

2017 National Teacher of the Year Finalist



MEGAN GROSS

2017 California State Teacher of the Year

Poway Unified School District
Del Norte High School
San Diego, California

School Profile: Suburban
District Size: 35,877
School Size: 2,085

Subject: Special Education - ASD Program
Grade: 9 -12

Years in Teaching: 9
Years in Position: 3

Application: Gross, Megan | 052

Round: Main

Page: Candidate's Basic Information

Question	Answer
Candidate Name	Gross, Megan
State	California

Page: Candidate's Resume Information

Question	Answer
Education	California State University, Sacramento, Special Education Credential Program
Dates (MM/YY)	2004-2009
Education	University of California, Davis, Bachelor of Science: Genetics,
Dates (MM/YY)	2002
Education	
Dates (MM/YY)	
Certification	Education Specialists Mild/Moderate and Moderate Severe, Level II Clear
Dates (MM/YY)	2009
Certification	
Dates (MM/YY)	
Certification	
Dates (MM/YY)	
Experience	Del Norte High School, Poway USD Autism Spectrum Disorder Special Day Class Teacher 9-12
Dates (MM/YY)	2013-Present
Experience	Krey Elementary School, Brentwood Union SD K-2 Resource Teacher

Dates (MM/YY)	2012-2013
Experience	California State University, Sacramento Student Teacher Mentor and Support Provider
Dates (MM/YY)	2008-2012
Experience	Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Jr. High, Davis Joint USD, Inclusion Specialist 7-9
Dates (MM/YY)	2007-2012
Leadership	Special Education Department Representative, English Language Learners Site Team, Del Norte
Dates (MM/YY)	High School 2015-Present
Leadership	Special Education Teacher Co-Advisor, Best Buddies International, Del Norte High School
Dates (MM/YY)	2013-Present
Leadership	Special Education Department Chair, Harper Jr. High
Dates (MM/YY)	2009-2011
Awards and Other Recognition	California Teacher of the Year
Dates (MM/YY)	2017
Awards and Other Recognition	San Diego County Teacher of the Year
Dates (MM/YY)	2017
Awards and Other Recognition	Poway Unified School District Teacher of the Year
Dates (MM/YY)	2016-2017
Awards and Other Recognition	Del Norte High School Teacher of the Year
Dates (MM/YY)	2017
Additional Resume Items	Kurth, Jennifer A., and Gross, Megan (2014). <i>The Inclusion Toolbox: Strategies and techniques for all teachers</i> . Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
Please list the month and year for each	Kurth, J.A., Gross, M., Lovinger, S., & Catalano, T. (2012). Grading students with significant disabilities in inclusive settings: Teacher perspectives. <i>The Journal of the International Association of Special Education</i> , 13(1), 39-55.

additional item.

Gross, M., Abalde, J., Collier, A., Thompson, R., & Ventura, T. (January 2016). Standing Out by Blending In. Professional development training led for Poway Unified School District Instructional Assistant Professional Growth Day. San Diego, CA.

Conlon, J., Galaz, M., & Gross, M. (December 2015). Leading Together: Creating an inclusive high school campus. Presented at the annual meeting of TASH. Portland, OR.

Kurth, J.A., & Gross, M. (December 2015). A three-stage model for implementing inclusive education. Presented at the annual meeting of TASH. Portland, OR.

Kurth, J.A., & Gross, M. (April 2015). Implementing inclusive practices: A three stage model. Poster presented at annual conference for Council for Exceptional Children. San Diego, CA.

Collier, A., Gross, M., & Thompson, R. (March 2015). iWhat? Supporting students who use iPads at school. Presented at annual CalTASH conference. Irvine, CA.

Gross, M. (March 2015). The Inclusion Teacher's Toolkit. Presented at annual CalTASH conference. Irvine, CA.

Gross, M. (January 2014). Life in the mainstream: supporting students in general education. Professional development training led for Poway Unified School District Instructional Assistant Professional Growth Day. San Diego, CA.

Gross, M. & Marquez, R. (April 2013). You're in a classroom, now what? Presented at annual CSEA California Paraeducator Conference. San Jose, CA.

Gross, M. & Marquez, R. (April 2013). Adapting on the fly. Presented at annual CSEA California Paraeducator Conference. San Jose, CA.

Kurth, J.A., & Gross, M. (December 2012). The Inclusion Teacher's Toolkit. Presented at annual TASH conference. Long Beach, CA.

Gross, M. & Marquez, R. (December 2012). Build a team: Training paraprofessionals for work in inclusive classrooms. Presented at annual TASH conference. Long Beach, CA.

