2023 National Teacher of the Year FINALIST

Jermar Rountree
District of Columbia

School: Center City PCS- Brightwood Campus
Subject: Health and Physical Education
Grade: PreK-8
Jermar Rountree is a health and physical education teacher at Center City Public Charter School, Brightwood Campus. In the Center City network, he also serves as the District teacher lead for the physical education and health department. Outside of Center City, he has led the state-level Physical Education Leadership Cadre in evaluating elementary and secondary health curricula in order to share that information with physical educators throughout the District.

Rountree started his career at the YMCA in Danbury, Connecticut, in 2004, working with children of all ages. He also started his own business teaching day care personnel how to deliver safe and fun physical education to their students. In 2012, Rountree moved to Washington, D.C., to begin teaching physical education and health to elementary students.

Rountree teaches not only game activities and sports, but also teaches students about their social, emotional and mental growth. Rountree thrives on connecting his students to the community through partnerships. He has established in-school, after-school and weekend partnerships with organizations to help kids grow in all facets of life. He serves as a voice of the community and has relationships with every student and family at Center City PCS, Brightwood. Rountree graduated from Western Connecticut State University with a Bachelor of Arts in history in May 2008 and holds a Master of Arts in elementary education from Relay Graduate School of Education.

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? Show how your deliberate instructional decisions create student learning and reveal your beliefs about teaching and learning.

In 2021, if you arrived at Center City PCS’ Brightwood campus at 8:15AM, you would have seen students arriving armed with their breakfasts, which consisted of trays of McDonald’s frappes, family-size bags of candy from Walmart, and backpacks full of chips from the corner store. Forty-five minutes later students would be asking about lunch, letting me know they were hungry. I realized that families were giving money to students to get food for the day, but students had no idea how to use that money to choose the most nutritious options to help them stay full throughout the day.

This experience inspired me to create a unit cycle this past school year that focused on helping students understand the current eating habits in their community, how to
develop healthy eating habits for themselves, and how to share information about healthy eating in their community.

I believe that it is important for students to feel a connection to the material they are learning, and to understand the impact that their learning can have on the rest of their lives and on their community, so we started this unit by looking at our own city. First, we explored the demographics of Washington, DC, and students dug into the categories of race and ethnicity, income, percentage below the poverty line, educational attainment, and languages spoken at home. Then we used Google Maps to compare the food options within walking distance of our community with the options in more affluent DC neighborhoods.

After this discussion, we read a few articles about obesity in America, including articles that focused on obesity in people of color, or in high-needs communities. Students began to make connections between lower-income areas and the lack of healthy options in their neighborhoods. During a field trip to Walmart (located across the street from our school), we collected information about what food was being sold. We compared nutrition labels and collected data about healthy versus unhealthy options including cost per serving, available options, locations in store, and packaging. Watching students get excited as they discovered the healthier options hiding at McDonald’s and realizing there are even healthier ice cream choices at Walmart was one of the highlights of this project for me.

After we finished collecting data and discussing what we found, we began creating our own book based on the “Eat This, Not That” book series. Students selected either a restaurant from the neighborhood, a chain restaurant located close to us, or an aisle in Walmart, and then compared the nutrition values of all the food sold in those restaurants or aisles. Then they picked the healthiest and least healthy options to showcase, keeping price in mind as well. Together, we created a 75-page book we shared with families as a guide to eating healthy in our area.

Throughout this unit cycle, I was able to engage all students by using multiple modalities of gathering information, such as watching videos, collecting in-person data, reading articles at differentiated reading levels, and conducting multiple class discussions.

Our community of learners come from many different backgrounds, so a part of the unit was spent comparing what some families buy at the grocery store compared to other families. The students were also able to discuss what recipes from home might be healthier than food made in restaurants.

I taught this unit in a manner that led students to understand healthy food availability through the lens of equity. As students became more involved in the unit, they began to
question why some neighborhoods had healthier options in their grocery stores, and why it was so much more expensive to maintain a healthy diet.

This unit gave students the opportunity to make a connection to themselves in the beginning by exploring their neighborhood and their own eating habits, and then opening the exploration wider to their family, friends and our community. In the beginning, students were shocked about the nutritional value of what they were consuming, but as we further explored the inequities in healthy options in our area, the students’ concern shifted from a personal reflection to a broader reflection about the inequitable policies in our country. This lesson cycle truly helped students become more reflective citizens.

