

Amanda Aguayo

"...a life-long learner who seeks to investigate the differences in communities that push us apart and offer ways to connect..."

Amanda Aguayo is the Visual Arts teacher at Gravelly Hill Middle School in Efland, NC, teaching grades 6-8. She has 15 years of teaching experience, prides herself in building relationships with students, co-workers and creating a safe, wholesome learning environment. She is the mother of three children, who keep her active in spectating a variety of sports throughout the year. When she's not elbow deep in painting and crafting at home, she enjoys cooking and trying out new restaurants. She is a fierce advocate for mental healthcare and equitable practices in the classroom which led her to dive into choice based pedagogy that she offers her students through implementing Teaching for Artistic Behaviors, which amplifies student choice and voice. Amanda is a 2024 LatinxEd Fellow and the 2024 North Carolina Art Education Association Middle Level Art Educator of the Year. She is eager and excited to be a part of the inaugural Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassadorship.



Nicole Ahn

"...a first-generation college graduate, dual Swiss-American citizen and mother of 2 kids raised in Raleigh."

Nicole Ahn is an art integration specialist at the Magellan Charter School in Raleigh where she collaborates with math, science, social studies, and ELA teachers in grades 3-8 to develop creative lessons and projects that extend classroom learning. Nicole's teaching career stretches from kindergarten to high school, from Seattle to Switzerland. Throughout her career she has always been passionate about the arts and incorporating hands-on, creative experiences for her students. Nicole is culture curious and seeks growth opportunities for herself and her students. In recent summers she was selected to study in Vienna with NC State's CIDRE program and in South Korea with NC Go Global's educator program. Traveling and collaborating with teachers from around North Carolina piqued Nicole's interest in becoming a Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassador. She looks forward to broadening her professional network with other curious, open-minded, passionate educators and hopes to learn more about the exciting resources the DNCR has to offer in her adopted home state of 23 years. As a Raleigh resident, DNCR's NC Museum of Art is a beloved resource for Nicole and she has had her own art on display at the museum. Nicole shares her (almost) empty nest with her husband, cat, and newly adopted rescue dog, Gus.



Kathleen Brinson

"...a North Carolina native from a family of educators who instilled the significance of learning..."

Kathleen Brinson is an ESOL Teacher and Refugee School Impact Coordinator within Craven County Schools. With 19 years of teaching experience, she has instructed students across various grades, including 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and is currently teaching K-12 ESOL. As an ESOL teacher she plans, organizes, instructs, and assesses the progress of students whose first language is not English. As the Refugee School Impact Coordinator, Kathleen provides management for the RSI Program including maintaining linkages among the Interfaith Refugee Ministry resettlement agency, schools, refugee families, and students to support refugee student success and educational integration. The RSI Program provides linguistically appropriate services, increases family engagement in student's educational experience, supports behavioral health interventions, implements tutoring programs and summer activities, and supports interventions for refugee children various learning needs.



Heather Butler

"...a wife, an aunt, and a cat and bird mom whose college path was more like a knotted ball of yarn than a straight line...a traveler. ...a collector of stories and images."

Heather Butler teaches K-5 Art at Northwest Elementary School in Greenville, North Carolina, in the Pitt County School District. She taught high school Art in Martin County School District for fourteen and a half years and has been teaching elementary Art in Pitt County Schools for about a year, believing that Art is for everyone, because it tells our stories and shows who we are. She is eager to be a Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassador, so she can learn more about her home state and is excited to go behind the scenes at the NC Zoo and hear the NC Symphony perform. Mrs. Butler enjoys growing houseplants, and with her husband, Rick, has two cats, Nocturne and Moo Moo, and a green-cheeked conure, Sugar, and they love traveling around the United States. In 2022, she applied and was selected to be a part of Cohort 11 of Art21 Educators, where she spent a week in New York City with eleven other educators from around the United States and the world, as part of the summer institute and a yearlong intensive program collaborating and learning new ways to incorporate contemporary artists and themes into her classroom.



