



Ali Wright: CTQ Teacherpreneur with the Fayette County (KY) Public Schools

Ali Wright is a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) at Lafayette High School in Lexington, Kentucky, where she teaches AP Calculus and Algebra. Ali majored in education at Transylvania University, a local private liberal arts college. She is a “home-grown” teacher leader who is deeply committed to her students and to a lifelong career in the classroom. With 13 years of teaching experience under her belt, Ali has found—and shaped for herself—a leadership role she didn’t foresee when she started teaching.

Over the last year in her role as a CTQ-supported teacherpreneur, Ali has taught a traditional course load every other day in her school’s block schedule. On days when she is released from the classroom, she leads a wide variety of Common Core alignment efforts inside her school and district, as well as across the nation. Terry Holliday, state superintendent of education, said, “Ali has really made her mark...here—helping more lay people really understand what it takes to teach effectively and what real reform looks like.”

In Ali’s teacherpreneur application, she explained, “I really like to look at certain problems and figure out how to find solutions to them.” And she has quite a record of doing so. Over her thirteen years of teaching, she designed a Summer Bridge for struggling math students, created a “camp” to ensure more minority students took (and passed) AP Calculus, served as a mentor for Kentucky’s new teacher induction program, and worked extensively with the state’s teacher association to advance classroom-based pedagogical and policy reforms.

Ali’s students, colleagues, and administrators in Fayette County Schools all admire her serious pedagogical skills and her developing role as a leader who does not leave the classroom. “She is an amazing teacher,” Lafayette High School principal Bryne Jacobs told us.

Ali’s leadership potential escalated rapidly three years ago when she joined CTQ’s inaugural Common Core TeacherSolutions team. This virtual community of NBCTs from Kentucky and North Carolina studied and tested a number of instructional tools for deep learning in math and literacy. Working with formative assessment tools developed by the Math Design Collaborative, Ali conducted virtual lesson study with other math NBCTs from Kentucky and North Carolina.

**“I have only been here two years,
but I know I am a better principal
because of teacher leaders like Ali.”
—Bryne Jacobs, principal, Lafayette
High School**

Her talents as an effective communicator—both in writing and before an audience—elevated Ali’s leadership beyond her school and state. By the end of the 2010-2011 school year, Ali was representing teacher perspectives on Common Core implementation before a national audience in Washington, D.C., and she has continued that sort of professional advocacy in her present role as a teacherpreneur. Ali told us, “I can’t even imagine how my professional life would be if I had not been part of the Common Core TeacherSolutions team.”

Model and approach

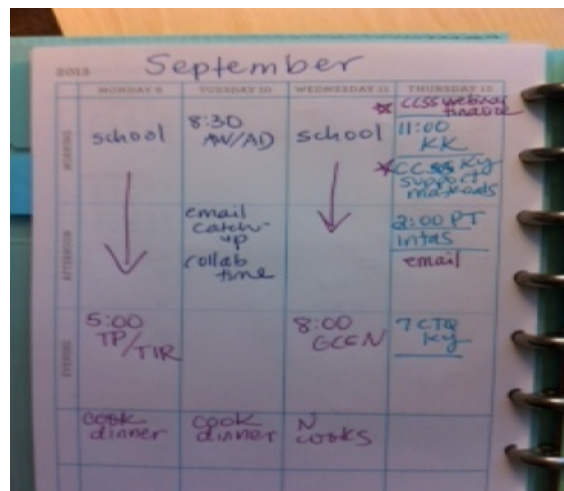
For the last year, CTQ has reimbursed Fayette County Schools for half the cost of Ali’s teaching contract so she can continue to teach students daily while having time to lead a variety of reforms. Much of Ali’s “teacherpreneur time” has been spent developing a virtual community of Kentucky teachers to lead Common Core reforms and connect their work to teaching colleagues in other states. Over 100 teachers are now involved. Ali is working closely with six of her colleagues (who serve in roles as virtual community organizers, or VCOs) to co-lead the growth of other teachers statewide as leaders on Common Core implementation.