Now, when students are given the opportunity to buy their own food, they take the time to compare nutrition information and choose something that keeps them full longer, and helps them stay focused throughout the school day.

2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in that deliberately creates culture in your classroom or school. Describe how you build and use relationships to collaborate and to teach students of all backgrounds, abilities and identities. What is the status of the project today?

Five years ago, a set of 24 bicycles provided a transformative opportunity for my students, and their families, to grow physically, cognitively and social-emotionally as they stepped outside their comfort zones to learn, then embrace, a new skill. These 24 bikes also provided me with a tremendous growth opportunity from a pedagogical perspective, as well as a powerful tool to bring together our school community.

Learning to ride a bike is one of the formative experiences in many children’s lives, especially in high income areas. Research also shows that “after kids started riding, they experienced positively altered brain activity, increased attention spans, boosted moods, and improved fitness and BMI” (Outride.org). Teaching at a public charter school in the heart of Washington, D.C., I realized many of my students had never even ridden a bike. So, when I learned about a grant being offered by Specialized Bicycles, I knew I needed to pursue this opportunity for my students. The aim of the grant was to provide underprivileged communities with access to top of the line bikes and curriculum. I applied for (and was awarded with!) this grant. As part of this opportunity, I attended a three-day professional development workshop in which I learned how to teach biking techniques and bike safety to students and families. The following month, 24 brand new Specialized mountain bikes (and helmets) were delivered to my school.
Immediately following the delivery of the bikes, I utilized the skills and knowledge I obtained during the training to begin implementing a biking program at Center City Brightwood. I started by making connections to concepts my students already had experience with, such as balancing on balance balls and seeing people out on city bikes. Since this was the first bike riding experience for many of my students, I also intentionally included emotional and mental health check-ins throughout the lessons. For example, we talked about how it can be nerve-wracking to try something unfamiliar and normalized vocalizing our feelings with our peers. I leveraged the strong relationships I had fostered with my students and the culture of “try anything once” in our classroom to encourage everyone to try riding. Also, in order to support students of all abilities we had bikes with a variety of settings as well as a stationary bike where students could practice and gain more confidence.

Knowing that I wanted students to be able to take their new skills home with them, I looked for moments to support and educate families as well. At our school based special events, I provided opportunities for families to experience some of the bike safety lessons and even practice riding themselves. Additionally, I leveraged another community based program, Washington Area Bike Association (WABA), and connected families to free programming and camps through that organization.

Once we were ready to go out and ride the bikes I saw the impact on students immediately. We spent time reflecting on how they felt before and after, and they brainstormed some of the ways that having this new physical outlet could support them in their classwork. Additionally, it was incredible to see the world open up just a little larger for so many of my students who rarely leave our neighborhood. Most students in our community walk to school, the grocery store, or a friend's house, but rarely have the opportunity or means to travel beyond their own neighborhood. All of a sudden we were riding through the paths of Rock Creek Park, past the National Zoo, down toward the White House and the Washington Monument. The sheer joy and wonder on their faces while experiencing these new places was indescribable.

We received that grant five years ago and are still utilizing the bikes today. I have worked hard to maintain my relationship with Specialized Bicycles and as their program has grown, so too have the opportunities for my students. Today we are using their middle school-based physical education program called: Riding for Focus (R4F). This program “promotes cycling as an outlet for students to improve their cognitive, physical, and socio-emotional well-being.” Last year I also nominated one of our sister campuses to receive a grant for the bikes. I worked with the physical education teacher at that campus to determine storage options, lesson planning, and possible route selections. It is amazing how two wheels can open up so many paths for my students, for their community, and for me.
3. Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. Show how these community connections dissolve classroom walls and are used to impact student learning and success.

I am fortunate to work at an organization like Center City where leadership deeply values the role of community in our classrooms and supports teachers in building and maintaining partnerships with community organizations.

