2024 National Teacher of the Year

FINALIST

Joe Nappi

New Jersey

School: Monmouth Regional High School
Subject: Social Studies / History; Holocaust and Genocide Studies; Psychology
Grade: 9-12
Joe Nappi graduated from Rowan University, where he received a Bachelor of Arts in history. He has taught at Monmouth Regional High School in Tinton Falls, New Jersey, for 18 years. Currently, he teaches U.S. history to sophomores and a Holocaust, Genocide and Modern Humanity course to seniors. This class is offered through a partnership with Kean University, which has allowed him to take more than 600 students to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where he has been honored to serve as a Museum Teacher Fellow since 2019. He also serves as a Key Club adviser and is a member of the Equity Council and Monmouth Helping its Own, the school’s charitable committee that he co-founded.

Nappi is an Alfred Lerner Fellow with the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous; a member of the Center for Holocaust, Human Rights and Genocide Education and district liaison to the Diversity Council at Kean. His lessons and blog have been published by PBS. He has received numerous teaching awards, including the Ida and Jeff Margolis Medallion for Excellence in Multicultural Education, U.S. Navy Distinguished Educator, the Dr. Frank Kaplowitz Human Rights Educator of the Year Award and the Monmouth County Teacher of the Year in 2023.

Daily, he inspires students to “be the change,” which has resulted in their efforts to end human trafficking, infuse Holocaust and genocide education nationwide and raise money for refugee resettlement, to name just a few.

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.

Growing up, I despised school; I was a teacher's worst nightmare, a constant discipline problem, and, despite being very intelligent, I was barely passing my classes. I was not allowed to walk at graduation, in either middle school or high school, as a result of my behavior. I can see now that my behavior was both a reflection of challenges in my personal life and a response to feeling detached from instructional techniques that wanted me to sit down, be quiet, and absorb a curriculum that did not speak to my interests. Today, I take inspiration from my own negative experiences as a student as I work to bring authentic learning experiences into the classroom in a manner that speaks to every student so they feel seen, heard, and a partner in a learning process that empowers them and helps them figure out who they are.
Getting here has been a journey that has forced me to confront many difficult questions: “How could I help students with life problems that made learning impossible? How could I make school someplace that students wanted to come to, as opposed to a place they dreaded? How could I show kids the power they had to bring about positive change in the world?” I work every day to try to answer these questions, and my journey to do so has pushed me to put students first, focusing on getting to know each one, identifying and helping them address issues they face inside and outside of the classroom, establishing a safe space for student conversations, and giving each a voice. I ensure that all of my students see themselves reflected in our lessons and can see the connections between what we are learning and our world today.

The success of my students and their investment in our curriculum requires the careful cultivation of a classroom community that encourages collaboration, nurtures students, and builds their faith in themselves. This process begins on day one as we work to get to know each other, develop classroom norms and expectations collaboratively, and create a brave space, where students feel safe having difficult conversations. Throughout the year I implement community building activities designed to both break down barriers and empower students to believe in themselves. A former student described the impact of our class community saying, “I was going through a lot with a close family member's diagnosis, and my own mental health. Without even knowing what was going on with me, I felt supported and cared for. I will forever be impacted by Mr. Nappi's class.”

One of the most crucial steps in building a nurturing community and empowering my students to have faith in themselves is our “Personal Heritage Projects.” Each student gets to present on one day of the year on a topic of their choosing relevant to themselves, their family history, or some aspect of their culture (ethnic, religious or otherwise) that they believe others should know more about. They focus on teaching us something about themselves by sharing family traditions, stories of immigration, or aspects of their personal beliefs or culture. The goal being to expose students to the diversity around them, to develop empathy through understanding of the experiences of others, while giving them the confidence in their own self importance.

Adopted students have chosen to celebrate their adopted families history, researched their pre-adoptive culture and even discussed their own experiences growing up with an adoptive family. Students with anxiety have the option to film the project in advance.(Seeing the class's warm reaction to their videos helps them to build confidence!) Topics have included: growing up in a mixed religious home, immigrating to the US, gay pride, living with hydrocephalus, and why I’m proud to be Jewish. Students supplement their projects with food, music, or games, and I support them by supplying plates, napkins and historical context to illuminate their
stories. We conclude each session with a Q+A where students follow our class contract for respectful questioning, and we end with applause.

