



Sarah Brown Wessling
National Teacher of the Year 2010

the NASBE Interview

Sarah Brown Wessling, an English teacher at Johnston High School in Johnston, Iowa, was named National Teacher of the Year in 2010. Wessling earned a bachelor's degree in English education and a master's in English literature from Iowa State University and is a national board certified teacher in English language arts/adolescence and young adulthood. Melinda George, president of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, interviewed Wessling on June 23, 2015.

What do you see as your mission as a teacher, and how did you get into this journey?

I started out as a broadcast journalism major. After a year, I realized I didn't actually like that writing very much, and I didn't think the camera liked me much, so I changed to philosophy. I changed a third time and went to the psychology department.... It was a moment of epiphany: I was walking through campus at Iowa State—I don't know if the sun was shining just right or something—but I realized I wouldn't have to give up all of these things I loved if I went to a classroom. I walked straight to the college of ed and said, "I'm going to be a teacher."

Tell me a little about how your students would describe your classroom.

A place where we laugh. I think that they would describe it as a place where they have a voice. They would describe it as a place of challenge, a place that offers them an experience. One of my goals is that they leave feeling they had an experience grounded in literacy and learning, one that taught them not only about the purpose of language in their lives but, more important, their role in a larger world.

What does it mean for your students to be ready for college, career, and citizenship?

They need to be able to apply things they're learning to new situations. They have to be flexible. They have to be able to handle situations that are unpredictable and do those things with communication skills: reading carefully and critically, understanding how to listen.

How do or don't the new content standards in your state support this deeper student learning?

Standards are a wonderful compass.... At the heart of them is the idea that we should teach students how to think. It's just as important to remember that it's not the standards that do the work. It's almost as though we envision them as a character in this larger narrative—the standards are the ones that are going to make the difference. We need make sure that we don't rely on that notion [but rather] we rely on the understanding that it is how teachers and how school districts interpret them; nothing replaces that interaction between teacher and student or learner and learner.

What does personalized learning mean to you?

I'm at an advantage because I teach writing, a very personal endeavor. Every time I ask students to write, I'm personalizing their learning because they get to choose what they write about. They're getting feedback that's for them specifically.

Can you describe experiential learning that you feel made a difference for a student?

I had been getting fed up with traditional final exams, so I decided to take a leap: I asked every student to deliver a commencement address that was not a cliché. We spent time looking at poor commencement addresses [and] amazing commencement addresses. Through that process, they figured out criteria. Then every student delivered their address. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my career because I got to see every student for exactly who he or she was. We laughed, we cried, and we were amazed. They used symbols. They went from the concrete to the abstract. They used anecdotes. They used logic. They referenced text. They wove in things that we had read throughout the year. Most important, one of the students stood up and gave an incredibly personal address. At one point in it, he stopped, looked at his peers, and said, “I’m telling you this story because I trust you.” I realized at that moment what it meant to have an experience. Those kids are never going to forget that day because they understood they had created a community, a space in which people could be vulnerable and know that that’s part of learning.

Are there supports in place that you would advocate for every state? Are their supports or policy that get in the way?

I hear these stories over and over about misinterpretation of the standards funneled through something related to an assessment or an evaluation—people talking about lessons that are taught in isolation, evaluators who are going around rooms looking to see that people are at certain point on a pacing guide, or that they are checking off boxes on an evaluation form. While those things are meant to elevate learning, what actually happens is that takes us further from it because those actions focus on surface qualities. I’ve been in classrooms where teachers have everything in that room [it] looks like [they] should, but they are just turning the page one day to the next. I have been in classrooms where I might not see an objective on the board, I might not see someone else’s determination of what a good lesson plan looks like, but I see genuine learning: teachers who know their content so well that it comes alive

for their students. So this larger conversation about support is actually about empowerment, the degree to which we are going to empower teachers to make sure they are staying human in the classroom.

How do you want to be held accountable for the success of your students?

