2023 National Teacher of the Year
FINALIST

Kimberly Radostits
Illinois

School: Oregon Junior/Senior High School
Subject: Spanish
Grade: 8-12
Kimberly Radostits, a National Board-Certified Teacher (world languages), is a Spanish teacher for 8th through 12th grade and teacher mentor at Oregon Community Unit District 220 in Oregon, Illinois. Her goal is to provide all students with a sense of community in a space where they feel safe and confident that they can excel.

In addition to teaching Spanish, Radostits leads a freshman mentoring program known as Hawks Take Flight, with the goal of keeping students on track for graduation in four years. The program utilizes an early warning system to identify students who are struggling in order to provide them with assistance upon their entrance to high school. This work extends beyond the classroom and is firmly rooted in building strong relationships with students and their families in order to give them access to the skills and support they need to be successful learners and community members. Additionally, Radostits co-directs a New Teacher Academy that provides support and consistent professional development to all new hires in her district to promote teacher retention and district connectedness.

Radostits was named an Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Emerging Leader in 2015. Since being named Illinois Teacher of the Year, Radostits has used her platform to connect with districts around the state, the Illinois State Board of Education and a variety of legislative stakeholders to advocate and raise awareness about the importance of on-track indicators statewide.

Radostits earned her Bachelor of Arts in Spanish language and literature from Northern Illinois University and a Master of Arts in educational leadership from Aurora 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? Show how your deliberate instructional decisions create student learning and reveal your beliefs about teaching and learning.

In 2011, I left freshmen orientation, at the school where I was teaching, after meeting a student named Robert who said that he hated school and there was nothing I could do to change that. The years I spent trying to prove him wrong shaped me as an educator and solidified the beliefs I have about education: that students need to feel valued in order to learn and that the most effective content is culturally relevant and personalized.

I love school and strive to provide an inviting space for everyone. To accomplish this, I start class by greeting students at the door and asking for the password of the day that comes from a shuffled stack of flashcards I store in my teaching apron. The correct vocabulary word grants access to class, where students begin a quick review of the previous lesson. While they work together, I pass out sticky notes of praise and conduct
social-emotional check-ins. This format gives my students a low-stakes, nonthreatening way to ease into Spanish and shows them that I care. I believe that for students like Robert to care about the content I am teaching, they must first feel cared about as humans and be in an environment that is upbeat and positive.

In class, I include reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities every day. I begin by asking students for news in Spanish about their activities, birthdays, or weekends. These interactions make learning relevant and provide the “comprehensible input” that is essential for language acquisition. Comprehensible input is content just beyond students’ current language proficiency, and I provide that while connecting with students and celebrating their accomplishments. For Robert, this meant asking about fishing, and he would beam with pride about his newest “pescado grande.” During my food unit in particular, I was able to connect to his interests by explaining the ways I learned to fish in Mexico and prepare the catch for dinner “estilo ranchero.” He and his peers were hooked as we exchanged anecdotes on the sport of fishing and the preparation of food. This learning personalization connects my students with the Spanish-speaking world, which can feel far away from our rural Illinoisan town.

The rest of class, I deliberately scaffold our language output up to higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. During the food unit, I first ask for choral responses for vocabulary practice on which we work together to build confidence. We then do group activities that feature games I have created to foster collaboration, joy, and community building. During this time, I build relationships with students and I provide formative feedback to individuals - like Robert - who have not felt success with school in the past. By the time we get to reading, writing, and speaking, students have felt success multiple times and are more confident about the tasks that are more open-ended, like crafting letter responses to pen pals in other countries about their favorite foods. This method of scaffolding is effective for all students, including those in our special education program. (I have advocated for such students to take my class.) Now that Spanish has a reputation of being more attainable, the program’s enrollment has increased, and we have added a new section of the course so more students will be exposed to global perspectives.

An example of that exposure is the annual Spanish immersion dinner I started at our town’s only Mexican restaurant. This event gives them context and motivation for further learning by showing them their progress in an authentic way as they interact with Spanish-speaking community members. Most years, I have over 40 students attend this after-school event and several alumni who are willing to support the program and facilitate conversation. In addition to spreading awareness that they can use the skills from class in the real world, this shows my students I care about them outside of school.

