



Department of  
**Education**

# Tennessee Teacher of the Year: Guidebook for Applicants

Tennessee Department of Education | October 2021



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# Introduction

Congratulations on your nomination for Tennessee Teacher of the Year!

The goal of the Tennessee Teacher of the Year program is to recognize and celebrate the wealth of excellent teachers that exist across the state. We applaud teachers who prioritize the needs of all children, who devote their professional lives to enriching the lives of Tennessee students, and who demonstrate exceptional gains in student achievement.

In order to be considered for the state-level award, a Teacher of the Year candidate must:

- be a full-time, certified, in good standing, pre-K–12 teacher in a state-accredited public or charter school in Tennessee at each stage of the recognition process (school, district, region, grand division, state, and national levels),
- spend the majority of the school day in direct instruction to students,
- have a minimum of three years of experience as a teacher in Tennessee public or charter schools, and
- have a track record of exceptional gains in student learning.

This guidebook is provided to help you complete each component of the application process.

With any questions, please contact the Tennessee Teacher of the Year Coordinator, Janelle Brown, at [janelle.brown@tn.gov](mailto:janelle.brown@tn.gov) or (615) 981-0302.

# Sample Timeline

Date	Action
Jan. 16	Teacher of the Year nominees are submitted by Directors of Schools and designees.
Jan. 17	Teacher of the Year nominees receive notification email from state Teacher of the Year coordinator.
Jan. 20	Webinar #1: Overview of the Teacher of the Year Process
Jan. 26	Weekly Office Hours Begin
Jan. 31	Webinar #2: Approaching the Part I Teacher of the Year Application
Feb. 27	District-level Teacher of the Year nominees submit the part I application.
March 30	27 region-level Teacher of the Year semi-finalists are announced, and semi-finalists receive part II of the application.
April 1	Webinar #3: Approaching the Part II Teacher of the Year Application
May 1	Region-level Teacher of the Year semi-finalists complete and submit the part II application.
June 1	9 region-level Teacher of the Year finalists are announced, and finalists receive instructions for completing the interview.
June/July	Finalist interviews are held.
August/September	Three Grand Division Teachers of the Year and Tennessee Teacher of the Year are announced at the annual Educators of Excellence Banquet.

***\*This timeline has been constructed based on the typical dates for the Teacher of the Year process. To view the timeline for the current selection cycle, please visit the Tennessee Teacher of the Year website.\****









# Benefits of Participating in the Tennessee Teacher of the Year Selection Process

While the application process requires time and attention to detail, there are many benefits to participating in the Tennessee Teacher of the Year process.

At the local level, you will be recognized and celebrated by colleagues and leaders within your school, district, and community for the hard work and passion you bring to Tennessee students each and every day. In some communities, school and district Teacher of the Year winners even receive recognition and awards underwritten by local sources.

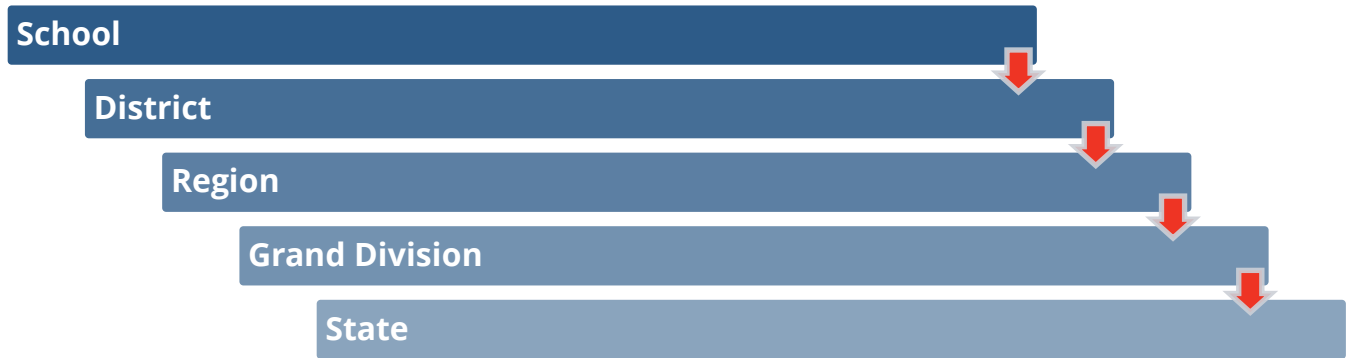
If you are named as one of the nine region-level finalists, you will have the opportunity to serve on the Tennessee Teacher Advisory Council, a group of educators from across the state who utilize their expertise and experience to inform the department’s programs and initiatives. Additionally, all nine finalists are recognized and honored at the annual Educators of Excellence banquet, which is held in Nashville, TN.

If you are named as the Tennessee Teacher of the Year, you will have the opportunity to represent Tennessee in the National Teacher of the Year program, which includes a year of all expenses paid travel and professional development opportunities with State Teachers of the Year from across the country.

RECOGNITION BY LEVEL	LOCAL	REGIONAL	STATE
Celebrated for making exceptional gains with students by colleagues, leaders, and community members.			
Honored at the annual Educators of Excellence banquet			
Serve as an advisor and advocate for state-level programs through the Tennessee Teacher Advisory Council.			
Represent Tennessee in the National Teacher of the Year program.			

# Overview of the Tennessee Teacher of the Year Selection Process

Teachers of the Year are selected competitively through five cycles: school, district, region, grand division, and state in three grade bands: pre-k-4, 5-8, and 9-12.



## ***School- and District-Level Selection***

To participate in the Tennessee Teacher of the Year process, you will first need to be selected as your school and/or district Teacher of the Year representative. Each school and district selects their Teacher of the Year representatives through a unique process – if you are interested in learning more about your local process, please contact your principal or district office.