It is the project which students reference the most in their exit surveys as their favorite of the year. One student wrote “We’ve sat in classes together forever but I never really knew who I was sitting with before this year.” Student centered projects like this, that engage my students and create a classroom community that values everyone’s participation, are what might have saved me as a student and what define me today as an educator.

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?

I still get emotional whenever I read my student Carly’s response to an essay prompt asking if something like the Holocaust could happen in the U.S. Carly has Asperger’s, and her essay, hauntingly speaks to her fear of a genocide on people with disabilities: “Autism has been called an epidemic, something that must be stopped, but I am not a disease! We are seen as children who ruin families and as strange monsters that live in our world. Some accuse us of having a “violent tendency”; they blame us for school shootings. Autism has become an insult and as a slang term suggesting we are stupid, weird, hyperactive and dangerous. None of this is true. We are just normal people with a different functioning brain. We have emotions, we still love, we have compassion, we still feel pain, even if it is difficult for us to express this.”

I knew immediately that more people needed to hear what Carly had written. After years of being perceived by students as “that weird kid”, she wanted a chance to share her story, in the hopes that her peers would finally understand her experience. The only question was, “how could we make this happen?” I only had to look to my students to provide the answer.

That same year students saw animosity towards immigrants and minority communities on the rise, and they wanted to do something about it. After many discussions, we decided to create a Diversity Day Program: a day to celebrate what makes us unique and to build empathy with the experiences of others. My students identified communities in the school who they believed were marginalized and strove to give them a voice within the program. Some of my honor level students met with our English Language Learner (ELL) classes, interviewed ELL students, and created presentations to tell their stories. With my students acting as moderators, ELL students told their personal stories of immigration, what it was like to be a new immigrant in our community, and how life in New Jersey was different from their lives at home. I’ll always
remember the story of a young man from El Salvador who spoke about leaving his parents for five years because they could not get a visa and he could. In search of a better life, he was living with cousins and hoping to one day make enough money to bring his parents to the U.S. Many students teared up as they considered his journey to reach an American Dream they already possessed. The presentations ended with students sharing food and games from their home cultures (sponsored by a grant from the PTSA) and answering questions.

The rest of the day was no less powerful, with other workshops that included “Living with hydrocephalus and Asperger’s” where two students, including Carly, who overcame great challenges to reach their senior year, described their school experiences. Carly minced no words in her remarks as she laid out what it had been like to be ostracized by her peers. By the time it was over she felt that her classmates had finally seen her for who she was, while I heard from more than one student in their exit surveys: “I never thought about it that way!” There was also a workshop from students in the Gay Straight Alliance, where students shared their experiences and advocated for an end to the use of gay slurs in our community.

Hundreds of students participated as we lifted up the voices of those who are traditionally silenced and invited those long excluded into our Falcon Family. I still remember the thank you I received from one of the participants. A young girl from St. Maarten was being bullied by a group of girls because of the head scarf she wore and the “strange food” she ate for lunch. Those same girls happened to be in the presentation that she gave, and afterwards they came up to her, complimented her clothing, thanked her for the delicious food she had shared, and even asked if she might consider trading lunches with them sometime. I’ll never forget how excited and happy she was! This is what Diversity Day is all about: celebrating our differences and building community.

As I sit here writing, plans are already under way for this year’s Diversity Day, which is now a school tradition thanks to the bravery of my students who helped make our school a place where all are valued and welcomed.

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.

If anything makes me an outstanding teacher, it’s the success of my students. I judge myself on the impact my teaching has on them and the impact they continue to have on others. I seek to help students find their passions and to act upon them to make change. These goals, not easily tackled in a classroom, encourage students to educate themselves on their own passions, seek
out others with similar interests, develop the confidence to advocate on behalf of an issue, take action to try to make positive change, and share what they have learned with others.

This philosophy has culminated in a project that changes my students’ views of the world and develops within them the confidence to speak up and get involved to solve problems. The “Be the Change” project directly impacts people both locally and globally. It challenges students to identify an issue, to research this topic and what people are doing or not doing about it, to work towards resolving it, and to collaborate with their peers on a Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time Bound (S.M.A.R.T.) action plan to address the issue. At the culmination of the project, students report back on their successes and failures, as well as the lessons they have learned. Then, they write letters to future students with advice about the project and advocating for the continuation of the work they have already done.

