

2019 National Teacher of the Year Finalist



Kelly Harper

2019 District of Columbia Teacher of the Year
Amidon-Bowen Elementary School
Washington, District of Columbia

Subject: Elementary
Grade: 3

School Location: Urban
School Type: Traditional Public

Years in Teaching: 6
Years in Position: 4

District Size: 48,000
School Size: 350

Kelly Harper is a 3rd grade educator who believes that education is a powerful tool for dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline and a transformative tool for combating injustice. Her students engage in culturally relevant lessons, and she embeds social-emotional learning to support her students' learning journeys.

Harper is completing her seventh year as an educator and began her education career as a Teach For America corps member in Houston, Texas. Harper led her students to significant gains and was the 2014 Sue Lehmann Excellence in Teaching Award Houston Finalist and National Nominee.

Desiring to return to her native Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, Harper began teaching at Amidon-Bowen Elementary School in the DC Public Schools (DCPS) in 2014. Harper has served as a teacher-coach for 3rd-5th grade reading teachers at Amidon-Bowen, professional development trainer for teachers across DCPS for English Language Arts (ELA), and written ELA Curriculum for DCPS. She currently is on her school's Flamboyan Foundation Family Engagement Leadership Team and is a facilitator for DCPS' Family Engagement Collaborative. Passionate about advocating for her students and her colleagues, Harper has served on the 2016-2017 DCPS Chancellor's Teachers' Cabinet and was a 2014 TeachPlus D.C. Federal Policy Fellow. Harper earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Spelman College and a master's in in education with a concentration in educational leadership from the Johns Hopkins University School of Education.

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?

As the flurry of hands waved in the air, waiting to share their thoughts on our text, I leaned back on Tomon-Tae's desk in awe of these amazing students. While their passion and articulation could also be seen in a high school classroom, my students are only in 4th grade. As part of our "Heroic Adventures" unit, we had just finished analyzing articles about Malala Yousafzai, the teen activist who was shot by members of the Taliban for blogging about girls' educational rights, and the legendary César Chavez' work in expanding migrant farmers' rights. Prior to this lesson, I supplemented our curriculum with a mini-study of child activism and igniting my students' schema about issues and injustices that they witness in their communities and the world. We did a "stop and jot" about some of the issues that we saw in our communities, and students responded or added their thoughts via a gallery walk. Next, we grounded ourselves in a common definition of activism and what defined a hero. The students were most excited about the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963, where thousands of children and teenagers marched and protested in Birmingham, AL, regarding issues of segregation and education.

These lessons reflect my belief that all students deserve equal access to a rigorous and culturally relevant education. In order to ensure that all students could access the content and analyze the strengths and challenges of each activist's strategies, I previewed key vocabulary and "chunked" the text into shorter sections. Using sentence starters for discussion and writing, students crafted reflections on their favorite movement and justified their position. Then, students broke into issue-based groups, and created an advocacy project that would address an issue in their own community.

Each year's group of students determines the course of the advocacy work. One group of students was motivated to research children's rights around the world, and were invited to visit the U.S. Capitol Building to meet with Representatives Karen Bass (D-CA), Judy Chu (D-CA) and Luis V. Gutiérrez (D-IL) to discuss the proposed resolution for a Children's Bill of Rights. Although the resolution died in that Congress' session, my students' passion for advocacy can never be extinguished. As my 8- and 9-year old students traipsed throughout the Cannon Tunnel in the U.S. Capitol Building and met with Congressional representatives, their sense of efficacy was ignited. This year, troubled by incessant tragedies related to gun violence in their neighborhoods and in the news, students wrote letters to elected officials such as D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser. Currently, I'm working to secure a visit from Mayor Bowser and our Ward 6 Councilman Charles Allen to speak with students in a town hall format.

Using literacy to inspire action was also a cornerstone of my teaching experience in Houston. After studying the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963, several of my students expressed disillusionment with the lack of culturally relevant literacy texts in our school. They submitted a proposal to the HISD Board of Education, and were invited to speak to the Board about increasing literacy funding in Title I schools like ours. As a result, our school received additional funding for literacy initiatives and library books. However, the greatest accomplishment is that my 9-year old students were able to experience their immense power and tap into their inner activist. Witnessing these petite powerhouses speak about standing on the shoulders of child activists that came before them was inspiring and powerful. These students are now entering 8th grade, and are leaders at their respective middle schools, advocating for themselves and their communities.

