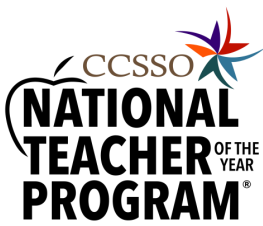


2022 National Teacher of the Year FINALIST



Joseph Welch
Pennsylvania

School: North Hills Middle School
Subject: Social Studies
Grade: 8



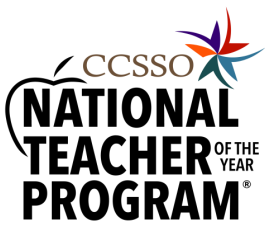
Joe Welch is a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Certified Teacher and currently teaches eighth grade U.S. history at North Hills Middle School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He has taught within the North Hills School District for 15 years, previously serving as seventh and eighth grade team leader for more than 10 years. Welch holds a Bachelor of Science in secondary education, Bachelor of Arts in history, and Instructional Technology Specialist Certification from Duquesne University. He earned a Master of Arts in teaching from California University of Pennsylvania, where he also earned his Pennsylvania principal certification. Currently serving as the Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year, Welch was named the 2019 National Middle Level Educator of the Year by the Association for Middle Level Education, as well as the 2019 Pennsylvania Social Studies Teacher of the Year. In 2018, he was honored as National History Teacher of the Year by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. He often presents his experiences at regional, national and international conferences and has authored a book, *Interpreting Primary Sources with Stop Motion*. Welch was recently elected to his local school board and serves on teacher advisory councils for the National Constitution Center; the Gilder Lehrman Institute; and Penn State University's Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Initiative. An Apple Distinguished Educator and PBS Lead Digital Innovator, Welch is a strong believer in bringing equitable opportunities, diverse stories, personal emotions and community connections into lessons and in fostering experiences that promote student-led conversations to enact changes aligned to their passions and interests.

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?**

Social Studies classrooms have long been portrayed in popular culture, movies, and television as spaces for memorizing dates, names of battles, and lectures centering on passive learning. But, in my classroom, I borrow a line from the award-winning musical *Hamilton*: "When you've got skin in the game, you stay in the game." A unit that defines me as a teacher is the process when my students develop into community historians, sharing a community member's narrative with the world.

My eighth grade American History course focuses on giving students opportunities to develop personal connections with our community by researching and sharing individual stories. Each year, my students complete an oral history project that answers the question, "How does history shape a person's story?" Students choose an event that aligns to their interests, research that event, and conduct an interview with someone



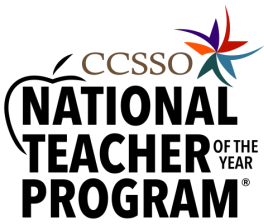
who was directly impacted by or participated in that event. Students combine their research and interviews into one of two projects, allowing for student choice and creativity. They can either write one chapter of a class multi-volume book that is published on the Apple Bookstore or produce a video documentary using their school iPad.

Students excitedly choose topics they are passionate about, selecting local, national, and worldwide historically-significant events. Their interviewees are as diverse as their topics. My students have interviewed Holocaust survivors, voters in the first post-Apartheid South African election, Vietnam War prisoners of war, air traffic controllers based in New York on September 11, environmentalists responding to crises, refugees fleeing the Iron Curtain, and hundreds of others. Many students also choose to tell stories of local impact, such as how the decline of the steel industry in Western Pennsylvania affected families, or how local events like tornados in 1985, blizzards in 1993, or the closure of a town amusement park affected citizens of the region.

I believe in empowering students to select these topics and I support students by connecting them with community organizations. I partner with personnel from our city's major research library to set up on-site visits for every student, ensuring that they have direct access to archivists, researchers, and high quality resources ranging from books, databases, microfilm, and, perhaps most impactful, local archives of photographs, newspapers, and journal writings. My students hold sources in their hands from past generations that support the learning from their oral history interviews. To make this possible, I secured grant funding from a national middle school organization to provide for transportation and to purchase video recording equipment. By securing community support in addition to local and national organizational support, I can ensure that every student has access to high quality materials, resources, and more equitable access to technology to create their books and documentaries.

