



2016 National Teacher of the Year Finalist



NATHAN GIBBS- BOWLING

2016 Washington State Teacher of
the Year

Lincoln High School

Tacoma, WA

Subject: Social Studies

Grade: 9 and 12

School Profile: Urban

District Size: 30,000

School Size: 1,400

Years in Teaching: 10

Years in Position: 7

NATHAN G. GIBBS-BOWLING

EDUCATION

The Evergreen State College

Master in Teaching, 2006
Middle Level Humanities Endorsement
Social Studies Endorsement
English Language Arts Endorsement

Bachelor of the Arts, 2004
Macro Economics and Twentieth Century American Foreign Policy

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

鲜花插在青蛙上, Chengdu China, Visiting Faculty **2014-Present**
Instructor in American Culture, student leadership, university transition, to future international university students

The Evergreen State College & Pacific Lutheran University **2012-Present**
Guest lecturer in the Masters in Teaching Programs

Lincoln High School, Tacoma Public Schools **2009-Present**
Teacher AP American Government & Politics (4 yrs)
Teacher AP Human Geography (3 yrs)
Teacher Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) Elective: College Prep (2 yrs)
Teacher World Cultures (1 yr)
Teacher Washington State History & Government (4 yrs)

Cascade Leadership Camp, Association of Washington Principals **2007- Present**
Senior Counselor at the Cascade Middle Level Student Leadership Camp at Cispus Learning Center

Meeker Middle School, Tacoma Public Schools **2006-2009**
Teacher World History, seventh grade (1 yr)
Teacher Intervention Reading, seventh & eighth grade (2 yrs)
Teacher Strategic Reading, seventh & eighth grade (2 yrs)

NON-PROFIT EXPERIENCE

Teachers United **2011-Present**
Founding member, former Board President, current Director of Government Relations

Washington Education Association, Tacoma Council PAC Chairperson **2010-2013**
Managed PAC for WEA Tacoma and sat on Washington State WEA PAC Board.

GI Voice / Coffee Strong **2009-2012**
Served as a member of the Board of Directors from 2009-2011
Served as Chairman of the Board of Directors from 2011-2012

AWARDS & HONORS

Washington State Teacher of the Year **2016**
Puget Sound ESD Regional Teacher of the Year **2016**
Lowell Milken Foundation Unsung Heroes Fellow **2015**
Pierce College Distinguished Alumni **2015**
Tacoma Pierce County Black Collective Education Hero Award **2014**
Milken Foundation National Educator Award **2014**
Washington State Golden Apple Recipient in the Lincoln Center Program **2012**

Professional Biography

I am and have always been fascinated when I hear why people chose to go into teaching. Many became educators because they loved being around children. Others sought the vocation because their parents or grandparents were teachers and it “runs in their family.” Tragically, some others go into teaching because they like the mythological “summers off.” None of those apply to me. I am a teacher for one simple reason: I believe in the transformational and liberatory power of education—especially public education—to change the trajectories of not only individual lives, but entire communities.

As an avid fan of local politics and a government teacher, I have noticed society’s collective blind spot regarding education and quality of life. When seeking to improve or evaluate communities, people often look at factors like infrastructure quality, public transit access, or the presence of community support programs and non-profits. While all these factors are important, there is no greater predictor of the quality of life, life expectancy, or overall happiness than the level of education of the populace.

Life is better for the educated. I am a living testament to how education can change lives for the better. I consequently seek through my classroom practice to help my students escape intergenerational poverty through the pursuit of academic excellence and post-secondary education. In my AP Government class, I am trying to inspire Tacoma’s future lawyers, entrepreneurs, social workers, and hopefully teachers to be thoughtful contributors to our society.

My life could easily have followed the typical path that befalls many men of color. I was born in, and have spent all but five years of my life living in, two of my city’s most infamous neighborhoods. Throughout that time, I have encountered innumerable examples of young people who have the talent to be successful in life, but lack the positive role models, life-skills coaching, and socio-emotional support. Luckily, my life trajectory was transformed by the intervention of caring role models, several of whom were classroom teachers. I seek through my practice to do the same for others. One of my favorite historic educational theorists, George Counts, made the case for education as a vehicle to societal transformation during the depth of the Great Depression when he wrote:

To refuse to face the task of creating a vision of a future America immeasurably more just and noble and beautiful than the America of today is to evade the most crucial, difficult, and important educational task.... Only then will we have discharged the age old obligation which the older generation owes to the younger and through which no amount of sophistry can obscure. (*Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*, 1932.)

