

Nominee Statement

Awardee Statement: Innovation, Methods, Leadership

With the internet in their pocket and surrounded by a constant deluge of media from around the world, our students are more globally connected than any generation in history. The internet, satellite broadcasting, and instant information should have made us all more capable of connecting with each other, understanding each other, and knowing the truth. But instead these have allowed us to live in echo chambers of those who agree with us, become numb to violence in the news, and be so buried with information that we struggle to tell truth from fiction. With the rise of STEM education and the overemphasis on data over all other measures of success, the humanities such as literature, languages, and the arts have been pushed aside, and with them has gone a little bit of our own humanity. Our children are losing touch with the emotional world and thus with their capacity for empathy. Barbara Kingsolver once wrote, "Art is the antidote that calls us back from the edge of numbness, restoring our ability to feel for another." It is my fundamental philosophy that, as a humanities teacher, it is my duty to reconnect children with their emotional world and to develop their sense of empathy through careful study of human emotional expression. The teaching of empathy through classical humanities is an innovation not just in classroom practice but an innovation in curricular focus. It is an innovation that reacts to both the social isolation demonstrated by the racial and political strife in our nation as well as the mental health crisis teachers are seeing across America.

One example of teaching empathy in my own class is the way I begin each literary period with what I call a "cultural extravaganza." In our 19th Century poetry unit, for example, I guide the students through a discovery lesson as they explore video clips of the fashion of the day, audio samples of the revolution in music from the classical movements of Mozart to the Romantic exuberance of Beethoven, PowerPoint slides of the changes in English Gardens, samples of the changing poetry of the era, a SmartBoard game I designed to practice with meter, and so much more. After a barrage of information, music, poetry, and knowledge, I let the class remain silent for a long moment and I say "now let me show you why." This is the moment when I show them why we bother, why we read the poem, listened to the song or read the play, and most of all, why I love it. At this moment I bear my soul and tell them all I have ever felt about the work. I tell them what it means to me and what it makes me feel, and I invite them to think out loud about their own impressions. They begin to see that art, music, literature, are the stuff of life because they make us feel what someone else feels. My course asks students to understand the emotional reality of others by connecting it with their own emotional reality through a variety of purposefully designed lessons such as daily expressive writing prompts, student lead Socratic seminars, and using Renaissance sonnet analysis techniques on student chosen modern music. I have been asked often to share my methods of teaching empathy with other teachers, whether it was working as a mentor teacher or for my district's Teacher Induction Program for Success, or in the 50 or more state and local conference presentations and keynotes I have delivered. What I quickly learned was that the difficulty is not in teaching participants to build lessons that inspire empathy, but in teaching them how to create a classroom atmosphere of mutual trust and respect in order to build genuine relationships with students.

NCAE/NEA Involvement

It was NCAE that first encouraged me to find my voice and who gave me the opportunity to spread this message beyond the walls of my classroom. I started as an Association Representative at my school, where I instituted monthly "legislative update" meetings for all teachers. My local affiliate not only trained me in speaking publicly about education, but gave me chances to do so on their behalf. On behalf of NCAE, I advocated for and got a teacher stipend increase in our district, lead trainings for teachers in our district policies, and participated in endorsement interviews of local school board candidates. Last year, with the incredible support of my association, I won North Carolina Teacher of the Year and became the Teacher Advisor to the State Board of Education. In that role, I helped the board craft a "Whole Child, Whole Community Model" that sets a new direction for North Carolina, one that recognizes the humanity of children and includes physical and emotional health as well as academics.

Community Impact

Part of the Whole Child, Whole Community Model I helped craft is to recognize the need to teach empathy by encouraging young people to engage with their communities. I strive to teach my students to be empathetic global citizens through the arts in and out of the classroom by encouraging that community awareness and interaction. To challenge my students to be global thinkers, I have taken students to England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and also made it a personal life goal to go to every location we study in class. I have the pictures of these trips around the room as a reminder to my students that we are all global citizens. I live my own philosophy of empathy through the arts in my school and in my community as well. I have played the trumpet for nearly 30 years, and I used that experience to serve as our school's assistant band director for many years as a way to encourage the arts in our school. In addition to the band, I have acted in school and local theater productions, including singing in the roles of Frankie Valli in Grease and as Gaston in Beauty and the Beast. I bring this love of theater into my own classroom every year through the annual Macbeth project, which has become one of my students' favorites. In it, the students use members of their family and the community to perform and film a scene of Macbeth "on location" in our small town of Belmont.

