



## 2021 National Teacher of the Year FINALIST



**John Arthur**

Utah

School: Meadowlark Elementary

Subjects: Elementary Education,  
Multi-Subject

Grade: 6



[@9thEvermore](https://twitter.com/9thEvermore)



[9thEvermore](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9thEvermore)

**John Arthur** teaches sixth grade at Meadowlark Elementary, a Title I school in Salt Lake City, Utah. His students have gained national recognition as advocates for children and immigrants through the videos they create and share on their YouTube channel, *9thEvermore*. He encourages his students to take the lead, coaching them as they craft their content and discover the power of their own voices.

Arthur found his passion for empowering youth while substitute teaching in Title I classrooms. Inspired by those students, he earned a Master of Arts in teaching from Westminster College; now, in his eighth year at Meadowlark, he is a National Board-Certified Teacher (NBCT) and an adjunct professor in the Graduate School of Education at Westminster College. He continues to advance his own learning in meeting the needs of all students, earning a Master of Education in K-6 special education and an English Language Learner endorsement.

Believing that educational equity is a moral imperative and that a teacher's perspective is essential when crafting educational policy, Arthur has chaired the social justice committee for the Salt Lake Education Association and currently represents the Asian community on the Utah State Board of Education's advisory committee on equity. He is also helping revise Utah's K-6 social studies standards.

A committed advocate for students, Arthur has spoken at conferences including the National Association for Multicultural Education, the Utah Education Association, and the Open Education Resources Project; he also delivered the keynote speech at the 2018 Leadership and Inquiry for Turnaround Conference

### **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?**

Kids recognize injustice when they see it and aren't afraid to call it out. When they do, they are often told to quiet down or keep it to themselves. In my classroom, students know that their voices belong in critical conversations and their perspective is invaluable.

Each year, my students research an equity issue that directly affects them and address it by writing a poem together, set to music, filmed, and published on YouTube. The video is their contribution to the public discourse; it is the final project in a unit that connects a social studies standard – students will understand current global issues and their rights and responsibilities in the interconnected world – with a variety of writing styles.

Before writing their poem, my students complete a series of lessons that develop background knowledge and writing skills. They stage formal debates addressing current events, learning to craft winning arguments and embed counterclaims in their writing. They create presentations on social justice leaders, studying the playbooks of champions who uplifted their communities as

they seek to uplift their own. They also write letters to their legislators, bringing awareness to the impact local issues like gang violence and rising levels of homelessness have on their lives.

With their research collected and topic selected by the class, my students begin drafting lines for their poem. Each day for a week, my students find a new sentence frame on the board, including “I am afraid that \_\_\_\_\_,” “I believe \_\_\_\_\_,” and “Because I know \_\_\_\_\_, I have to \_\_\_\_\_.” These sentence stems are scaffolds, so all students, including English learners and those with IEPs, can contribute their ideas and words, and more proficient writers can craft lines of greater complexity. These elements – low entry/high ceiling, low risk/big reward – epitomize my approach to lesson planning and instruction.

My students write one line after another, and by the end of the week we have hundreds of well-crafted lines to choose from. Working in small groups, the students sort the lines into stanzas based on similarities expressed by different writers, all while analyzing each line for meaning, impact, and craft. Once the class has stitched together a draft of their poem, they revise each line to fit the rhythm of the song chosen to accompany their piece. Finally, the students record their lines, film their parts, and share their video online with their target audience: kids just like them.

My 11- and 12-year-old students, the children of immigrants and refugees, understand that it is their right to defend marginalized individuals and communities, especially their own. Over the years, students traumatized by racist rhetoric in the media and the constant threat of deportation have challenged the notion that immigrants are a drain on our society and watched their videos reach over 200,000 views on Facebook alone. In 2019, students angered by the caging of children and families under a bridge in El Paso wrote a poem both criticizing that action and modeling the greeting they felt asylum seekers should receive upon entering our country. Last fall, my students partnered with Girls Education International to draw attention to the threats and dangers girls often face attending school in Tanzania and Pakistan.

