

# Meet the 2020-2021 Advocacy Fellows

During the last two years, the AAE Foundation (AAEF) has been developing programming focused on educator advocacy. Our goals are to encourage and empower our nation's educators to influence policy through advocacy and engagement. This is an effective way to advance our profession and transform the lives of more students for the better. We believe now is the perfect time to lean in and live out the call to leverage our educator voices. We believe that educators are the true experts.

We are pleased to introduce our second cohort of AAEF Advocacy Fellows. These accomplished educators, administrators, professors, authors, and community leaders from across the country are dedicating time throughout the 2020-2021 school year to advocate for policies and issues that directly impact their students, communities, classrooms, and themselves. These fellows will receive monthly one-on-one coaching calls, participate in training with their cohort, and conduct various advocacy projects and actions including writing op-eds, meeting with legislators, testifying before committees, developing policy briefs, and much more. Additionally, fellows will foster and build the skills and knowledge to effectively advocate for and organize others. They will increase their familiarity with policy and bill tracking, and grow their network and sphere of influence.

Like you, these fellows share a commitment to AAE's mission and vision. They are harnessing that commitment to advocate for policies that allow for more equitable outcomes and opportunities for educators and students. In the first week of activity, fellows have already begun writing op-eds, submitted content for our social media outlets, and have attended state charter school association meetings. We cannot wait to see what else this year has in store! Congratulations and welcome!



**Jason B. Allen**  
GEORGIA

Jason B. Allen has worked in education for more than fifteen years. Jason holds a Bachelor of Arts in English degree from University of West Georgia. He has completed the Family Engagement in Education Program through Harvard University. He began his career as an ELA teacher and then served in school administration. He saw the disproportionate numbers of Black boys in special education being suspended or expelled and decided to return to the classroom as a special education teacher to make a bigger impact.

Throughout his career, he has mentored Black boys through his national mentoring program, BMWI (Black Men with Initiative), started at the University of West Georgia. As an education advocate and blogger, Jason seeks to improve the educating of Black boys and to build Black male engagement in schools through the #iAmABlackMaleEducator blog. As a special education teacher at 7 Pillars Career Academy in Forest Park, Georgia, he works to improve the educational experience of the high number of Black boys in special education programs.



**Grant Brewer**  
ARKANSAS

Grant Brewer received his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree from East Central University and a Master of Education in Higher Education degree from the University of Arkansas. He currently serves as the Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) (aka drones) Instructor for Southside High School in Fort Smith, Arkansas. During the 2019-2020 school year, Fort Smith Public Schools partnered with the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith to offer the UAS classes as concurrent courses, allowing Grant to become an adjunct professor for UAS. Prior to his position with Southside High School, Grant taught at Alma Middle School, in Alma, Arkansas, for three years. During his time at Alma, Grant taught seventh- and eighth-grade mathematics, seventh-grade key code, sixth-grade PE, and helped coach football and baseball.

Grant's passion for educational advocacy shines through in his work on the Fort Smith Public Schools' inaugural Personnel Policy Committee.

**"I see teaching as an opportunity not only to teach but also to lead, develop, impact, and empower."**

OP-ED BY JASON ALLEN,  
*Education Post*, Feb. 26, 2020  
<https://bit.ly/3cykYAp>



**Tabitha Brown**  
 COLORADO

Tabitha Brown currently teaches kindergarten at Global Village Academy in Northglenn, Colorado. Global Village Academy is a public charter school with a focus on dual language immersion learning. As a strong believer in dual language education, Mrs. Brown works with the team of English, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian educators to identify effective practices in supporting young learners. With an emphasis on creating independent and confident learners, Mrs. Brown focuses on how to best guide students toward their potential.

Mrs. Brown was born in Anchorage, Alaska, and has lived in California and Germany before calling Colorado her home. She holds a Master of Science in Education in Instruction and Curriculum Design degree from Jones International University and a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies degree with an emphasis in Elementary Education and Spanish, and a minor in Computer Information Systems from Humboldt State University.