At Amidon, I have taught students from myriad backgrounds, including Sierra Leonean and El Salvadorian, with the overwhelming majority being African-Americans whose families have lived in Southwest and Southeast D.C. for generations. Our common thread is that each culture matters and is invaluable in strengthening our local and global communities. It is important that my students are co-constructors of knowledge and that our lessons and the texts that my students read are responsive to their community and experiences. My role as an educator is more like a facilitator of learning, and advocacy is embedded throughout our year-long curriculum versus just an isolated lesson. As a D.C. area native, I teach to empower my students to become the next leaders and change-agents of their generation. Ultimately, I envision my students becoming voices for marginalized communities, voices that reverberate throughout the city and the world.



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?

Without strong family engagement, our critical work will never reach its full potential. Amidon is what's referred to as a "40/40" school in DCPS, meaning it is one of the lowest performing, most challenging schools. My choice to work here is intentional, because many members of my family matriculated through similar DCPS schools. Our school has struggled with authentically engaging our families, particularly our families living in poverty. I became the Chair for the Family Engagement Committee, which aligned with my work as a participant in the 2016-2017 DCPS Family Engagement Collaborative (FEC). The FEC trains teachers to build strong relationships with families to make strong academic and social-emotional gains. Eager to share the transformative experience that I had in the FEC, I recruited 7 colleagues to apply for and join the FEC in 2017-2018. Beginning with our in-service pre-planning week in August 2017, I facilitated workshop trainings for my colleagues related to building trusting relationships with families as well as the nuances of conducting effective home visits. Now, teachers routinely collaborate with families to have classroom and school-wide events such as "Chat and Chews" in the classroom, student work celebrations, and teacher-family days outside of school hours. As Family Engagement Committee Chair, I've developed and executed family engagement opportunities and experiences. In the spring of 2018, I initiated and led the first-ever PARCC Parent Night for our families. We had over 40 families from the 3rd-5th grade attend, which was a significant increase from the sparse attendance that we traditionally have had at school events. Teachers now create data plans for family engagement, not just academics. Additionally, I've mentored and coached colleagues on ways to build and strengthen relationships with families as a way to increase academic and social-emotional outcomes for students. I've accompanied colleagues on home visits, and in our collaborative sessions, I have role played difficult conversations with families and provided feedback about opportunities to partner with families to support student learning and growth. Our school culture shift is exciting, because there is a visible difference in the ways that students and staff relate to each other. My work leading and coaching peers related to family engagement led my principal to select me to lead the school through the Flamboyant Family Engagement Leadership Team (FELT). As the Teacher Leadership Innovation (TLI) 3rd-5th Grade Literacy Coach, I co-lead the Literacy Night Committee for the past two years. We had over 100 families participate in our Literacy Night event, which means that more families received strategies, resources, and information on supporting students' literacy development. In addition to supporting the families, I coached teachers in creating a culture of literacy. Now, you can catch students reading an unforgettable novel while waiting in line for the bathroom, or teachers using sight words as an interactive entry routine before entering the classroom. Witnessing students' invested interest in academic excellence is powerful, especially in a turnaround school.



3. How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community.

I once heard a guest share on my role model Oprah Winfrey's eponymous show that, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." With those words in mind, I've mentored several students, particularly ones with challenging home lives. It is often said that one's zip code should not equal destiny, but without exposure to new experiences, a child's zip code often does. I have taken students to Smithsonian Museums, participated in the Cherry Blossom Festivals, and coached them in oratorical competitions. I've developed a mentoring program, "Young Queens", where I expose some of my current and former female students to different experiences around the DC area. We have gone to classic plays, attended different cultural events around the area, and I have taught them about the art of spoken word as a tool of expression. Additionally, I've taken them to experience dining in fine restaurants through partnerships with local restaurants.

For several years, I partnered with NASA to expose my students to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers as well as creating engineering projects through the "I'm An Engineer" program. Each week, the NASA team members would come to my classroom for a mini-lesson on engineering design thinking and complete a step towards creating a "launch". At the culmination of the unit, the then-NASA Administrator Charles Bolden attended our launch and spoke with my scholars about pursuing a career in STEM. Additionally, I wrote and secured a grant through the Redskins Read program, a part of the Washington Redskins Charitable Foundation that provides resources to increase 4th and 5th grade students' reading levels and frequency. I have brought students to football games at FedEx Field, where they were able to meet some of the players as a way to encourage high levels of participation and achievement in school.