I believe all students can learn, and that when you embed rich, engaging content with specific and scaffolded learning strategies, students will rise beyond your expectations. The poetry project is not just about creating an authentic product that all of my students can be proud of. It is also a testament to their ability to achieve and master academic skills.

**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.**

In 2019, a school turnaround needs assessment listed school culture as an area of serious concern for our site. Morale was low, and few teachers felt motivated to talk about culture or climate. So, as a member of our school's leadership team, I helped form a culture committee tasked with implementing schoolwide systems to promote positive attitudes and behaviors. Golden and purple tickets were introduced to provide positive feedback to students for academic and behavioral successes, redeemable in our new school store. We hung pictures and personal interest surveys from our staff in our entryway to better connect the community with our caring adults. Teachers also used markers to write about their students' most impressive learning achievements on the glass windows in our main hallway for all to see. Providing public opportunities to recognize our students' hard work, and thereby our own, made our school a more joyful and welcoming space.

Seeing what an impact public recognition made, I took personal responsibility for reinstating our monthly SOAR assembly, a celebration of student achievement that had been cancelled indefinitely in 2018. We sent home invitations, and parents who had been previously absent from our school began to arrive laden with balloons and gifts. Classes received trophies for excellence and leadership, our principal created slideshows of the incredible work – and fun – occurring at Meadowlark, and at the end of each assembly I led our students in our Mighty Meadowlark chant, their shouts filling our gymnasium with school pride.

This sense of belonging cannot be underestimated, and the assembly also serves as an essential means of sharing data with our school community on academic successes and progress toward short- and long-term goals. These assemblies fed the remarkable growth we saw last year in literacy and the WIDA assessment for language learners, along with reductions in behavioral referrals and suspensions.

Throughout the COVID-related dismissal last spring, our Culture Committee worked hard to keep our kids connected to the school. We organized a car parade through the neighborhood and a care package delivery to let our students know we love them, and we'll never stop working to meet their needs. To end the year, we placed a graduation sign in the yard of each 6th grade student and hosted a drive-through promotion ceremony so every student left knowing that their accomplishments matter and will always be celebrated by our school community.

This August, the Culture Committee organized a socially distanced reverse Back-to-School parade so kids could meet their new teachers and start the year off right. While our instruction is online, committee members still go around taping positive shout-outs submitted by colleagues to our classroom doors. They also oversee our school's pantry, ensuring that families receive the food, clothing, and supplies they need. These efforts have contributed to our highest teacher retention rate in 9 years, a 95% student attendance rate this fall, and over 70% of our families reporting that they are moderately to extremely satisfied with their child's distance learning experience.

**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.**

A picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sits on the wall in my classroom, along with the quote, "Life's most persistent and urgent question: What are you doing for others?" Before a student can leave the classroom each day, they must tell me one thing they did to help someone else. Their answers are typically small acts of kindness; however, my students recognize that each act of service positively impacts our community, and therefore is extremely valuable.

In our school, it is well known that if you need a student's help, you call my room. In a typical year, my students read with 2nd graders weekly, collect winter clothes for kids in our school, pick up the playground equipment at the end of each recess, and, when we lost our school counselor at the beginning of last year, my students volunteered to mentor younger students.

My students are activists and advocates, and the reach of their impact extends well beyond the walls of our school. My kids were invited as speakers to the University of Utah's Leadership and Inquiry for Turnaround Conference, where they spoke to teachers and administrators about what education needs to look like for culturally diverse students like them. They have been interviewed on local TV and radio stations, and their fans on social media include former NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia and the author Jacqueline Woodson.