Each district is eligible to nominate three educators to participate in the region-level selection process, with one educator representing each of the three grade bands: Pre-K-4, 5-8, and 9-12. District nominations are due in January each year.

## ***Region-Level Selection***

After you have been nominated at the district-level, you must complete the part I application to continue to the region-level selection process.

You can find the part I application on the Tennessee Teacher of the Year [website](#), as well as in the direct email sent to you by the Tennessee Teacher of the Year coordinator.

The part I application contains three sections:

- basic information about you and your school,
- three written response questions, and
- an optional opportunity to submit up to 5 pages of supporting documentation.

Guidance for each component of the part I application is provided later in this guidebook.

After all part I applications are submitted, regional scoring committees will identify one region-level semi-finalist in each grade band for each of the nine regions. This region-level selection results in a total of 27 region-level semi-finalists from across the state. All region-level applicants will be notified of their application decision following the completion of scoring.

### ***Grand Division-Level Selection***

If you are selected as a region-level semi-finalist, the Tennessee Teacher of the Year coordinator will provide the part II application to you via email following region-level selection. To move forward in selection, you must complete the part II application.

The part II application contains the three written response questions you completed in your part I application, as well as several new components. These components include:

- three new written response questions,
- an opportunity to submit additional supporting documentation,
- a professional resume,
- three letters of recommendation,
- a professional biography, and
- a professional headshot.

If you choose, you may duplicate your responses from the part I application, or you may revise them before submitting the part II application. The responses will be scored again by the state-level scoring committee, who has no prior knowledge of your part I application responses or scores.

The entire part II application will be scored by a statewide scoring committee who will identify one finalist in each region of the state for a total of nine region-level finalists. All applicants will be notified of their application decision following the completion of scoring.

### ***State-Level Selection***

The nine region-level finalists will then complete an interview, which may be held in-person or virtually. During the interview, finalists will be asked several questions regarding their professional growth, teaching philosophy, and achievements. Additionally, finalists will be asked to share a prepared, two-minute speech on a topic given in advance of the interview.

A statewide scoring committee will utilize both the application and interview components to identify one educator to represent each of the East, Middle, and West Grand Divisions as well as one educator to represent the entire state as the Tennessee Teacher of the Year.

The Tennessee Teacher of the Year will then move on to represent Tennessee in the [National Teacher of the Year](#) program administered by the Council for Chief State Schools Officers.



# Written Response Guidance

The written responses account for the majority of the points available in application scoring, and as such, it is critical that the written responses represent your best qualities as an exceptional educator. This section provides several useful strategies to ensure your writing compellingly captures your story in addition to exemplars from previous application cycles. It is important to note, however, that the tips and suggestions included in this guidance are not to be considered “magic,” and the exemplars do not represent the sole way to address the written response prompts. There is not a formula and there are not right or wrong answers. Using these suggestions does not guarantee a specific outcome in the selection process. However, this guidance can help you to reflect on the application and encourage fruitful conversations about the essays.

## ***The Application Extended Response Prompts***

1. How do you know that your students are successful in your content area specialty as a result of your instruction? Include evidence, such as data, stories, or anecdotes, to support your response. *Do not exceed 500 words.*
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 in your response. *Do not exceed 500 words.*
3. How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. How do you collaborate with others (e.g. colleagues, students, families) in this work? Please include evidence of student impact. *Do not exceed 500 words.*
4. 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 and your teaching influence your students? How are your beliefs and teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit? *Do not exceed 750 words.*
5. What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue, both in and outside of the classroom walls. *Do not exceed 500 words.*
6. The Tennessee Teacher of the Year serves as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students across the state. If you are selected as the Tennessee Teacher of the Year, what will be your primary message? What will you communicate to your colleagues and to the general public? *Do not exceed 750 words.*

## ***Criteria Used to Evaluate the Prompts***

Overall, each response question will be assessed according to the degree to which the response:

- adheres to standard grammar, spelling, and punctuation conventions;
- answers the question clearly and concisely; and
- provides a compelling narrative that speaks to the applicant's ability to serve as the Tennessee Teacher of the Year.

Additionally, the application will be evaluated holistically to assess the degree to which the applicant:

- Is an expert in their field who guides students of all backgrounds and abilities to achieve excellence.
- Collaborates with colleagues, students, and families to create a school culture of respect and success.
- Deliberately connects the classroom and key stakeholders to foster a strong community at large.
- Demonstrates leadership and innovation in and outside of the classroom walls that embodies lifelong learning.
- Expresses themselves in an engaging and articulate way.

Though a strong response may look different for each written response prompt, these guiding criteria can help you ensure that the components of your application complement one another and give the most comprehensive view of your excellence as an educator.

## ***Addressing Common Missteps***

- Are you answering the question?
  - Take the time to unpack the question and think about what it is asking.
  - Ask someone else to read your response and ask if they can determine the question being addressed.
- Are you answering **all parts** of the question?
  - Use the unpacking strategy below to ensure that you plan for and address all parts of the prompt with sufficient detail.
- Are you giving a comprehensive picture of yourself as an educator throughout all responses?
  - Try to avoid using the same example or idea in your response to each question. Your goal is to give a complete picture.
- Are you writing to show what learning looks like in your classroom?
  - Write to **show not tell**. Use examples and tell stories of things that students, parents, or colleagues have said or done.
  - Show how your work influenced the learning and growth of others through examples and evidence. Highlight your accomplishments rather than being humble about them.

- Write “through” the word count in your draft. Often, it takes writers some time to get to the best part of their responses, so begin by writing more than you need, then strategically edit to meet the word count.

