

Yonas Michael's Iowa Character Award Nomination

Introduce us to your nominee. 300 words

By January of our 2018-19 academic year, the Ames Middle School staff sat attentive ready to be introduced to our fourth principal that year. Greeting us, Yonas Michael talked about trauma—knowing trauma, our trauma and our responses to it. Little did we know then, how well his character and his words--“We must sharpen each other, love each other and hold each other accountable” --would shape our culture and arm us in 2020 & 2021.

Yonas has a unique understanding of trauma. His mother left a daughter in Eritrea, Africa to embark on a two-year journey to Khartum, Sudan where she later gave birth to Yonas and his younger brother in a refugee camp. When Yonas was two and a half, his family made their home in Maryland, his sister, he did not meet until his graduation. Yonas first moved to Ames in 2004 for graduate school, stayed to serve the Ames Community School District first as a counselor and then as the Director of Student Services. In 2017, he returned to Maryland to support his family and ailing brother.

He returned to Ames to help our school. Known for his “integrity and compassion” (former Superintendent, Tim Taylor), “unwavering belief in [struggling] children” (former Board Member, Bill Talbot), and “ability [to create a shared] vision . . . [and have] hard conversations” (current Board Member, Alisa Frandsen), Yonas Michael was recruited to serve as our new principal. He was asked because he embodied the character needed to heal our wonderful community. In these three short years, even through Covid, we have grown more courageous and ethical because his belief in us fueled our ability to believe in ourselves.

How has the nominee impacted your life and/or the lives of others? 300 words

Prior to Yonas's return, our school had experienced a toxic environment and stressful days. Yet, within a short time, Mr. Michael assessed procedures and shifted our priorities, created a growing culture of restorative justice and critical consciousness, and reshaped our building's leadership and organization to ensure needed support and success.

Yonas built trusting relationships and revised our building structures to honor our need for transparency, consistency, fairness and sound decision making. While nudging us towards a mindset needed for the change to come, behind the scenes, Yonas collaboratively overhauled our schedule, behavioral responses, and the composition and responsibilities of a new administrative team.

As we began the 2019-2020 academic year, hopeful and renewed, Yonas detailed the cogs that would drive our approach to teaching and learning. An expanded administrative team would ensure delegated leadership within desired systems of change—operational logistics, climate and culture, and curriculum. New strategist

positions with peer leads would support culturally sustaining pedagogy and a new restorative justice initiative.

As the staff began to thrive, Yonas pushed us to examine patterns of inequity and expand the voices being heard. Yonas's personal background and early career in counseling afforded deeper understanding of the untold struggles students, families and teachers attempt to shoulder. Further, his experience leading the district's approach to serving our at-risk population offered focused, data-driven ways helping us see the disparities in systems rather than in people. This shared awareness allowed us to become better attuned to basic needs and the supportive environments needed to cultivate a people-first ideology.

More importantly, his unified administrative team guided each of us to examine and undertake personal work needed *to sharpen ourselves and each other with love and accountability*. Reflecting on 2020-21, this vital mindset bolstered our commitments while also sustaining healthy minds and bodies during the pandemic.

In what ways do you feel the nominee has exemplified the Six Pillars of Character (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship)? 300 words

I have witnessed these pillars within actions aligned with his call to *sharpen with love and accountability*.

- *We must sharpen each other*, as both a collective body and as individuals, we must champion **fair** treatment that reflects **care** and concern for the human condition. "I am not afraid to say 'yes' or 'no.' And if I do not have the answer, I will take the time [to make] sound judgements." An unhealthy environment is often a result of complex, overlapping issues. Yonas peeled back decayed layers with impartiality and compassion. He worked through divisive gossip, disregard for directives, student accusations, issues of teacher disrespect, bullying, operational challenges and negotiations for appropriate pay. If he heard one voice, he asked us to consider differing perspectives and context. If he erred, he owned it publicly and made reparations.
- *We must love each other*, as **citizens of a greater community respectful of the feelings and rights of others**, we must examine and dismantle systems to **ensure equity**. "Sometimes I feel we have higher expectations for our students than our adults." Yonas challenged us to breathe "an air of connectedness." His administrative team guided us to think critically about bias, systemic - oppression and -privilege, and about our roles as allies and anti-racists. And, if high expectations were compromised, he rallied us to reframe honoring the rights of all as human beings.
- *We must hold each other accountable*, as **honest and responsible partners**, we must **bolster and push towards a desired vision through agreed upon actions**. "I believe in respect and dignity—conversations *will* occur." At the middle school, Yonas promoted LGBTQ+ awareness and eliminated discriminatory gender practices. When an elementary principal took down LGBTQ+ posters, Yonas

challenged that decision at a district leadership meeting (resulting in a new district consensus).



Dr. Anthony Jones • Director of Equity

April 13, 2021

To: The 2021 Iowa Character Award Committee

It is a complete honor I write this letter of recommendation for Mr. Yonas Michael for the Iowa Character nomination. Yonas Micheal is a phenomenon. His leadership and decision-making abilities extend beyond his age and experience. Transformative is the closest word I can think of that would describe his leadership style. I have known Yonas for about 15 years and we have worked together as administrators for 10 years.

