analyze school data in order to identify areas for growth and utilize this data to strategically create and implement a plan for improvement and establish annual goals for our school. As the social-emotional learning (SEL) Lead, I interviewed teachers, conducted a school walk-through and developed surveys for students and staff.

After reviewing and analyzing the data, several stark areas for growth emerged. One particularly glaring area that our administrative team agreed that we could improve on was our students' attendance. Nearly 24% of our student population had more than 11 absences. The data collected from the surveys indicated that one of the most salient reasons that students were consistently absent from school was their lack of access to local laundry centers in our community, which makes it difficult for families to provide their children with clean clothes each day. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of students in our district must walk or take public transit to school regardless of weather conditions. This requires clothing to be washed more often, which can be challenging for a family that must wash multiple uniforms in a week. Students also shared that they were subjected to bullying and ridicule when attending school with unwashed clothes, which in many cases causes students to remain at home.

I began to research local programs and found the Loads of Love Program through the Washington Football Team Charitable Foundation (WFTCF). The Loads of Love Program aims to install laundry facilities in schools in order to directly impact children who may not have access to sufficient laundry facilities. I drafted and submitted the grant proposal to the WFTCF, who had begun accepting applications for schools looking to introduce laundry services to their community. Later that fall, I was invited to the WFT vs. Cowboys game where I was presented with a \$10,000 grant in order to begin constructing a laundry center for our community.

Our laundry center was completed in February 2020, and students are now able to anonymously enroll in laundry services. Prior to our departure from school in March we were able to enroll 25 families for the program, with hopes of growing this number each year. Addressing this issue not only helps increase our student attendance, but also improves student morale and overall school culture. As an educational leader, my goal is to identify explicit barriers that prevent students from attending school and to design creative solutions targeted at breaking down some of these barriers. I believe that the cleanliness of clothes should never obstruct a student's opportunity to receive an education, and at Aiton Elementary, this is no longer an issue.

**3. How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. Please include evidence of student impact.**

As an educational leader, I aim to not only provide students with opportunities to access a variety of people, programs, resources, and connections, but also include students in the decision-making processes in order to empower our students to use their voice, even when they believe their voice goes unheard.

When I entered Aiton, it was known as a “40/40 school,” which means it was identified as one of the lowest performing schools in DC. Additionally, many students shared their disinterest with the content that they were learning. In order to integrate student interests into my instruction and empower students to use their voice, I developed a student council.

Each year, my students are able to participate in a variety of content-aligned experiential learning opportunities, which include investigating plant adaptations at the U.S. Botanic Garden, interviewing an Egyptian diplomat through our Embassy Adoption partnership, analyzing the Preamble at the National Archives, and cleaning and canoeing down the Anacostia River. I’ve also established a partnership with the Washington Football Team Charitable Foundation (WFTCF) which provides our students with monthly reading logs and activities that promote a love for literacy. As a result of my dedication to our school community, Aiton was chosen to participate in the NFL Reads Kick off, which is hosted at one school in DC each year. NFL players visited our school to read and donate books to students, and we were also recognized at halftime during an NFL game.

Additionally, I have worked to include families in these activities as well. As the school’s literacy lead, I co-lead our literacy night, which provides innovative strategies and literacy games to our students’ families and has encouraged learners to develop a deeper understanding of the content area. I also integrate preventative health programs into our curriculum and provide students and families with cooking lessons through our partnership with Common Threads. As the liaison for our partnership with Live it Learn it (LiLi) and a 2020-2021 experiential learning fellow, I’ve worked with teachers and families to plan nontraditional learning opportunities that connect to our units of study. I believe that collaborating with families played an essential role in increasing our schoolwide PARCC ELA scores nearly 12% last year.