## ***Unpacking the Application Prompts***

Unpacking is a useful writing preparation strategy that can ensure you successfully plan for and address all aspects of a writing prompt with sufficient detail. Often, it can be easy to allocate a significant portion of your allotted word count to one aspect of the prompt, leaving the other aspects unanswered and ultimately sabotaging your success. A sample “unpacking” for each application prompt is provided below. Again, it is important to note that using this strategy and these samples will not guarantee a particular outcome in selection. Instead, this strategy should serve as a solid foundation to ensure that the personal experiences and instructional practices you describe in each response are represented in a way that allows reviewers to focus on evaluating your innovation and excellence as an educator.

### **Question 1**

*How do you know that your students are successful in your content area specialty as a result of your instruction? Include evidence, such as data, stories, or anecdotes, to support your response. (maximum 500 words)*

[How do you know that your students are successful in your content area specialty as a result of your instruction?] If am successful as a teacher, what would I expect to see from my students at the end of the year? The quarter? The week? The day? In what ways can I describe what success looks and sounds like in the specific content area, grade level, and context in which I teach? [Include evidence, such as data, stories, or anecdotes, to support your response.] How do I assess my students’ success on a daily, weekly, monthly, and/or yearly basis? What stories, anecdotes, formative data, or summative data can I share that shows this success? I should clearly describe how I know my instruction is effective for my students’ learning and growth.

## Question 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 in your response. (maximum 500 words)*

[Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in which contributed to the improvement of overall school culture.] I need to articulate our school culture and its importance. What have I done to improve my school outside of my classroom? When I describe the project or initiative, I want to focus on sharing the ways this project or initiative contributed to how our culture is built. [What was your role, and what is the status of this project today?] Here, I want to specifically define my role and tasks I completed as part of the project or initiative. I need to be clear about how I collaborated with others and the value of this collaboration—for my practice, the project, and/or school culture. I need to be explicit about the result of the project or initiative, how it is being carried forward and/or improved, and my current role in the project. [Please include evidence of student impact.] Here – or earlier when I’m describing the project – I need to make the connection between the project, my role, school culture, and ultimately student impact. How do I know the project was successful? Put differently, how did students explicitly benefit from this project or initiative? What stories, anecdotes, or data can I share that shows this success?

## Question 3

*How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. How do you collaborate with others (e.g. colleagues, students, families) in this work? Please include evidence of student impact. Please include evidence of student impact. (maximum 500 words)*

[How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom?] I need to think about how what I do (i.e. instruction, specific projects, clubs or extracurricular activities I lead) impacts the world outside of my classroom, specifically with my students. Why is what I teach my students important for the lives they live outside of my classroom, both now and in the future? [Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community.] Here, I should specifically describe and “show” how I connect my students to the community. Do students participate in

community service? Explore the heritage of the community they live in? Connect with community members through mentorship? I should aim to show examples of both how I bring the community into my classroom and how I bring my classroom out into the community. When I describe these connections, I want to focus on how these connections expand student learning beyond the classroom and what I do to make this learning relevant and accessible to my students. [How do you collaborate with others (e.g. colleagues, students, families) in this work?] Here, I should identify how I work with others, such as colleagues, community partners, families, and even students themselves, to create these experiences. [Please include evidence of student impact.] How do these community and world connections impact my students? What stories, anecdotes, or data can I share that shows this impact?

#### **Question 4**

*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 and your teaching influence your students? How are your beliefs and teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit? (maximum 750 words)*

[Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher.] I need to think about who I am as a teacher: what I value, what makes me unique, what my students would say about their experiences in my classroom. When I describe this lesson, I want to focus on showing the way students learn and what I do to create that learning. [How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning?] Here, I want to specifically address how I engaged ALL my learners. I want to explore what that looks like, how it is reflected in my practice and in their learning. [How did that learning and your teaching influence your students?] Here – or earlier when I’m describing the lesson – I need to make the connection between my instructional decisions and their learning. [How are your beliefs and teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit?] This ties to the first part of the question about a lesson that defines me. I need to be explicit about the connection between the concrete details about the lesson and how those details demonstrate my beliefs as well as my instructional practices.

### Question 5

*What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue, both in and outside of the classroom walls. (maximum 500 words)*

[What do you consider to be a major public education issue today?] I need to think about issues in public education that I am passionate about and have experience addressing. I should clearly describe the issue and cite evidence that establishes that the issue exists. I need to clearly show why the issue is important to me individually as well as important to public education writ large. [Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue, both in and outside of the classroom walls.] Here, I want to explicitly and specifically describe how I am a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue. How do I continue to seek new information and improve my expertise regarding this issue? I should also connect my actions as a teacher leader in this space to tangible results where possible: as a result of my leadership and innovative ideas or solutions, how has this issue been addressed in my classroom, school, district, community, and/or state?

### Question 6

*The Tennessee Teacher of the Year serves as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students across the state. If you are selected as the Tennessee Teacher of the Year, what will be your primary message? What will you communicate to your colleagues and to the general public? (maximum 750 words)*

[The Tennessee Teacher of the Year serves as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students across the state.] Because the Tennessee Teacher of the Year is a state-wide spokesperson and representative for education, their message should be inspiring and relevant to wide and diverse audience. I should consider this when developing my message. [If you are selected as the Tennessee Teacher of the Year, what will be your primary message?] If I could speak to every single teacher in Tennessee (or even the United States), how would I want to influence their thinking? What about students? The general public? I need to clearly articulate a message that is inspiring for teachers, students, and the general public alike. Why is the message that I'm sharing

important for the audience to consider? [What will you communicate to your colleagues and to the general public?] Here, I need to clearly organize my message to ensure all audiences (colleagues and the general public) can understand (or even relate) and be inspired. What are stories, anecdotes, or data that might illustrate my message for audiences from different backgrounds? I should also clearly articulate a call to action: as a result of my message, what should colleagues, students, and the general public be inspired to do?

## **Written Response Exemplars**

The written responses below were taken from high-performing applications in the regional, state, and national selection processes. Following each exemplar, a commentary is provided to identify why the response is considered an exemplar.

