Aspiring Educator Builds Her Own Leadership Pathway

#EdLeader uses Leadership Competency framework to support the Association and the profession

By MARILU BEDOLLA

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Tori Mitchell, a senior at Kansas State University (KSU), is hopeful and looking for a new leadership opportunities after losing her bid for re-election as a student representative on the National Association (NEA) Board of Directors.

“I think going into a new leadership position is scary, especially when you have to run for a position,” says Mitchell, a history and secondary education double major. “Even if it does not work out [there are] always other things you can do…you just have to give it your best shot.”

Looking Ahead

Mitchell is an active member of the NEA Aspiring Educator Program. The program creates local, state, and national leadership opportunities and professional support for college students interested in becoming educators.

In this next year, Mitchell will turn her attention to the state level, utilizing skills she learned at the national level to organize a caucus of Aspiring Educators in her state. In fact, she has been elected as president of her chapter at Kansas State University.

“It’s a really exciting opportunity since we’ve never done it before,” Mitchell says. “We can really take it anywhere.” The caucus will officially start in September.

State Affiliate Spotlight

This summer, NEA Leadership Development staff partnered with state affiliates to build organizational capacity by focusing on leadership development. This spotlight features highlights of state engagements and partnerships in North Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin.

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Voices from the Summit: NEA EdLeaders

For more, see Page 7.
In the meantime, Mitchell is organizing other leaders to grow the caucus, and researching how other caucuses function. This won’t be Mitchell’s only leadership role. She is also the newly elected Lead Director of the National Aspiring Educators Caucus.

Advocacy

Mitchell will use her platform to grow chapters and increase awareness of racial and social justice issues that impact public education.

“I want to bring in people [who] can talk to my chapter about racial and social justice,” Mitchell says. “I want to help my officers, but also other students, see that it’s important and it should continue to be pushed.”

Mitchell is passionate about both issues and knows first hand the harm that can come when there is a lack of diversity within student chapter leadership and the teaching profession. Since becoming active in her local chapter, Mitchell has noticed that teams leading local chapters were not diverse. Often, she has been the only leader of color.

“It’s really hard to see yourself in a profession if you’ve never seen someone who looks like you.” — Tori Mitchell

In a 2017 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a federal organization focused on collecting and analyzing data on American and foreign education, found that Asians and Caucasians constituted the majority of those enrolled in college.

In a separate report from the NCES, that analyzed admission data for KSU, Caucasians made up more than half of the fall 2017 undergraduate class.

“Kansas is not a very diverse place... where I grew up. I’ve never had a Black teacher before,” Mitchell says. “I think everyone should be able to have some kind of teacher who looks like them.”

Mitchell is passionate about the need to recruit educators of color and says, “It’s really hard to see yourself in a profession if you’ve never seen someone who looks like you.”

The future educator also wants her students to see themselves in classroom textbooks, and wants them to learn about positive, strong, diverse, and empowered people who look like them.

“When you learn about Native Americans you’re not just learning about things like the Native American Removal Act,” Mitchell says. “You’re learning about the diversity in their tribes and the great things that they accomplished before Europeans had even shown up here.”

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Leadership Journey
Vision
To facilitate the development and growth of activist leadership for our thriving association.

Our Strategy
To identify members with the potential to become organizational and education leaders at the local, state and national level.