If we are failing to help students make the world a better place, we are actually failing to teach. If we are displeased with the world around us, we have an obligation to make it better. Public education, more so than politics, the law, or charity, can create systemic change. I don't teach because I love children. I teach because I love humanity—specifically my city—and want to see it transformed.

In the past year, I have been recognized for my work at Lincoln High School. I was named Regional and then State Teacher of the Year. I have been named a Distinguished Alumni of The Evergreen State College and Pierce College, and I was recognized in 2014 with the Milken Family Foundation's National Teacher Award. But all of that pales to the satisfaction I get when one of my students gets into the college of their dreams or receives a financial aid offer from a university that makes what was once impossible, possible.

I strive to be a beacon for young people in my community—a living, breathing, walking, and talking testimonial of how lives can be changed by education. As a man of color working in a high-poverty school, I am acutely aware of the consequences for those who miss out on education. The neighborhood I grew up in is on the northern boundary of my school's attendance zone. I “made it out,” but I didn't leave. Now I am helping others find their own paths “out” as well.

Community Involvement

I believe in Paulo Freire's oft-repeated axiom that "teaching is a political act." If I am to be a real agent of change, I need to model the civic behaviors that I expect my students to embrace and emulate. As an AP Government and Politics teacher, it is essential to my practice that I walk my civic engagement talk. In the past, I have led student-staffed voter registration drives targeting economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. My wife and I host "Bring Your Voters' Guide" events to help people in our community learn about ballot measures. I doorbell for local political candidates, and once I took a personal day from work on Election Day to help drive elderly and disabled residents of my city to the polls.

I am involved in my local community. I am a member of the Tacoma-Pierce County Black Collective's education advisory committee. I volunteer at a veterans support center near Joint Base Lewis-McChord. However, I believe the following three examples are most demonstrative of my commitment to the community:

1. My church, New Community Church, has adopted McCarver Elementary School, one of the highest poverty schools in all of Pierce County. For years, McCarver was without a PTSA. I joined members of our church to step in and help. We have held soccer clinics for youth, filled backpacks with food for kids in the Backpack Program, and host a holiday auction that raises more than \$5,000 annually for the school.
2. For the past four years, I have mentored students for the College Success Foundation Achievers Scholars Program. Achievers is a mentoring and college support program targeting potential first-generation college students. Each of my mentees has been a young man of color. I meet with my mentees at least monthly and provide them with life advice and help completing college applications, financial-aid paperwork, and scholarship forms. In the spring, I help them decipher their financial-aid offers so they can make an informed decision about their future.
3. Last fall, two other Lincoln teachers and I undertook what we called the Fall Alumni Support Tour. It was a three-day, 600-mile road trip. We visited with and brought care packages to Lincoln alumni at universities all over the state. My colleagues and I covered all expenses for the trip, including the cost of meals we purchased for students. The students were all excited to see us and proud to show us their dorms, campuses, and syllabi. It was a great investment and one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. One of the best parts of being a teacher is seeing your students blossom into productive members of society.

Philosophy of Teaching

My educational philosophy is based on three core tenets: “teaching causes learning,” “every student is capable of greatness,” and “it takes a village.” These statements are my pedagogical core values. They permeate my instruction, my interaction with students and colleagues, and the environment in my classroom.

At my school, my principal ends every email he writes the same way: “teaching causes learning.” I have no control over what my students had for breakfast or even had breakfast. I cannot control their home environments. But I do have absolute control over the instructional and curricular choices I make in my classroom. I never waste a second of it.

Throughout my career, I have held myself, my students, and my colleagues to high expectations. Those high expectations have resulted in growth from my students and a reputation for inspiring students to achieve. This has been most evident in my AP Government class during the past three years. I recently had an exchange with a colleague in the district about Tacoma’s Academic Acceleration/AP for All Initiative. My position was: “I would rather have 100% of the students at my school enrolled in the most rigorous possible class and have a 25% exam pass rate, than have only 25 students enrolled in the class and a 100% pass rate.”