Any one measure doesn’t give you the entire picture, and the entire picture shifts over time. It is important for teachers to be able to show that they have moved students. I don’t know there’s only way to show that. My experience going through the National Board certification process has been really formative in how I see the role of being evaluated.... I’m trying to figure out how I move individual students. One of the other things that I had to do during that process is a deep analysis about practice. It’s not summarizing what I’ve done in the classroom, but it’s making what’s very implicit to me very explicit to someone else. That process has absolutely been crucial in my growth as a teacher.... It’s important to have other sets of eyes in the classroom, whether that’s an administrator or a coach or someone else. But what I would want to be most evaluated is not necessarily what they saw, but what I did with what they saw and how I used what they saw.... We’re always riding a really fine line between garnering feedback that can make us really better and creating fear, because as soon as we create fear, teachers shut down. This is what humans do. I know what’s going to make me a better teacher is not being isolated. The more isolated I am as a teacher, the less effective I’m going to be.

Are there policies that allow you that leeway to be able to do things differently?

It’s not a policy that makes me feel I can make that leap [toward deeper learning]. It’s the support of my administrators who trust me enough to say, “All right, if you think this is going to work, then OK, we will give it a try.”

How do we as a profession improve an atmosphere of trust and collegiality systemwide?

That’s the tough one.... I wish I had the panacea. I wish I could say, “If we did this one thing, or these five things, it would all be better,” but the truth is it’s going to be a combination

of a degree of protection at the policy level, but more than that, the ability to grow people.

Are there ways your teacher prep program helped prepare you?

My program taught me I was ready to engage in a lifetime of figuring it out. I felt ready to struggle, and that's a really important characteristic. Understanding the importance of professional networks was important. I spent a lot of time in classrooms prior to student teaching—something like 300 hours—and that part of my experience was formative.... It comes back to whether a program has formalized mentorship or internship; it is incredibly important to have people who help you understand the classroom. We still largely do it in isolation. If it weren't for video, we would see far fewer classrooms.

Describe your best professional development experience and what makes it so valuable.

The most beneficial professional learning helps teachers to reframe what they know and to think more carefully about their practice. It helps them determine ways in which they can be a learner, too.... When I'm [teaching teachers] the most beneficial things are not when I explain steps of a strategy but when I ask them to be metacognitive about their experience and work to transfer that. Establishing problems of practice becomes really important.... They want to investigate what's not going well. On the other side of professional learning, a few experiences had a huge impact on me as a teacher, and they all have things in common: They were rigorous, and they involved student work.... I had to discern where my learners were and how I was going to get them from one point to the next.... I oftentimes tell people that I'm more afraid of my mediocrity than of my mistakes.

What can we do to better prepare teachers to be leaders?

Connecting them with other teacher leaders is important. Teachers need to be told that what they're doing is special because a lot of teachers really don't know it. It speaks to the isolation we experience in the profession. Making sure that teachers get out of that isolation is crucial to leadership.

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continue to build professional learning communities within our schools, strong instructional leaders in conjunction with highly qualified teachers are critical for raising the bar for all students.

Lessons for State Boards

Although it is too early to judge the impact of these reforms on teacher quality in West Virginia, much less the impact on student outcomes, it is possible to draw early lessons from efforts to reset the course for teacher preparation in my state.

Commitment from the top provides an unmatched opportunity for state action. The governor's call to increase literacy and reading by third grade, combined with national research and trend data on student literacy, created a sense of urgency that brought constituencies to the table around a common goal.

Buy-in is important. Representation from all higher education institutions in the state was reflected in all stakeholder groups and steering committees, with multiple opportunities to provide feedback. Efforts to collaborate paid off. Colleges and universities willingly participated in the TPA pilot and have requested more opportunities for their students to participate TPA after the pilot is completed.

National organizations provide important support. West Virginia relied on them for meeting facilitation, research, resources for planning and implementation, survey development and data analysis, as well as grant funding from NASBE and the Benedum Foundation. ■

¹National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Education Progress (2013). In 2013, 27 percent of West Virginia fourth grade students tested at or above proficient, compared with the national average of 34 percent.

²E. R. Tomblin, State of the State, speech delivered February 13, 2013, in Charleston WV, <http://www.governor.wv.gov/media/pressreleases/2013/Documents/2013%20State%20of%20State%20Final.pdf>; West Virginia Senate Bill 359, 81st session (passed March 22, 2013), http://www.legis.state.wv.us/Bill_Text_HTML/2013_SESSIONS/RS/pdf_bills/SB359%20SUB1%20ENR%20PRINTED.pdf.

³West Virginia Department of Education, High Quality Educator Stakeholder Committee, preliminary report, white paper (2014), <https://wvde.state.wv.us/certification/educatorprep/documents/WHITEPAPER.pdf>.