### **Question 1 Exemplar**

***How do you know that your students are successful in your content area specialty as a result of your instruction? Include evidence, such as data, stories, or anecdotes, to support your response. (maximum 500 words)***

*The following exemplar response was taken from a 2020-21 region-level finalist application.*

The students I teach have achieved success through a variety of classroom practices. One of the most effective practices I utilize is goal setting. At the beginning of each semester, I share each child's benchmark data with him/her. This data comes from several sources including EasyCBM, iReady, and classroom assessments. I conference individually with each student and encourage him/her to make his/her own goals as well. We discuss plans for achieving the goals. I get parents on board by sharing the results of the assessments with them and answering any questions they may have. I ensure that the information is presented in a clear and parent friendly manner.

I group students based on their performance and adapt learning materials to their goals. I use leveled readers, sight word lists, and online tools. I often work with small groups of students who require extra support with a given concept. Using iReady, I assign lessons to students in their area of need. While students work, I remind them they are working on meeting their goals. I find it to be

especially motivating when we are working on a class assignment and I am able to tell a student: "This will help you meet your goal."

In August 2020 while analyzing data, I noticed most students scored one to two grade levels below the grade-level expectation in phonics. Accordingly, the goal for several students was to improve their phonics score by one grade level by December. When using iReady, growth of one grade level is indicated by 100% of Annual Typical Growth. After the December benchmark, students who make 50% of Annual Typical Growth are considered on track for making a year's growth in a year. Nine of twenty-two students made more than 100% of Annual Typical Growth from August to December as measured on the iReady benchmark assessment for reading. Eight students made between 50% and 100% of Annual Typical Growth during the same time frame. Only four of the students I had for the full semester did not achieve the goal.

In the spring of 2021, I set a class goal. I challenged my students to beat their previous growth score. Fourteen of seventeen students achieved the goal. Of the three remaining students, two still made more than a year's growth. I had students set individual goals as well by choosing an area in which to improve their scores by at least one grade level. They looked at their data and chose the area. Eight chose phonics, three chose comprehension, three chose math, one chose high frequency words, and three chose vocabulary. Fifteen students made gains toward their goal. Twelve of those improved their scores by one grade level from January to April.

I analyze data to determine if students are successful. When students are involved in setting a measurable goal, and they see daily learning as taking steps toward that goal, they are more engaged and more focused in the work of learning.

**Commentary:**

This written response clearly and compellingly identifies how the educator knows students are progressing towards mastery: the educator works collaboratively with students to set and achieve goals based on data. Rather than simply telling the reader about student or educator data, the educator weaves evidence and data points into a larger narrative about goal-setting. In addition to describing the process of goal-setting, the educator defines key components of their instruction (i.e. grouping, leveled readers, online tools) as well as key forms of assessment used to track success (i.e.



EasyCBM, iReady, and classroom assessments). In addition to responding to each component of the question, this response also shows evidence of the Teacher of the Year criteria:

- We can identify that the educator is an expert in their field who guides students of all backgrounds and abilities to achieve excellence based on the student success data shared.
- It is clear that the educator collaborates with students and families to create a culture of respect and success based on the collaborative nature of goal-setting.
- The educator clearly expresses themselves in an engaging and articulate way, as the narrative presents a clear and compelling storyline that presents no gaps in responding to the prompt.

## Question 2 Exemplar

***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 in your response. (maximum 500 words)***

*The following response was taken from the 2020-21 Tennessee Teacher of the Year's application.*

"...winning that talent show in the 7th grade lit a fire in me and made me want to perform everywhere I possibly could." - Emily Ann Roberts, former KMS Talent Show contestant, runner up on "The Voice," and contracted performer for WME Entertainment & Starstruck Management in Nashville

In 2007, during my first year at Karns Middle School (KMS), I launched the KMS Talent Contest. In our very first year, we had over 1,200 audience members rattling the gym floor with excitement during this inaugural event. It would soon become a school tradition and a foundation for "The Karns Way."

"The Karns Way" is an expectation of personal excellence in how we present ourselves and how we treat others—reminding teachers and students alike to celebrate and elevate our peers even in

uncomfortable situations. In middle school, this community is critical for ensuring students feel safe and supported as they learn and grow.

**THE AUDIENCE:** I ask kids, during their most vulnerable years, to sing, dance, and talk in front of people. If the culture in my program isn't right, situations can spiral and have lasting consequences on students' self-confidence. This school-wide project that connects my classroom to the rest of the student body is an extreme example of when I hold "The Karns Way" to the fire. I painstakingly train my student audience to be supportive, even in the unpredictable gymnasium atmosphere during the final competition. My training has been effective—for 14 years, students, parents, and visitors have encouraged in a way that has picked dancers off the floor, calmed the spirits of frightened singers, and changed the minds of the self-doubting kids.

**THE CONTESTANTS:** My reputation as one who runs a risk-free and supportive environment is essential—or the students will never trust me to help showcase their talent to the world (or at least their peers). I hold live auditions and give personalized feedback so contestants can improve after each round and truly shine. Recognition for having something special to offer is a powerful gift for a middle schooler—especially when that something special is unique. Giving confidence is life-changing.

**THE CREW:** School staff plays a large role in planning, but the real magic happens when I collaborate with the 40-60 member student crew. I treat the student crew as true colleagues, coaching them in leadership and teamwork to handle extreme situations in sound, setup, lighting, and audience control. The event requires problem solving and creativity to keep the attention of 1200+ spectators, making lasting memories for everyone – and even catapulting some performers and crew members into entertainment careers and fame.

**THE LEGACY:** Today, the KMS Talent Contest is a living, breathing tradition that defines "The Karns Way." Despite the pandemic, we are working to recreate the show's magic in The Virtual Karns Way!