I partner with outside organizations that help my students grow their capacity as changemakers for their communities. The Utah Film Center provides my students with curriculum, film equipment, and professional media mentors to support them in their filmmaking. Every Friday, lawyers, and law students from the Utah Center for Legal Inclusion mentor my students in their argumentative speaking and writing. And when the head of the organization Girls Education International visited my students last year to discuss her organization's mission to expand educational opportunities for girls in Africa and South Asia, my kids committed to partnering with students in Tanzania to raise funds and awareness of their needs. These partnerships better prepare my students to rise as champions for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Many of my former students are active in student government at the middle and high school levels, have joined clubs dedicated to community service, and give back to Meadowlark by volunteering in our afterschool program. They have also taken the lead in organizing recent youth protests and events. In conversation with these students, I am proud to say that they often cite their time in our classroom as the catalyst for the work they are doing to improve their communities today.

**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.**

The inequitable distribution of financial and human resources in our educational system is the root cause or the effect of most major public education issues today. Educational inequity denies entire communities of students access to effective teachers, high-quality curriculum, rigorous instruction, technology, safe learning conditions, and more. As a Title I teacher in a turnaround school, I witness the impact these disparities have on student achievement every day.

To provide an equitable education in my own classroom, I continuously study the craft of teaching and sharpen my practices. I earned a Master of Education in Special Education because I wanted the ability to provide all necessary services for students in my class; subsequently, I completed my English Language Learner endorsement and National Board Certification for the same reason.

Recognizing that educational equity requires us to attract and retain strong teachers in our highest needs schools, I mentor new teachers in my building and at other sites on effective and equitable practices. To grow in this work, I am joining the next cohort of NEA Leaders for Just Schools, to learn how to advocate for equal and just schools for all students. As an adjunct professor in a school of education, I also push preservice teachers to consider teaching in our city's Title I schools; in fact, I recruited both of my 6th grade teammates while they were still in grad school.

Addressing inequities in our schools means fully funding public education, especially during this economic recession. Teachers will need to put greater pressure on our Utah lawmakers during the next legislative session; fortunately, I am experienced in advocating for funding on behalf of our kids. As a representative of my local association, I have written op-eds, spoken at rallies, and given TV and radio interviews calling for necessary increases in educational spending. Last February, I spoke to a crowd of nearly 2,000 educators and supporters in our capitol building who were calling for a 6% increase to per pupil spending, which we ultimately received. Collective action is our best tool for achieving change, and my students need to see that I practice what I preach.

Increasing the level of educational equity in the classroom often requires changes to rules, policies, and standards at the state level—that's why I serve on the Advisory Committee on Equity of Educational Services for Students (ACEESS) for the Utah State Board of Education. Through this committee, I have provided input on equity-related board decisions ranging from increasing access to accelerated programs for students of color to amending rules on bullying and hazing policies. Just this month, ACEESS submitted recommendations to the Board addressing racial inequalities, antiracist practices, culturally relevant curricula, and the digital divide that passed out of committee and will be considered by the full board in November. I am also on the team of educators currently rewriting our K-6 Social Studies Standards; my contributions include increasing the cultural relevance of our 5th grade US history standards by integrating more diverse cultural perspectives.

**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?**

It is almost impossible to imagine that education could be improved by the COVID-19 pandemic; and yet, I see a rare window of opportunity here for achieving greater equity in our schools. The convergence of the public health crisis, revealing systemic inequities in education, with the Black Lives Matter protests, and with our national civic conversations spurred by our elections, has resulted in an unprecedented, culturally reflective moment for our nation, one in which teachers and students are optimally positioned to transform our teaching force, our schools, and our instruction with an eye on equity and racial justice.