Patrice Hardy

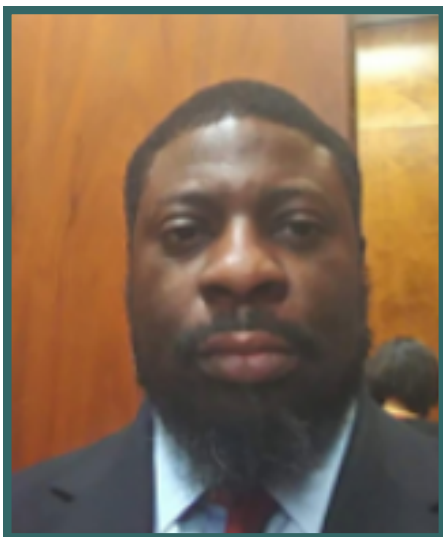
"...a Black Woman whose ancestors built and fought for the right to stand up and shout our agency to the diaspora."

Patrice Hardy is a thirty-year public school educator who loves her chosen craft and career. She counts it a joy to "teach herself happy" daily to teens who keep her young and inspired. As a granddaughter of educators and a proud alumna of Bennett College for Women and North Carolina A&T State University, she is old school in thought and practice. She believes that our presence in the building makes a difference and how we show up matters. You can find her with her signature pearls around her neck and that voice ringing through the halls daily to remind us of all of the reasons for the pushing and pulling and work. As the ELA department chair and the co-advisor for Student Government, co-advisor for the National Achievers Society, and co-chair of the School Improvement Team at Willow Spring High School, her presence is felt and heard. Patrice says "what we do matters...in every way and every interaction, we touch the future. Teaching is how I positively impact future generations. My ancestors paid too great a price for me to turn back now."



Guy Hill

"loves to learn and grow as a person and as a teacher, to be the best version of himself personally and professionally..."



Guy Hill is from the Bronx, New York and teaches at Triton High School in Erwin (Harnett County). He has taught 9th and 10th grade English as well as AP Language and Composition for 24 years. He is a former president of the North Carolina English Teachers Association, a former member of Gov. Beverly Perdue's Teacher Advisory Committee, as well as an executive board member of Gov. Roy Cooper's DRIVE (Developing a Representative and Inclusive Vision for Education) Task Force. He was an America 250 NC Fellow with DNCR and has also been awarded the Marvin Pittman Champion of Education Award by the NC Department of Public Instruction, as well as the NC African American Heritage Commission's Leader in Education Award. His mother (Myrtle B. Hill) was a teacher and he embraces his role in bringing a high level of instruction, expectations, and educational experience to his students. He is married to a fellow educator, Dr. Angela M. Hill and they have two daughters, Zora and Charlotte. He enjoys reading, learning, teaching, exercising, and helping young people discover their destiny.

Rody Huertas

"...a dedicated music teacher & performer who values creativity & connection...with roots in Puerto Rican culture that deeply influence my work..."

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Rody J Huertas is an educator and professional trombonist with a wide range of skills in jazz, classical, Latin American, and folkloric music styles. With over 19 years of stage experience, he has brought his music to countries including Puerto Rico, the United States, France, Spain, Egypt, Belgium, the Netherlands, Turkey, and Perú. He holds a Master's Degree in Music Education from the Conservatory of Music of Puerto Rico. In 2023, he reached the third level of Orff Certification and completed World Music Drumming Level 1. Since 2005, Rody has been an active performer, educator, and composer, making significant contributions to the music scenes in Puerto Rico and North Carolina. Currently, he is a music teacher at Frank Porter Graham Bilingual School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he has worked since 2019. He has conducted music workshops in various locations, including Puerto Rico (2012-2019), Hueytamalco, Puebla, Mexico (2015), Hofstra University in New York (2021), Hidden Valley Music Seminars in Carmel Valley (2022), California (2023), the North Carolina Museum of Art (2023), and the University of New Orleans (2024).



Sarah Walls

"...a creative, curious, and innovative teacher that excels at connecting academic content with wider experiences for students."