For Ali, too many policymakers in her state confuse teacher leaders with department chairs. Her role as a teacherpreneur, first and foremost, is to “show them what a teacher leader is and does” and “how important it is to have classroom teachers leading their own profession.” Too many teachers work in isolation—a fact that education sociologists have described for many decades. Ali seeks, more than anything else, to de-isolate teachers and their teaching in ways that “improve outcomes for kids.”

Ali is deeply committed to the Common Core and deeper math learning for all students. She told us, “Teachers are working hard to implement the Common Core, but they do not have resources and tools to do so. There is very little communication between teachers within and across districts.” By the close of the 2014-15 school year, Ali expects that she and her colleagues will have prepared 1,000 teachers from Kentucky as leaders of teaching and assessment designs for 21st-century skills.

Before she took on her teacherpreneurial role, Ali would typically teach 180 different students each year. Her teaching days remain the same as those of her colleagues. It is a frenetic pace, with very little structured time for collaboration with peers. Ali shares her expertise widely but laments the lack of structured time for teachers to watch one another teach and share their best practices. “I have not had another teacher observe me teaching at all during this school year,” Ali said, “except for a 20-minute peer observation that was part of our new evaluation pilot.”

Ali’s released days are packed: she’s engaged in policy meetings and leads professional development sessions in her district, as well as nearby Madison and Jefferson counties. She often finds herself immersed in conference calls, video chats, and emails packed with opportunities to



One week in Ali’s planning calendar.

collaborate with the state teachers association, the Prichard Committee (an influential state-level education advocacy nonprofit in Kentucky), and other teacher leadership organizations. Most recently, Ali has worked with the Kentucky Education Association (KEA) and a number of universities to plan how NBCTs in Kentucky can play a more instrumental role in teacher education reform. She is building an initiative with the Prichard Committee to connect an effort to elevate student voice with the teacher leadership work of CTQ-KY.

Ali has become a prolific writer, publishing dozens of blog posts and articles in national and regional venues—many of which have led to additional speaking and writing opportunities. These pieces share her expertise on a variety of topics, from pedagogy (“[Creating a Positive Classroom Culture: Minute By Minute](#)” in *Educational Horizons*) to advocacy (“[Lessons Learned from an Education Advocate](#)” in *Education Week Teacher*). One of Ali’s most groundbreaking pieces was “[The Math Standards and Moving Beyond the Worksheet](#),” a commentary published on the back page of *Education Week*—a prized placement rarely offered to teacher authors.

The impact of leadership grounded in the classroom

When the possibility of hybrid roles comes up in many education circles, two concerns about teacher leadership commonly surface. First, some worry that any time spent outside the classroom erodes a teacher leader’s instructional effectiveness and has a negative impact on their students. Conversely, others wonder if having one foot in the classroom prevents a teacher leader from being able to do much more than teach. But Ali’s impacts in her first year as a teacherpreneur show that neither of these is true when teachers are well-supported in their roles.

In 2013, more than half of Ali’s students earned a “5” on their AP Calculus exam. They are also highly motivated by the example she sets as a teacherpreneur. Ali has been transparent about her own experiences of trying new, challenging things in her role this year, and she used that example to inspire every one of her students to sit for the AP Calculus exam in 2014. And it’s not just Ali’s AP students who succeed—all of the others passed their math coursework despite having a teacher available to them only on days when their classes meet.

But more important to Ali, her students routinely mention how much they “love math” and how much she “knows how (we) learn.” Ali expects students to take charge of their learning. Her once-struggling algebra students make their way past basic quadratics to solve complex polynomials. Ali’s math colleagues often ask her for advice on using new instructional strategies. Stu Silberman, who was superintendent in Fayette County when Ali began teaching in the district, smiles broadly as he tells how she started “Camp Crowley” (dubbed with Ali’s former last name).