Professional Knowledge and Contribution

One of the challenges of my advocacy for the humanities and the Whole Child Model has been working with policy makers. That is why one of the most rewarding professional experiences of my career was the North Carolina Education Policy Fellowship Program. In this year-long program we were taught by experts in educational policy, law, and politics while we worked with a group to study an educational topic and complete a policy project on that topic. My project was on Teacher Leadership and I worked with a group to develop a concept for Advanced Teacher Roles in our state which we then shared face to face with Representative Craig Horn, the Chair of the House Education Committee. While working on that project, I travelled to Las Vegas with the Council of Chief State School Officers. While there, I and several employees from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, worked to create the first ever North Carolina Teacher Leadership Plan (which will be presented for approval by the State Board of Education this year). Our plan creates a teacher leadership lattice in order to allow talented teachers to advance in their careers without having to leave classroom teaching. By far my most rewarding professional experience so far, though, has been my work as the North Carolina Teacher of the Year. In that role, I have worked as Teacher Advisor to the State Board of Education, have lead the State Superintendent's Teacher Advisory Council, have travelled to Capitol Hill to advocate for public education at the national level, and have spoken at nearly 100 different education events at the state and national level. I have presented workshops on teaching empathy in the humanities, given keynote addresses to audiences as large as 2,000 teachers, and spoken to hundreds of young people at high schools and colleges around the state to encourage them to join our profession.

Diversity

I never thought teaching empathy would be controversial, but it has had its challenges. I grew up in a mixed-race family and my parents taught me that being born into a society of opportunity such as America comes with a responsibility, an obligation to make all I can of my opportunities and also to work so that all people, regardless of race, creed, or identity may do the same. Soon after moving to North Carolina, I learned my personal history had given me a perspective on tolerance that often challenged my community. At no time was this more apparent than when a student asked me to co-sponsor a Gay-Straight Alliance in our high school. The first year of our club was full of tension, newspaper articles, gossip, and tears. Three years later, and in the midst of a divisive LGBT fight in our state, the GSA is simply a fact of our school, a non-issue that is just one of the clubs on picture day. In a very real way, simply being just another group of kids, is a measure of overwhelming success for this group and the success of empathy.

Advice to Beginning Teachers

Ultimately, the key to teaching empathy to others is to model it ourselves. That is why every time I have the opportunity to talk to young people entering the profession, I always end with the advice to "teach gently." In a letter to his son's teacher, Abraham Lincoln wrote, "To live in this world will require faith and love and courage. So, World, I wish you would sort of take him by his young hand and teach him the things he will have to know. Teach him -- but gently, if you can." Like so many parents and teachers, Lincoln was keenly aware that this world is often no place for children, that the things our children need to know to survive it are dark and sad and often pessimistic. But in that same letter, Lincoln urges his son's teacher to, "Teach him that for every scoundrel, there is a hero, that for every crooked politician there is a dedicated leader. Teach him that for every enemy there is a friend." Lincoln believed that we do not have to steal a bit of innocence for every ounce of experience we give. By teaching empathy in a world of numbers and data, metal and machines, we can make schools a garden of kindness, humanity and hope so that, maybe, they will build a world just a little kinder than the one we built.

Application Type: Awards for Teaching Excellence Application

April 28, 2017

Dear NEA Teaching Excellence Award Panel:

It is with great pleasure and honor that I nominate Bobbie Cavnar, North Carolina's 2016 Teacher of the Year, as our 2017 state NCAE winner for the NEA Foundation for Teaching Excellence Award. NCAE has had many outstanding candidates over the last several years, but Bobbie truly stands out among them. A well-respected classroom teacher from Gaston County, he is a trendsetter in education, a lifelong learner, and is dedicated to his Association.

Bobbie is a well-known advocate for his students, and for public education. Prior to his selection as NC Teacher of the Year, Bobbie was active within his local Association, speaking at Board of Education meetings advocating for resources for his students. He connected individually with local policymakers to help them understand why these needs were critical. He engaged local members to join him in connecting to the school board -- and when they didn't come, he went back to those local members and asked them why. When they told him they were afraid to be there, he responded by actively *showing* them that effective advocacy didn't have to be adversarial, and helped to build power among teachers in his school.

Bobbie serves as an Association Representative, and upon his selection as NC Teacher of the Year, immediately reached out to NCAE in order to build stronger connections on the state level. Each month, he checks in with our Education Policy staff person, to determine if there are issues upon which he needs to focus at the upcoming State Board of Education meeting, upon which he serves as an advisor. He has spoken at NCAE's Instructional Leadership Institute, the NCAE Convention, and the Student NCAE Spring Conference, each time bringing a different message with a consistent theme -- whatever you do, wherever you do it, make sure it's in the best interest of our students. His work as a leader within the Gaston County Unit of NCAE and within the statewide Association has consistently lived up to that philosophy.