This learning led to the creation of a four-volume community history book that was published and made available for free on the Apple Bookstore and in local libraries as well as student-produced video documentaries that were made accessible online. No matter the topic, students reported an underlying theme: they were more connected to community and family members they interviewed. For instance, Hannah, a 14 year old, stated, "I never knew all of this about my grandmother. She lived an exciting life!" In the past five years, my students have told more than five hundred stories, each with a recorded oral history from a community member, each in the unique voice of my students' words.

This unit represents so much of what I believe about teaching. Teaching that is student-centered and results in collaborations between educators, family members, and the community is the most meaningful. Effective teaching requires a team effort. This oral history project is the result of a partnership with an English teacher, school librarian, and



a special education teacher, who each played a role in making this project accessible to all students.

Second, this project demonstrates the most important and impactful aspect of history education: History is not just dates, places, and names. History is a living subject that is full of personal stories. When we focus on those stories and on diverse perspectives, experiences, and voices, we truly bring history to life and allow students to develop personal connections with the emotions of others.

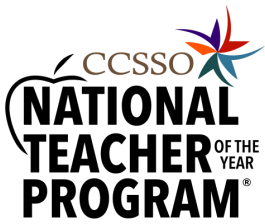
Third, learning in schools must reflect partnerships with the community. Students give back to our community while learning from it, sharing narratives across generations, socioeconomic status, and backgrounds into a common idea: we are all part of our nation's history and we all have a story worth sharing.

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.

Less than a decade ago, I embarked on a path that transformed the culture of my middle school, making it a building that values student-centered inquiry, technology integration, and innovative teaching and learning. Several years ago, I led a team of teachers in redesigning our 8th grade United States history course at the same time as Apple released its first iPad. I worked with my Assistant Superintendent to secure grant funding that allowed us to purchase class sets of iPads and MacBooks for the building's three 8th grade social studies teachers.

With new technology, we leveraged these tools to foster student inquiry. Using iBooksAuthor, an application released in 2012, I led teachers and reading specialists to program, write, and deploy a 12-unit interactive book on student iPads that became an ecosystem of lessons and activities. Publishing the first ever K-12 teacher-authored interactive book in my state, we shifted from a curriculum that emphasized rote memorization to a class culture that emphasized student creations, including narrated animations, podcasts and songs, 3D designs, grade-wide augmented reality museum walks, and graphic novels. The result, based on student narratives and parent surveys, was greater engagement and a more thorough understanding of history.

Building upon the success of our social studies transformation, I then aimed to transform teaching and learning throughout my entire middle school to foster a more innovative culture. I successfully applied to become an Apple Distinguished Educator in 2015, a lifelong acceptance into a worldwide network of educators who advocate for innovation. I then lead professional development sessions in the summer, weekly Lunch and Learn workshops, and Tech Tip Tuesdays to share not only what I had learned, but also to highlight innovation that was occurring in our school.

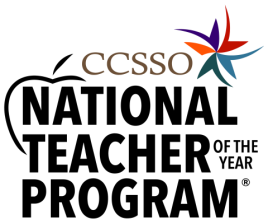


I initiated an effort for all staff in my school to earn an Apple Teacher designation with the mission of “build[ing] skills on iPad and Mac that directly apply to activities with students.” In less than a year, I provided training that led to every teacher and counselor in my school becoming Apple Teachers. But this was only the beginning of our culture shift.