I remember our team asking each of our teachers to encourage a few minority students to take AP courses. Well, Ali asked 15 students—and the next thing I knew, she had 15 students taking a summer boot camp from her in order to prepare them for Advanced Precalculus. She wrote a grant, and the next thing you know, she has funds to buy them graphing calculators as well as t-shirts and snacks. We made it a district program.

Ali's principal Bryne added, "I wish I had the research evidence on how she's affected other teachers' practice, but I know it is really significant." Ali does much to help her colleagues learn new teaching strategies and become leaders themselves. Lu Young, the district's Chief Academic Officer, shared the same perspective:

She's had an important influence at the district level in math because of our Gates-funded MDC work. She's been instrumental in spreading really good teaching practices. She's been learning so much in her role as a CTQ teacherpreneur—picking up the practices and supporting others in their implementation. At the state level, there's the TALK [Teaching Advocates Leading Kentucky] committee that's helping other teachers lead reforms, and then with the Prichard Committee, she is helping bring her classroom knowledge to state-level policy conversations. We would not be nearly as successful with our reforms without her leadership.

Lu later made another important point about Ali's leadership, related to the kinds of dispositions Ali brings to the work (in addition to her impressive instructional, mentoring, and organizing prowess). "She has a pervasive optimism that's critical in public schools today. She's resilient and always seems to bounce back from any challenge she faces."

Ali's influence is best defined by her teaching colleagues. Lauren Hill, an NBCT from Franklin County who served with Ali on the inaugural Common Core TeacherSolutions team, said it well:

As we work to create a virtual community in Kentucky, Ali leads by example. We all need to find our teacher leader voice within the community, and her ability to ask questions and to listen deeply help the rest of us begin to hear ourselves. She's motivated by her heartfelt desire that the work achieve its goals—a thriving group of Kentucky teachers working together to professionalize teaching.

Ali's colleagues at Lafayette High School offered up many of the same accolades. Stephanie McDermott, an English teacher and academic dean at her school, said, "Ali brings things back to the classroom that she would not have had the opportunity to learn had she not been in this role." Adam Wilkinson, who also teaches math at Lafayette, noted:

I don't have time to read [as much professional literature as I'd like to], and I think she does a great job of relaying ideas and information to us. We knew more about the Math Design Collaborative and formative assessment practices than most teachers, even before the district offered us their professional development.

Ali helps her colleagues—who are embroiled in the frenetic pace of teaching 150+ high school students—to keep a pulse on what’s going on with education policy so “they know what’s going on.” She considers this a priority so they “are more ready to deal with a new reform that is coming next year,” like updated assessments or the launch of a state evaluation system for teachers.

The bottom line from our interviews is that Ali’s influence has much to do with the confidence her colleagues have in her. Adam said, “I know the most important thing is that I trust that what she says is the same as what I would say in those policy meetings. I am glad she is there.” At Lafayette High, a group of about eight teachers serve in some form of a hybrid role, teaching classes and serving other necessary functions.

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However, as we were told, “These hybrid roles can be more about information sharing, with no time to implement what you’re learning; this is not the case with what we are seeing with Ali.”

More recently, Ali has been working with a small group of teacher leaders from Denver and Seattle as well as Singapore, Shanghai, and Toronto to analyze their respective professional learning systems and inform the deliberations of the Asia Society’s [Global Cities Education Network](#).

As Ali told us, “Teacherpreneurs must be a link between policy and the classroom, and [we] have a responsibility to represent the work for teachers who don’t yet have the opportunity to serve in a hybrid role.” And her colleagues made it clear: “She’s our expert and always helping folks here make the connections between policy and practice.”

Innovative solutions

Ali has been instrumental in leveraging networks of teacher leaders toward a shared vision of improving outcomes for students in Kentucky. She works alongside fellow educators who lead beyond their classrooms as curriculum designers, instructional coaches, union leaders, virtual community organizers, and writers. Her role is to bring these isolated efforts together to plan for a shared agenda moving forward. Her status as a leader among leaders was no accident: Ali is deliberate in how she develops relationships. In doing so, she connects disparate efforts toward a common purpose.