With a teacher shortage and retirements expected to rise among educators, this is the perfect time to revitalize our teaching force by recruiting and retaining teachers of color who are more reflective of our student populations. Research shows that these teachers help close achievement gaps for students of color and are rated highly by students of all races. A report by the Learning Policy Institute shows that for students of color, having a teacher of color improved reading and math scores, graduation rates, and aspirations to attend college. Teachers of color often report feeling called to teach in low-income communities, providing positive role models for at-risk student populations. I am a male teacher of color in a turnaround elementary school, and I am not alone: at Meadowlark, we have 15 male and female teachers and paraprofessionals of color. We increased these numbers by being intentional in our hiring and letting educators of color know that our school is a place where they are appreciated and wanted. As the National Teacher of the Year, I would advocate strongly in favor of increased funding for programs that offset the cost of college and teacher preparation, like the TH Bell Scholarship program, which prioritizes first generation students who intend to teach in Utah public schools. I would also advocate for increasing the number of Grow-Your-Own-Educator programs at the district and state levels. When students enter the post-pandemic schoolhouse, we need to make sure they are greeted by welcoming, smiling teachers who look like them.

As we get our students safely back into school, we need to simultaneously dismantle the systems and policies that pushed so many of our Black and Brown students out and into the criminal justice system. While educational leaders at all levels are reevaluating how we serve our students, let's also consider how the academic policies, allocation of resources, presence of police officers, and behavior management practices in our schools have resulted in the suspension, expulsion, and arrest of millions of our minority students. Students of color and those with disabilities or who identify as LGBTQ are disciplined at disproportionate rates. Considering this crisis, it is incumbent upon us to remove any remnants of a system that perpetuated higher drop-out rates, unemployment, reliance on social-welfare programs, and imprisonment through the school-to-prison pipeline. Getting kids back in school has been the national priority during the pandemic; keeping all kids in school must be the priority forevermore.

Delivering on the promise of more equitable and racially just schools also requires an updating of our instructional practices. While schools and districts rethink how we teach during the pandemic, whether onsite or online, teachers must reexamine what we teach and build our instruction on a foundation of cultural relevance. Students of color, whose cultural identities and

points-of-view have long been overlooked and dismissed in our schools, have been taught a history devoid of their excellence and contributions. As National Teacher of the Year, I would champion culturally responsive teaching practices that promote positive self-images among students. Finally, given the recent protests and groundswell of support for addressing racism in our institutions, it is time to recognize that it's not enough to passively teach about racism—we must be actively antiracist in our practices and instruction. Our students need to see that we stand with them in opposition to racist rhetoric and policies that rob them of their power, and we must clear space for them to rise as advocates for themselves and their communities.

We know what we need to do to make our schools more equitable for our kids. Now—when the inequities in our systems have been revealed and the status quo isn't even an option—is our time to put in the work and make it happen.

**Resume**

**Education**

School	Westminster College
Degree	Master of Education
Major	Special Education
Years Attended	2011-2013

School	Westminster College
Degree	Master of Arts in Teaching
Major	Elementary Education
Years Attended	2011-2013

School	University of Utah
Degree	Bachelor of Arts
Major	English
Years Attended	2000-2010

**Certifications**

Certification	National Board Certification Middle Child Generalist
Year Obtained	2019

Certification	English as a Second Language Endorsement
Year Obtained	2016

Certification	K-6 Special Education, Mild/Moderate Disabilities
Year Obtained	2013

### Experience

Title	Teacher
Organization	Salt Lake City School District
Years in Position	2013-Present

Title	Adjunct Professor
Organization	Westminster College
Years in Position	2020-Present

### Leadership

Position	Asian Community Representative
Organization	Utah State Board of Education ACEESS Committee
Years in Position	2018-Present

Position	Co-Chair, Social Justice Committee
Organization	Salt Lake Education Association
Years in Position	2019-2020

Position	Member, School Leadership Team
Organization	Meadowlark Elementary, Salt Lake School District
Years in Position	2018-2020

Position	Chair, School Improvement Committee
Organization	Meadowlark Elementary, Salt Lake School District
Years in Position	2015-2017

### Awards and Other Recognitions

Award/Recognition	Teacher of the Year, Salt Lake City School District
Year Received	2020