**Commentary:**

The educator clearly identifies a project (school talent show) that impacted school culture. By clearly defining the school culture ("The Karns Way"), the educator then shows the reader how each aspect of the talent show is connected to the culture (audience, contestants, crew, legacy). The educator states the role that they played in each aspect of the talent show (training the audience to

be supportive, giving feedback, collaborating with the school staff and student crew), and identifies that the status of the project is ongoing as they transition the project to meet the constraints of the current pandemic. Lastly, educator identifies several forms of student impact throughout the narrative, both abstract (i.e. empathy, self-confidence, leadership, teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving) and concrete (i.e. career and fame). In addition to responding to each component of the question, this response also shows evidence of the Teacher of the Year criteria:

- The educator deliberately connects the classroom and key stakeholders to foster a strong community at large by including students, families, and school staff in the execution of the event.
- It is clear that the educator collaborates with colleagues, students, and families to create a culture of respect as defined by “The Karns Way”.
- The educator clearly expresses themselves in an engaging and articulate way, as the narrative presents a clear and compelling storyline that presents no gaps in responding to the prompt.

### Question 3 Exemplar

***How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. How do you collaborate with others (e.g. colleagues, students, families) in this work? Please include evidence of student impact. (maximum 500 words)***

*The following response was taken from a 2020-21 National Teacher of the Year finalist’s application.*

A picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sits on the wall in my classroom, along with the quote, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question: What are you doing for others?” Before a student can leave the classroom each day, they must tell me one thing they did to help someone else. Their answers are typically small acts of kindness; however, my students recognize that each act of service positively impacts our community, and therefore is extremely valuable.

In our school, it is well known that if you need a student’s help, you call my room. In a typical year, my students read with 2nd graders weekly, collect winter clothes for kids in our school, pick up the

playground equipment at the end of each recess, and, when we lost our school counselor at the beginning of last year, my students volunteered to mentor younger students.

My students are activists and advocates, and the reach of their impact extends well beyond the walls of our school. My kids were invited as speakers to the state university's Leadership and Inquiry for Turnaround Conference, where they spoke to teachers and administrators about what education needs to look like for culturally diverse students like them. They have been interviewed on local TV and radio stations, and their fans on social media include former NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia and the author Jacqueline Woodson.

I partner with outside organizations that help my students grow their capacity as changemakers for their communities. The state Film Center provides my students with curriculum, film equipment, and professional media mentors to support them in their filmmaking. Every Friday, lawyers, and law students from the state Center for Legal Inclusion mentor my students in their argumentative speaking and writing. And when the head of the organization Girls Education International visited my students last year to discuss her organization's mission to expand educational opportunities for girls in Africa and South Asia, my kids committed to partnering with students in Tanzania to raise funds and awareness of their needs. These partnerships better prepare my students to rise as champions for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Many of my former students are active in student government at the middle and high school levels, have joined clubs dedicated to community service, and give back to our school by volunteering in our afterschool program. They have also taken the lead in organizing recent youth protests and events. In conversation with these students, I am proud to say that they often cite their time in our classroom as the catalyst for the work they are doing to improve their communities today.

**Commentary:**

The educator clearly identifies in the opening paragraph that education transcends their classroom through service. The narrative identifies both how students demonstrate acts of service in their school (i.e. volunteering, mentoring) and in their community (i.e. activists and advocates to outside stakeholders). The educator also identifies how the community is brought into the classroom through strategic partnerships. The discussion of partnerships also shows how the educator collaborates with others to provide these transformational opportunities to students. Lastly, the educator cites evidence of student impact, such as continuing to improve their community through

volunteering, activism, and advocacy. In addition to responding to each component of the question, this response also shows evidence of the Teacher of the Year criteria:

- The educator deliberately connects the classroom and key stakeholders to foster a strong community at large by building relationships with external partners.
- The educator clearly expresses themselves in an engaging and articulate way, as the narrative presents a clear and compelling storyline that presents no gaps in responding to the prompt.

#### **Question 4 Exemplar**

***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 and your teaching influence your students? How are your beliefs and teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit? (maximum 750 words)***

*The following response was taken from the 2020-21 National Teacher of the Year's application.*

Each year, I explicitly teach my students about how our brains help us learn and manage our emotions and behavior. The concept of growing our brains intersects naturally with our year-long unit of Growth Mindset in the Garden. This learning unit encapsulates my holistic approach of teaching the whole child, inclusive of their family and community. My teaching centers on strengths-based approaches that are culturally responsive, relevant, and responsible.

During the unit, we become neurologists and learn about critical parts of the brain. Together, my students and I dedicate ourselves to understanding how the amygdala triggers the prefrontal cortex when we are upset or scared. We brainstorm and practice how to train our prefrontal cortex to proactively reflect on triggers so we can process information while staying calm. We celebrate when our hippocampus helps us make wise choices because our body has remained or reclaimed calm. We ignite metacognition to reflect on our personal strengths and needs. We support each other; when my students hear others say, "This is too hard," or "I can't do this," they are quick to

remind them to add a “yet” to their statement. My students generously offer support and reassurance to their peers because we have all experienced moments of self-doubt or frustration.

I empower my students by helping them understand how they can harness the power of learning by embracing mistakes and challenges. We take time to examine the root causes of behaviors that may impede or slow the development of learning and social relationships. My students and I set goals and chart our growth towards goals of becoming fluent readers, communicative writers, sound mathematicians, and members of learning communities who are kind. My instruction includes sensitive data collection that is responsive to their specific learning needs so they see what I see—that their learning emerges piece by piece.

As a special education teacher, I know the challenges my students encounter in pursuit of their goals. With this knowledge, I design learning thematically aligned with my students’ interests, including learning outdoors in the garden. Since my students and their families have helped build the gardens, they are even more excited and motivated to learn in the garden. Learning in our community-created outdoor classrooms gives us an incredible opportunity to learn with a hands-on approach that is guided by our collective curiosity.