As president of the North Carolina Association of Educators, it has been an honor to work with Bobbie , and to come to know him better, because he is truly an example of what a teacher leader can do when empowered by his school, his administrators, and his Association. His impact on the education community, and the community at large, cannot be understated. I am honored to call him a colleague in the field of education, and proud to present him to you for this prestigious award. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Mark D. Jewell
President, NCAE

Dear Selection Committee:

I am honored to recommend Mr. Bobbie Cavnar for the NEA Award for Teaching Excellence. Mr. Cavnar has taught both of my children and continues to be an influence in their lives. My daughter, Mary, was a student in Mr. Cavnar's Advanced Placement English 12 Literature and Composition course in the fall of 2013. Mary, like so many of her friends, was excited to have Mr. Cavnar her senior year. This "rite of passage" for many Belmont teenagers was something she had looked forward to since the beginning of high school and the actual experience surpassed all of her expectations. Mary is now a junior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and often remarks on how Mr. Cavnar's guidance and teaching strategies prepared her for both the academic and day-to-day challenges she now faces.

I saw Mary fully immerse herself into Mr. Cavnar's summer reading assignments and was pleased to see her enthusiasm continue throughout the semester. She never complained about the rigor and felt that the class was always engaging. Mr. Cavnar selected and assigned readings that helped Mary explore the author's details of imagery and symbolism in literature. She often commented that "Mr. Cavnar just teaches us to look at things differently." His constructive feedback was invaluable and helped Mary grow tremendously as a writer. In fact, Mary's choice of majoring in Journalism is directly related to the influence of Mr. Cavnar's class. Mary would talk about the setting of his classroom and how it made her feel as if she was away from everything for ninety minutes a day. She loved his use of a reading area as well as the décor of a British red phone booth and lamp post. She said that not only did Mr. Cavnar have incredible knowledge about the subject, but his own travel and life experiences would help bring a story or character to life. Mr. Cavnar's influence and direction is the reason that Mary chose to study at the University of Nottingham in England this year.

My son, Craig, was a student in Mr. Cavnar's English 12 Honors course in the fall of 2015. Craig had always looked at Language Arts as something "he had to do" and never seemed to engage himself in the curriculum the way he did in other subjects. Additionally, he lacked academic confidence in this area. Through Craig, I saw the exact same things I did with Mary. Craig often remarked that Mr. Cavnar could bring any story to life and that time passed quickly in class. Craig became completely captivated by his *Macbeth* project and the meaning behind difficult poems such as *Beowulf*. His confidence grew as he successfully grasped the content. Craig is now a freshman at North Carolina State University enrolled in an Academic Writing and Research English course. He came home last weekend just to pack his notes from Mr. Cavnar's class -- just one more example of the excellence Mr. Cavnar portrays in the classroom.

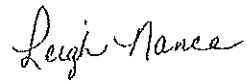
Mr. Cavnar fosters a strong connection to parents, while at the same time recognizes that high school seniors should begin the transition into young adulthood. From my perspective, I believe what makes Mr. Cavnar so distinct is the way he prepares his students for a lifetime of learning, not just a semester. He shares his knowledge of various subjects and he sparks their curiosity. He emphasizes group collaboration, explaining its importance in the world. He conveys his delight in learning and this clear message makes the student want to learn more as well.

One of the most valuable things both of my children learned from Mr. Cavnar was the joy of seeking balance in life. They learned to make time for exercise, because Mr. Cavnar was often seen running through town or riding his bicycle to school, and they recognized the benefit. Both Mary and Craig began to spend more time with friends and extended family, because Mr. Cavnar was willing to share part of his own life and demonstrate how important socialization is. He showed that he was real, had a sense of humor, and he was optimistic about each of his student's future. Moreover, he helped both children with proofreading college essays and provided tips on the SAT writing section. He is the type of influence every parent hopes for and every teenager needs.

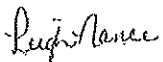
Mr. Cavnar is the strongest advocate for public education I have ever been associated with. He has worked tirelessly at the local, state, and national level. As we face a time when public schools are under attack, I can think of no one else I would rather have supporting students and teachers than Bobbie Cavnar. His passion, intellect, and communication skills are such an asset to education.

As adults, we can all look back to that one teacher who inspired us and made us want to be more than we ever thought possible. I often reflect on a teacher that helped me gain confidence. These are the things magnificent teachers do; they make us better students and eventually better adults. They stay with us for a lifetime. I know that Mr. Cavnar has done, and will continue to do this for both Mary and Craig. My husband and I are so grateful for Bobble Cavnar's character, love for education, and inspiration. I recommend him for this honor with absolute confidence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leigh Nance".

Leigh Nance

A second handwritten signature in cursive script, identical to the one above, reading "Leigh Nance".

March 19, 2017

To: The NEA Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence Selection Committee

Re: Mr. Bobbie J. Cavnar, North Carolina Nominee

Greetings Committee Members:

First of all, as a 26-year career Educator and member in North and South Carolina, I want to thank you for all you do to support the successful education of all of our students across the nation.