Within our school, we developed a culture of sharing, constant learning, and a desire to push the limits of what was possible to engage our students in equitable and meaningful ways. This led to my building being selected by district administration to be the first 1:1 iPad school in our district in an initiative known as Project Connect, with every teacher and student being provided with an iPad. I co-chaired a steering committee to recommend best practices, application selections, and training opportunities for all staff and families. I facilitated meetings with our school’s stakeholders, formulating the goals of the project with students, families, and administrators, and later developing training and informational videos about Project Connect, highlighting the innovative environments now in our school.

In just a few years, we became a model school for technology innovation, and I led the application effort of earning a rare designation as an Apple Distinguished School in both 2017 and in 2019. I also authored a book about our school’s shift that is available for free on the Apple Bookstore. In 2017 and 2018, I organized visits from over 50 schools around Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, giving their students, teachers, and administrators the opportunity to learn from our students and teachers. I was proud to have my school’s students facilitate these events; students shared their learning, teaching attendees how to podcast, produce songs, code drones, print 3D objects, create StopMotion movies, and produce documentaries, all highlighting the impact that a culture of innovation has had on their own learning.

Project Connect’s success in my middle school led to our school being named a National School to Watch and our district adopting Project Connect district-wide. When Covid-19 closed buildings, this improved culture of innovation placed us in a position to better respond to a shifting educational landscape and better meet the personalized needs of our students and families. I am proud to have shared our transformative story at the International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE) conference multiple times and to have represented our school as part of the Apple Distinguished Schools Global Summit. I feel empowered to have had a significant role in leading our school’s improvement in creating a culture at North Hills Middle School where students, teachers, and administrators are creators, innovators, problem solvers, and collaborative leaders in education far outside the walls of our school.



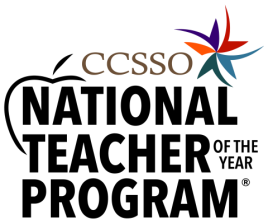
3. **How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. How did you collaborate with others (e.g. colleagues, students, families) in this work? Please include evidence of student impact.**

Just as learning from personal narratives is essential to learning history, developing personal connections with the community is essential to transcending the classroom and preparing students to be lifelong contributors within their own community.

As the Lead PBS Digital Innovator from Pennsylvania, I partnered with our local PBS affiliate, WQED-Pittsburgh, as the network announced its release of a Vietnam War documentary series in 2016. I presented an idea to the network to put my students at the forefront of community research to share the narratives of Western Pennsylvania Prisoners of War (POW/MIA) and share their stories with the community.

Students gracefully conducted difficult conversations with local veterans and their families. One group of students recorded an hour-long phone call interview with a veteran who spent six years in a Vietnamese prison camp. One student described the call as “life changing.” My students and my interactions with colleagues, professional groups, community leaders, and our local Veterans Administration made a culminating event possible: a Vietnam War Community Conversation. My classes and I publicized the event widely, all with the goal of hosting an evening event that would allow community veterans to share their stories, students to share their research, and for PBS to debut their documentary series right within the walls of our school building. It was an emotional night, exhibiting an outpouring of interest from a capacity crowd, with reflections that it was both a healing experience for attendees and a learning experience for students. One community member wrote to my students, “My husband...had tears in his eyes watching about the POW’s. He’s a Vietnam era vet. The students did a wonderful job.” PBS provided a personalized Vietnam War era POW/MIA bracelet to each student with the engraved name of the community veteran they researched. This experience inspired several of these students to be our school’s first participants in National History Day (NHD), leading to one student being named a state medalist for her research.

Each winter, my students collaborate with our community, resulting in a community oral history project described in Prompt 1. This allows students to conduct individual oral history research of community members and share those stories. They interview relatives, neighbors, and community members of all ages and backgrounds. I arrange for my students to visit the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh in downtown Pittsburgh over the course of several days, allowing for smaller groups to have meaningful interactions with research experts and community archivists. This project was named the 2017 Association for Middle Level Education Community Collaboration National Award recipient! Thus far, my students have recorded and shared over 500 oral histories from



our community members. Their work has been accessed by people across four continents on the Apple Bookstore.