Lastly, my students and I were able to successfully address the digital divide in our community by advocating for devices during the Covid-19 pandemic. In October 2020, we received a donation of 265 laptops for our entire school community from actress and talk show host, Drew Barrymore. When I arrived at Aiton, the district-administered student satisfactory survey indicated that only 73% of students were satisfied with their educational experience at Aiton. While serving at Aiton, I’ve learned that students’ academic investment and resilience increase dramatically when they are invited to participate in the important decision-making processes that take place within the school. I believe that this has not only provided our students with dramatic academic gains but has also contributed to our student satisfaction rate rising to 96% for the 2018-2019 school year.

**4. What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue both inside and outside the classroom walls.**

In the United States, there exists a large underrepresentation of Black male educators. This is particularly concerning as various studies have demonstrated the importance of Black students having Black teachers. A 2017 Johns Hopkins University study, for example, found that among a sample of low-income Black boys, having just one Black teacher in the 3rd- 5th grade reduced their chance of dropping out of high school by nearly 40%, and increased their interest in pursuing college by almost 30%. Although there is clear evidence that Black boys benefit from having Black male teachers, Black male teachers only represent 2% of our workforce.

At Aiton Elementary School in Ward 7 of Washington D.C., where nearly 99% of students identify as Black or Hispanic/Latino and more than 76% of students are identified as at-risk, I am often the first Black male teacher that students encounter. In order to impact as much of our school's population as possible while remaining in the classroom, I decided to loop with multiple cohorts of students from 2nd to 5th grade. As a result, our schoolwide PARCC ELA scores grew nearly 12% last year, and student satisfaction has risen to 96%. It's apparent that the academic and social-emotional growth of our students is attributed to the connection that our staff builds with families, which is deeply rooted in our collective shared identity.

I believe that all students benefit from having Black educators and I'm committed to advocating for representation throughout our profession. As a member of the Academic Leadership Team, I am deeply involved in the process of interviewing, hiring, and mentoring potential candidates. Over the past six years at Aiton, our staff has grown to become more than 90% Black, with multiple Black male educators throughout the building.

As the Social and Emotional Learning lead, I work to ensure that our teachers enter the classroom without implicit bias and are constantly integrating culturally responsive practices into daily instruction in order to ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of their culture and context. I've hosted several professional developments that have provided teachers with culturally responsive restorative justice practices, developed a peer observation schedule that allows staff to observe and provide actionable feedback to colleagues utilizing these strategies, and collaborated with teachers to develop lesson plans that address the cultural and social-emotional needs of our students.

**5. As the 2021 National Teacher of the Year, you serve as a spokesperson and representative for all teachers and students. What is your message? What will you communicate to your profession and to the public?**

As a young Afro-Latino boy growing up in Prince Georges County Maryland, I was able to experience the benefits of having an inspirational teacher who shared my racial/ethnic identity, when I enrolled in Mr. Harris' 7th grade class. The lifelong mentorship and compassionate guidance that I received from him altered the trajectory of my life, and ultimately prompted my decision to attend his alma mater VSU, as a first-generation college student. After graduating from VSU in 2014, I aspired to continue my educational journey by working towards my Doctorate in Physical Therapy, but ultimately departed after not receiving adequate support from professors following a racially charged incident that occurred on campus.

Following my departure, I spent time reflecting on my journey and it became evident that a lack of teacher diversity in education at all levels is consequential. I became committed to preventing other students from experiencing this and wanted to provide representation and subsequent support that would equip every Black or Hispanic/Latino student with the tools necessary to attain their goals and dreams, which prompted my decision to apply for Teach for America in 2015.

In order to ensure that students like me were supported from the inception of their educational journey, I decided to teach 2nd grade at Aiton Elementary School in Ward 7 of Washington D.C. When I entered my class of 36 students, I reflected on the effective and inspirational practices that Mr. Harris showcased both in and out of his classroom and was determined to integrate these strategies into my own instruction. Over the course of six years, I've been able to deliver instruction to all students at our school from grades 2-5, with the ultimate goal of inspiring them to continue their educational journey beyond high school.

