

The U.S. Department of Education School Ambassador Fellowship Program

By Dr. Joseph P. Masgai



About the Author: Joseph P. Masgai, Ed.D., is the principal at Afton Elementary School, a 2019 National Blue Ribbon School for closing the Achievement Gap, in the Pennsbury School District (Bucks County, Pa.) where he has served as the instructional leader since 2009. Afton has also been recognized with the titles of National and State School of Character in 2015 and 2020. Prior to his 17 years in administration, he taught secondary English at public, private and parochial schools at both the middle and secondary levels.

Dr. Masgai is a 2020-2021 School Ambassador Fellow in the School Ambassador Fellowship Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. He is also an adjunct professor at Lehigh University.

He earned his bachelor's degree in English from La Salle University; his master's degree in education from St. Joseph's University; his Pennsylvania Principal Certificate from Gwynedd-Mercy University; and a doctorate in educational leadership from Lehigh University.

The School Ambassador Fellowship Program is a prestigious and competitive program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education; however, it is not yet the household name current fellow Joseph Masgai, Pennsylvania resident and Pennsbury School District principal, wants it to be. Dr. Masgai plans to change that during his two-year tenure with the department as a full-time fellow and the first Pennsylvania educator to hold that position.

A Voice at the U.S. Department of Education

Since its inception in 2008, the U.S. Department of Education's School Ambassador Fellowship Program (SAF) has provided practitioners with a voice at the Department in the development of policy to impact classroom practices. As a strong advocate in support of the program, I hope to recruit other Pennsylvanian educators to apply to this career-changing experience that has been the "capstone" to my 30-year career in education.

The School Ambassador Fellowship is an incredible one-year opportunity for practitioners to engage closely with the U.S. Department of Education [Department] in a yearlong cohort setting with educators from across the country. The Fellowship is part of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and operates out of the Effective Educator Development Division. This elite program has produced a network of accomplished practitioners – superintendents, principals, teachers, counselors, psychologists and social workers – who contribute solutions to the challenges in education and provide guidance to the Department in the development and refinement of policy.

In order to maximize participation from the field, the fellowship provides choice to interested candidates in terms of serving as full-time or part-time fellows. Those selected to serve as full-time fellows are expected to relocate to Washington, D.C. for the duration of their fellowship and complete a 40-hour per week residency with the U.S. Department of Education. Full-time fellows have the opportunity to engage with multiple offices within the Department and participate in a variety of projects. Those preferring to remain at their campuses can apply to the program as a part-time fellow with the intent to provide at least 10 hours of work per week to the Department while remaining in their current role and district. Part-time fellows typically are invited throughout the year to attend events, summits and meetings at the Department.



Dr. Masgai and another school ambassador fellow from Georgia disaggregating data for discussion on national policy.

The Goals of the School Ambassador Fellowship Program

The goal of the School Ambassador Fellowship is to improve educational outcomes for students by leveraging the expertise of school-based practitioners in the creation, dissemination and evaluation of national education policy. The SAF seeks to:

- ✓ create a community of teachers, principals, counselors, psychologists, social workers and other school staff members who share expertise and collaborate with leaders in the federal government on national education issues;
- ✓ involve educators who work daily with students and teachers in developing policies that holistically affect learning environments; and

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- ✓ highlight practitioners' voices and expand educators' critical leadership at the national, state and local levels.

The Pennsylvania Administrator Connection

Operating through the mantra of "Once a Fellow, Always a Fellow," the SAF alumni network consists of 127 exemplary and accomplished educators from across the country with 39 states represented. Pennsylvania has been well-represented in the SAF program. In total, four Pennsylvania educators have served as school ambassador fellows and represented both charter and public-school districts. Of the four, three have been administrators. This speaks to the quality of strategic instructional leadership of our principals and assistant principals in Pennsylvania that attracts the attention of the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, two Pennsylvania principal fellows found their experiences so rich and valuable they returned to serve in two separate cohorts.

While engaged in the fellowship educators maintain their district titles, but some also experience a metamorphosis in a post-fellowship world, as the time spent in service to the U.S. Department of Education becomes the catalyst for a career change. Many enter with a local understanding of education but exit with a changed perspective and trajectory for career advancement. For example, one Pennsylvania educator is currently the Chief Program Officer at the Go Green Initiative, and another is the Chief Executive Officer for the Center for Black Educator Development. Other non-native fellows have since relocated to Pennsylvania to embark on innovative educational initiatives. Transplants from New York and Boston are now the senior directors of Equal Measure and North 10, both located in Philadelphia, that seek to advance social change and improve community outcomes.

My experiences as a school ambassador fellow at the U.S. Department of Education have provided me with a deeper, and national, understanding of education. Moreover, it has placed me within the company of the finest educational leaders who model daily the Department's mission statement to promote student achievement by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access for all students. I highly encourage my Pennsylvania colleagues to give thoughtful consideration to apply to this incredible program. You will not be disappointed.



School Ambassador Fellows meet with Frank Brogan, former Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, in Washington, D.C.

How to Apply

Educators interested in more information on the School Ambassador Fellowship are encouraged to visit the U.S. Department of Education's website. (A link to apply is provided below.) The application process for the next selection of school ambassador fellows will begin in October 2022. The Department expects to receive hundreds of applications from across the country. Those applications will reflect educators from public, private, parochial, public, and cyber schools in urban, suburban, and rural settings – and I hope many will be from Pennsylvania.

The process typically includes the application screening, a Skype interview for those who qualify and a full-day, in-

person interview for the selected finalists at the Department in Washington, D.C. Having participated as a candidate in the interview process, as well as now in the planning of the interview process as a school ambassador fellow, I can only describe the experience as challenging but exhilarating. No one should feel daunted by the process as the journey is incredible and the outcome could be another Pennsylvania principal ambassador

fellow who will continue to be a voice for the educators and students of our state at the U.S. Department of Education.



Dr. Joseph P. Masgai, full-time School Ambassador Fellow, 2020-2022, U.S. Department of Education.

For further information, please contact the author at joseph.masgai@ed.gov or jmasgai@pennsbury.org or Twitter [@EdDsChangeWorld](https://twitter.com/EdDsChangeWorld) Details to apply to the U.S. Department of Education's School Ambassador Fellowship Program are available at bit.ly/school-ambassador-fellowship-program