As a result, after four years of learning alongside each other, Robert made me cry again as I watched him walk across the stage at graduation. He successfully completed
Spanish 1 and 2 and became my teaching assistant his junior and senior year so he could be a role model for others. I learned that relevancy, personalization, consistent formative feedback, and making sure students feel valued are crucial to reaching every student. I believe my role as a teacher is to instill confidence, compassion, and grit through unconditional love and a belief that all students can succeed with the right support in place.

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?

The bulk of my life’s work has been improving freshmen failure rates not only in my district, but also in the state. As an advocate for students who are disengaged, I have presented at many conferences over the years to share evidence that freshmen with a D average have only a 28% chance of graduating from high school on time. Back in 2007-08, our high school was averaging 273 Fs a year for a class of 130 freshmen. To overcome this, I assembled a small team to pilot an after-school program that we named Hawks Take Flight (HTF), which has now operated for over a decade. For HTF, six teachers mentor the 15% of our freshmen class that is most at-risk of not graduating on time. In our first two years of the program, 27 of the 32 students graduated in four years, which was a drastic jump from previous years. Since then, I have delved deeper into research about Freshmen On-track Indicators. With this information, I partnered with our district data guru to pilot an early warning system that examines student performance in junior high while flagging the major factors that contribute to failure -- missing work, absences, and lack of school connectedness. Utilizing this tool allows us to identify students who need additional support before they even reach our building. As a result, failing grades received by the freshmen class of 2019-20 dropped to just 16.

HTF has been successful because we set specific and realistic academic goals for students and foster their social and emotional growth. The program is 100% relationship-based. When checking in with students weekly, I utilize data points like grades, test scores, and attendance but also pay close attention to their attitude toward school and their needs. I have meaningful, personalized conversations with my mentees and take pride in working with students like Gavin, who successfully passed all his coursework freshman year- despite a junior high experience in which he failed 17 classes. Through HTF, I got to know him personally, set realistic expectations weekly, provided him with consistent and timely feedback, broke down big tasks into manageable chunks, gave him extra homework help when needed, and celebrated his successes alongside him throughout our time together. Additionally, I now lead a gradelevel team in our building that meets weekly to discuss the performance of all freshmen to provide consistent support across content areas.
This work is important to me and my efficacy as an educator both in the classroom and as a teacher leader. I present regularly at conferences about how to utilize trauma-informed practices as well as John Keller's Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction model of motivation to build relationships with students. I demonstrate how to utilize information gained from personal conversations with students to build up their confidence regarding school. Many students who become disengaged do so because of previous experiences of failure. Our model successfully reengages them by providing a trusted adult who helps overcome obstacles and build resilience for the future. For students like Gavin, this approach makes graduating on time, passing difficult subjects, and building personal confidence attainable.

Finally, I am a firm believer that to address failure rates, relationships also need to be built with parents. I send positive notes home after HTF every week so parents know we have a safe space where students can thrive in the school setting. I utilize a messaging app so that parents can contact me any time regarding their students’ progress in school. I have essentially become a case manager for all students in our program (in freshman year and beyond) and parents know they can rely on me so they can stay connected to the school community. These interactions make parents active partners in their students’ education, and students are held to more consistent expectations in school and at home.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I worried my HTF students would become disengaged like many across the country. Instead, the relationships I spent so much time fostering earlier prevailed, and current and former HTF students, like Gavin, stayed connected for support. This is a concrete example that relationships overcome obstacles as our school’s graduation rate has been above state average every year since starting the program. And, for these reasons, I have continued to advocate that other schools utilize our early warning system, which has been adopted by dozens of districts across the country while the format of our mentoring program has also been replicated by several districts of varying sizes.
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.

Although I love teaching Spanish and sharing my “orgullo” (pride) for the Spanish-speaking world, my content is simply a vehicle for connecting with my students. My true passion is making sure that every student I have feels known and valued and is developed into a productive, responsible member of society who demonstrates compassion and resilience. Connecting my students with the greater community around them and around the world is a critical part of this mission.

As a language teacher, I value connecting students to cultures and communities that are different from their own. In our small, rural town, most students do not get many opportunities to travel. To widen their horizons, I fundraise with students and take them on trips to Spanish-speaking countries. Each of these experiences is life-changing and gives them a global perspective that they carry into adulthood. One student, in particular, after going to Mexico with me some years ago, spent the following school year picking up odd jobs to make money for a second trip. All year long she organized donations of vitamins from our community so that she could deliver them to a women’s shelter in Mexico that we had visited the year prior. The look of accomplishment on her face when she was greeted by some of the women of that home will stay imprinted in my mind forever. Ten years later, I reconnected with her and learned that this global perspective and commitment to service influenced her to travel abroad as an international nurse for villages that need support.