After realizing the significance of being introduced to higher education at an early age, by an educator who shared my racial identity, I was determined to not only introduce my students to the prospect of college, but to deeply embed a variety of college-themed activities into my daily instruction. College became a prominent theme in my classroom, and students participated in activities such as receiving acceptance letters to college-themed reading groups, conducting research, and analyzing data, participating in student-led intensive Socratic seminars, presenting projects, interacting with guest lecturers, and ultimately, attending my graduation at Johns Hopkins University. The experience of seeing someone who shared their identity walk across that stage, only made their goal appear more attainable.

In Washington D.C., 14% of District of Columbia Public School teachers identify as a Black or Latino male, a rate that far surpasses the national average of 4%. While racial/ethnic minorities comprise more than half of the student population in our nation's public schools, most students will never experience the benefits of having a teacher who shares their identity. In order to ensure that every student is afforded the opportunity to have a teacher who shares his/her identity, it is necessary to establish multiple systems that identify teacher diversity as a top priority. School districts should aim to develop programs that focus on recruiting and retaining teachers of color. Such recruitment processes must entail grooming, mentoring, training, and supporting high school and college students interested in becoming educators. Supports should

also include providing educational funds to aspiring teachers of color throughout their entire educational journey. For instance, paying for additional tutoring to prepare prospective teachers for state licensure exams, covering testing fees, and also offering stipends to offset living expenses during student teaching. Once teachers are hired, we must ensure that they are not forced into disciplinary roles, or disproportionately clustered in under resourced schools with limited opportunities for growth, both of which contribute to high attrition levels and teacher burnout among educators of color. We must also prevent new teachers from feeling isolated, by pairing them with high performing veteran teachers, and organize affinity groups in order to provide teachers of color an opportunity to not only discuss unique challenges, but to also offer ongoing support, mentorship, and encouragement.

In summary, I believe that all students can benefit from increased exposure to Black teachers. Investing in strategies that empower, prepare, and support Black teachers to join and remain in the profession not only provides Black students with a role model, but also clear representation that Black students can go to college, and that Black students can become teachers.

**Resume**

**Education**

School	John Hopkin University
Degree	Certificate Program
Major	Administration and Supervision
Years Attended	2018-2019

School	John Hopkin University
Degree	Master of Science
Major	Education
Years Attended	2016-2018

School	Virginia State University
Degree	Bachelor of Science
Major	Health, Physical Education and Recreation
Years Attended	2010-2014

**Certifications**

Certification	District of Columbia Educator License (Grades 1-6)
Year Obtained	2016

### Experience

Title	4 <sup>th</sup> /5 <sup>th</sup> Grade ELA/Social Studies Teacher
Organization	Aiton Elementary School, District of Columbia Public Schools
Years in Position	5

Title	Summer School Programs Coordinator
Organization	District of Columbia Public Schools
Years in Position	3

Title	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Science Teacher
Organization	Morgan Elementary Holyoke Public Schools, Massachusetts
Years in Position	0.5

### Leadership

Position	Cultivation Ambassador for Teacher Recruitment and Selection Team
Organization	District of Columbia Public Schools
Years in Position	1

Position	Experiential Learning Leadership Pathway Facilitator
Organization	Teach for America
Years in Position	1

Position	Mentor Teacher
Organization	University of the District of Columbia
Years in Position	1

### Awards and Other Recognitions

Award/Recognition	Sanford Teacher Award for District of Columbia
Year Received	2020

Award/Recognition	Live It Learn It Experiential Learning Fellow
Year Received	2020

Award/Recognition	Keynote Speakers, AmeriCorps, Symposium Opening Plenary
Year Received	2019

Award/Recognition	Panelist, Black Male Educator Conference
Year Received	2019

Award/Recognition	Featured in Washingtonian Magazine, Baltimore Sun, and WUSA-9 News for bringing students to Graduation Ceremony at John Hopkins University
Year Received	2018