As a health and physical education teacher it is my responsibility to teach our middle school students about their growing and developing bodies and how to keep themselves healthy and safe. While these lessons are essential, they can also be difficult and awkward for kids this age. Knowing this and hoping to find a way to help my students connect and engage, I partnered with The Grassroots Project (now Grassroots Health). Grassroots believes that schools are the vehicle for changing the way “students think about their health, access health services, and understand their responsibility to support others’ health.” They mobilize and train college athletes to visit schools weekly, provide ongoing mentorship, and teach lessons to our students. Grassroots provides a comprehensive and engaging curriculum centered around three essential components: Nutrition, Social, Emotional and Mental Health, and Sexual Wellness. Many of the athletes who engage with our students are from our area and can relate to our students on a whole new level. While I could easily implement the curricula myself, my students experience a much deeper impact when they learn about these important health topics directly from college athletes.

Another way I intentionally connect my students to the DC community is through a running program for middle and high school students called Teens Run DC. Throughout the eight years I have been involved with this program, our school has had over 70 students involved - whether it was during a lunch bunch program, through after school practices, or as part of Saturday running clubs. Even after my students move on to high school, some of them continue to participate in this program. The program has been crucial in connecting my students with the DC community in ways they would not otherwise be able to connect.

One major aspect of this program is Saturday running clubs. Every Saturday, my students and I meet at the school at 8:30AM to take a city bus, then a Metro train, across the city to a running practice. Together, we have learned time management skills and how to navigate public transportation using maps and schedules. These executive functioning skills are especially important once my students move on to high school, where they must navigate the city by bus and train each day to attend high schools across the city. My students are also building their network of support as once we arrive to practice, my middle school students are then paired with high school, college, or adult mentors in the Teens Run DC program.
Before we begin our Saturday run, the students and mentors talk through a set of self-reflection questions, and set goals both for the day’s run and the upcoming week. These mentorship conversations push my students out of their comfort zone, improve my middle school students’ interpersonal skills and provide leadership opportunities for the high school students. Students learn skills such as how to listen and respond, while also building self-awareness, confidence, and connections with members of their community. It is exciting to see my students outside their comfort zone, growing and learning outside the classroom walls as they build mutual respect with community members.

The most amazing part of the program is when students are able to participate in a number of 5K races across the city. Students have the chance to see a part of DC they rarely see, and engage with a community of runners that is extremely welcoming and supportive.

The impact of this program is unmatched. Students who participate in this program have high self-awareness and greater self-efficacy than many of their peers. They learn to make goals, create action plans, and follow through no matter how difficult. Three of my students even trained and ran a 10-mile race while they were in middle school, and now as high school students are mentoring new middle school students who are working toward the same goal. The relationships I have built with students through this program is the reason why many of them continue to wake up early on Saturdays, and make running a part of their weekly routine.

4. **Describe a time when you grew as a teacher leader and life-long learner as a result of being an advocate in your school, state or beyond. Describe your advocacy, how it helped you grow and how it impacted students.**

I have always been extremely passionate about the importance of health and preserving time for health and wellness education in our schools. Sadly, over the course of my career I have seen the instructional length of my physical education classes shrink from year to year. Knowing how tightly linked movement and physical education is to academic success and mental wellness, I quickly became an advocate for not just maintaining but increasing the amount of time students spend being physically active during their school day.

In 2018, I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the Physical Education Leadership Cadre at the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). This state-level group was comprised of 15 educators who taught physical education and health in DC schools. The goal of the cadre was first to evaluate whether schools in DC were meeting the P.E. and health education curricula requirements, and then to create tools and resources for physical education teachers in order to improve their classrooms. We discovered, not surprisingly, that the vast majority of schools were failing to meet the minimum requirements for physical education classes. As we designed educator
resources our cadre also worked collaboratively with the state education agency on a WSCC (whole school, whole community, whole child) framework that explains the collaborative approach to learning and health. Being a part of this team helped me realize the continued need to advocate for increased P.E. time and I was honored to be a part of the solution.

In addition to advocating for more physical activity in schools, I knew that health and wellness education was another area in which many schools were lacking, including my own school. There were few quality resources to support teachers and very little consistency across schools. I was able to be a part of a team that evaluated and adopted a new health curriculum. The P.E. team at Center City partnered with the state agency (OSSE) to utilize the Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool (HECAT) to vet five potential health curricula. We looked at the curricula through the lens of equity and ultimately decided on a recommendation for our Central Office.