Because of Tacoma’s Academic Acceleration Initiative, we don’t have “traditional looking” AP classes. I work at the highest poverty high school in the district, but my students pass the exam at a rate three times the district’s average. I hear from educators all the time about how disadvantaged their students are. Who cares? Teaching is not about what your kids do not have at home. It’s about the relationships you build with them and what you do to inspire them to achieve in the classroom and beyond. If we expect mediocrity, they will deliver mediocrity. If we demand greatness, they will strive for it.

I am uneasy with the idea of individual teacher awards. I believe that what we see from students is often influenced by dozens of adults. The proverbial “it takes a village…” is far more accurate than many realize. If Jenny does some amazing writing in my AP Government class, is that because her parents read Amiri Baraka to her as a child? Or is it because she had Mrs. Knittle, a known teaching rockstar, at the middle level? Or because Jenny has some innate ability to string together phrases in a way that would make Longfellow or Toni Morrison blush? We might never know. What we do know is that academic excellence flourishes in places where great educators are gathered. Even more importantly, we know that when those educators have a collaborative relationship that lives can be transformed. Every bit of recognition I have ever received, or will ever receive, as a teacher is because of the phenomenal team of educators I am surrounded with every day at Lincoln High School.

Education Issues and Trends

Year after year, interest groups flood state capitols around the nation to testify and lobby over their laundry lists of issues: charter schools, splitting urban school districts, A-to-F ratings for schools, shifting levy dollars, etc. But rarely do they strike at the core of what separates good schools from great schools. There is no issue more important in public education than teacher quality.

Effective teachers help us close the opportunity gap. Highly effective teachers, especially when clustered at high-poverty schools, can transform lives. America's public schools often attract bright, energetic world changers, but we don't retain enough of them. I frequently read the frustration from some of my best colleagues on social media. Teachers are one of our society's most important assets, and right now their collective morale is low.

In Washington State and around the nation, our evaluation and compensation systems do not do an adequate job of identifying and retaining highly effective teachers. National Public Radio reports that teacher turnover costs districts, nationwide, more than \$2.2 billion annually. With an alarming and accelerating frequency, effective, mid-career educators are leaving the classroom for other, often more lucrative and highly regarded, career opportunities.

Recently, I was approached by a headhunter with an offer to work for a nationally known insurance company. I declined the offer, but the recruiter pointed out her firm is targeting accomplished educators because of the skill set we possess: leadership, comfort with public speaking, the ability to collaborate with diverse populations, and high levels of organization.

As I shared in *The Seattle Times* this January, investing in teacher quality through smart retention strategies is one of the best investments we can make as a state:

More than a decade's worth of research has shown that the most important in-school factor for a student's academic achievement is his or her teacher. Therefore, it stands to reason that the most important thing we can do for our students is to focus intensely on attracting, developing, training and retaining the best possible teachers for our students. (*The Seattle Times*, "Guest: It's time to get serious about keeping effective teachers.")

If we want to keep effective teachers in the classroom, we must treat them like the valuable professionals they are. More than that, we must provide them with leadership opportunities to grow their practice through hybrid roles and career lattices. A teacher's job shouldn't look the same in year 13 as it did in year one.

Another factor essential to teacher quality is meaningful, ongoing, job-embedded professional development. All teachers want to improve their practice, but effective PD opportunities are often lacking. During last year's Washington State legislative session, I personally advocated for legislation to create a statewide definition of high-quality professional development. This bill proposed universal standards for PD, statewide, and pushed districts to create PD for teachers that is relevant, ongoing, and job-embedded.

There is already a teacher shortage here in Washington. I have read the situation is even worse in places like Arizona and Kansas, where teachers have been impacted by crippling austerity. In Washington, the shortage is currently manifesting itself in the substitute pool. Substitute jobs are getting harder to fill. This is a portent of what is to come as older teachers choose to retire. We have to retain effective educators and help those who are less effective improve their practice. Given the current substitute shortage and anecdotal reports about declining enrollment at education programs around the nation, improving teacher quality through retention and effective PD should be a top priority.

