

June 2015 marked the beginning of a career changing opportunity. The third cohort of Kentucky Hope Street Group Teacher Fellows (HSG) met for the first time face to face and began a professional journey that has allowed us both to participate in high quality professional learning led by our peers and by Learning Forward facilitators. Along the way we were empowered to lead professional learning in our own schools, districts and statewide networks. We have designed and led focus groups collecting teacher perspectives and generating policy recommendations around issues that are important not only to classroom teachers but also to policy makers and community members. We continue to lead grassroots teacher led initiatives that will outlive our personal tenures as Hope Street Fellows. Our involvement in Hope Street Group has helped us to quantify and define what it means to be a Teacher Leader.

Within a few months of our tenure as fellows, there was a huge shift in national educational policy. On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law renewing our government's commitment for every child to be successful in education. Across the nation, individual state legislatures, departments of education and teachers are creating new ESSA regulations and accountability measures. In Kentucky, Teacher Leaders knew that it was extremely important for us to have a voice and a seat at the table to guide where and how those decisions were being made. Our opportunity to make substantive change would be offered through Learning Forward; the only professional association devoted exclusively to those who work in educator professional development.

Part of the new ESSA regulation was a redefinition of what quality professional learning must look like for teachers. Learning Forward wanted to make sure teacher voice was represented on a national platform in this vital area to increasing teacher quality and the quality of learning for all students. In that vein, Learning Forward and the National Commission of Teaching & America's future (NCTAF) designed the Agents for Learning Competition. This would be yet another opportunity for us because of the networking and credibility that we've been able to establish through our work as Hope Street Group (HSG) Fellows. A small team of HSG State Teacher Fellows from Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina worked together to submit a multi-state plan for improved professional learning aligned to ESSA requirements. We were one of 12 competition finalist teams that presented plans for the best use of federal funding for improved professional learning under ESSA guidelines to a panel of nationally recognized experts and judges.

Our [presentation](#) was limited to four minutes and the competition judges included Stephanie Banchemo, Program Director for the Education Program at the Joyce Foundation; Jahana Hayes, 2016 National Teacher of the Year; Chris Minnich, Executive Director of CCSSO; and Rachel Wise, Chair of the Nebraska Board of Education. All 12 teams' presentations were filmed and streamed live for viewing audiences across the country. The process was both challenging and invigorating as we used virtual platforms to collaborate and design a work plan for completing our application. Our pitch was centered around the common themes that we identified among each of the states represented by our team, and it ended up being similar in content to other presentations:

- Current professional learning opportunities are not meeting the needs of our teachers.
- Teachers are more than ready and capable to design and lead the professional learning of their peers, even peers outside their school and district.
- Professional learning has established a culture for compliance rather than growth.
- ESSA funds could and should be used to help compensate teachers with stipends and/or release time to implement programs that improve the quality and personalization of professional learning.

As we began to research and cultivate solutions, we discovered how fortunate we were to be members of the teaching profession in our state because the Kentucky Department of Education had already adopted professional learning standards based on Learning Forward's work. These standards were used as a foundation to drive our work and helped us establish a clear vision of how we would like to see professional learning in our states. Some of the professional learning standards were already familiar to us, such as the standards surrounding learning communities, leadership, resources, data, learning designs, implementation and outcomes, but the knowledge and the implementation of these standards was not widespread across the state.

Apart from the limited time constraints and the virtual facilitation for a multi-state team, the presentation itself was not that unusual in structure compared to others we have designed; however, the conditions and environment surrounding the competition were very different. We were treated as professionals. All expenses were paid. Our expertise and experiences were valued. We were the experts in our field, and were treated as such. Our opinions were heard throughout the nation, and our solutions to common problems of practice mattered. Since the competition, other stakeholders have sought our opinions on various education policies. We were asked to share about our experience to the Kentucky Teacher Advisory Council comprised of 40 teachers from across the state, several Kentucky department of Education employees as well as our state's Commissioner of Education. This conversation sparked a healthy discussion about what professional learning means to Kentucky teachers, and how we can shape and transform it to an activity that builds the capacity of all teachers across traditional and often artificial barriers to deepen professional learning. The competition gave us even more hope that the inconsistencies and ambiguities that characterize professional learning in most schools and districts can be eliminated, and that new and experienced teachers alike can be a part of the movement to truly professionalize the teaching profession.

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*Cassie, National Board Certified Teacher, taught six years at South Todd Elementary before moving to Russellville to teach at Stevenson Elementary. Cassie has devoted herself to maintaining a student-centered learning environment and instructional practice in which her students take ownership of their learning. Cassie is active in KEA and relishes the role of “hybrid” teacher-leader; it allows her to stay in the classroom while seeking professional development and sharing it with her colleagues.*