Though the impact of these international trips is profound on the students who take them, I also find ways for my students to connect with Spanish-speaking culture closer to home. I started the tradition of a Spanish immersion dinner with my students at a local Mexican restaurant to provide my Spanish students with a cultural experience that makes their learning authentic. I developed relationships with the wait staff and set an expectation that they only address my students in the target language when we visit. Students look forward to this event every year. I often hear that students continue the practice of only speaking Spanish when they revisit this restaurant on their own, and this shows me that students value what they are learning and the Spanish-speaking community members they have connected with.

Aside from the cultural aspect, research suggests that a feeling of community makes a difference in a student’s overall education. As an advocate for freshmen in the Hawks Take Flight program, I looked for ways to jumpstart that connection for our incoming students and took on the role of freshmen class dean. As dean, I planned and facilitated two all-freshmen community service days. I reached out to the community and suggested student involvement at facilities such as our local nursing home, food pantry, library, etc. Additionally, I secured numerous bus routes and found parent chaperones
to help facilitate these activities because they happened during the school day at various locations. This gave students a sense of accomplishment and motivation for future service such that these service days have now become an annual all-school tradition that benefits the community in many ways. The program has even extended into our junior high school.

To promote further leadership skills, I encourage freshmen to start becoming more active in our school community by participating and planning events like movie and/or game nights and running our school concession stands. These activities provide authentic work habits like communication and problem-solving. Additionally, they promote student inclusion that allows students of all backgrounds to engage with a diverse group of peers in a safe environment and to find a sense of belonging. After a tornado struck my hometown – and my own home – in 2015, I saw the full impact of my efforts to strengthen students’ connection to the broader community. My current and former Hawks Take Flight students asked to organize a school wide community service trip to provide tornado relief at a supply warehouse for eight hours on a Saturday. Many of these students had a history of avoiding school and school-related activities, so I was floored to see a bus load of them excited to do some heavy lifting to support an extension of our school community. While we did work on homework on the bus ride home, I took pride in knowing that the bigger lesson was that these students were going to leave our learning community with a heart for humanity.

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 once heard a teacher from the high school say that she didn’t realize that our junior high was located in a town seven miles away even after she had already been in the district for three years. That same teacher didn’t return the following year because she didn’t feel a connection to the community. Then in 2017, our district was in need of 18 new teachers. I had just finished my master’s degree in Educational Leadership and wanted to utilize what I had learned about building strong communities to avoid that type of disconnect again. With that in mind, our dean and I created a program for all new hires that we call the New Teacher Academy. Since its inception, 65 of our 69 new teachers have had their contracts renewed and have stayed in the district.

Unlike our former mentoring program, which lacked professional development opportunities and group connectivity resulting in only four of the 12 hires in my cohort staying in the district, we created a safe space for all our new hires to seek support and advice. Little did I know, this experience would not only make a difference for them but would give me a meaningful learning opportunity to grow in my leadership capabilities.
The kickoff to our academy in August includes an introduction to the administrative team, building tours, and distribution of laptops. What sets our orientation apart is the bus tour we designed of the four towns our district serves. We point out landmarks, important festivals and customs, fundraising opportunities, and resources that are available for families. We show them the diverse backgrounds of our student body, so our new teachers can recognize and appreciate students’ individual differences and can make their instruction more personal and relevant to students’ lives.

What follows that initial kickoff is the true magic of the academy. After numerous conversations with our union leadership and our administration to advocate for funding and extra time with our hires, we structured the program to provide 13 evenings of support. Each event includes a dinner with veteran teachers and an hour of local professional development that is aligned to our district’s needs, such as setting meaningful student learning objectives, making strong connections with families, engaging with the special education community, and utilizing technology effectively. Our veteran and new teachers alike have stated that it is some of the best professional development they could have asked for and our students are now receiving instruction from a cohesive, tight-knit faculty. Additionally, the new hires in our district have collectively raised thousands of dollars for our students from local grants we exposed them to.

