

Kurt Russell, a high school history teacher in Ohio's rural community of Oberlin, believes education can transform students' lives. He emphasizes cultural relevance and diverse representation in the curriculum for the 9th-12th grade classes he teaches: African American history; U.S. history; International Baccalaureate History of the Americas; and Race, Gender, and Oppression. Russell also serves as a lead teacher for the school and advisor for the Black Student Union, Student Council and Junior Class. Russell received Teacher of the Year awards from the Oberlin Heritage Center (2009) and the Oberlin chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (2019). As the head coach of the boys' varsity basketball team, he has received numerous awards, including the Lorain County Basketball Association Coach of the Year and the Northeast Ohio Coach of the Year. Inspired by his first Black male teacher, Russell made the decision in middle school to pursue teaching as his career. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in history and a minor in Black studies from the College of Wooster. He obtained a Master of Education in curriculum and instruction from Ashland University and continues to take courses in child development at Oakland City University.

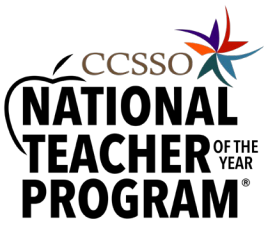
Application Questions

- 1. Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning? How did that learning influence your students? How are your beliefs about teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit?**

I created the Race, Gender, and Oppression course to enhance the History Department's curriculum and allow students to examine the injustice different groups face in America. One might be surprised to hear that this course is offered in Oberlin, a rural city, located twenty miles south of Cleveland, Ohio. Growing up in Oberlin and graduating from the high school where I teach, I know how important it is to expose students to these topics.

The course deals with analyzing the Declaration of Sentiments' impact under the Seneca Falls Convention. The basis of the study is to provide an understanding and appreciation of the plight of women, under extreme circumstances, to gain equality. As the lesson unfolds, I challenge students to describe current issues of inequality that affect women and other marginalized groups. Students then engage with one another through a process of information sharing called A Walking Gallery.

There were several reasons why this lesson is engaging:



1. It speaks to current issues. Students are more engaged when the subject is relevant and relates to meaningful discussion points that deal with injustice and equity in our current climate.
2. Students focus on themselves as the exercise prompts them to examine inequality through their lens, making the lesson a personal discovery.
3. Students gain a sense of empathy towards oppressed groups. The Race, Gender, and Oppression class became a catalyst for starting the LGBTQ(+) club at Oberlin Senior High School.

Students are prompted to reflect on the interrogative word, “why”. They respond to the following questions. Why does injustice occur? Why are some individuals in our society discriminated against? Why must people combat the injustices presented to others? With these questions, I engage all students by differentiating and scaffolding my assessments. Students choose to discuss the questions orally or write in their journals. This assignment allows students to select their learning outcome, which empowers them and encourages them to see themselves as stakeholders in assessing their learning.

My commitment to examining injustice, exploring restorative justice, and facilitating cultural acceptance is the basis for this lesson. With turmoil and divisiveness throughout the nation, the safeguard against intolerance and unacceptance is education. Teachers are responsible for equipping students with the tools to combat the maltreatment of oppressed groups. This lesson serves as a vehicle to cultivate their understanding of injustice and ways they would address it in their own lives.

- 2. Describe a project or initiative you helped create which contributed to the improvement of overall school culture. What was your role, and what is the status of this project today? Please include evidence of student impact.**

Due to the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others, I realized the need for Oberlin High School teachers and students to have dialogue and discourse about race in America. With the support of my administrators, a fellow teacher, and several dedicated students, we organized the Black Student Union (BSU) in 2019. The goal of the BSU is to promote cultural enrichment with an emphasis on school-wide solidarity. As one of the group’s advisors, I help to plan bi-weekly meetings, invite guest speakers, and organize field trips. We use a restorative practice agenda since the BSU members are from different racial, economic, religious, and gender identity backgrounds. Out of the forty-five BSU members, seventeen are White.

The impact has been far-reaching. Through restorative practice, the suspension rate of Black high school students decreased. Notably, behavioral referrals for students of color decreased from 60% to 45% since the conception of the BSU. A significant reason for this decrease is the continuous education of faculty by our student members about



empathy and positive relationships. Enrollment of White students in the African American History and Race, Gender, and Oppression classes have increased. The school's overall atmosphere is energized, barriers and stereotypes are breaking down, and an inclusive community is being built. In addition, our high school BSU collaborated with the Black student organization at Oberlin College to form a mentorship program. Due to the Covid pandemic, the meetings have been held over Zoom, but it did not affect the momentum of our goal to broaden the Black experience in education. Twenty students from the college's organization work collaboratively with the BSU to bridge the gap between the college and the high school.