For the multiplication component of the unit, we focus on finding multiple patterns in the garden. I still remember the thrilling moment when Orlin, who struggles with short-term memory loss, made the vital mathematical connection. “Ms. Earth-tubey! The strawberries each have three leaves, that means that two strawberries have six leaves and three strawberries have nine. I get it! I get it!”

Student-guided learning like this is the most powerful as it transcends learning and thinking differences. Even more indicative of the magnitude of his connection came later that week when his general education teacher shared with me that Orlin, who was very shy and reserved, shared his knowledge with his peers during a science lesson in the garden. She overheard him tell his peers, “Sabes [you know], patterns repeat in nature and they help us with math. Look at this plant, it has five leaves so three of these plants have fifteen leaves.”

We collectively celebrated his generalization of skills and his self-realization. I knew that this was possible because of the collaboration I facilitated between his mother, his general education teacher, his identities and input. I also knew it was possible because of my students’ and my dedication and commitment to develop and improve our growth mindset.

A twice-exceptional student, Joaquin, made tremendous growth in his emotional and behavioral regulation. When I started working with Joaquin, he was transitioning from a self-contained setting to an inclusion with resource setting. I collaborated with his autism program teacher and his new general education teacher to plan for a healthy transition. I partnered closely with his family. Using his exceptional strength of illustration and love for superheroes, I taught him growth mindset through the creation of his own comic book. After each lesson, Joaquin drew a scene for the comic book that defined a trigger, self-regulatory strategies, a solution, and the application of the solution. When Joaquin was ready to transition to inclusion services only, his comic book served as his guide to help him. As an educator, to see my students assume responsibility for their learning and behavior is one of the greatest rewards experienced.

**Commentary:**

The educator clearly identifies the Growth Mindset in the Garden unit as a unit that defines the educator. The educator briefly ties this unit to core teaching beliefs and strategies in the opening paragraph before describing the unit more in depth. The response describes how the educator engages all students in the learning, illustratively describing specific anecdotes and stories of student success. In addition to responding to each component of the question, this response also shows evidence of the Teacher of the Year criteria:

- The educator is an expert in their field who guides students of all backgrounds and abilities to achieve excellence as shown by students with exceptionalities guiding their own learning.
- The educator collaborates with colleagues, students, and families to create a school culture of respect and success as shown by the involvement of students and families in the garden.
- The educator expresses themselves in an engaging and articulate way.

**Question 5 Exemplar**

*What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue, both in and outside of the classroom walls. (maximum 500 words)*

*The following response was taken from a 2020-21 National Teacher of the Year finalist's application.*

Today's major public issue is providing equitable educational opportunities that enable every student to reach their maximum individual potential. Today's teachers must find ways to provide effective instruction, with less funding, to an increasingly diverse group of learners.

As an educator, I develop innovative, individualized lesson plans that meet the diverse learners' unique needs in my classroom. I implement research-based methods, strategies, and culturally responsive practices in my instructional design to ensure I help each student learn in the way that is best for them. To develop individualized lessons, I quantify performance and behavioral objectives and differentiate instruction to meet each student's unique needs. While developing lessons, I monitor students' mastery of objectives to identify gaps in knowledge and adjust instruction. I use data-driven instruction to collect information from various artifacts related to a standard or learning objective to determine a student's overall mastery of the desired learning outcome. This practice enables me to develop individualized learning activities designed to help students bridge gaps to acquire knowledge in a way that works best for their individual learning styles and requirements. Providing equitable opportunities through culturally responsive teaching and intentional consideration of each student's circumstances is an essential part of my teaching practices.

I seek to improve my teaching practice through formal and informal learning opportunities. I actively pursue graduate-level and professional development courses to improve my content knowledge and pedagogical practice. I have earned master's degrees in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Curriculum Instruction and Secondary Science Teaching. Improving my teaching practice enables me to identify research-based methods and strategies that I can use to develop and implement effective, equitable instruction in my classroom.

I fill additional duty positions that enable me to develop, present, and facilitate professional development seminars and sessions at the site, district, and state-levels. I have created and facilitated content area and leadership sessions focused on equitable education. These sessions present classroom implementation strategies and practices that incorporate culturally responsive and restorative practices with standards-aligned activities and lessons that engage students in the learning process while analyzing data to determine student shortfall and educational gaps.



A member of my school's Instructional Leadership Cadre, I develop and present monthly seminars covering topics including effective data analysis, data-driven instruction lesson design, differentiating instruction, effective practices, and translating research-based instructional models and strategies into effective classroom lesson design.

I was awarded a Leadership Certificate of STEM Education from the Teachers College, Columbia University. For this program, I created and presented a professional development program designed to enhance student success in math and science through culturally relevant art and music using the Fibonacci sequence across content areas. I authored a cross-curricular educator's resource guide and developed a series of professional development seminars presented over 18 weeks to infuse the Fibonacci curriculum into core and elective classes. The professional development series provided teachers with background knowledge, differentiated, classroom-ready activities, assessment data analysis assistance, and continuous lesson design and implementation support.

**Commentary:**

The educator identifies the provision of equitable educational opportunities to all students as a major public education issue today. First, the response addresses how the educator addresses the issue within their classroom walls, such as using research-based practices and culturally responsive teaching. Then, the response identifies how the educator serves as a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator regarding the issue, including seeking additional education, developing professional development, and participating in a leadership program. The educator clearly defines each of these experiences and connects them to the identified public education issue. In addition to responding to each component of the question, this response also shows evidence of the Teacher of the Year criteria:

- The educator is an expert in their field who guides students of all backgrounds and abilities to achieve excellence as shown by the use of research-based and culturally responsive teaching practices.
- The educator demonstrates leadership and innovation in and outside of the classroom walls that embodies lifelong learning by seeking out education, PD, and leadership opportunities.
- The educator expresses themselves in an engaging and articulate way.