**Teresa Brown**  
 COLORADO

Teresa Brown currently serves as dean of student support and a teacher coach at Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning (AcademyACL), a charter school designed to meet the needs of gifted learners in Colorado Springs, Colorado. She supports teachers in learning and implementing gifted best practices and the process toward formal gifted identification. She is also developing AcademyACL's Center for Gifted Resources that will focus on advocating for the academic and social-emotional needs of gifted learners through parent and educator workshops, book studies, conference presentations, pre-service teacher trainings, observation opportunities, and small group or one-on-one coaching for educators to better serve the gifted learners in the Pikes Peak region and beyond.

Teresa attended University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and Colorado Christian University, earning a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts degree with an emphasis in Elementary Education and a Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction degree, as well as endorsements in English Language Arts and Gifted Education.



**Alicen Fair**  
 COLORADO

Alicen Fair graduated from the University of Northern Colorado in 2014 receiving her Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education degree with Visual Art emphasis. While at UNC, she was an officer and member of Kappa Delta Pi International Honor Society in Education. She is currently in her fifth year of teaching at Littleton Academy — a charter school in Littleton, Colorado. Alicen is a firm believer in schools of choice and giving families the opportunity to select education for their children. At school, Alicen advocates for students by placing a priority on relationships. Alicen recalls, "My wonderful fifth-grade teacher Miss Berger inspired me to be a teacher because she modeled this kindness to each of us every day."



**Christian Harden**  
 GEORGIA

Christian Harden is principal of RISE Preparatory Charter School. In this capacity, Christian is responsible for hiring staff and developing a growth mindset among staff and scholars. As a proud graduate of Georgia State University, Christian studied educational technology. He received his Educational Specialist in Educational Leadership degree at Kennesaw State University.

Christian was a classroom teacher for twelve years in addition to serving as grade-level chairperson, teacher support specialist, and social studies chairperson. After twelve years as a classroom teacher, Christian served as a data support specialist. This work led Christian to become a trained Critical Friends facilitator. Christian used these activities and protocols to support educators to arrive at desired outcomes, efficiently and productively.



**Ryan Bytheway**  
 TEXAS

Ryan Bytheway currently teaches sixth-grade geography and world history at Sugar Land Middle School in Sugar Land, Texas, where he also coaches eighth-grade girls basketball. He is in his seventh year of teaching. His teaching journey began in Utah at Noah Webster Academy Charter School where he joined AAE. He then moved to Houston, Texas, near Sugar Land Middle School. Ryan believes that when parents, teachers, and students put education first, everyone wins! He is a graduate of Brigham Young University.

"Seeing the evidence of successful learning and witnessing students achieve an industry-level certification are the best parts of my job."

OP-ED BY GRANT BREWER,  
*Times Record*, Feb. 14, 2020  
<https://bit.ly/3awPUzn>



**Jamila Jendayi-Scott**  
NEW JERSEY

Jamila Jendayi-Scott was born and raised in Paterson, New Jersey. She graduated from Ramapo College of New Jersey with a Bachelor of Arts in International Business degree and a Master of Science in Educational Technology degree. The majority of Jamila's career has been in the city of Paterson in both the nonprofit and education sectors. She works to help individuals value themselves and their self-worth. Her favorite saying is, "There is nothing that you can't recover from." With this thought in mind, you know that there is no problem for which you cannot find a feasible solution.

As assistant director of operations at Paterson Arts and Science Charter School in Paterson, New Jersey, Jamila leads a team of more than twenty teachers and staff members, and provides meaningful enrichment programming to hundreds of high school students. She manages staff direction, student recruitment and retention, vendor recruitment and management, and event and program planning.

"Teaching is by far one of the noblest professions. This is my inspiration to keep fighting for and advocating for an education that is transformative."

BLOG BY BRIAN PAYNE,  
[weloveteaching.org](https://bit.ly/2PTgSJl), Feb. 15, 2020  
<https://bit.ly/2PTgSJl>



**Meran Khon**  
MICHIGAN

Meran Khon is a twenty-year public school educator. She has spent the majority of her career in the same rural southeastern Michigan district serving in a variety of capacities. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English and Elementary Education degree from Spring Arbor University and holds a Master of Arts in Middle Level Education degree from Walden University. Her experience includes seventh-grade ELA, third grade, a third-fifth grade Gifted/Talented STEM program, and currently directs the elementary media center as the librarian/technology/maker space/STEAM teacher for kindergarten through fifth grade.

