

# GROWING *Teacher Leadership*



*Tasha Hartzfeld is a 5<sup>th</sup> year teacher at Turrentine Middle School in the Alamance-Burlington School System. She was served by the UNCG region of the NCNTSP from 2022-2024. Having previously taught elementary students, Tasha has found her niche in 6<sup>th</sup> grade Math. Last year, she was Turrentine's Teacher-of-the-Year, moving on to become a district finalist. This year, she serves as the school's Lead Mentor. Tasha shares her thoughts on how new teacher supports helped her grow into a school and district leader.*

## **Looking back on your first year of teaching, what stands out most about the support you received as a Beginning Teacher?**

What stands out most about my first year of teaching is the incredible support I received from people who didn't have to be there for me. They chose to show up, offer advice, and go out of their way to help—and that meant everything. It didn't take long for me to realize that even though you spend most days alone in your classroom, teaching is not something you can do alone. You need support from coworkers, teammates, and administrators. You need people you can lean on, and who can lean on you in return. The best advice always seemed to come at just the right moment from those who reminded me that I was capable, even on the days I doubted myself.

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## **Can you share a moment or experience when you realized you were growing into a teacher-leader?**

I don't think there was ever one specific moment when I felt myself becoming a leader. I just felt myself growing as a teacher, day by day. I'd come up with ideas, try them out, and when they failed, I'd reevaluate and try again. Before, when something didn't work, I tended to give up and see it as a loss. I spent so much time telling my students that the only real failure was giving up, yet I wasn't taking my own advice. My students changed that. They taught me persistence. They taught me that obstacles will always come up, that some days nothing goes as planned, and that sometimes all you can do is laugh and keep going. The more we laughed and supported each other, the more we grew together. For a long time, I thought it was just me and my students in that classroom, until others began to notice. Fellow teachers, students I didn't even teach, and eventually my administrators saw something in me that I hadn't yet seen in myself. It was their belief, and my students', that empowered me to step into my role as a teacher-leader.

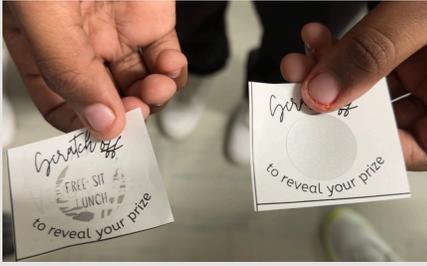
## **What challenges did you face on your journey from Beginning Teacher to district finalist for Teacher of the year, and how did you overcome them?**

The most challenging part of my journey last year, from being nominated as TMS Teacher of the Year to becoming a Teacher of the Year Finalist for ABSS, was overcoming my own insecurity. I felt inadequate sitting at that table. I saw myself as just a teacher who came to work each day doing her best to support her students, like so many others do. My years of experience often came up, and while I'd been devoted to education since I began interning in classrooms at sixteen, I'd only had a classroom of my own for four years. That number felt small, even though I knew how much I'd grown and overcome in that time.

Through it all, I kept reflecting on what the nomination truly meant. I realized it wasn't just about me. It represented everyone who had shaped me into the educator I am today. My teachers, professors, family, students, coworkers, administrators, and even those who doubted me all played a part.

In the end, it was never really about me. It was about them and what I chose to do with the experiences and tools they gave me, and especially about my students. They're the ones who pushed me through every doubt and every hard day, reminding me, “Ms. Hartzfeld, you always tell us we can do it and that failing is only giving up, so don't be nervous, you can do this too!”





**How did being supported early in your career influence your approach to mentoring others now as a Lead Mentor?**

My first year of teaching wasn't a cakewalk, though I don't think anyone's is. However, I had the most supportive and loving team I could have asked for. They were there for the laughter, the tears, and the "I don't think I can do this" moments. We showed up for each other every day, and that year, I was celebrated by my administration and nominated as Beginning Teacher of the Year.

In my second year, I moved to a new grade level with a team of veteran teachers who offered endless support and shared wisdom I'll always be grateful for. But that same year, the principal who once celebrated me, told me that I wasn't fit to be a teacher. He said he was disappointed in my performance and worried about my students, even though they were exceeding expectations. Being young, I believed him.

Thankfully, I had my people in that building, those who listened, reassured me, and helped me rebuild my confidence. I learned that it takes a lot to build someone up but very little to tear them down. And I knew then that if I could be part of the village that once helped me believe in myself, that's exactly where I wanted to be.

It's the little things that matter most. It's the Kit Kat left on your desk after a rough day, the sticky note reminding you to be proud, the quiet "How are you doing?" from a teammate. Teachers aren't so different from students, the more we lift them up, the more they grow.

*Tasha has led her PLC and Grade-level teams to use innovative, and fun, engagement strategies for their 6<sup>th</sup> grade students*

**What advice would you give to current Beginning Teachers who aspire to become leaders in their schools?**

The best advice I can give is to ask, ask, ask. Never stop being a student. The moment you stop being willing to learn, you create your own roadblock. If you see something inspiring in another classroom, ask to observe it. If you're unsure how to use a tool or website, ask that new teacher for help. Ask the questions. Ask for opportunities, for feedback, for support. The worst that can happen is someone says no and even then, it simply reroutes you.

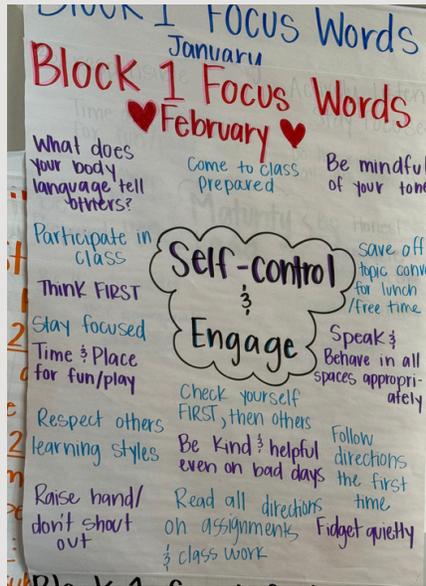
Being reflective in my practice, day by day, hour by hour, has helped me fully embrace what it means to be a lifelong learner. Learning from others is powerful, but the best teacher you'll ever have is yourself and your experiences.

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**How do you continue to grow professionally, and what keeps you inspired in your work with new teachers?**

What I love most is seeing the passion and the strong connections our Beginning Teachers build with their students. Watching them grow and flourish in their classrooms this year has been such a joy. We have an incredible cohort of BTs who are already so intentional and thoughtful in their practice; it's truly inspiring. It makes me genuinely excited to see them in the halls, catch up about how things are going, and stop by their classrooms to see the amazing work they're doing.

*Article by Nate Bourne, who is proud to have coached Tasha at Turrentine from '22-'24 as part of the school's partnership with NC NTSP*



*Students in Tasha's class are engaged in content through active instructional strategies, self-tracked achievement goals, and community created classroom expectations*