To administer the program, I have spent countless hours researching best practice and pedagogy and have improved my written and oral communication skills by explaining to this audience how to utilize technology, access data, analyze student outcomes, and connect with students and their families. Prior to this experience, I never would have volunteered to present in front of my peers; however, now I feel strongly that being a successful teacher leader includes using my voice to advocate for the programs and strategies students need. The experience of creating and leading this program gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own teaching practice, what makes me successful, and the resources I find most valuable to continuous improvement.

When the pandemic struck, I continued my leadership journey by stepping up to provide district wide professional development via Zoom focused on reengaging hundreds of students across our district. I also began recording video tutorials on technology and created a hyperdoc to serve as a tech hub for our district, which I still add to frequently. The videos I record are concise and practical and support teachers in expanding their educational toolkits to serve all students.

With my new platform as Illinois Teacher of the Year, I am continuing to grow as an advocate. In the months since being named, I have already completed over 30 speaking engagements to elevate issues I am passionate about, including raising graduation rates, investing in relationships, motivating unmotivated students, and engaging aspiring educators. The New Teacher Academy not only supported the new hires in our district
but also provided me with reflection on my practice and goals for the future, which will undoubtedly allow me to support more new teachers and students. In the years to come, I am committed to its success and to advocating for other districts to adopt similar practices to improve teacher retention.

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.]

In my desk drawer is a photo of me sitting on a stump looking out at a field. Behind me, out of the frame, my home is being rebuilt after being destroyed by an EF4 tornado. Sitting on that stump, looking at the remnants of my house, made me feel loss and uncertainty. But turning around and looking out toward the horizon brought feelings of hope and possibility.

At the onset of the pandemic, those same feelings washed over me as I thought about our students. For many, school is their safe space – their home, and the people and the structure of our learning communities bring them the comfort they need.

Paired with the memories of loss in both of these situations were feelings of appreciation for the extreme acts of kindness and resilience I saw happening in communities as we took life one day at a time. After the tornado, my fellow teachers brought me laundered clothes and lunches to help me get through the school day. During the pandemic, I again saw the strength of those relationships as schools across the nation pulled together resources for families in need.

If we were to compare ourselves now to how we were in February of 2020, we would recognize that many of the issues in education are the same -- but we have grown. We are stronger, and we have proven time and time again that we are capable of amazing things. I am so proud to be a part of a profession that is full of people who go above and beyond for humanity every single day.

During both of these situations, I heard the phrase “adversity is the best teacher” used many times. And, though I can personally affirm that there were moments for reflection and growth, the best teachers are the people who are willing to be there during that adversity, guiding and supporting those that need it most.

For many children, the metaphorical storm, in whatever form it may take, is still not over. Now, more than ever, we need to focus on building strong communities. We need to
ensure that children see that they are known and that they are valued, so that we cannot only meet learning targets but develop them into the productive, responsible community members we need.

That work – the work of teaching – effectively involves investing in relationships. First, we need to build relationships with the students in our classrooms. We need to meet their needs by connecting them to the resources we have in our communities and by making sure our classrooms are safe spaces with consistent expectations. We need to teach with the belief that all students can excel regardless of their backgrounds, and we need to commit to restoring relationships when damage has been done so that students stay engaged in the communities we build.

Second, those relationships need to extend beyond our classrooms into the homes of our students by developing partnerships with families in order to foster growth in and out of the classroom. I will never forget the handwritten note I received from a Hawks Take Flight graduate last year about her freshman brother after their mother was incarcerated. The note explained that she knew I called home every Wednesday with updates and she wanted to be kept in the loop despite their mother’s disconnected phone number. During what was likely the most difficult year of their lives, we were able to maintain a relationship in which he was able to grow both socially-emotionally and academically. I will always advocate for partnerships such as this because families are key to developing the whole child.

Third, we need to lean on each other and invest in relationships with one another in education. One triumph of the pandemic was watching the boundaries of professional development fade as teachers all over the globe made the effort to coach and support each other when we were asked to teach in unfamiliar territory. I saw more clearly than ever that we all have unique skills and knowledge that, when put together, make us strong, resilient, and exactly what our students need.

Now is our time to look out towards the horizon and stand up proudly from this metaphorical stump in education. If we use our newly expanded toolkits and continue to work together, we can come out of this even stronger than when we went in -- with our faces toward a brighter future for our students and our nation.