Each month, I bring in various men and women of color who hail from the D.C. area to speak with the students. We have hosted members of predominately African-American fraternities and sororities, entrepreneurs, college students as well as other community leaders. I partnered with Howard University to take my scholars on college visits and to meet with student leaders on campus. This yielded significant impact, as this was almost all of my scholars' first time on a college campus. As a result, 98% of scholars on an exit survey said that they wanted to go to college or post-secondary training after graduating from high school.

Finally, families are critical in our work to close the opportunity gap that exists in our District's schools. Our students' parents are essential parts of their lives, and I am passionate about helping the community that envelops my students. I've helped parents in their pursuit of a G.E.D., coached parents in finding the best-fit middle school for their child, as well as in understanding how to effectively advocate for their child's needs. When you empower parents, you're empowering families and helping to break generational cycles of poverty.



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 in and outside of the classroom walls.

Our nation's educational and societal reality requires an intentional focus on incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) into our curriculum. Educators should be artfully and routinely trained about how to support students who encounter trauma and struggle with myriad issues; this is not a large component of pre-service training. My students often enter my classroom with heavy hearts and minds due to homelessness, foster care, generational poverty, food insecurity, witnessing acts of violence, and other challenges. Unfortunately, far too many children across the nation experience similar traumas, yet are expected to embrace rigorous content without attention to their heart's needs. In order for me to yield critical academic gains with my students, I embed strategies such as explicitly teaching coping and self-monitoring strategies, mindfulness exercises, metacognitive thinking, collaborative partnering and restorative justice circles to ensure that all of my students are able to fully engage with the content.

My passion for SEL began long before I became an educator. As a Spelman College junior, I became a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), where I advocated for and supported children in the Atlanta foster care system. I witnessed how several children struggled with coping with their emotions and traumas. Additionally, during my work with the Southern Center for Human Rights as well as in the Montgomery County (MD) State's Attorney's Office, I witnessed how the lack of social-emotional training yielded lifelong consequences for students and youth, many of whom were minorities. Working with inmates' cases illuminated the alarmingly high rates of illiteracy and inadequate social-emotional support in Pre-K through 12 education. Initially, I planned to attend law school upon the completion of my Teach For America commitment, but I fell in love with education. Rather than work to dismantle the pipeline from the courtroom, I opted to serve marginalized students in the classroom. Through my advocacy work as a TeachPlus DC Federal Policy 2014-2015 fellow, I learned and honed invaluable skills such as crafting a compelling story that permeates the hearts of elected officials and researching skills. Over the years and across the states in which I've worked, I've served in various prison ministries as well as with clients who were recently released from prison and were reentering the workforce through programs such as A Wider Circle.

While serving as a member of the 2016-2017 DCPS Chancellor's Teachers' Cabinet, I advocated for social-emotional learning to be incorporated in all schools, especially in some of the lowest-performing ones such as Amidon. Each month, I met with the Chancellor and senior-level administrators in Central Office to discuss critical topics such as social-emotional learning and teacher leadership and retention. Additionally, I was able to become an advocate for other teachers at my school, communicating their needs and concerns directly with our district leadership. In the 2017-2018 school year, we finally received District-wide professional development related to SEL. Although this is an

important step in the right direction, we still need more consistent, in-depth trainings for educators in nurturing our students' social- emotional needs.

5. As the 2019 National Teacher of the Year, you serve as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students. What is your message? What will you communicate to your profession and to the public?

As a native of the Washington, D.C. area, the future of our students is personal; the students that I teach could very well be some of my family members. If it were not for concerned and caring educators, my father would never have graduated from Roosevelt High School. His teachers and counselors at Roosevelt High School worked relentlessly to get him back on track after he temporarily dropped out of high school. For my cousin closest to me, after moving from one family member's home to another across the District, she finally received invaluable support in her time at Backus Middle School (now Lasalle-Backus Middle School). However, I often wonder if her life's trajectory would be different if she had received the right support when the signs of childhood trauma first emerged in elementary school. While I cannot reverse some of the experiences of some of my family members, I have the power to help create a new reality for my students.

Now, more than ever, our students need strong social-emotional learning (SEL) structures weaved into the everyday fabric of education. Teachers and staff in schools serving students of all backgrounds should receive frequent, research-based training on how to implement SEL in classrooms. Our students deserve an education that encompasses their whole-child needs, including their social-emotional learning. We need frequent, job-embedded as well as district- wide consistent professional development (PD) on integrating SEL into our classrooms. We now have a few SEL PDs, but we need more. Trauma is not limited to extreme cases such as gun violence. Divorce, mental health challenges, and low self-esteem are just a few examples of troubling issues that can be difficult for students to process.