www.nea.org/leadershipdevelopment
Mitchell’s leadership journey began her freshman year in college, when a professor recommended she join the KNEA chapter on campus. After attending her first chapter meeting, she had a positive impression and continued attend meetings. It was during those early meetings that Megan Melling, former student KNEA chapter president, told Mitchell that she should consider running for statewide president. Mitchell did not believe she was qualified, but Melling insisted. Mitchell ran and won the position. Since then, she has run for other leadership positions, including a seat on the NEA Board of Directors. “Running to be the president-elect my freshman year, running to go to AEC (NEA Aspiring Educators Conference), it was like the best decision I made in college because, after that, NEA kind of defined my entire college experience.” Mitchell says. Her leadership journey has brought her many lessons. When she planned her first training, the event was canceled due to low registration. “A lot of our officers were really upset,” Mitchell says. “It was a really big learning experience because I wanted to be upset and complain to them…I realized I had to be the one that tried to stay positive and figure out other solutions.” In preparation for her next conference, she applied strategies she’d learned from attending NEA conferences and from networking with other chapters. She and other chapter members held a leadership conference, and Mitchell organized and planned every hour of the event. Her goal was to run a successful conference. The organizing and preparation paid off. “Once the conference started happening, [I] was like, ‘Okay, we have to be organized and we have to stay calm,’” Mitchell says. “It's really important one advocating our students and ourselves as aspiring educators and eventually as educators.” - Tori Mitchell Mitchell says her favorite part about being a member of NEA is the opportunity to meet other union members because they share similar career goals and challenges. “You really do create a union family that you grow with, that pushes you to be a better leader, and you become leaders together,” Mitchell says. Mitchell has attended two NEA Leadership Summits and has found the NEA Leadership Competency Framework helpful in her advocacy work. “One of the things I really liked about the Leadership Summit is [that] it was scaled…by your experience level,” Mitchell says. “Sometimes, it can be kind of intimidating to walk into a room full of teachers who’ve been doing this for 30 years.” For her first summit, Mitchell attended foundational level leadership training sessions, but at the 2019 Summit, she attended advanced level sessions. Mitchell advises educators starting on their leadership journey to work through each leadership competency domain slowly. “Work on ones that kind of appeal to you the most at first, and the ones that you're interested in, and then dig deeper as you continue to grow as a leader kind of digging in to the rest of them,” Mitchell says. “Just try not to overwhelm yourself.” At the summit Mitchell has gravitated toward sessions focused on improving her communication, but wants to further explore the advocacy competency domain. “It's a really important one advocating our students and ourselves as aspiring educators, and eventually as educators,” Mitchell says. “I feel like I can I can never be good enough, so I could always keep on improving my advocacy work.”
Toward the Future

In July, Mitchell traveled from Kansas to NEA headquarters in Washington D.C., for an aspiring educators conference where she and other attendees created resources for NEA Aspiring Educators.

Before the gathering, Mitchell wrote in a Facebook post that she was not sure of the resources they would create but was excited to see the outcome.

Mitchell’s optimism is also driving her future. She is also excited to return to her hometown after graduating from her university and discover what it is like to be a union member as an active teacher.

Partnerships: State Affiliate Spotlight

This summer, staff from the NEA Leadership Development team partnered with state affiliates to provide an overview of the NEA Leadership Competency Framework, and participate in affiliate conferences.

Preparing educators to lead their associations and professions

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Members of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) are redesigning the way the organization equips educators to lead their associations and become better practitioners.

In a letter to conference attendees, WEAC Conference Coordinator Becky Bachman wrote: “So often we get caught up in the definition of a leader as one who holds an office or title, and we know that there are leaders within each local who hold no office, and yet they are leading the profession.”

The three-day conference helped attendees develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities outlined in the NEA Leadership Competency Framework. This kind of adoption and integration of the framework is an example of the partnership the NEA Leadership Development Team is working toward in every state affiliate.

The training design for WEAC’s conference is a model for other locals in how to host trainings that consider members’ experiences. Members new to working in their local association attended foundational trainings, while more advanced leaders attended trainings focused on mobilizing and power building.

Another important aspect of the WEAC model is that the entire training is delivered by member leaders who have completed the trainings since the WEAC training design was revamped three years ago.

“The Summer Leadership Academy is meant to empower the local leaders in their work with members, the community, administration, elected leaders, and the students they serve on a day-to-day basis,” Bachman wrote.

Tressa Stults, a Wisconsin English Language Arts teacher, was among the attendees.