It is indeed my honor and privilege to compose this letter of recommendation on behalf of one who is quite seriously the single most outstanding and effective teacher I have even known. I met Bobbie when I became the Director of Bands at South Point High School, where both he and I currently teach. Bobbie had been hired there a year or two earlier than me, and was among the first faculty members to welcome me.

As I began to settle in and get to know my students again, as I had taught many of them in the feeder program at Belmont Middle School before coming to South Point, I began to learn the landscape, if you will, of South Point High School. The dominating feature in the landscape was football, and on Friday nights Belmont was like a small, but intense college town coming out by the thousands to support its home team.

Then the next most important point of enthusiasm, and even wonder of the landscape, was Mr. Bobbie Cavnar! As the 12th Grade Honors Teacher in the English Department, it was clearly the hope and goal of all rising seniors to win, yes I said, "win", a seat in his class. Personally, I loved English in high school and in college, but it only magnified my already well established "Geek" status, with Band as its strong foundation. At South Point High School however, English with Mr. Cavnar was truly the ultimate status symbol of cool! Seeing his name on your schedule for the upcoming school year was seriously like winning the lottery for students and parents alike. This one man, with his extraordinary passion for literature and learning, his gift of inspiration, and his sincerity, literally shifted the paradigm of this school and community.

Having performed in Marching and Concert Band in high school as a trumpeter, as well as having marched with the great Florida State University Marching Chiefs, Bobbie was still a fan, supporter and advocate for music, and for our South Point Band Program and its members. In fact, Bobbie joined our Marching Band Staff to assist with Brass and Drill Instruction, where he served our kids with fantastic musicianship and leadership for three seasons. He brought the same passion, creativity, and sincerity to our Band room and practice field he displayed in his own classroom.

What I especially appreciated was seeing first hand how he held each student fully accountable for his/her personal growth and success in the band, as well as the success of the entire ensemble. He had no problem calling them out on their laziness or half-effort, but he did so in such a way as not to denigrate or demean them as a person. When he was finished with them, they knew that they mattered...they knew they were truly important...and they were inspired to do more, to try harder.

As a faculty member, I overhear students talk about their other teachers. Sometimes they just come right out and say what they think of teachers directly to me. I've heard both positive and negative about many here, including about myself. I can honestly say that every comment I have ever heard from students regarding Mr. Cavnar has been beautifully positive and inspired. This has been true each of the thirteen years I have taught here thus far. I see their admiration when he is chosen by the Senior Class to represent them in the Faculty competitions taking place during the big "Black Friday" Pep Rally each year, and those seniors cheer him on with so much energy. I see it when he is chosen by the Senior Class as the most outstanding Teacher at our annual Spring Awards Ceremony, year after year.

When it was announced that Bobbie was named North Carolina Teacher of the Year for 2016-17, our campus was elated! When our, then, Junior Class realized what this meant, they were heartbroken. Their hopes of being in Mr. Cavnar's class were shattered when they realized he would be away from campus fulfilling his responsibilities as the NC Teacher of the Year for the entirety of their senior year. Truly bittersweet for those kids. However, Bobbie's inspiration has continued to reside in the building, even in his physical absence. For all of these kids, regardless of their grade level, even for the Freshmen who don't know him yet, Mr. Cavnar is "their Teacher of the Year!". The class of 2017 still loves him, even though they missed out on their one chance to be in his class. Their pride in him, his achievements, and who he is as a person, still resonates with our seniors.

In our community of Educators, Bobbie served us very well as our NCAE Representative. We could not have asked for a better representative. His intricate knowledge of the myriad of political movements, proposals and strategies effecting the education of our students honestly astounds me. His interest in the big picture is genuine, and I truly believe this is because his motivation, i.e., the success of our students, is his passion. He truly believes in, and operates on the notion that, "Education is the Great Equalizer...!". Along with the life, health, strength, safety, success and love of his family and friends, this belief is the nucleus of who Bobbie Cavnar truly is.

At the risk of preaching to the choir, Teaching is not just a career, a springboard to higher levels of positions or achievements, or a simple paycheck. Teaching is a calling, one of great reverence, sacrifice, and devotion. In my career as both a student and a teacher, I have been incredibly fortunate to know some folks who were, and still are, not only great teachers and role models, but were and are also great people who genuinely love our kids and our country. Of all these marvelous angels, none is greater than Mr. Bobbie J. Cavnar.

Thank you for recognizing our nation's most devoted Educators, and for all you do to make what we do in the classrooms worthy of this great calling!

Sincerely,

Timothy M. Hamilton
Timothy M. Hamilton
Director of Bands
South Point High School
906 South Point Road

Belmont, NC 28012
Sch. 704-836-9612
trnhamilton@gaston.k12.nc.us