The connections and learning from both of these experiences captivated my students and led me to develop the Middle School History Club. Believing in the power of place, I look for opportunities to connect students with the physical locations significant to our community and world. For example, I led approximately 50 club members on a trip to several locations in downtown Pittsburgh, exploring how our region has played a significant role in our nation's past. I also organize our Washington, D.C. trip, bringing more than 2,500 students to our nation's capital over the past decade.

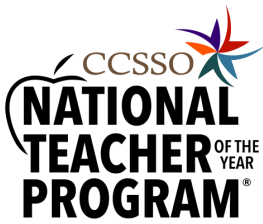
When Covid-19 occurred, I wanted to continue to connect the community with my students. I began teaching each class "live" from areas in our city and region to tell diverse stories, from the life of Roberto Clemente, to the intertwined lives of George Washington and Gyuasuta, to the battlefields of Fort Necessity. Although my school is within miles of several of these locations, many students shared that they had not ever visited them. It helped to open students' eyes that our local history helps to define who we are as a community. I also partnered with WQED-Pittsburgh to film lessons that were broadcast over WQED's public television channel, reaching many families who may have not had reliable internet connectivity.

I co-chaired the first National Junior Honor Society chapter (NJHS) at my school, advising hundreds of students as part of the program. NJHS members built relationships with local borough leaders, organizing a variety of events including community clean-ups, Valentine's Day events for senior communities, and holiday celebrations for veterans.

These community collaborations are authentic and impactful experiences, displaying how we can learn from our community, but more importantly, how students have the opportunity to become leaders and storytellers in our community.

**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.**

For the last two decades, funding, class time, and resources have been diverted from social studies and history classrooms throughout the United States. Now, our nation finds itself embroiled in conversations about those same classrooms, sometimes in inflammatory discussions about what should or should not be taught and what should be included within the teaching of our nation's history and civics courses. From Pennsylvania to California and every state in between, a major public education issue is



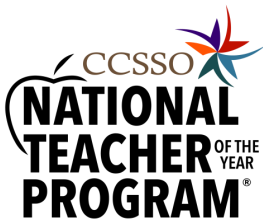
the need to provide equitable, fact-based, inclusive, and meaningful civics and history education.

This is an issue that affects all ages and schools. As standardized testing shifted focus away from the teaching of social studies, our nation settled into a metaphorical sleepwalk that is civics and history education in America. It is beyond time to open the conversation about how to improve the teaching and learning of civics and history, widening the lens to ensure that all people are included.

To do this important work, I collaborate with colleagues, scholars, policy makers, and organizations to commit to my learning, be a more effective educator for my students, and be an innovative leader in pursuing change across the country. A first step that I took was to apply, on behalf of my school, to become a Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Affiliate School, providing students with access to 80,000 primary sources from our past, removing our reliance on textbooks. By replacing textbooks with primary sources, we can remove the filtered lens to our past. Why read an editor's view of the origin of the 4th of July when you can put John Adams' letters or Frederick Douglass' speeches in front of your students?

I began attending on-site Gilder Lehrman Summer Teacher Seminars with colleagues and leading historians. Invigorated by thoughtful debate and discussion, I became a Gilder Lehrman Master Teacher, serving as the lead teacher for multiple seminars. In the summer of 2020, I coordinated a seminar titled The South in American History alongside Professor Dr. Edward Ayers. Over 150 educators enrolled, engaging in necessary dialogue on how to have difficult conversations, how history relates to modern controversy, and how certain narratives take hold. I helped to launch Gilder Lehrman's History School in April of 2020 which has provided real-time courses to over 5,200 students on topics that prioritized marginalized voices, including lessons on Children of Japanese Internment, Women of the World Wars, Social Change in Athletics, and Youth in the Civil Rights Movement.