The 2018 cadre met once a month throughout its year long term, and by the end had accomplished several of its goals. The following year, I was invited to lead the 2019 Physical Education Cadre with a small group of teachers in DC. During this time, we reviewed the WSCC framework, and made edits based on equity and accessibility for teachers. I was able to share my knowledge and experience by reviewing teachers’ lesson plans and giving feedback. Additionally, I looked at the data from a number of local education agencies to screen whether or not they were meeting HECAT requirements, and then advised on next steps based on where they fell in their HECAT ratings.

Being a part of this cadre and using my voice to represent our school and community had an incredible impact on me as a teacher and leader. I learned about the power of professional learning communities as I was able to collaborate with so many incredible people throughout the process while also learning best practices that I could take back and turnkey with my school-based team. I have since implemented the framework and structure that we used in many cadre meetings to increase the productivity and collaboration within my school and team. There were times when I needed to compromise or listen to opposing opinions and ultimately weigh the information against our purpose and mission, which is to provide the best possible health and physical education experience to our students. This opportunity to engage with practitioners and policymakers across school systems and at the state level provided me with a tremendous growth opportunity. Most importantly, this opportunity made me an even more fierce advocate and a more confident and skilled teacher for my students.
5. As the 2023 National Teacher of the Year, serving as the ambassador of education for the United States, you have been asked to give a speech to a large audience of teachers. This speech is being recorded and will be shared broadly with a larger audience. What is your message? What is the talk you give? [You may indicate a specific audience. For example, a “back to school” talk.]

As important as it is for students to learn to read and to write, it is just as important to teach students how to take care of their bodies. In fact, there is a direct connection between physical activity and academic success. I am not just saying this because I am a health and physical education teacher. There is a growing body of research focused on the association between school-based physical activity and academic performance among school-aged youth. According to the CDC, physical activity has an impact on cognitive skills such as concentration and attention, and it also enhances classroom attitudes and behaviors, all of which are important components of improved academic performance.

This is why it saddens me to see the time allotted for physical education to shrink from year to year. So what can we do about this?

A few years ago I joined my state’s Physical Education Leadership Cadre, where I now lead a group of P.E. teachers from across DC to come up with solutions to combat this problem. As a team, we have tried to figure out ways to get more movement in classrooms, inspire teachers to incorporate healthy living lessons into students’ core curriculum, and advocate for students to have physical after school activities.

This is not an easy problem to solve, but we are not alone as educators in solving this problem. There are countless community organizations and partners who are working toward this same goal. I have attended various professional development sessions hosted by partner organizations, including SHAPE America, Everfi and other organizations that encourage more physical activity for students. I have also partnered with Grassroots Health, which teaches sexual health through an active curriculum, Teens Run DC, a running and mentoring program, Volo City, an after school sports program, and WABA, the Washington Area Bike Association. These organizations have inspired me and have given my student multiple opportunities to be active both inside and outside of classrooms. As a lifelong learner, I am trying to absorb all the information I can about teaching physical health so I can share it with my students and now with other teachers.

We know schools are doing better at giving students time for physical education, but they are still not always meeting the requirements. As a spokesperson for teachers, I challenge all schools to find innovative and creative ways to meet the physical education requirements and increase movement for all students. This will lead to a win-
win-win situation for all stakeholders involved, including students, families, and educators across all academic disciplines, as we know there is a direct connection between physical activity and academic success.

It is not just our students who need support and time to move their bodies. I also believe deeply that teachers need to take care of themselves in order to be their best selves for students each day. Kids are sponges, they are observant, and they don't miss anything. The way that we care for our own mental and physical health has a huge impact and influence on students. At every school I have worked at, I have offered personal and group training sessions, encouraged staff participation in fun runs and bike rides and have attempted to make physical movement a part of all large staff gatherings. ‘Practice what you preach’ is an age-old adage but it certainly applies here. I would love to see schools support and encourage teachers to use their breaks to take a walk outside or to find a why to be active and move.

And finally lets talk about equity and access - physical health is so important, yet underserved communities often lack the opportunities and basic resources to fully engage both students and educators in common physical activities, such as swimming and biking. As Teacher of the Year, my goal is to elevate this conversation so that the Department of Education and other stakeholders can begin the work of making sure that all students are getting adequate opportunities to move their bodies during the school-day. I am extremely passionate about teaching students all the ways to keep their bodies healthy, and providing a plethora of ways that they can do just that, regardless of the zipcode where they live, learn and play. My goal is to support all educators who aspire to do the same. “Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort.” – Paul J. Meye