Sarah Walls is a veteran middle school educator of nearly 20 years. She currently teaches Humanities to a mixed age classroom of 7th and 8th graders at Lakewood Montessori Middle School in Durham. She has a passion for field studies and project based learning and relies on the rich resources and sites of NC in her teaching. She considers North Carolina her adopted home state and has been shaped by a family of curious educators. Sarah has taken advantage of professional development and collaborations with the Museum of Natural Sciences, the National Endowment of the Humanities, the NC Civil War Center, the NC Museum of History, the John Hope Franklin Scholars at Duke, and many others. Since coming to Lakewood nine years ago, Sarah went through extensive secondary Montessori training in order to become a credentialed Montessori teacher. She has established programs and field studies for students that allow them to immerse themselves in academic content combined with personal development. Through curiosity and innovation, Sarah has pursued and created opportunities with a sense of experimentation for her students.





DNCR Teacher Ambassadors

dncr.nc.gov/learning-happens-here-teacher-ambassadors

Starlette Jacobs

"...a member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina & a native of Robeson County...a product of North Carolina public schools & a firm believer of the equity of public education..."

Starlette Jacobs teaches at Kernodle Middle School in Greensboro where she proudly grows 7th graders in English Language Arts. She has expanded the learning environment outside the classroom, by serving as a STEM Academy Service Opportunity Coordinator, organizing a student historical tour of Washington D.C. and Raleigh area museums. She has also coordinated a student hurricane relief fundraiser and played a key role in the Guilford County Schools American Indian Education Cultural Camp curriculum development. She is elated to become a Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassador, and eagerly looks forward to exploring innovative teaching strategies. Starlette is a grateful mother of four who cherishes long nature walks, reading, watching football, spending time with family, exploring history, and discovering Native American culture. She has taught 18 years in North Carolina and was honored by fellow teachers as Teacher of the Year in 2013 and 2024. She obtained her Master's in School Administration and Bachelor of Science in Middle Grades Education from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. She currently serves as the school Data Team Leader and MTSS School Coordinator.



Landon Leggett

"...a product of a hard working family with deep roots in rural eastern North Carolina."

Landon Leggett is a history teacher at Martin Innovative Middle School in Williamston, NC. Landon teaches 6th and 7th grade social studies and is an advocate for hands-on learning and works to provide opportunities for her students to take their learning outside the classroom whenever possible. Landon enjoys teaching in the same school system that she grew up in (Martin County) and making generational connections with families. Landon was thrilled to learn of her placement as a Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassador and the connections she will be able to make across the state. She is excited to learn how to best connect DNCR sites to her classroom and students. Landon is the oldest of five children and values the role her family plays in her life. She recently reached a goal she's been working toward for years, officially visiting all fifty states. Landon has been teaching for seven years and was selected as a Teacher of Excellence by the NC Museum of Natural Sciences in January of 2024. In Summer 2024, she was a part of the NC Go Global delegation that traveled to South Korea to study their educational system.



Allyson McFalls

"...a proud National Board Certified Teacher from a family of educators who grew up in rural coastal plains of North Carolina."

Allyson McFalls is a 20 year veteran North Carolina teacher, having taught middle school science and ELA for her entire career. She is a National Board Certified Teacher, and holds a masters degree in library science. She recently was selected as an Educator of Excellence and went to Yellowstone National Park with 12 other NC educators and staff from the NC Museum of Natural Sciences. She has a passion for education, and for engaging students in outdoor learning experiences and independent science research projects. Allyson was a North Carolina Teaching Fellow at Appalachian State University and is now grateful to call Boone home, where she lives with her husband and boys. Outside of school, Allyson enjoys spending time with her her family and dogs outdoors hiking, camping, boating and gardening.



Natalia Mejia

"Global Citizen. Latina. Multilanguage Learner Teacher. Daughter. Sister."