## Question 6 Exemplar

***The Tennessee Teacher of the Year serves as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students across the state. If you are selected as the Tennessee Teacher of the Year, what will be your primary message? What will you communicate to your colleagues and to the general public? (maximum 750 words)***

*The following response was taken from the 2020-21 Tennessee Teacher of the Year application.*

Students, you may feel powerless in these uncertain times, but your voice is valuable, and we want to hear your ideas as we look toward the future. These circumstances are temporary, but your dreams are not. Count on teachers to always believe in you and fight for you, no matter what difficulties arise.

Teachers, our students and their families are counting on our expert, wonder-driven leadership. The same strategies we use to convince a child to try again or try something new are the same strategies we must use on ourselves as we set the stage for this new day. We must be brave in the face of change, blaze the trail for them, and bank on the magic of a new beginning.

America, we have countless stories of people banding together to help out when there is a need, from natural disasters to pandemics. Right now, public schools need that kind of support and commitment more than ever before. This spring, the race began to get internet to low-income homes and rural areas. City governments were pressed to get a plan in place to give homeless populations options during a lockdown. Schools were busing food out to families who couldn't get to school for pickup. Even the justice system, from courtroom to incarceration, reevaluated its "normal" to navigate our unbelievable circumstances. America has kids in all of these situations and communities came together to support their students.

As former Secretary of Education Richard Riley memorably put it: "We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet." America, that "unknown" is here. Many aspects of our lives are being rapidly altered, as well as policies about its future. Public education is part of those changes, and we need to take advantage of this momentum to support schools in every way possible. We need to craft a blueprint that equips our kids with the tools to build the lives they desire. Volunteering, partnering, and investing in our public schools will change the game

for mental health, safety, and poverty, ultimately improving our communities and our beloved nation. We must give education – and our students – our all today.

**Commentary:**

The educator's message for colleagues and the community is to rally support for public education in a time when collaboration and innovation are needed more than ever. The educator communicates this message to each of their three audience by clearly describing the challenges that each audience faces and provides motivation to overcome. The message is clear and compelling, and the audience leaves with a call to action.

# Additional Documentation Guidance

Additional documentation encompasses all application materials submitted outside of the written responses and includes the optional supporting documentation, resume, letters of recommendation, and professional biography. Additional documentation is assigned one total score and is evaluated holistically to assess the degree to which the applicant:

- Is an expert in their field who guides students of all backgrounds and abilities to achieve excellence.
- Collaborates with colleagues, students, and families to create a school culture of respect and success.
- Deliberately connects the classroom and key stakeholders to foster a strong community at large.
- Demonstrates leadership and innovation in and outside of the classroom walls that embodies lifelong learning.
- Expresses themselves in an engaging and articulate way.

This section provides several useful strategies to ensure your additional documentation complements your written responses and presents a comprehensive picture of your excellence as an educator.

## ***Optional Supporting Documentation***

Supporting documentation is permitted to provide additional evidence for references made in your extended responses. Some examples of supporting documentation include student work, teacher effectiveness data, lesson plans, parent or community communications materials, etc. Please ensure all supporting documentation adheres to your school and/or district's privacy policies (i.e. media releases).

Supporting documentation is completely **optional** and choosing not to submit supporting documentation will **not** penalize the applicant in any way. If you choose to submit supporting documentation, documentation is limited to **5 pages maximum** for the part I application and **7 pages maximum** for the part II application. Any documentation over this maximum will not be provided to reviewers. To submit supporting documentation, upload one single PDF file in the space provided on the online form.

Additionally, applicants should consider the following best practices when compiling supporting documentation:

- ***Directly connect supporting documentation to the written responses, but do not rely on supporting documentation to make your case:*** Supporting documentation should not be a substitute for high-quality explanation in the narrative nor stand alone as extraneous

information. Effective supporting documentation should **extend** a reviewer’s understanding of your written responses by directly connecting to aspects of the narrative where additional evidence (such as student work) may make your writing clearer.

- **Ensure each page of the supporting documentation demonstrates the Teacher of the Year criteria:** In some cases, you may identify that the written response prompts do not permit you to share characteristics of your teaching or specific experiences that fully demonstrate your ability to serve as Teacher of the Year. Like the best practice above, effective supporting documentation can serve to **expand** your reviewer’s understanding of your ability to meet the Teacher of the Year criteria. To ensure reviewers understand what they are viewing and why it is important, be sure to provide notes with relevant information and context for any materials not directly addressed in the narrative.

## **Resume**

Approaching the resume for the Teacher of the Year application requires a different perspective than tailoring a resume when seeking a new job opportunity. The primary goal of the resume is to provide information about how your previous experiences have positioned you as a strong candidate for Teacher of the Year. With this goal in mind, you should think strategically about which of your experiences (and further: what aspects of your experiences) align to the Teacher of the Year criteria, and your resume should highlight these experiences.

At a minimum, the professional resume includes the following required components:

- **Education:** In this section, you should list any degrees that you have earned or are currently completing.
- **Licenses/Endorsement Areas:** In this section, you should list your valid license and all valid endorsements (*based on the information listed in [TNCompass](#)*).
- **Professional Experience:** In this section, you should list your most recent jobs and associated responsibilities. Be sure to note significant accomplishments in each role as well as key features of each position.
- **Professional Leadership:** In this section, you should list any professional leadership positions you have held. Professional leadership may include school-level responsibilities such as leading a PLC or student organization, district-level responsibilities such as leading professional development, or region-level responsibilities such as serving as a pre-service mentor or cooperating teacher.
- **Community Leadership and Involvement:** In this section, you should list any leadership positions you have held or community organizations you have been involved with. This might include non-profits, faith-based organizations, or service organizations.

- **Awards and Recognition:** In this section, list any awards or recognition you have received for your work as an educator. This may include your school- and district-level Teacher of the Year award, community awards or recognition, any published articles, presentations, or featured news items.

