

# What It Takes to Be a Top Teacher



Four teachers and two principals discuss the environments that helped produce award-winning educators



Every year, the National Teacher of the Year Program honors teaching excellence by recognizing the best teachers state by state across the country. But beyond a passion for molding young minds, what do the nation's top teachers have in common? They receive continuous support from school administrators and peer professionals.

Schools that produce Teachers of the Year forge collaborative cultures that encourage teachers to learn new skills, take risks, and be the best they can be, say the principals and teachers who staff them. For this article, we asked two principals and four Teachers of the Year for specifics on the strategies that helped them win recognition.

Tracy Hilliard was Maryland's 2018 NAESP National Distinguished Principal<sup>®</sup> and leads Centerville Elementary School in Frederick, Maryland, where a 2018 state Teacher of the Year finalist, Karima Sharper, teaches special education.

Brian McDaniel was the 2018 California Teacher of the Year and is director of bands and choirs at Painted Hills Middle School in Desert Hot Springs, California.

Becky Mitchell was the 2018 Idaho Teacher of the Year and teaches English, drama, physics, and chemistry at Vision Charter School in Caldwell, Idaho.

Melissa Romano was 2018's Montana Teacher of the Year and is a fourth-grade educator at Four Georgians Elementary School in Helena, Montana.

And finally, Aaron Pope and Keith Noyes of Belmont Middle School in Belmont, New Hampshire, are the state's 2018 NAESP National Distinguished Principal<sup>®</sup> and 2019 Teacher of the Year, respectively.

We asked them what makes them and their schools excel. Here's what they said:

### How can principals create an environment that encourages teachers to give their best?



**Tracy Hilliard:** Any teacher will thrive when they feel appreciated and respected, [and] being a cheerleader for the staff is one of my best strategies. Highlight the instruction you see in classrooms via a staff newsletter. Be in the classroom on a daily basis. Be an active listener so [teachers] know their voice is valued. Teachers who execute on a high-performing level need reassurance that they are making a difference.



**Melissa Romano:** Encouraging teachers to give their best is about creating an environment in which teachers feel valued, respected, [and] supported. Strategies that encourage collaboration can help create a culture of support, and teachers who feel supported want to give their best.



**Aaron Pope:** Having teachers put in 100 percent each day starts with a positive school culture. It's important to provide an environment for students and staff that is safe and allows individuals to take risks that benefit the school community.



**Keith Noyes:** The best environment for a teacher is one where he/she feels that their voice is heard, one where collaboration among colleagues is encouraged and expected, and one where administrators, parents, support staff, and teachers work as a team to best meet the needs of the kids.

### What do you want principals to know about the teacher's role?

**Romano:** I want my principal to remember the daily challenges of working with a room full of students with varying learning and social-emotional needs. Also, I'm surrounded by amazing, talented colleagues; make time available to talk to them. I may be a seasoned teacher, but I find great value in mentoring and being mentored.



**Brian McDaniel:** My role is to be an architect of dreams for my students. I establish student habits and routines that can be applied [elsewhere] to maximize the transfer of knowledge and discovery. Principals need to meet with teachers to develop a shared vision of what schools can be, then spend their energies helping make those dreams into reality. My principal worked with me to establish an award-winning music program.

### What is the difference between coaching, evaluating, and mentoring teachers?

**McDaniel:** Coaching is key to developing an educator's practices. Evaluating is assessing teaching effectiveness. And a mentor is someone who guides a teacher from their own experiences and proven practices. In other words, coaching is about teacher discovery, evaluating is about teacher effectiveness, and mentoring is about teacher development.

**Hilliard:** Coaching helps a person realize what their career goals are. Mentoring is used to allow the teacher to grow under the direction of a teacher leader or principal, providing expertise and modeling instructional strategies to build that person's capacity. Evaluating is a formal measure [that] indicates teacher ability [and] provides the teacher with resources to help build teaching capacity.