Natalia Mejia is the NCCAT 2023 Empower NC Beginning Teacher of the Year. She entered education with the hope of increasing the diversity of educators in the classroom. An alum of the Honors in Education program and the Cato College of Education at UNC Charlotte graduating Summa Cum Laude, she is currently pursuing her Masters degree in Latin American Studies at UNC Charlotte. She was a two-time participant in study abroad programs to Cape Town, South Africa. This inspired her philosophy of education around Ubuntu, "I am, because we are". She has co-written two book chapters about her experience and research in South Africa and was the co-founder of the non-profit organizations: 49ers for Puerto Rico and Knit-Together Prana. Natalia teaches ELL students at CC Griffin Middle School. She is currently a Volunteer NC Commissioner and supports AmeriCorp programs and encouraging civic engagement. She also volunteers her time as an Educational Community Council Member for the Dudley Flood Center for Educational Equity & Opportunity, advising the Flood Center in different community and policy initiatives. Natalia currently lives in Concord, North Carolina. In her free time, she enjoys antique shopping and spending time with her family and her Cavalier King Charles Mercury. She is so excited to be an Ambassador for the Learning Happens Here program to network and learn more about North Carolina.



Pauline Merritt

"...a first generation college graduate who lives in her hometown... a person of faith who believes that all people are important and should be nurtured to be the best they can be in order to make our world a better place."

Pauline Merritt is a 23 year veteran English teacher in Shelby, NC where she has taught grades 6-12. Merritt's career is summarized as stepping up and stepping in by imparting knowledge and empowerment to her students. Merritt was honored to be selected as one of 24 teachers nationwide to serve in a cohort sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities at UNC-Wilmington in 2023. An amateur poet, Merritt won first place in the NC Career Development Poetry and Art Contest (2024). Merritt is elated to serve as a Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassador and feels this will allow her to capitalize on resources available to public schools. She has devoted her career reaching students in and out of the classroom. Merritt was the Student Government sponsor leading Crest Middle School to the Golden Eagle Award for fundraising efforts supporting the United Way. She served as sponsor of the Crest Middle Spelling Bee, seeing several students off to the Scripps National Bee in Washington, DC. She has served as Chair of the English Department and represented the School Improvement Team at Crest Middle School. She counts successes in her many students who attain perfect scores on statewide tests. Merritt leads on the basketball court and track field, winning nine total championships. She serves as an after-school tutor, a regular bus driver, and a test item writer for NCDPI. Merritt and her husband raised two academically gifted star athletes, who attend NC State and UNC-CH.



Ashley Moser

"...a dedicated educator with a passion for inclusion, equity and hands on learning."

Ashley is a career educator currently teaching 3rd grade at the Exploris School in Raleigh NC. She has 24 years of experience in the classroom and is a National Board Certified teacher. She strongly believes in the importance of relevant, relationship based learning. Students learn best in an environment where they are encouraged to collaborate, express their creativity and develop their natural curiosity. Ashley is excited about helping students and educators tap into the amazing natural and cultural resources that North Carolina has to offer. She believes that deep learning often occurs outside the walls of the classroom. She is a die-hard Tarheels fan, who also enjoys gardening, hiking and traveling. A teaching fellow at the University of NC Chapel Hill, Ashley has been an Earthwatch ambassador and a Schools in Parks grant recipient. She was also elected to serve on the leadership committee for her school. Ashley is thrilled to be serving as an ambassador for DNCR.



Talicia Smith

"...an energetic individual that loves people, conversations, a good song, and making a positive impact."