Meran believes firmly in the role schools play in the local community, and is passionate about building relationships between students and their educators, especially within her Title 1 building.



**Brian Payne**  
GEORGIA

Brian Eugene Payne is the health and physical education instructor for Dekalb PATH Academy Charter School. Brian also serves as the elective team leader. Brian believes that physical education has been relegated to a "rollout of the basketballs recess." He has written new curriculum and transformed the reputation of physical education at PATH Academy and throughout the Dekalb County district.

Brian received his Bachelor of Science in Physical Education and Health degree from High Point University and a Master of Divinity degree from Howard University. Prior to his career as an educator, Brian served as a Peace Corps volunteer.

"It is time that we turn the tide on stagnant education and focus on meeting the needs of our students by any means necessary."

OP-ED BY TIFFANY SVENNES,  
[AAE Blog](https://bit.ly/2VeZdOf), Mar. 2, 2020  
<https://bit.ly/2VeZdOf>



**Lou McCall**  
NEW JERSEY

Lou McCall has been an educator for six years and has served in a variety of capacities as he continues to grow as an educator. After earning a Bachelor of Arts in Communication degree from Monmouth University, he spent several years in the private sector before finding his passion in the classroom setting. He became a certified teacher and later pursued his Master of Education in Educational Leadership degree from American College of Education.

Known as an enthusiastic educator with an aptitude for connecting learning to the real world, he taught at the elementary level prior to his current position teaching sixth- and seventh-grade mathematics at a charter school in southern New Jersey. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, Lou has served as after-school program director, developed a soccer program, served on numerous school committees, and assists in overseeing the school's summer camp. His commitment to advocacy began with the implementation of a flexible seating initiative for a special learning needs classroom.



**Ashley Simpson**  
 COLORADO

Ashley Simpson is an education professor and chair of the Education and World Languages program at the Community College of Aurora, Colorado. She works fluidly within the worlds of academic teacher preparation and career and technical education, with the goal of guiding students to become the best early childhood and elementary education advocates and providers they can be. She sums up her advocacy philosophy by saying, "I help my students understand that to be the best advocate for children and their families you must first understand children and their families. You must understand the connection between school and home (community) and how they interrelate. Once you understand this connection, then you can advocate effectively."

Ashley holds a Doctor in Education in Early Childhood Education degree, Master of Science in Education in Literacy Education degree, and Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education degree from Jackson State University. In addition, she also holds an Education Specialist in Administrator Leadership in Higher Learning and Teaching degree, and a Master of Science in Psychology degree with a specialty in Industrial Organizational Psychology.

**"Learning can take place in innovative ways and still bring people together."**

OP-ED BY JASON ALLEN,  
 EdLANTA March 28, 2020  
<https://bit.ly/2V74tos>



**Melissa C. Smith**  
 NEW JERSEY

Melissa Smith is the co-founder of a financial wellness start-up. Melissa has a strong sense of social responsibility and is committed to finding new ways to garner equitable distribution of quality education for all people at all stages of life. She currently leads efforts for recruitment and family engagement strategy for a network of four charter schools serving approximately 2,000 students from pre-K through twelfth grade. Melissa has experience collaborating and engaging with stakeholders at all levels, from parents seeking sound academic options for their children to members of senior leadership on marketing, advertising, and branding projects. Melissa's goal is to increase her level of civic engagement and social responsibility by learning public policy, developing strategic relationships, and working with colleagues to combat unfair policies and practices while offering clear and attainable solutions.



**Joli Sotallaro**  
 ARKANSAS

Joli Sotallaro has been a public school educator for five years. She received her Bachelor of Arts in History degree from the University of Arkansas and a Master of Science in Educational Leadership degree from Arkansas State University. After ten years as a business manager, Joli began her teaching career in Decatur, Arkansas, teaching English and social studies in the secondary setting and was a member of the Innovation Council. She then moved to Siloam Springs where she has taught both English and social studies.

As a passionate teacher of students in the middle grades, Joli advocates for the idea that all students can learn at a high level, and works to build and create real-world learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful.



**Danielle Stewart**  
 GEORGIA

Dr. Danielle Stewart is founder and president of the education consulting company, In School Spirit, LLC and the nonprofit, Community Empowerment Foundation, Inc. She is a proud graduate of Hofstra University, where she studied and worked in the New York television industry.