Gee, K., Gonzalez, M., & Gross, M. (December 2011). Providing access to the core curriculum for individuals with complex/multiple disabilities. Presented at annual TASH conference. Atlanta, GA.

Gee, K., Gonzalez, M., & Gross, M. (December 2010). Access to the general education curriculum. Presented at annual TASH conference. Denver, CO.

Kurth, J.A., & Gross, M. (December 2015). Teacher grading practices in inclusive settings: Findings and strategies. Presented at the annual meeting of TASH. Denver, CO.

Gee, K., Gonzalez, M., & Gross, M. (July 2009). Inclusive schooling: Meaningful instruction, supports, and organization for all students. Presented at annual National Down Syndrome Congress. Sacramento, CA.

Page: Candidate's Professional Biography

Question	Answer
Professional Biography Please complete your professional biography in 3rd person, as this will be used in promotional materials for CCSSO speaking opportunities and	Megan Gross is a special education teacher at Del Norte High School, in the Poway Unified School District and California Teacher of the Year 2017. She has taught and facilitated inclusive education for students with disabilities at both the elementary and secondary level for nine years. As an educator, Megan has advocated and supported students' transitions from segregated Special Day Classes, to an instructional day including general education academic and elective classes. In addition, she facilitates social inclusion and extracurricular activities as a Special Education Co-Advisor of the Del Norte High School Best Buddies Club. Megan is passionate about supporting individuals with disabilities through the lifespan. As a

engagements.
Maximum 250 words.

college student, she provided in-home care to children with developmental disabilities through the respite program of Summer House, Inc. After graduating from college, Megan advocated for adults with developmental disabilities whom lived in a residential group home. As an educator, Megan has presented at regional and national education conferences. Her professional interests include: supporting the transition of students with severe disabilities from segregated classrooms to general education classrooms, developing curricular modifications to increase student access to general education, and facilitating professional development for paraprofessionals and classroom teachers. Megan is the co-author of *The Inclusion Toolbox* and *ParaEducate*. She resides in San Diego, California, with her husband and two children.

Page: Application Question #1

Question	Answer
<p>Question 1</p> <p>Describe a lesson that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage all students in the learning and how did that learning influence your students? How are your beliefs about teaching demonstrated in this lesson?</p>	<p>The central theme of each Individualized Education Program (IEP) for students on my caseload is to develop the skills to lead a self-determined life, a life of purpose, independence, and the freedom of choice. The ability to communicate opinions, beliefs, and interests, a skill most adolescents have no difficulty exhibiting, is a challenge for my students with autism, some of whom are nonverbal or verbalize only a few words at a time. To support my students' growth in self-determination, each lesson I teach embeds opportunities for students to communicate and emphasizes the importance of sharing your voice, whether that voice is typed, generated by a voice output program, or gestures.</p> <p>One recent lesson I taught my students is to recognize the value of self-advocacy. My students had learned earlier in the week that a self-advocate is someone who speaks up for themselves and can share with others about their interests, wants, and needs. But, when I ask what that looks like and why it is important, I am greeted with eyes that look away and one student who timidly says, "I'm not sure." To demonstrate self-advocacy, we watch a short clip from the new ABC television series, <i>Speechless</i>. This show is about JJ, a high school student with cerebral palsy who uses an electronic device to communicate and a wheelchair for mobility —this show has understandably become quite popular with my students. Within the clip, JJ's new one-to-one assistant gives him the nickname "J. Tizzy", and JJ, expressing his displeasure, indicates that the new nickname is not OK. Following the clip, I ask students to share examples of how the characters in the show demonstrated self-advocacy. I keep a picture of the entire cast displayed on screen as a visual cue for students who need that cue to respond. A few students provide verbal examples of how JJ advocated for himself in the clip, while others point to JJ's picture when I ask, "Who was a self-advocate?". As a class we discuss how important it is that JJ says, "Please don't" using his communication board, so the new assistant knows he does not like or want a nickname.</p> <p>At the end of our discussion, I ask each student to share something he has advocated for with his family. One student uses his iPad and picks the baseball picture, his favorite sport and a representation of his baseball team. His ability to pick pictures to represent his interests and select yes or no from a printed card, have enabled him to communicate with his family about what he wants to do and in this case, how he wants to be a part of a baseball team. Another student excitedly says, "Homecoming!", and after a verbal cue to expand his thoughts, he explains that he told his dad that he wanted to go to the Homecoming dance and needed money to buy a ticket. I praise my students for sharing and for finding their voice to advocate for their wants and needs.</p>