Here’s an example of how these projects have impacted student learning. In 2021, after a two-day lesson on Jewish History and Culture, a student approached me and asked, “Why am I a senior in high school and only now learning all of this about my people?” and why is “the only time we ever learn about Jews in history when they are being victimized?”. He had found his project. Over the next several months, he made connections with the Jewish Heritage Museum, a local rabbi who teaches Jewish History, and our local Holocaust Center. After pouring over curriculum documents and consulting with experts to find where our curriculum and Jewish History intersected at places not mired in victimhood and bloodshed, he created a presentation and resources for teachers. He first shared this with our history department where he explained the gap he had experienced and provided the content and resources to resolve it. It was so well received that he was invited to present at the Jewish Heritage Museum of Monmouth County. Now, students at our high school and beyond learn a more well rounded history, and he has found his calling: a career in history, with a focus on Jewish American History to continue the work he started.

The same is true for a group of students who, last spring, became upset that the high cost of senior fees was preventing some students from participating in senior traditions like Prom. They surveyed the senior class to see how many students were being affected. They reached out to guidance counselors to set standards for who should receive aid and met with the Parent Teacher Student Association, our local union, a local charity and the senior class advisors to advocate for students in need of assistance. Initially, they raised funds for eight students to attend prom, but soon they found another seven in need. They called on their peers to organize fundraisers, and by the end of their efforts, they raised enough money to not only pay off those fifteen student’s fees, but to pay off six more next year. In fact, the organizations they worked
with were inspired to form a committee to meet annually to ensure that no student is ever barred from attending senior events because of financial need.

Since 2016, students involved in “Be the Change” have hosted countless fundraisers, lobbied for mandates for genocide education, advocated to local government for improved handicap beach access and for statements opposing anti-Semitic and anti-Indian hate speech in our community, cleaned beaches and parks, hosted mental health awareness assemblies, and founded their own charitable organizations to oppose human trafficking and to increase access to youth sports for those unable to afford it. In each instance, they are engaging with the community beyond our school walls.

I am proud of the good that has come from empowering and challenging my students to act, to engage with community organizations, and to bring the community into our school family. The impact of these actions has extended and continues to extend well beyond my classroom walls.

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.

It was supposed to be an easy Friday afternoon in my US History II class, but little did I know, this class was about to change my life and result in the most meaningful initiative of my career. As we broke up into teams to play a review game before our upcoming test, it was clear that one student was in no mood to participate. She scowled at me and put her head down on the desk. She was a senior repeating a junior class she had failed. She wore a label in our school as a “problem student” but since I had also worn that label I felt I would be able to reach her. I had been making strides in building our relationship, which seemed to be working, until that Friday when it all fell apart.

When I tried to get her involved she looked up at me angrily so I decided not to push it and let her sit quietly until class ended. Afterward, I brought her a study guide and explained that she needed to study for the test. It was then that she cursed me out, flipped her desk, and stormed out. As I followed her, she picked up a chair from the hallway and smashed it against a window. I was in shock, after calling the office and filing my incident report, I sat back down at my desk at a loss. What just happened? I thought things were going so well between us.

As I left school and walked out to my car I saw her, sitting alone on a planter by the bus circle. I hesitated to approach her but I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I didn’t see what was wrong.
I walked over and said “Can you help me understand what just happened?” She immediately broke down crying. She told me that her mother had gone to Atlantic City with her boyfriend over a week ago and hadn’t come back. She wasn’t answering her calls, and she didn’t know if she was even alive. There was no food in the house, and she was only coming to school to eat.

I reached into my pocket and gave her the money I had. I took her phone number and said that I would call her to check in. After she left, I reached out to her guidance counselor seeking support. Together, we called the Division of Youth Services, which promised to send someone over to her house. He then told me that these sorts of things happened all too often, and he began to share other, similar, stories he had dealt with in the past year.