Applicants should also consider the following best practices when completing the resume:

- Because your contact information is included elsewhere in the application, you can save space by leaving out your address and contact information on the resume.
- Similarly, since the process includes letters of recommendation, you can also save space by leaving out any references.
- Emphasize skills and experience related to the Teacher of the Year criteria.
- Write your responsibilities using the Action + Results format, and begin with an action verb to describe the type of work you did. For example: Led 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies professional learning community to analyze and accelerate student learning, which resulted in a 15% increase in student proficiency on the TNReady.
- Be sure to define all acronyms. For example: School representative for the Tennessee Education Association.
- Proofread carefully to ensure your resume has no spelling, grammar, or formatting errors.

## ***Letters of Recommendation***

The letters of recommendation serve as a critical external perspective of your excellence from colleagues, supervisors, parents, students, and community members. One letter must be from your principal, but you may choose who writes the remaining two letters. Applicants should think strategically about who will provide the most compelling and clear evidence that the applicant demonstrates the qualities of a Teacher of the Year awardee. It is recommended that applicants share the Teacher of the Year criteria with those who will be writing the letters of recommendations as well as identify several key criteria for each letter writer to focus on.

In general, every letter should:

- Be one page in length.
- Be typed.\*
- Be a PDF.
- Include evidence of the applicant's strength in on or more of the Teacher of the Year criteria.

\*Applicants may submit handwritten, translated, or transcribed letters if the letter is from a student, parent, or adult caregiver. Transcribed/translated letters must include the name and signature of the transcriber/translator and may not be transcribed/translated by the applicant.

Reviewers will pay special attention to how an applicant's accomplishments have impacted student success. In the letters of recommendation, student success can be documented either anecdotally or with statistical evidence. A mix of both makes for a stronger application. Student success can come in many forms. Some examples are:

- Increased academic achievement
- Decreased disciplinary referrals
- Increased enrollment in challenging curriculum
- Increased participation in enrichment activities
- Increased student confidence and self-esteem
- Increased time spent in service to the community

To reduce the impact of implicit bias on our awards and recognition programs, we may redact identifying information from letters of recommendation before the selection committee begins their review. To support this effort, we encourage applicants and recommenders to use words and phrases like "our school," "our community," "a colleague," etc. instead of naming particular places or individuals.

### ***Professional Biography***

The professional biography is used by the Tennessee Department of Education when responding to requests for information about finalists as well as in public releases and promotional materials. The professional biography should articulate your influences for entering the teaching profession and your greatest contributions and accomplishments as an educator. The professional biography must not exceed 250 words and must be written in the 3rd person.

When writing the professional biography, consider the following questions:

- Why did I seek a career in education?
- What experiences led me to the place I am today?
- What is my teaching philosophy?
- What degrees do I hold?
- What are my greatest contributions to the teaching profession?
- What are significant accomplishments I have made in the teaching profession?
- What awards or recognition have I received?

*Example:*

The 2020-21 Tennessee Teacher of the Year, Kami Lunsford, has been sharing her love of learning and music with students, teachers, and future educators in all three regions of Tennessee for her entire career. As choir director of Karns Middle School, she uses singing, guitar, ukulele, and percussion to help students find their place in middle school and promote personal and academic success. She operates before and after school programs, including theater and advanced ensembles, that seek to expose students to disciplines, careers, and opportunities in the arts. She credits exceptional, visionary K-12 teachers in her rural, west Tennessee upbringing for her passion to provide opportunities in creativity and leadership that equip students for their future— wherever it takes them. Paying it forward has always been the goal.

Two-time Middle School Teacher of the Year for Knox County Schools, she consistently answers the call to serve her school and county through leadership and collaboration on improvement initiatives. She actively supports Tennessee teachers as an evaluator and mentor, as well as a facilitator for the Tennessee Arts Academy at Belmont University. Her music ensembles have performed in nine states and extensively in Tennessee, recording at Studio B in Nashville, live at Graceland in Memphis, and alongside performers like Knoxville star, Chris Blue. Many of her students have pursued careers in music, performance, church music, theater, and education. She counts the privilege of using music and the arts to help kids build a better life as "the best job in the world."



# Additional Opportunities for Support

To further support Teacher of the Year applicants, the department will offer a webinar series as well as weekly office hours throughout the application period. Educators can register [here](#) to attend any of the webinar sessions below. All webinars will be recorded and available on the Teacher of the Year [website](#).

- **Jan. 20 from 3:30-4:30 p.m. CST:** Overview of the Teacher of the Year Process
  - This one-hour webinar will orient applicants to the Teacher of the Year process. Applicants will also hear from the 2020-21 and 2021-22 Tennessee Teachers of the Year. Lastly, applicants will have an opportunity ask the Teacher of the Year coordinator any questions.
- **Jan. 31 from 3:30-4:30 p.m. CST:** Approaching the Part 1 Teacher of the Year Application
  - This one-hour webinar will dive more deeply into the components of the part 1 Teacher of the Year application.
- **April 1 from 3:30-4:30 p.m. CST:** Approaching the Part 2 Teacher of the Year Application
  - This one-hour webinar will dive more deeply into the components of the part 2 Teacher of the Year application.
- **Weekly Office Hours:** Held on Wednesdays from 3-4 p.m. CST from January 26 to May 25. *Access office hours [here](#).*

# Additional Resources

Please visit the Teacher of the Year [website](#) for the following additional resources:

- **Selection Process Timeline:** This document contains important dates and deadlines for the current year selection cycle.
- **Part I Application:** This document contains all questions listed in the electronic application. Applicants are encouraged to use this document to draft and revise application responses prior to submitting via the online form.
- **Part II Application:** This document contains all questions listed in the electronic application. Applicants are encouraged to use this document to draft and revise application responses prior to submitting via the online form.