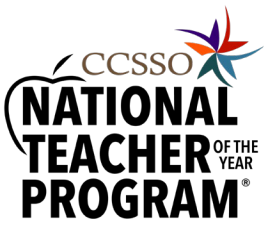
During our bi-weekly meetings, we not only discuss problems but work towards solutions. In early 2020, we met with the chief of the Oberlin Police Department to discuss the perceived harassment of police officers towards teenagers of color. What developed out of this meeting was remarkable. The chief formed a youth advisory committee that meets once a month to discuss the relationship between law enforcement and teenagers in Oberlin. This momentous act by the chief of police and students has improved the overall culture of our entire community.

3. How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. How did you collaborate with others (e.g. colleagues, students, families) in this work? Please include evidence of student impact.

During my first year of teaching, I attended an educational workshop on curriculum development and heard these words, "Education is not solely for the classroom." The speaker's words resonated with me and shaped my understanding of "holistic learning." I decided to return to my hometown of Oberlin, Ohio and teach at the high school for this reason.

It was in the eighth grade that I first saw someone who looked like me standing in front of the classroom. Mr. Thomas wore a tie to school every day and addressed each student as brother or sister. Since he lived in town, we would see him around, and he regularly attended student events. For the Black males in Oberlin, Mr. Thomas displayed an uncommon profession for people who looked like us. I also wear a tie to school every day and greet students when I see them. I continue this level of representation because it is essential for students to feel respected and see their teachers as an active part of the community.

Besides teaching, I am the varsity boys' basketball coach, advisor for student organizations, a church trustee, a recreational supervisor, and served on the board for various local organizations. My presence is important, and I hold myself to the highest standards because I know I am a role model for all students, especially Black males. My community has an enormous sense of pride because I am the first Black man awarded



Ohio's Teacher of the Year. This recognition symbolizes the years of work I have done to foster positivity and empathy within and outside the classroom.

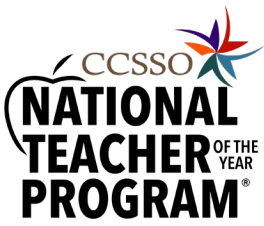
A few years ago, a colleague and I started a program called Dress for Success because we saw a need for Black male students to change their self-perception and how their peers viewed them. Every Wednesday, they would wear a button shirt with a tie. As the weeks progressed, male students from other ethnic backgrounds began to wear shirts and ties. This program promoted a sense of belonging, positivity to rid stereotypes, and encourage self-worth. We noticed a change in attitudes and behaviors as the students felt more confident. For many participants of Dress for Success, their grades improved as they discovered a positive aspect of their education.

Family involvement is crucial in providing support to students. I have been an active liaison between the schools and disenfranchised families since I started teaching. As I grew up in Oberlin, I know many of the families personally, so they have a level of trust and comfort with me. I am often the point of contact when a high school student needs assistance, and I advocate for their best interest and needs. I have worked closely with local agencies to provide support for families and employment opportunities for students. It takes a village to mold and shape young minds, and I often serve as the conduit to resources and opportunities that expand their learning.

As a history teacher, I encouraged students to be active, engaging citizens participating in the democratic process. I have partnered with our local historical society, Oberlin Heritage Center, to expose students to local history. Oberlin has a rich, diverse, and impactful history that has shaped American history to a large degree. As a result of this connection, students in my classes became docents and provided tours to visitors about the town's history. During the town's celebration of Juneteenth, my students lead the Freedom's Friends: Underground Railroad and Abolitionist History tour. Also, several of my students organized an afterschool tour for students in the district. I am reminded of the saying, "Each one, reach one, and teach one."

4. What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, teacher, and innovator about this issue, both in and outside of the classroom walls.

One of the major issues facing public education today is the lack of cultural sensitivity and responsive practices within the classroom. The Oberlin City School District (OCSD) is a rural community with a diverse student demographic, encompassing learners from all backgrounds. Yet, students of color fall short on standardized testing and academic achievement compared to their peers. According to OCSD's data, White students score 10% higher on Ohio's End-of-Course exams than Black students. As a lifelong learner, I'm devoted to research, inquiry, and exploration to close this achievement gap.



Baruti Kafele's book, *The Equity and Social Justice Education 50: Critical Questions for Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Black Students* has been a focus of my study to promote cultural sensitivity and responsive practice within the classroom. Dr. Kafele's idea of making education relevant to all learners and exposing their "likeness" in the curriculum has inspired my teaching. To yield academic gains for my students, I explicitly broaden the scope of my lessons to incorporate all students in my classroom and ensure diverse representation is highlighted. My efforts to create a sense of belonging for all students has increased academic achievement and engagement in my classroom. As a result, there is no significant disparity between White and Black students' grades in my classes.

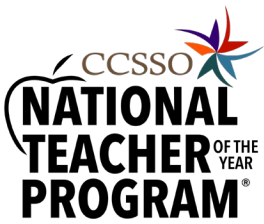
I encourage cultural sensitivity and responsiveness and have been afforded the opportunity to use my research to bring awareness to other educators within OCSD. Along with several of my colleagues, I started a book study to build cultural awareness. Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* was our first book. DiAngelo's work allowed our staff members to examine best practices in being a responsible teacher to ALL students.