The Teaching Profession

There is no shortage of acrimony within the teaching profession and education policy debates. When engaging with other educators I pride myself on being solutions-oriented. In every department meeting, conference presentation, or meeting with early career and pre-service teachers, I stress three points:

1. We should be looking for solutions that are best for students rather than what entrenched adults prefer or what is dictated by “we’ve always done it this way” traditionalism or institutional inertia.
2. We should go into contentious situations with other educators assuming the best intent and approach potential conflicts seeking common ground rather than winning converts.
3. We should model the habits of professionalism and disciplined inquiry that we expect students to emulate. We are professionals, sanctioned by the state to mold the next generation of voters and citizens. We should listen more than we speak and always be thoughtful and reflective about the instructional choices we make.

In the last year I have mentored a student teacher in my classroom; guest lectured to pre-service teachers at The Evergreen State College Masters in Teaching program; presented a workshop on countering systemic racism within schools for a groups of early career educators at a regional convening; keynoted at the ECET2PS (Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teaching and Teachers) Conference and Pacific Lutheran University’s School of Education commencement; shared my teaching philosophy & thinking routines with teachers in Chengdu, Sichuan, China; and hosted the President of China, Xi Jinping in my classroom. For the past several years I have led a solutions-oriented network of teacher leaders in the Puget Sound that seeks to amplify teacher voice in conversations about education policy.

But none of that—none of it—is as important as the work I do with my colleagues in my building.

My colleagues challenge me to be better and question my practice. The power of people within the profession to help others grow is limitless. When I was young, a friend’s father, who was a leader in the local IBEW, told me the union sets high standards for membership and craftsmanship because they want people to know that IBEW work is synonymous with quality work. If someone hires an IBEW electrician they’re paying more, but they’re getting more and the job done right.

The best accountability systems come from within the profession. Teaching can be very isolating. Unless intentionally sought out by a teacher or encouraged at the building level by a visionary principal there are few

opportunities for professional collaboration built into our work day. Fortunately, I work in a school with both of the aforementioned conditions. Through collaboration, whether it is in my building, at a conference or even on Twitter I strengthen and am strengthened by other educators.

National Teacher of the Year

Education is a gift that is handed to each generation and a heritage that we pass on to the next. Education transforms societies. Throughout human history there has been no greater democratizing force within societies than education. It is the great equalizer; the great opportunity creator; the greatest economic stimulus ever conceived. Education has saved more lives than anything save modern medicine.

- During Reconstruction, teachers (both white and black) flooded into the South to educate new freedmen and help them emerge from the bondage of chattel slavery, into a new world of agricultural and industrial opportunity. I am a beneficiary of this legacy and those teachers.
- During the Cold War, teachers in the Eastern Bloc risked their careers and lives to lead and organize protests in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Poland against Soviet backed Communist rule.
- During the Civil Rights movement, teachers left the classrooms in Selma, Montgomery, and Memphis and all over the South to be at the forefront of protests, modeling non-violence and activist citizenship to their students and serving as leaders within their communities.
- During the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge, teachers were targeted because the ruling junta recognized and feared their ability to organize communities.
- During the last decade of drug war fueled unrest and violence in Mexico, teachers have been at the forefront of efforts to combat cartels and to protect their communities from the collateral damage of the drug war. Many have given their lives to serve their communities.

We face none of these perils, but our leadership in this moment is just as essential. There is a vacuum of teacher leadership within our schools and communities. It's time for us to step up.

This year my friend and fellow AP Government and Politics teacher John Hines announced his candidacy for the Tacoma City Council. John is a NBCT, works at a high school in a neighboring district, and is an alumnus of Lincoln. John gets it. Instead of sitting on the sidelines, teachers should model the conduct we expect from our students: activism, engagement, thoughtfulness, and reflection.

Teachers have their fingers on collective pulses of their communities. In our daily interactions with students, we see echoes of lost jobs, deployed parents, and run-ins with law enforcement. No one is more plugged into communities than the teachers who work there. Teachers have a responsibility to lead. There's no one more equipped than us and no better time than the present for us to start.