I joined the Teacher Advisory Council for the National Constitution Center, Gilder Lehrman Institute, and the Holocaust Education Initiative at Penn State University. I have presented on national panels about teaching difficult subjects for the Association of Middle Level Education and the Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement. In my first meeting with Pennsylvania state legislators after being named Teacher of the Year, a priority was to begin a conversation about writing inclusive social studies standards and funding for students of all backgrounds to have experiential civics education opportunities. I also joined the Pennsylvania Teacher Advisory Council and Teach Plus program to learn how to better advocate for policy change. I led an effort of a diverse group of 25 highly-effective history educators in America to publish an op-ed, Self-Evident Truth: Unequal American History in Schools. This was a statement as to the status of social studies education in schools, roadblocks to advancement, and



pathways forward. To help advocate for improvement, I ran and was elected to my local school board.

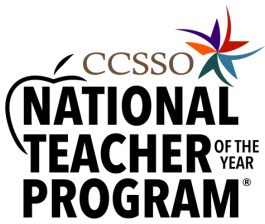
In my own classroom, my learning made a significant impact on students. On the first day of every school year, I ask students to draw a response to the prompt “What does American history look like to me?” 80 percent of students responded with a drawing of either George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, and only two of 124 drawings depicted a woman in history. Washington and Lincoln are significant figures to our story, but we also learn through the sacrifices of Stanley Hayami, actions of Stokely Carmichael, words of Ida B. Wells, and artwork of Titus Kaphar. My advocacy and teaching is best summarized by the response of one of my students responding to what American history looks like to them on the last day of school. Lily, 14, again drew George Washington famously crossing the Delaware, however, widened the view of her drawing, displaying a woman and a man of color asking “may we get on the boat?” It’s time to get everyone on that boat.

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?

In April of 2011, Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, learned of his diagnosis with terminal cancer. A month later, Randy delivered his final lesson, now well known as the Last Lecture. He offered many powerful life lessons about making your time count, inspiring the lives of others, and persisting through challenges. As teachers, this advice aligns with the work we do every day. One sentiment stuck out to me as he addressed his students and colleagues: “when there is an elephant in the room, introduce them.”

Within education, there is an elephant in the room: there is a battle over the soul of education in America. The time is now for society to rise up to support students and teachers. The time is now to make school communities more diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces. The time is now to ensure that schools across America continue to move in the direction of providing opportunities for all children, no matter where they may live, what they may look like, and what their background might be.

The last two years have already tested the resolve of teachers. Time and time again, teachers and school communities face down challenges and continue to connect, educate, and take care of the nation’s most important people: our students. Schools work together with families to provide social, physical, and emotional support from food service programs, counseling initiatives, and a variety of teaching models to engage students. Frankly, more has been asked of teachers over the last 24 months than at any other time in our nation’s history. Students, too, have been more flexible and have faced greater challenges than any group of students in a generation.

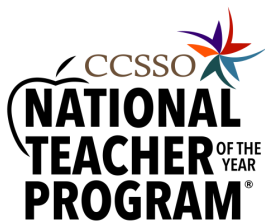


Schools and teachers in America have held up to the weight that has continually been placed upon them. But, challenges continue to mount for teachers and schools. Some voices hope to move our education system backwards to a previous era rather than towards a more hopeful future. From legal challenges against measures intended to keep students safe, legislative attempts to restrict curriculum, disparagement against initiatives to foster inclusivity, rising mental health needs, and teacher retention issues, important conversations are needed to support students and teachers.

Despite these challenges, I see hope. I feel optimism for the future of education in America. I have belief because teachers can do something about each of these challenges, facing down that elephant in the room. Teachers have always figured out ways to solve problems within classrooms. It is time to use that resolve to solve problems beyond our classrooms. Just as teachers have long inspired students to find pathways to make their communities better places, we must now model this for students just when our education system needs it most.