We agreed that we had to do something to help these students in need; I went home and wrote what became the charter for Monmouth Helping Its Own, a faculty-run, charitable organization funded by staff donations. On Monday I shared it with my colleagues and together we set up standards for how money would be collected and dispersed. We decided that half the money left unspent at the end of each year should be dispersed in scholarships to help these kids break out of poverty.

Sixteen years later, my colleagues and I have collected and distributed over $75,000 in direct aid and scholarships to students in need. We have purchased eyeglasses, winter coats, paid student’s electric bills, and provided groceries to students and their families; so that they can focus on their studies and not on finding food. We have provided forty-five students with scholarships to help them overcome the financial challenges that make furthering their education all too difficult.

Over the years, I have received numerous thank you’s from the students Monmouth Helping Its Own has helped with touching comments: “My sister got a Christmas present because of you” or “I’ll use this scholarship to accomplish great things”. But the most impactful thank you of all came from that same girl whose story set this all in motion. When she heard I had won NJ Teacher of the Year, she reached out with a message: “I appreciate all your efforts and understanding, but mostly just for listening and being there for me.” That is why I do this job, to be there for my students when they need me the most, and that is what she reinforced in me: to use my voice to advocate for our most vulnerable students and to work towards solutions that help them find success.

5. As the 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
What if I told you that I knew a real life superhero? A person who is so unbelievably powerful that they could change the world? A person who has spent their life helping others and vanquishing evil? This person wasn’t born with mutant powers, possesses no supernatural gifts, doesn’t even wear a cape; yet they’ve done something that only a true superhero can do: they’ve made a lasting difference in this world.

My encounters with this superhero have changed my view of what is possible in my classroom, for my students, and in our world. And since I assume that you’ve not had the opportunity to meet a real life superhero yourself, allow me to share with you their origin story and what our adventures together have taught me.

My superhero’s name is Manny Lindenbaum, a local Holocaust survivor who shares his story with my students. His life is far from a comic book. As a child, his family was deported from Germany, surrounded by the Nazis, and threatened with death. His parents faced an unthinkable choice: keep their family together, or ship their sons away to England in the hopes of saving their lives. So at seven years old, Manny was separated from his family and sent away with strangers. After experiencing tremendous emotional trauma and living through the horrors of war, even the celebration of an allied victory would be darkened by the revelation that he would never see his parents or his sister again, because they had been murdered by the Nazis, a moment that, for many, would result in hopelessness. Yet Manny did something next that would make him a hero, he made a choice, a choice to focus not on the horrors of what he had endured, but on the reason why he and his brother were alive: the actions of strangers who had chosen to act to save their lives.

Manny and countless other survivors have come to understand something I thought was only true in comic books, that one person, any person, has within themselves the power to change the world. After all, Manny would not be alive today if it wasn’t for individuals, who, facing overwhelming horrors at great personal risk to themselves, were willing to act to help strangers. And there is great power in that realization, the realization of the power of the individual, the power within all of us to make a difference in the lives of others. Manny never forgot this lesson and has dedicated his life to volunteerism and education. Whether working with the same organization that saved his life to help refugees escape the horrors of today’s world, or sharing his story with students in the hopes that he could prevent others from enduring what he and his family had endured, Manny chose to act.
His superhero story is a testament to the powers that we all possess, the power of compassion, the power of action. These are Manny’s true super powers; yet there is nothing super about them, for they exist within us all. We all have great powers within us and “With great power comes great responsibility”. What might you do with yours?

Inspired by a superhero, my students have used their powers to take on issues, both global and local, and have worked together to enact positive changes in themselves and our community. Convinced that what they do matters, they have set off to change the world. Whether it is pushing states to adopt standards on Genocide Education, sharing stories of their struggles with addiction, standing with a classmate who was subjected to anti-Semitism, raising thousands for refugee resettlement and local food banks, forming their own charity organizations, and dedicating themselves to careers helping others, my students have shown that ANYONE can make a difference.

And we can do the same. Because the most important lesson that I’ve learned from Manny is that anyone can be a superhero; all they need is the will to act. And our profession brings us tremendous opportunities to act, to nurture, to educate and to reveal to others what we already know: that we are all more powerful than we can possibly imagine. So allow me to extend an invitation to you and your students to join our Social Justice League! Let’s join forces around our belief in the power of the individual. Because if one person has the power to change the world, imagine what we could do if we would all work together?