October 29, 2015,

Letter of Support for Nathan Gibbs Bowling
National Teacher of the Year

Nathan Bowling is the best teacher in the state, and I believe he is also the best teacher in the United States. He teaches Social Studies for me at Lincoln High School and he has set the tone in his classroom, his department, and the building as a whole. He is knowledgeable about his content, has expert pedagogy, and he motivates his students in a myriad of ways. As he is known to say, "Teaching is one third sales, one third performance art, and one third instruction." I believe he has the formula just right and, in my 23 years as an educator, I have never seen anyone better.

Walking into Mr. Bowling's room is like walking into a cognitively demanding environment with ALL kids working, following his prompts and knowing exactly what is expected of them. The routines are key for him because he does not want confusion to get in the way of student discourse, whether that is when students are debating the great Supreme Court cases or studying demographic patterns of Tacoma in the 1960s. It is his systematic approach to the work that allows his student's intellects to blossom.

The results? He introduced the first 9th grade Advanced Placement class in the school district three years ago and he currently teaches AP Human Geography and AP Government. He has record numbers of students passing the AP exams and he says that when students come to his class, they may not be AP students but when they exit his class they are AP students. However, it is not just about being Advanced Placement students; it is about changing the trajectory of their lives. Mr. Bowling views the intersection of poverty and education as a life or death matter. This is evident in his passion for their outcomes.

Mr. Bowling is also a very active staff member in the affairs of the school. Over the years he has served as a de-facto leader for a small school at Lincoln, sat as a founding member on our Professional Development Leadership Team, and offered his expertise to the planning, growth and expansion of our expanded day model. He even announces our football and wrestling competitions – and is amazing at those as well.

Finally, Mr. Bowling makes me a better principal and, by extension, he helps our entire school through his influence with me. He has uncanny insights into teaching practice as well as how schools should function. The result is that we are a high performing school that best reflects the needs of teachers which directly benefit the students in the school. He is the exemplar of a teacher leader and is irreplaceable for the students, teachers and administration of Lincoln High School.

As far as I am concerned, Mr. Bowling is the face of education in the State of Washington and should be for the United States of America. I can think of no one who can match Mr. Bowling's performance in the classroom, and I can think of no better representative for teachers throughout the country than Mr. Nathan Bowling.

Sincerely,



Patrick Erwin
Principal, Lincoln High School

Thursday, October 29th, 2015

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to serve as a recommendation to Nathan Bowling.

In my entire primary, secondary and post-secondary school career, I have yet to have a professor or mentor as passionate, driven and caring as Nathan Bowling. This passion carries through not only in his teaching, but how he treats and cares for all of his students. Nathan deliberately goes out of his way to make sure that each student is reaching their fullest potential in all that they do amongst a population that lacks drive and support.

Lincoln is an urban school on the east side of Tacoma that serves many students who often are facing difficult situations at home. Therefore, it is understanding that school may not be of priority when more critical issues such as supporting families, having food on the table and securing housing are amidst. To these students who are barely staying afloat, Nathan often takes their hand, believes in these students and pushes these students to see not only the importance of school, but to value themselves and their own abilities. I have seen it with my own eyes: pulling students aside and seeing what's going on, checking in on students' progress in their classes, and even holding them after school for additional assistance. He is very deliberate and wants his students to see their own potential. Many of my peers owe it to Nathan as the reason why they find passion in education, graduated high school and believed in themselves to pursue a higher education. He is a champion for his students' potential that they sometimes cannot see.

Personally, I too have experienced Nathan in this role as well. As an independent student who was second in class ranking, I often found myself to be lazy to strive for more. No other teacher has ever challenged this apathy aside from Mr. Bowling. Even if I aced the test, he always saw room where I could grow. He continuously pushed me to my limits, never allowing me to settle with what was enough; he wanted me to never settle. This made me driven and determined to strive for greatness beyond what I even expected of myself. I worked harder, applied to schools that I never even dreamed of, and got more involved. I wanted to make him proud of me. Mr. Bowling did not rest at the students who were failing school, he even pushed the students who were succeeding in school. There was no standard for Nathan, he believes that everyone can do better.