“I had a fantastic time at this conference. The leaders were excellent and I am looking forward to attending again next year,” Stults wrote in a Facebook post.

NEA Leadership Development Team member Donald Washington attended WEAC’s conference and is working with state leaders on documenting their success to share with other affiliates.

Know of a 21st century education leader in your state?
Tell us their story!
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NEA Leadership Development Team

NCEA Invests in Leadership to Build a Movement

Since last year, the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) has won significant legislative and policy victories for students and educators. North Carolina was also among a handful of states where educators organized, marched, and demanded that their legislature fulfill their promise to students through additional funding. NCAE was a driving force behind the state’s #RedforEd movement in the state—an effort that led to thousands of educators demonstrating at the state capitol.

#RedforEd was an opportunity for NCAE to capitalize on the frustration of educators, and it signaled to NCAE leaders that sustaining the movement requires continuing to invest in leadership development.

NCAE President Mark Jewell recognizes that NCAE has a unique opportunity to meet the needs of educators who are looking for support and leadership opportunities that will improve the learning conditions of students and the working conditions of North Carolina educators.

This summer, Annelise Cohon, a member of the NEA Leadership Development team, partnered with NCAE to train local leaders to increase their awareness of NEA’s Leadership Development Framework and, more importantly, to use the tool to develop themselves, create leadership opportunities for other educators, and learn how to lead their organizations.

Tonya Harris Ellis, a high school teacher and the president of the Wilson County local, was among those who attended the 2019 Summer Leaders Conference.

“Together we can make a mighty blow and make a difference for educators and students,” Harris Ellis says.

Lee County Association of Educators member Sandi Shover also attended the training. She has been an active member and teacher in demonstrations protesting budget cuts.

“Educator leadership does not have to mean wanting to be an administrator,” Shover says. “It can mean building your voice within your school and community in order to improve public education.”

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT TO-DO LIST

- Contact your state association for potential leadership opportunities within your state or local affiliate.
- Plan to attend the 2020 National Leadership Summit to be held on March 13-15, 2020 in Orlando, Fla.
- Join or create a leadership development community page using NEA edCommunities. It’s free and open to all NEA members.
- Join NEA EdLeaders Facebook Group Page. Stay connected and engaged.
- Take the Leadership Competencies Self-Assessment to identify your own areas of strength and opportunities by visiting nea.org/leadershipdevelopment

Tip: Before starting the self assessment, review the six leadership competencies by exploring the PDF version or request a copy of the NEA Leadership Competencies Guide by scanning the code below.
By BRENDA ALVAREZ

State Affiliate Spotlight:

Creating opportunities for Education Support Professionals

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Former elementary school teacher Kisha Davis-Caldwell continues to support the vision of great public schools though her leadership role is no longer in the classroom. Davis-Caldwell is a member of the NEA Leadership Development team within the NEA Center for Governance.

Recently, Davis-Caldwell collaborated with the NEA ESP Quality Department for a joint leadership and professional development training in Washington state where UniServ Director Nache Duncan is training the state's Education Support Professionals (ESPs). Davis-Caldwell and Jessica Brinkley, a staffer in NEA's ESPs Quality Department trained the affiliate's Education Support Professionals (ESP) Action Coordinating Team (ACT), which advocates for the state's ESPs.

Davis-Caldwell’s presentation gave ESPs the opportunity to learn about the importance of leadership and how the NEA Leadership Competency Framework supports members' career growth.

Washington paraprofessional Julie Wickersham, from Clarkston School District, attended the retreat. Wickersham says the leadership framework helped to “improve her knowledge” and describes it as a “measurable tool.”

She also says the information was easy to understand and plans to use it in her professional development.

Amy Hagins learned of the training through her work with the ACT. In her evaluation, Hagins shared that in the district where she works, ESPs do not receive leadership training. Hagins’ experience is not uncommon. Many districts do not include funding to support the leadership and professional development of education support professionals. “It is empowering to have [NEA] come out to Washington and train us,” Hagins wrote. “My leadership skills go unnoticed by my supervisors and director. NEA has provided the training I need to be the most competent professional I can be.”