### How does the teacher "diversity gap" impact teaching and learning at your school?



**Becky Mitchell:** Our elementary schools don't often have male teachers, especially in the early primary grades. Having a male role

model at that early age is an important aspect of the teacher diversity gap.

**McDaniel:** I spend a significant amount of time teaching jazz—a genre that is not dominated solely by one group of people. As a result, my students are invested in their education through personal connections to the content being studied. They are able to see themselves in their jazz heroes—Arturo Sandoval, Billie Holiday, Gene Krupa, and Miles Davis. However, I would like to see curricula across all subjects where students can see their cultures represented.

**Hilliard:** We are very diverse; 39 languages are spoken here. Two years ago, we began to look at the literature in classrooms, and have conversations about how to meet the needs of the diverse population. Literature won't solve the diversity gap, but our school system is trying to grow and retain minority teachers so the gap can stop growing.

### What have been your most rewarding professional development experiences?

**Romano:** The most rewarding professional development opportunities have been those that have resulted in a positive change to my teaching practice. Professional development that is built into my day and school year has been extremely beneficial. Summer professional development is often too late for the challenges I face in the classroom.



**McDaniel:** I recently had the opportunity to travel to Japan as an ambassador of the California Teacher of the Year Foundation. I struggled to communicate and, for the first time in my life, was able to understand how my English-language learner students feel. This changed how I teach.

**Pope:** Our school has professional learning community time built in to allow [teachers and administrators] to work together on schoolwide initiatives that support student success. Without this, consistency in instruction and effective communication wouldn't be possible.

### What do you do to maintain your involvement in the profession and community?

**Keith:** Being inquisitive is something we ask kids to do every single day. We, as adults, need to be just as inquisitive to allow for continued growth as professionals. [This] means collaborating frequently with colleagues and sharing knowledge and best practices [with] other schools. Visits allow us to reflect on the journey we have gone through, how we have overcome obstacles along the way, and how we still are pushing to perfect our craft.

**Romano:** Now that [my own children] are older, I have found that being involved in a union has allowed me to be an advocate for education, teachers, and students. I am also involved with state groups such as the Montana Council for

Teachers of Mathematics. Social media has also created opportunities to grow my network.

**Hilliard:** I continue to be a part of professional associations, attend staff development, and keep current with research, and I am currently working on my doctorate. I connect with the community by informing them of events at our school and communicate with the staff and scholars involved in the programs.


**Mitchell:** It's important to be an active part of statewide professional organizations. Attending and presenting at conferences maintains relationships with fellow educators.

### What would you tell new principals about getting the best out of teachers?

**Hilliard:** You don't need to be [a teacher's] best friend, but instead be their best cheerleader and a model of respect and hard work. To have a positive impact on student achievement and teacher capacity, let your teacher leaders create teams that promote a diversity of opinions [and help them] be risk-takers. Let the school's vision drive your teacher leaders to lead.

**McDaniel:** Try to schedule time each week when you are available to listen to your teachers. Some of my most stressful situations seemed to dissipate after I had a five-minute discussion with my principal; just being heard lowered my anxiety, and the discussion that followed built our relationship and trust. Teachers are willing to climb uphill for a principal who invests time and compassion.

**Mitchell:** I can't say enough about face-to-face communication. Long emails can't convey the right emotion when change is needed. Beyond communication, remembering and relating that administration and staff are on the same team is vitally important.

**Romano:** Listen to your teachers! Create a culture where asking for help is OK—a culture of respect and appreciation. Provide opportunities for growth. Recognize the day-to-day hard work teachers put in. Show you care! 



### SHOW SOME APPRECIATION

Principals in award-winning schools make themselves available, Teachers of the Year say, and value teacher contributions.

To show teachers they are appreciated, Hilliard recommends stopping by classrooms frequently and leaving teachers positive notes recognizing their instructional capacity and student progress.