I want to empower students to become advocates of multicultural and diverse learning. Students from different backgrounds belong to my daily lunch group where we discuss the school's racial climate. From these conversations, students got excited to organize a "diversity day" that focused on the theme "Who are you?" The topic examined student significance and importance towards society. Students invited community members to speak on their experiences and share their thoughts on the meaning of cultural awareness.

With the Ohio State Board of Education rescinding Resolution 20, an anti-racist legislation that condemned hate crimes and White supremacy, the need for inclusivity in our school's curriculum is of utmost importance. Therefore, attention must remain fervent towards this issue to produce the best learning environment for all children. Cultural awareness in the classroom validates all cultures which helps students discuss topics with sensitivity and care.

5. As the 2022 National Teacher of the Year, you serve as a spokesperson and representative for all teachers and students. What is your message? What will you communicate to your profession and to the public?

Both of my parents attended segregated schools during the Jim Crow era. The lack of basic resources, funding, and safe infrastructure were prevalent among Black schools in the South, which caused a significant disparity among White and Black children during this era. Although the decades have changed, this disparity has not fully closed. It saddens me that a zip code still determines the quality of education a child receives.



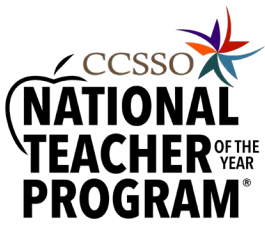
Marginalized students and families are still disenfranchised within our educational system. Children living in inner-city and rural areas should obtain the same rich learning experiences and opportunities as children in the suburbs. Our schools need equity. We need to ensure that education is inclusive for all students and not determined by wealth or prestige. While I cannot alter time or reverse past practices or policies, I can help construct opportunities for students of all races, ethnicities, religious affiliations, and gender identities.

I want to make sure the history curriculum is relevant to all students. In addition to teaching mainstream courses like United States History and International Baccalaureate History of Americas, I created three new courses; African American History, Black Music in the African Diaspora, and Race, Gender, and Oppression. Through these courses, I provide an inclusive and safe environment for studying the histories of diverse groups and encouraging all students' voices to be heard.

We are living in a time when our students need conscientious teachers more than ever. Social unrest, blatant discrimination, infectious diseases, and other societal ills have caused emotional and physical stress on our youth. Students deserve an education that's impartial, caring, and holistic. We can do this by continuing to focus on social-emotional learning, cultural responsiveness, and character development so that all shareholders will benefit and be rewarded with stronger and more responsible students.

We must promote equity and diverse representation in our school curriculum and in our teaching faculty. This will empower students and encourage them to be stakeholders of their education. Education is more than brick and mortar, it's personal with humanistic emotions that transcend race and class as it alters and shapes one's future. Nelson Mandela stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world".

Teachers can inspire and change lives so we must strive to be restorative and stimulate lifelong learners. We can do this by establishing an ecosystem of support built on trust and honest relationships. From school employees to families and businesses, all facets of our educational system must redefine and reshape opportunities and experiences for all students. An example of this collaboration happened for me when I needed funding for my students to attend a regional diversity workshop in Cleveland. The community interceded and paid for the expenses. We spent the day focusing on respect and equity within schools with 200 students from throughout Northeast Ohio. As a result, in 2019, Oberlin High School students started the Black Student Union (which welcomes ALL students). One of the first activities was a trip for students to see the movie, Just Mercy. When given support and opportunities, students will rise to the occasion.



Resume

Education

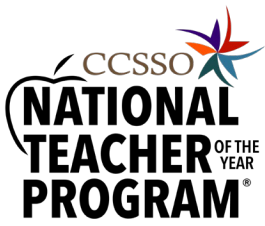
School Name	Degree	Major	Years Attended
Oakland City University	Child Development	N/A	2014-Present
Ashland University	Master of Arts	Curriculum / Instruction	1996
College of Wooster	Bachelor of Arts	Education	1994

Certifications

Certification	Year Obtained
5 yr - Professional High School History	2018
5 yr - Pupil Activity	2021

Work Experience

Title	Organization	Years in position
Lead Teacher	Oberlin High School	1.5
History Teacher	Oberlin High School	25
Boys Varsity Coach	Oberlin High School	15
Summer School Teacher	Oberlin High School	7
Supervisor	Oberlin City Recreation	27



Leadership Experience

Position	Organization	Years in position
Diversity Committee Member	Oberlin City Schools	1
District Representative	Oberlin Education Association	13
District Interviewing Team Member	Oberlin City Schools	17
Student Teacher Mentor	Oberlin High School	25

Award or other recognition

Award/recognition	Year received
Ohio Teacher of the Year	2021 (for 2022)
Kurt Russell Student Scholarship	created by Alumna 2021
Colored People Oberlin Chapter Teacher of the Year	2019
Ohio High School Athletic Association State Award	2018
Lorain County Basketball Association Coach of the Year	2021, 2020, 2017, 2014, 2011