



Interview with James Ford

North Carolina's 2014 Teacher of the Year James Ford did not start out wanting to be a teacher. His intent was to become a journalist, but then he found work as a truancy intervention specialist and then became a director of a teen center. It was in these experiences with young people that he finally realized he was essentially a teacher. This led him to pursue a Master of Arts degree in a teaching program.

Ford sat down with Public Schools First NC to share his experience as Teacher of the Year and what he plans to do next.

PSFNC: How did you end up in Charlotte?

Ford: I was born and raised in the Midwest. I got tired of the cold weather and Charlotte is warmer than Illinois, so I relocated. Plus, Charlotte is known as the capital of the progressive south.

PSFNC: What were some of the highlights of the TOTY tour?

Ford: It has been a tremendous experience. One of the highlights was being able to provide a voice to the issues of greatest concern. To have that resonance with decision makers has been rewarding.

PSFNC: What have you learned in this role?

Ford: I've learned how the sausage gets made. I've learned all of the different moving parts, the hands in the pot, and the basic areas of need. I've learned how to advocate and get your voice heard in the way that's most apt to be received. I've learned that education does not look the same everywhere you go. There are very unique circumstances for localities, and yet some things remain the same. What's consistent is that teachers are role models, they have influence, and they can change lives.

PSFNC: What looks different?

Ford: There are districts that take radically different approaches to address a situation. There are those that would rather take a "one size fits all" approach and there are districts that look at the data and see what things clearly need to be emphasized.

PSFNC: What did teachers tell you about the affects on the teaching profession?

Ford: Prior to the election, morale was so low. A lot of the time administrators would call me just to have me give a message of inspiration so teachers would know how important they are. They needed to feel affirmed. The lack of compensation was huge. There was the feeling that their job security was hanging in the balance and their relevance was being questioned. Veteran teachers especially felt disrespected. There's a big concern that teachers aren't part of decisions. Folks are generally pessimistic of any decisions being made that don't include teachers as part of the discussion. Teachers need to be guiding those discussions-- that's what I want to see. Teachers generally don't feel like they are treated professionally. The funding is not there for professional development. It goes back to master's pay. Teachers should be rewarded for making an investment in their education, especially if that's what they are trying to communicate to young people.

PSFNC: There is this notion that public schools are failing, leading to the creation of alternative schools. What is your response?

Ford: Substantiate that claim. The notion that public schools are failing doesn't hold up when you look at the data. There are areas where public schools need improvement and we should absolutely address those areas, but the notion that public schooling as a whole is failing, I don't feel it has a lot of merit from an academic stand point. We have a constitutional obligation to improve public schools, and I feel that's used as a gateway into the conversation of divesting funds from public schools to the private sector and used as an excuse to legitimate dismantling the system altogether and seeking an alternative.

PSFNC: What would you say to young people hoping to enter the teaching profession in this climate?

Ford: I continue to encourage them to follow their passions. I tell them it's my business to make sure they are professionally and fairly compensated for their work. I'm never going to discourage them from making that decision. I'm going to be honest with them that it's not the most financially rewarding position. There are positions of greater prestige, but if you want to make a change instead of just making a dollar, I can't think of a better position for them.

PSFNC: What impact do you think you've had on teachers?

Ford: I wonder if I've accomplished anything. I hope I've amplified the voices of teachers, and made the genuine concerns of public school educators audible and inescapable where they can't be ignored. I hope that I've properly represented all of the skillsets that we embody as teachers. I hope that I've given policymakers a different vision of what the possibilities could be if you elevate the profession. I hope that teachers have the faith to carry on and that better days are ahead because I'm going to continue to fight.

PSFNC: What message would you like to send to teachers?

Ford: The days of the teachers who close their door without regard for the outside world are probably over. Teachers need to wear at least two hats: one as a master instructor and one as an advocate for the profession. We are going to have to get out there and speak for ourselves, to be on boards where the decisions are being made. The expectation that somebody is out there doing it for us isn't true. We have to be out there.

PSFNC: How did your experience this year inform your work in the classroom?

Ford: Throughout the year I was always thinking about how I can turn this into an awesome lesson. Every school year I think I'll be a better teacher this year than last year. This experience has given me such richness and perspective to impact education from outside the classroom. I'd be a fool not to use it and try to reshape public education.

PSFNC: Schools have a majority of minority students but teachers are of little minority. How do you think we can help encourage teachers who are better able to relate to those majority/minority students to seek positions?

Ford: I think there are two things you can do: Make cultural competence a real statewide initiative among teachers and be intentional about recruiting potential teachers that reflect the population they'll be serving. However, you have to sweeten the deal. Minority students are at a decreased chance of succeeding. Once they have that degree, they need a great case for being a teacher, because they can go anywhere else and be compensated handsomely. Why would they want to make it out of a situation to go back to poverty? We need to treat public education as service to our country and like the social good that it is. There are a lot of things that are complex about education, but teacher pay is not one of them. I went to the National State TOY conference. When the topic of pay came up, I was really embarrassed. For the first time, I was personally ashamed to talk about how much I got paid. There were teachers from other states who in their twelfth year are making \$80,000. There are other issues of concern, but teacher pay is not one of their gripes. Our TOTY program is phenomenal, but I'm only one of them. We have a body of teachers at this pay level. There has to be something about teaching that awakens the call to teach, because right now it's just not a real option for people.

PSFNC: If you were going to evaluate what happens in a school, what are the components that you would add to get a more realistic result?

Ford: There needs to be some starting point. You have to get a baseline. Are you really measuring my growth? First of all, there needs to be a greater focus on growth. 80-20 is disproportionately skewed in favor of achievement. It affects kids and schools already at a disadvantage. Increase growth to 50-50. Additionally, what are you using to measure growth? What did the kid come into my classroom

knowing? What is their attendance? What is their English level proficiency? For students in poverty, can we control what affects their ability to perform? Schools that have high growth and low achievement isn't fair compared to schools that already prosper. I don't think there will ever be a perfect measurement, but we're moving in the right direction.

After our interview with Ford, he announced he accepted a position at the Public School Forum rather than return to teaching. His new role as program director involves helping early-career teachers become better instructors and more effective leaders in their schools, communities, and the state.

Interview conducted on March 31, 2015