I am confident because, just as teachers make a difference each day in the classroom, we can make a difference every day in the board rooms, the policy discussions, and the legislation that shapes America's schools. To ensure that the best interests of all students, teachers, and schools are preserved, teachers need to not only be at the table where decisions are made, but to have a voice and a vote on those decisions. Teachers must have a hand in the important policy work that directly impacts our learners. Teachers have the compassion, expertise, and forethought to see the world of education with a wide lens that captures the backgrounds of all of our children. Put simply, to address the elephant in the room of increasing challenges to our schools, teachers have the opportunity to run for local offices and advocate that our schools are places of equity, inclusivity, and hope. Teachers already do this in classrooms. From school boards to advisory committees, from steering commissions to parent-teacher organizations, teachers are trusted voices. I believe teachers can do this. Our colleagues and our students are counting on us. It's why I ran for my local school board.

It is time to have conversations about the soul of education in America. It is time to trust teachers to be in positions to make decisions to advocate for our profession and students. Teachers have a powerful voice. Teachers have the power to move decisions and policies forward so that each child is seen, heard, celebrated, and empowered for who they are. We have an obligation to ourselves and our students to advocate for the future of education in America and we must do it. I look forward to doing this work alongside you.



Resume

Education

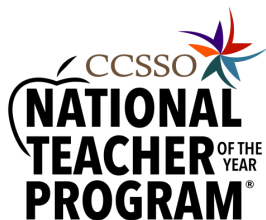
School Name	Degree	Major	Years Attended
California University of Pennsylvania	K-12 Principal	Educational Administration	2012-2015
California University of Pennsylvania	Master of Arts in Teaching	Advanced Secondary Education	2008-2010
Duquesne University	B.A.	History	2003-2007
Duquesne University	B.S.	Secondary Social Studies Education	2003-2007
Duquesne University	PA K-12 Specialist	Instructional Technology	2003-2007

Certifications

Certification	Year Obtained
Principal (PK-12)	2015
National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (EA-Social Studies/History)	2011
Middle Level Mathematics and English (6-9)	2007
Instructional Technology Specialist (K-12)	2007
Secondary Social Studies/Citizenship (7-12)	2007

Work Experience

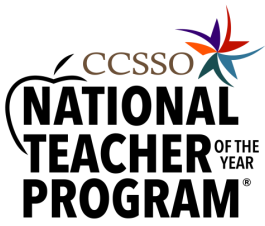
Title	Organization	Years in position
Social Studies Teacher	North Hills School District	2007-present



7th and 8th Grade Team Leader	North Hills School District, Pennsylvania	2009-2019
Master Teacher and Seminar Coordinator	Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History	2019-present
Consultant, Presenter, and Distinguished Educator	Apple Education	2019
Author and Lead Programmer of Regional iBook	Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Pennsylvania	2015-2016

Leadership Experience

Position	Organization	Years in position
Teacher Advisory Committee	Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, National Constitution Center, Penn State Holocaust Education Initiative, PA Teachers Advisory Committee, Duquesne University School of Education Advisory Board	2020-present
Professional Development Presenter	NCSS, PETE&C, ISTE, PA Teach, PDE, Duquesne University, St. Vincent College, PSEA, AMLE, PASCD, GLI, MSCSS, Allegheny IU	2007-present
Board of School Directors (Elect) and Strategic Plan. Comm.	South Fayette Township School District, Pennsylvania	2021-present
Faculty Advisor, Founder, Sponsor	North Hills History Club, National History Day, Washington D.C. Trip Coordinator	2012-present
Policy Workgroup - Act 13 in Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania Department of Education Educator Effectiveness Workgroup	2019-present



Award or other recognition

Award/recognition	Year received
2020-2021 Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year	2019
National Middle Level Teacher of the Year, Association for Middle Level Education	2019
National History Teacher of the Year, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History	2018
Lead Digital Innovator for Pennsylvania, PBS Learning Media	2016
Worldwide Apple Distinguished Educator	2015