Nathan's teaching was what truly made me motivated to go to school. He created a sense of community in his classroom: having students collaborate with others, drawing on each other's strengths to allow growth and creating opportunities where students can rely on each other for help. He created an environment where students wanted to learn. When traditional textbooks were filled with the histories of men that many students cared less for and could not relate to, Nathan taught the histories of those never told, the story of those who were lost and forgotten. The most impactful were the horrific teachings of the Native American colonization, African American enslavement, Japanese internment and even Chinese expulsion. However, Nathan doesn't stop there. He constantly challenges his students to connect the past to the present, drawing from what is going on today to see that history constantly repeating itself. This has been the most impactful teaching that I have ever had. His lessons go beyond the classroom. Through his teaching, Nathan creates aware and active students who see the injustice in the world. Students who want to make a difference. He has the ability to take the textbook out of the classroom and into the real world.

Nathan Bowling is a man that has my greatest respect and admiration. What he does truly makes a difference and has changed many lives including mine. The impact he has made will serve as a model for future leaders in our community.

Trang Tran



Inquiry Partners™

University of Washington • StartUp Hall • @inquiryfive
1100 NE Campus Parkway, Seattle, WA 98105

Dear Committee Members:

October 28, 2015

I am thrilled and not at all surprised to learn that Nathan (Nate) Gibbs Bowling is a nominee for the National Teacher of the Year Award. Our country deserves someone like Nate to energize and inspire the teaching profession. Nate and I sat side-by-side as board directors at a statewide non-profit dedicated to supporting practicing teachers who wanted to understand and influence the policies that affected their public school students. Our mission: *To create a public school system worthy of our students' potential.* Nate was our board chair.

Leadership turnover, shifting funding priorities and teacher recruitment were major challenges. Despite this, Nate adeptly moved our work forward with professionalism, honesty and integrity. We did not lose a single board member and we raised tens of thousands of dollars thanks to Nate's incredible passion and public speaking abilities. Nate gathered teachers in his school, home, community to talk openly and honestly about policies that affected the most vulnerable students in our state. He wrote and published compelling Op-Eds. He spent hours on the road meeting with teachers from across the state to understand their needs, pain points and visions. Nate would always remind us that: *"Effective reforms will not happen without teachers behind them."* This is the Nate I met initially; and, to be sure, he was impressive.

But the Nate I grew to truly love and admire is in a category all by itself: Nate the classroom teacher. Like Nate, I am compelled by statewide policy and politics, but my heart is in the classroom. I run an international professional development organization promoting inquiry-based instruction. We scour the planet to identify the best teachers and film their practice so others can observe the magic. I asked Nate if I could visit his classroom, not knowing how it might turn out. Our bar is exceedingly high and we find great inquiry teachers in less than 10% of the classrooms we visit.

Nate's lesson left me awestruck. Luckily, we had a cameraperson and extra mics ready to capture his US Government lesson in its entirety. Nate's artistry in the classroom was multi-dimensional and profound. He has an authentic and respectful relationship with students and treats them as equals by asking great questions and listening with genuine interest to their ideas. Nate incorporated current events through video and primary sources, encouraged the use of technology and expected their best thinking at every turn. After analyzing the lesson on video, we calculated that Nate spoke only 40% of the time while his students (100% participated during the lesson) spoke 60% of the time. Research tells us that whoever is doing the talking is doing the thinking. It's not surprising how Nate's students achieve at such high levels – and why his *students* are what I remember most from visiting his classroom. This is the kind of regular experience I want my own children – and every child – to have.

Admittedly, I've tried to recruit Nate out of the classroom, but he is resolute. Lincoln HS is his family. Tacoma is his home. Nate grew up in the community, lives next door to his students and their families and is committed to staying in the classroom. It's where he belongs and where he is determined to stay. Nate makes me proud to be in the field of education. Many have urged Nate to pursue these opportunities not for his own profit, but to lift up the profession for others to be inspired to join and support public education. With this outcome in mind, I can think of no better ambassador for our country.

Kimberly Lasher Mitchell
Co-founder and CEO
Inquiry Partners, Seattle, WA