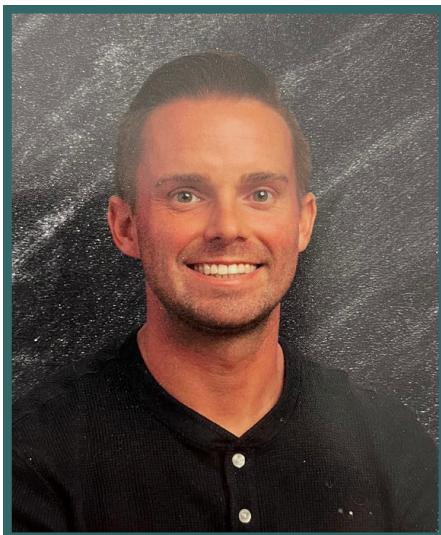
Talicia L. Smith is a native of Florida, currently living in North Carolina with her husband and two daughters. She is the author of three powerful books, "Learning to Walk the Unforgettable Journey," "Strength for the Journey," and "Monday Motivation for Educators". As a science teacher for Cumberland County Schools she teaches, mentors and encourages middle school Science teachers. As the spouse of a retired U.S. Army Veteran, she has had the privilege of teaching in various states across the United States and working abroad with the Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) in Germany. Talicia was the 2023 Teacher of the Year for Cumberland County Schools and the North Carolina Sandhills Region runner up. She was also featured in the "I am Carolina's Black History" segment sponsored by the North Carolina Burroughs Wellcome Fund. As an educator for over twenty years, her passion remains for the profession and she is elated about becoming a Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassador. It is her desire to use the experience to empower classrooms and other educators. She is also a doctoral student at Alverno College in Wisconsin, researching the Impact of Research Based High Yield Instructional Strategies on Middle Grade Students' engagement and achievement.



Sean Stanek

"...a first-generation college graduate who grew up along the coast of the Carolinas...history buff, surfer, skateboarder, and motorcyclist."

Sean Stanek is an 8th grade Social Studies teacher in Wilmington, NC. With 11 years of teaching experience, he advises the Holly Shelter Middle Surfrider Foundation Student Club, and runs a local non-profit organization called Share the Stoke. Share the Stoke connects downtown Wilmington youth to southeastern NC's robust surfing community (follow their work on Instagram @sharethestoke.nc). Sean's goal as an educator has always been to be the teacher that he wished he had when he was in middle school; firm, understanding and fun-loving, but with high expectations. Sean believes that it is incredibly important to have high expectations for his students and always push them to do their best work. Coupled with building positive relationships with his students, Sean encourages them to remain dedicated, persevere in the face of adversity, become life-long learners, and rise to the occasion. Maintaining this growth mindset since his first-year teaching, his students always experience growth. They learn to think like historians, develop leadership skills, and become more well-rounded.



Robert Summerell

"...a second-generation NC Music Educator who is a proud product of NC Public Schools."

Robert K. Summerell is the Choral Director at Freedom High School in Morganton, NC, where he has shared in the creation of meaningful, music-making memories with his beloved students over the past six years. A ten-year career educator in the NC Public School System, Summerell holds degrees in Music Education from Wingate University and Florida State University. His choirs have consistently received "Superior" ratings in competition and have performed for the NC chapter of the American Choral Directors Association at Duke University Chapel. In April 2024, his students performed as members of the National Youth Choir at Carnegie Hall in New York City. When he isn't conducting all-county choir events, accompanying local school choirs from the piano, or sharing his love of music with his students, Robert leads music at his church, enjoys golfing, and lives a wonderful life with his darling wife. He is honored to be a Learning Happens Here Teacher Ambassador and looks forward to learning, teaching, and sharing alongside his statewide colleagues.



Patrice Wade

"...a champion for equity in STEM education."

Patrice Wade is a trailblazing educator, visionary leader, and unapologetic advocate for equity in education. Patrice currently teaches Technology at Guilford Preparatory Academy. With a mission to empower underserved students, she leads transformative programs like Girls Who Code and trains educators across North Carolina through Code.org. She supports educators across North Carolina to bring computer science to their students. Patrice is a CSTA member, Amazon Future Engineer Teacher Ambassador, Google Educator, Apple Teacher Certified, an Everfi Champion and a Common Sense Educator. Patrice is a proud NC Teaching Fellow pursuing her Masters in Education to further deepen her impact in the field and help change students lives. In her work, she inspires a new generation as a trailblazer to help shatter barriers, redefine possibility, and build futures that know no limits.