Page: Application Question #2

Question	Answer
<p data-bbox="102 254 367 590">Question 2 Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in. What was your role, and how did this contribute to the overall school culture?</p>	<p data-bbox="386 254 1511 680">The principal's message on the school website was a beacon: The dream for Del Norte has always been to create a school where everyone belongs, where everyone feels valued, supported, and safe, and where everyone contributes. These words, as an educator and inclusion advocate, convinced me that I had landed in the right place. In August 2013, I opened the classroom doors to the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Program at Del Norte High School. This program was designed for students with autism who needed significant support with academic, communication, and social skills to progress in their education. My students and I were new to Del Norte High School: my students were freshman bussed in from across the district and I had just relocated to San Diego with my family. The principal's message gave me hope that we would not be outsiders, but equal contributors to the school, embraced by our fellow Nighthawks. Since that first day, it has been my job to ensure that happens.</p> <p data-bbox="386 688 1511 1556">Each student on my 2013 caseload started with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that included time in general education and physical education classes. I scheduled them in Ceramics, Design Mixed Media, and Exercise and Nutrition Science. At the time I hoped for the opportunity to schedule them in more classes and sought to build the relationships with my fellow teachers to make that happen. I met with general education teachers to discuss how I could best support them in modifying the curriculum so my students could access the written assignments and exams. This initially generated concern and elicited comments such as "OK, your students don't have to take the test". I gently pushed back, knowing that for my students to be part of the community, they must participate to their full capabilities and know their teachers have high expectations. I worked with my students in their general education classrooms, modifying exams, creating visuals of vocabulary, and pre-programming contextual messages into the iPads of my non-verbal students so they can communicate with their teachers and peers. This effort engaged students in learning and in a climate of trust, their teachers and I built new curriculum together. Building a school culture capable of creating and sustaining inclusive education requires time and patience by a resolute group of colleagues . My assistants and I continually sought out general education classes that would be a good fit for our students and I met with administrators and teachers to garner their support. Since 2014, our students have been included in Biology, Human Body Systems, U.S History, Civics, Spanish, Chinese, Intro to Business, Integrated Math, Digital Media, Photography, Court Sports, and more. Once-hesitant teachers now seek us out, demanding to know why none of our students were on their class roster or asking for them to return next trimester. Our students now walk the hallways as their classmates' shout hello and offer high fives in passing. In three years, they have become a part of the Nighthawk flock.</p>

Page: Application Question #3

Question	Answer
<p data-bbox="102 1808 367 1986">Question 3 How do you ensure that your students are connected to the world</p>	<p data-bbox="386 1808 1511 1997">What do you remember most about high school? Was it the time you spent cramming for finals? Or, more likely, was it the friendships you made in clubs, playing sports, or marching with the band? Students at Del Norte High School receive a rigorous education but they are also actively engaged in one or more of the 60 clubs on campus, compete in athletics, or perform in the school theatre, choir, or orchestra. The world of high school for many Nighthawks extends beyond the bell</p>

around them?
Describe the ways in which you do this.

schedule, yet the world of students with autism can be smaller. Many of my students have limited or no verbal communication skills, which hinders their ability to make friends and communicate their desires, and they have difficulty navigating social events independently. To support my students in experiencing a high school social life, I've actively partnered with and co-advised the Del Norte Best Buddies club.

The Del Norte Best Buddies club is chartered through Best Buddies International and pairs students with developmental disabilities with a peer. As a co-advisor, my role is to support peers in learning more about their buddy and helping them break down barriers in communication to form genuine friendships. In addition, I support my students in understanding the dynamics of friendship, program their iPads so they can use them to communicate with their buddies, and role play expected behaviors of friends. I communicate about upcoming Best Buddies social events with parents and chaperone events so my students can have the simple but empowering experience of being with friends on a Friday night without parents. Through Best Buddies, my students have enjoyed Homecoming football games and dances, cheered on the Nighthawks basketball team, reveled in beach parties, and joined community service events such as beach clean-ups.

Best Buddies has given my students confidence, a valued role on campus, and friendships. It has also provided them an opportunity to expand their world into a role of leadership and self-advocacy. Every summer, Best Buddies International hosts a leadership conference in Indiana for students across the United States to attend. Our club sponsored an essay writing competition in the spring for any club member with interest in attending. One of my students, Nathan, surprised everyone by independently writing and submitting his essay to the competition. His essay included his thirty-two goals for improving the club and himself, with a focus on including everyone. Nathan won our club's essay contest and with support from our club president was able to travel to Indiana for the conference. He traveled for the first time without his close family, slept in a college dorm room with roommates, and experienced a whole new world.

Being a part of the Best Buddies club provides all of my students an opportunity to be involved in the social aspects of high school and develop relational and communication skills needed to continue to be involved in the world around them for years to come.