Partnering with our school's counselor and social workers has been immensely beneficial in creating an ecosystem of support for students in my classroom. For the past 4 years, we collaborated to create and execute units for conflict resolution, self-esteem, and dealing with traumatic emotions and experiences. For students with extreme challenges and traumas, we deepened the ecosystem to create plans that provided students with outlets to healthily express emotions and learn/practice coping tools. Given that I once was a student with similar behaviors, I feel compelled to provide a safe space for my students to feel supported, empowered, and valued. Using programs such as Second Step, mindfulness practices, and Peace Tables have completely reshaped our classroom culture. Students who initially would scream and push a classmate for a perceived (or real) transgression now use "I" statements and use emotion expression protocols.

According to the 2016 District of Columbia Department of Corrections Census, 90% of DC inmates are Black/African-American. This is a gross overrepresentation of Black inmates compared to the total DC population, for which Blacks/African-Americans only account for



47.1%. As for college attendance/graduation rates, only 4% of male inmates and 3% of female inmates have a college education. These figures are unacceptable, and they are driving factors in the work that I do each day at Amidon. Many of my students' parents have been incarcerated, and they share with me their dreams of a better future for their children. As educators, we have had numerous national academic initiatives; it is time for a national push for SEL. Teachers should not be left to scrounge for viable SEL programs on their own; we should receive targeted training so that we are trained in the nuances of addressing students' SEL needs. These trainings should not be limited to schools in high-poverty areas; students across all socioeconomic levels are experiencing struggles and mental challenges.

I also want to empower teachers about the value in learning about different SEL strategies to help our students learn to their fullest potential. SEL does not have to take away precious minutes of learning time; SEL can be interwoven into daily content lessons. Whether your class analyzes a character's motivation, or embraces a growth mindset during a challenging mathematics problem, SEL is essential to educating our students. Our work as educators must be supported and supplemented with training, programs and support. However, teaching students who experience trauma can be traumatic. After almost seven years of digesting my students' experiences of loss and hurt, I've learned that educators, especially urban educators, need to receive training on how to process these traumas. By creating strong SEL learning structures and creating spaces for students to build their advocacy capacity, we can help strengthen the fabric that binds our city and our nation together.

Resume

Education

School	Johns Hopkins University School of Education
Degree	Master of Science
Major	Education (Educational Leadership Concentration)
Years Attended	2014-2016

School	Spelman College
Degree	Bachelor of Arts
Major	English, Child Development Minor
Years Attended	2008-2012

Certification

Certification	District of Columbia: Elementary (Grades 1-6)
Year Obtained	2017

Certification	District of Columbia: Non-Categorical Special Education (Pre-K-12)
Year Obtained	2017

Certification	District of Columbia Public Schools LEAP Elementary ELA Certified
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Year Obtained	2016
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Certification	Texas: Generalist (Grades EC-6)
Year Obtained	2013

Experience

Title	3rd and 4th Grade Teacher
Organization	Amidon-Bowen Elementary School, District of Columbia Public Schools
Years in Position	4

Title	3rd Grade Teacher
Organization	Woodson K-8 Leadership Academy, Houston Independent School District
Years in Position	2

Leadership

Position	3rd-5th Grade ELA Teacher-Leader/Coach
Organization	Amidon-Bowen Elementary School, District of Columbia Public Schools
Years in Position	2

Position	D.C. Federal Policy Fellow
Organization	TeachPlus (Washington DC)
Years in Position	2

Position	Chancellor's Teacher's Cabinet Member
Organization	District of Columbia Public Schools
Years in Position	1

Position	District Course Chair & Common Core Reading Corps, Summer Curriculum Writer
Organization	District of Columbia Public Schools, District-wide Literacy PD
Years in Position	2

Position	Lead Facilitator & Fellow
Organization	District of Columbia Public Schools, Family Engagement Collaborative
Years in Position	2

Awards and Other Recognitions

Award/Recognition	DCPS "Essential Practices Online Video Library" featured teacher (classroom lesson filmed for viewing of over 4,000 DCPS teachers for professional development)
Year Received	2018

Award/Recognition	District of Columbia Public Schools "Highly Effective" Educator Award
Year Received	2016, 2017, 2018

Award/Recognition	DCPS Capital Commitment Fellow
Year Received	2015-2018



Award/Recognition	National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2018 4th Grade Writing Test Achievement Levels-Setting Field Trial Panelist
Year Received	2017

Award/Recognition	Sue Lehmann Excellence in Teaching Award Houston Regional Finalist and National Nominee
Year Received	2014