With legitimacy as both a practicing teacher and a policy leader, Ali narrows the distance between well-intentioned policy and classroom-level implementation. She raises questions among policymakers that only a practitioner would consider: Where will teachers find the time to thoughtfully execute this initiative without appropriate time to plan and collaborate? How might new standards create space for better student assessments? Can a different approach to the configuration of the school day give teachers time to improve their practice by observing colleagues?

Fortunately, Ali doesn’t always have to pose these questions in face-to-face venues. Her development as an accomplished writer in recent years has allowed for her solutions to reach far beyond Kentucky.

Ali had never published anything before she got involved with CTQ—but she has become a prolific, in-demand writer. As a math teacher, she initially felt that writing was intimidating... out of her comfort zone. But once she realized that writing could help a broader audience understand her ideas and learn from her expertise, her thought leadership took off. To begin with, Ali was supported by a CTQ editorial coach who matched her with writing opportunities and encouraged her to develop confidence and an independent voice. Editors now contact Ali directly to ask her to share her expertise on specific topics, especially Common Core implementation.

Ali believes that learning to write for publications—particularly online—has influenced her professional writing: “People at work have started to tell me how much more readable my emails are now that I split things in smaller paragraphs. And if you have a lot of questions and you number them so people can answer them in order, people reply faster.”

Articulating her ideas in writing also seems to have contributed to Ali’s confidence as an oral communicator. Not long ago, she wrote her former editorial coach about testimony she wrote and delivered before the state legislature: “Can you believe I didn’t have anyone even look at [it]?! Crazy! No way I could have dreamed about doing something like this a few years ago.” The time and supports Ali has received as a teacherpreneur have made her a formidable voice and advocate for students’ best interests.

Unique challenges

Ali’s leadership has not been without its challenges. After 13 years of classroom experience in a regimented profession, Ali’s adjustment to a flexible work environment led her to wonder if she was on the right track. While her instructional days were marked by the student progress she observed, building a movement for teacher leadership does not have such overt indicators of success. Ali was accustomed to a curriculum map she developed at the beginning of each school year to guide her lessons, but developing capacity among colleagues and interest among stakeholders was new terrain.

Yet Ali soon triumphed by applying her classroom strategies to her leadership. She established benchmarks throughout the year based on the ultimate goals of her role. She developed daily routines that mirrored her instructional day in order to ensure that her leadership efforts didn’t stretch late into the evening. Most important, Ali spent considerable time developing relationships with new partners who were critical of her success and satisfaction, just as she had done for years with students and colleagues.

Lessons for leading without leaving

Ali has had a tremendous impact on her state while continuing to be effective with students. Other teacher leaders can do this, too, with the right supports in place. Here are some takeaways from Ali’s story that can help others structure hybrid roles that allow them to achieve great things both inside and outside the classroom:

- **Relationships matter.** As demands on Ali’s time grow, she’s careful to schedule time with colleagues, family, students, and key partners. This helps her live and work in connected, balanced ways. “She listens deeply to help the rest of us hear ourselves as leaders,” says teacher Lauren Hill.
- **Teachers who model leadership do the most for their students, in and out of the classroom.** Ali shared her experiences as a budding blogger and speaker with her students, and she challenged them to

take a risk of their own: the AP Calculus exam. This year, all of Ali's students sat for the exam, and 50 percent earned the highest possible score.

- **Blurring the lines between policy and practice makes each stronger.** Fayette County Chief Academic Officer Lu Young notes that Ali's hybrid role has allowed her to influence math teachers districtwide and to participate in related state-level policy conversations. Because Ali has time to engage in education issues from both policy and classroom perspectives, education leaders in diverse roles see her as a trusted voice with legitimacy in multiple contexts.

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Interested in learning more about how CTQ supports districts, agencies, and organizations to create effective teacherpreneur roles?

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