Page: Application Question #4

Question	Answer
<p>Question 4</p> <p>What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe why this is important to you, and how you are addressing this from your classroom.</p>	<p>In special education there are systemic needs to address at the local, state, and national level: namely (1) lack of access to the general education curriculum and grade-level academic content standards for students with the most significant disabilities (autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and deaf-blindness) and (2) implementing evidence-based practices that support students with significant disabilities to be prepared for the college and/or career path that they are capable of. The expectations and pedagogy for students with the most significant support needs must change to prepare them for a fulfilling adulthood.</p> <p>Three decades of special education research since the 1970s has established support for teaching students with significant disabilities in general education settings. Unfortunately, these evidence based practices have been slow to trickle down to practices in public schools. Current research shows students with significant disabilities are four times more likely to be placed in segregated classrooms than students with all other disability labels (Morningstar, et.al 2016). However, increasing the percentage of students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms is not enough—it takes more than simply providing a seat in a classroom. Shifts in special</p>

education pedagogy are required, redefining functional life skills to include access and instruction in general education academics so all students can develop the communication, academic, and problem solving skills needed in the 21st Century.

I have seen the research on inclusive education come to life for students with significant disabilities on my caseload. My students have had the opportunity to access grade-level academic content standards within general education classes and the results have been powerful. They are members of academic, general education classes, contributing to group projects, giving presentations in front of the class, and learning the big ideas of biology, history, and math. In three years, I've seen significant growth in my students' communication skills, social interactions, and comprehension of curricular content. In addition, I've seen a shift in how classmates perceive and understand my students. Once uncertain students, embrace my students, welcome them to class, and ask them to join their group.

The time is right to align K-12 pedagogical standards to cultural shifts in higher education. In 2016, college has become an option for students with significant disabilities in the U.S. Currently there are 247 programs nationwide, affiliated with accredited colleges and universities, providing 2 or 4-year certificate programs for students with disabilities (Think College, 2016). Emerging research indicates the first graduates of these programs experience significantly improved outcomes in employment, independent living, and community participation. To support college and career readiness for my students, I have developed lessons to research entry level requirements and course offerings at local community colleges, facilitated student participation in mock job interviews, and sponsored field trips to visit potential future employers and college tours.

The possibility for individuals with significant disabilities to become productive, valued members of their community is rooted in the expectations and inclusive opportunities available to them as students in American public schools.

Page: Application Question #5

Question	Answer
<p>Question 5</p> <p>As the 2017 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 general public?</p>	<p>Inclusive education represents the promise of an equitable education for all students. If selected as National Teacher of the Year, I believe my unique experiences creating and sustaining inclusive education in K-12 schools would enable me to relate and effectively collaborate with educators throughout our nation. I have worked with the best early childhood, elementary, middle school, and high school educators and regardless of the age of their students they all possess a common characteristic: they believe all of their students can succeed and will do whatever it takes to support their achievement. I would be honored to represent my exceptional colleagues and communicate our profession's belief in the ability of each child to learn and the value of an equitable education for all students.</p> <p>My advocacy for student inclusion in general education enables me to work closely with colleagues from every department on my campus. I have the opportunity to observe all students and directly teach in their classrooms. I witness firsthand how my colleagues continuously share new instructional strategies, technologies, and classroom management tips that I incorporate into my teaching practice. I believe teachers are better when we teach and reflect on our practices, together. In my role as the nation's ambassador for public education, I would share and create a national dialogue regarding the innovative strategies and instructional practices that support each child's growth and education.</p> <p>As National Teacher of the Year, I would also highlight the essential work in equity-based</p>

education that is happening in classrooms and schools across our country. We need to celebrate the progress we are making towards including all students; since 1990 we have increased the number of students with disabilities ages 6-21 who spend 80% or more of their school day in general education, from 33% to 62% in 2013-2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). With this celebration, we should also collectively reflect on our instructional beliefs and practices for our students with the most significant disabilities, who continue to remain segregated at much higher rates, with only 16% of students with intellectual disabilities spending 80% or more of the school day in general education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). We need to promote and share evidence-based practices for inclusive education with our colleagues and communities, and support them in creating educational opportunities that improve all students' access to curriculum, social skills, employment, college, and the community.

Teaching is life fulfilling work. I love the challenge of identifying the best instructional and support strategies for my new students each fall and delight in the rewards of each student's "a-ha" moment that ultimately leads to growth and continued success. It would be an honor to share my experience teaching with colleagues and the public and continue advocating for inclusive education on the national level.

Page: Supporting Evidence

Question	Answer
Letter 1	Download File
Letter 2	Download File
Letter 3	Download File

Page: Complete

Question	Answer
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