After receiving a Doctor of Education in Education Leadership degree, with a concentration in K-12 from Argosy University, she has continued to research, create, and build innovative ways to reach parents and students and ignite the school spirit of underrepresented students. She has dedicated her professional work to providing educational support, resources, and tools through strategic community building.

Three years ago, she launched a campaign, Education Advocacy Awareness, that engages parents, students, and community members in what it means to advocate for quality education locally. "I'm a firm believer that change begins with a conversation but change happens with commitment." Through this campaign, she has committed annually to 31 days every October to celebrate those who are doing amazing advocacy work both locally and nationally through various platforms, events, and conversations.

## TELL YOUR COLLEAGUES ABOUT AAE

Are your colleagues interested in joining you as an AAE member? Send them to [aaeteachers.org](https://aaeteachers.org) to learn more!





# The Legal Help and Support You Need



**Tiffany Svennes**  
■ COLORADO

Tiffany Svennes is director of Post-Secondary Studies at Denver Justice High School in Denver, Colorado. In this role, she advises, advocates, teaches, and guides secondary students through options that exist after high school. She is responsible for academic counseling, transcript evaluations, and scheduling oversights. She is a proud alumna of Colorado Christian University and holds a Master of Arts in Education degree from Western Colorado University. She is a supporter of charter schools and alternative education. Recently admitted to Concordia University-Portland, to pursue a Doctor of Education degree.

Tiffany spent three years teaching ninth- through twelfth-grade social studies and continues to teach a twelfth grade seminar course as well as serve as the senior class advisor. She recently became the GED site coordinator at her school and desires to continue opening doors for underserved and underrepresented populations.

If you would like to learn more about AAEF advocacy projects and initiatives, contact [kira@aaeteachers.org](mailto:kira@aaeteachers.org). ■



**Kira Tookes** is the director of advocacy for AAE Foundation. In this role, Kira is responsible for recruiting, training, developing, and empowering teachers to make strategic and impactful policy advancements for the benefit of all children.

## AAE LEGAL SERVICES

You will receive caring, professional support and direct contact with our legal team for confidential advice with no conflicts of interest.

☎ 800.704.7799

✉ [contactlegal@aaeteachers.org](mailto:contactlegal@aaeteachers.org)

**A**n overwhelming number of educators have contacted AAE Legal Services recently about students who are verbally or physically aggressive. Some educators have even been injured, assaulted, or harassed by students. If you find yourself in this type of situation, there is something that can be done. You can take action and we suggest you follow these steps:

- 1. Document your incident with a workers' compensation claim.** Injuries suffered in the workplace are most often covered by workers' compensation. Please make sure you contact administration or HR and ask for a claim form to report your injury. Be factual in your reporting. There are time constraints on when forms for workplace injuries should be filled out; therefore, this is something you should do as soon as possible after the injury.
- 2. Document your injuries.** Seek medical care, take pictures of bruises, lacerations, or other injuries. Make sure you tell your doctor that your injury was a result of an incident at work. If you are suffering emotional trauma stemming from student conduct, seek the proper care through counseling or other medical treatment. Keep your communications with your counselor limited

to the workplace incident and its effects. Remember, these communications could become part of your workers' compensation claim and reviewed by school district attorneys.

- 3. Document with the district.** You should always document student aggression with your district, regardless of whether it is verbal or physical. If your school site uses incident reports, fill one out. If your school does not use official forms, send an email to your principal and/or HR documenting the incident with the student or students.
- 4. File a report with the School Resource Officer or law enforcement.** Depending on the age of the student involved, filing a criminal complaint is an important way to involve a third party that will be less concerned about the student suing the district and more concerned about addressing the criminal behavior of the student.
- 5. Seek legal support.** School districts are often hesitant to help because students, parents, and/or guardians often threaten legal action. However, AAE is on your side. AAE Legal Services can help guide and support you through the above process. You are not alone. We are here to help. ■



**Sharon Nelson** is the senior director of legal services for the Association of American Educators. In this capacity, Ms. Nelson oversees AAE's legal services team and works daily with members and panel counsel to address members' legal concerns. A passionate advocate for educators, Ms. Nelson has been a lawyer focusing on employee rights issues for more than twenty years.