Organized groups completing a leadership development task at the July ESP Action Coordinating Team retreat in Washington state.

Voices from the Summit: NEA EdLeaders

For Gail Trotter, a senior at Wesley College in Dover, Del., and a member of the Delaware State Education Association, the NEA’s National Leadership Summit in Denver was her second go around.

“I was at the summit in Chicago last year and I fell in love with it,” she says. It was in Chicago that someone asked the then-president of Wesley College’s Aspiring Educators chapter if she had given any thought to running for a national leadership position. She hadn’t, but the seed was planted.

Today, Trotter serves on NEA’s Aspiring Educators Board of Directors. The position allows Trotter to share the lessons she’s learned through her own leadership journey with newly minted education majors.

“I want them to know that to be a leader you don’t have to be the smartest person in the room or the most boisterous,” explains the education major who is pursuing a minor in multimedia communications. “Leadership is a shared responsibility and it’s a skill that is learned.”

The annual National Leadership Summit has fueled much of Trotter’s understanding of what it means to be a leader. The gatherings have expanded her interests in other areas, too.

In Denver, for example, Trotter signed up for sessions on advocacy—one of the leadership competencies that advances the cause of public education through social justice, and how it benefits students and members’ professional needs and rights.

“I’ve learned how to stand up for aspiring educators. At times, we’re perceived as the ‘cute little ones who just want to be babied’ when that’s not the case,” underscores Trotter. “I know what I’m doing. I know what I want to stand for and I know what my students need.”
Learning How to Engage

Maria Borrero, a family-school liaison in Carpentersville, Ill., was a first-time attendee at the Denver summit, and says she learned more about political involvement.

“Not in the sense of political affiliation, [but] rather how to engage in social and community action and partner with other organizations and people who are focused on student success,” Borrero says.

“The summit has been a good experience because everyone here is on the same page.”
- Maria Borrero

The summit offered Borrero an opportunity to connect with educators nationwide.

“Every group I’m in, I meet people like me, and it makes me feel like I’m not alone, which at times can happen. The summit has been a good experience because everyone here is on the same page,” she explains.

This kind of peer-to-peer engagement is critical for Borrero, who shared that four years ago when she first joined her local and state unions she “felt intimidated at the idea of participating in conferences and leadership development.”

There was a lot of information to take in as an early career educator, but one thing quickly became clear to her: Membership meant action.

“I saw some educators doing one-to-one sessions while others were active in the community. I realized there were educators in different positions, too—bus drivers, lunch ladies, secretaries, custodians—who were involved with the union.”

Today, Borrero’s track record of union engagement is impressive. She has created support groups for other family-school liaisons within her area. They meet for coffee or catch up at different Illinois Education Association (IEA)-related events. She’s also organized her peers to get more resources for students, such as a $1,000 IEA grant for a back-to-school event this fall.

While Borrero may have started her profession and union activism on the apprehensive side, she soon “realized the magnitude of NEA and the power it has, so I decided I wanted to be more invested in events like this.”

The NEA is excited to announce the upcoming NEA Leaders of Color Pathways Collective Learning Project. The project is a collaborative effort between The NEA Center for Governance’s Leadership Development Team and the NEA Center for Social Justice. The year-long, development program targeting educators of color was developed to address the systemic underrepresentation of educators of color in formal and informal leadership positions at all levels of the association. The project aims to develop leaders who are prepared to assume formal and informal leadership positions within the Association, and to equip educators to have an even greater impact as practitioners and leaders in their communities, schools, colleges, universities, and worksites. The project will provide valuable information for the NEA enterprise that can inform how the NEA and its state and local affiliates intentionally design systems to increase the number of leaders of color within the organization. Participants and mentees will have an opportunity to apply. Look for more information soon at: nea.org/leadershipdevelopment.