As the Director of Student Services, Yonas transformed the way our district supported our students who were, at the time, identified as at-risk only by their behaviors. The majority of the students in the At-Risk programs were also not doing well academically either. The graduation rate was 53% for Black students. Yonas implemented a way for the district to identify students based on research. Therefore, we started using the Early Indicator Signs (EIS) data district-wide to identify students who were considered at risk of failing or dropping out of school. Within a year's timeframe, the graduation rate increased to 88% for Black students. Yonas would always say, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world." As a leader, Yonas was always looking for ways to transform the way we support our most vulnerable students and staff and was a trusted member of the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent's team. Yonas eventually went back home to Maryland to be closer to his family.

In late November of 2018, the middle school principal resigned which left the district scrambling to find someone to step in to continue leading the middle school. In the planning meeting, there were suggestions made as to who could come into a large middle school building, put effective systems in place, and build the school culture and climate. At first, suggestions were made to hire a retired principal with a lot of experience to support the building until the end of the year, which is typical, when there is a principal vacancy in the middle of the year. Mr. Michael's name was mentioned as someone who was a system-thinker, who knew our school system, and someone who was strong in building relationships. We were excited that he took on the assignment. Yonas, no doubt, has surpassed these expectations. Having worked at the middle school in the past, what excited me the most was to hear from veteran teachers at the middle school how they were now excited to come to work again! Yonas, along with a group of thoughtful, committed administrators, teachers, and staff, have transformed the culture and climate at the middle school and our district. He leads with integrity and high expectations for himself and others. We are all better because of his leadership and character in the Ames Community School district.

Therefore, I have no reservation at all in writing this letter of recommendation. I believe Mr. Yonas Micheal is well-deserving of the 2021 Iowa Character Award.

Sincerely,

A. D. Jones

Anthony Jones, PhD

Director of Equity

Ames Community School District

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To Whom it May Concern:

I am writing to support the nomination of Yonas Michael for the 2020-2021 Iowa Character Award, Educator of Character. I am a teacher at Ames Middle School where Mr. Michael is the building principal, and I have worked under his leadership for the past two years. As principal of the Ames Middle School I have seen Mr. Michael lead our school through challenging circumstances. Not only did Mr. Michael contend with the pandemic this past year, but he was in the process of healing our building from prior issues that he was brought here to help. Needless to say this was no small undertaking in a middle school the size of AMS with over 1,000 students.

Within the first weeks of the pandemic when the world didn't know what was going on, Yonas was communicating with this staff, this is vital to point out. Being an educator, you tend to make friends with other educators and within my circle of friends from around the state, and country the communication that Yonas was providing was an anomaly. My peers in other states, cities and even buildings in our own district were unsure of what was happening meanwhile the staff at AMS was not, Yonas kept us informed, which helped with reducing stress through the Spring of 2020. This simple insight into how his educators needed information speaks to the type of person Yonas is. He is a leader that cares about his staff. He doesn't do this in a way that is over the top, or disingenuous, but it in a stoic strong way. It is informed and comforting. It is a way that tells his staff he knows what he is doing and he is doing his job for the right reasons.

In education you see a lot of fluff, people making statements about teachers deserving parades and a million dollar an hour paycheck. During the beginning of the pandemic the media was inundated with these images. Those images are long gone and forgotten and there is a different narrative of an educator that is being pushed forward. What Yonas Michael does for his community of educators is the appropriate recognition that educators need. What they/we need is an administrator that respects us as professionals and hears our voices. Yonas does this, by listening to our concerns and refusing to make us do sub rotations in the year of Covid-19. Yonas has also gone to great lengths to protect our teacher planning time, and not by over loading any educator in his building with extraneous meetings, and or professional development that wasn't germane to our teaching needs in the moment. Simply put, he cares about his staff in a way that is real, that is important, and that is valued.

Being a diabetic I was naturally concerned about returning to in person learning. I did receive a note from my physician to teach remotely. But with Yonas' strong confident leadership, there was no need for me to use the note. I knew he would follow through on his promises to keep our building as safe as possible by following all scientifically valid guidelines. There were times when he wasn't popular for asking us to not socialize, but he remained on course for the greater good of our community. Stronger character means making hard decisions for the greater good of all. Yonas Michael is a man of strong character, he is fair, trustworthy, and a leader I greatly respect.

I feel confident that you will agree that Yonas is a deserving candidate for the Educator of Character Award. Please feel free to contact me for any additional information you may require.

Sincerely,
Darlene Meidenbauer
Instructional Strategist I
Ames Middle School
darlene.meidenbauer@ames.k12.ia.us

To Whom it May Concern:

I am writing to support the nomination of Yonas Michael for the 2020-2021 Iowa Character Award. I am a teacher at Ames Middle School where Mr. Michael is the building principal, and I have worked under his leadership for the past two years. This candidate, in my opinion, continuously displays all six of the Pillars of Character Counts more than any other person I know in this field. Without hesitation, I would choose Yonas Michael for this honor.

While I can find examples of all six traits to discuss, I would like to focus first on trustworthiness. As a building principal in what has arguably been the single most challenging year for educators, Mr. Michael has consistently been open and honest with both staff and students. This has been a year with changes happening at a breakneck pace, and Mr. Michael has remained a calm and steady voice throughout each challenge. I can trust him to share “need to know” information with his staff in a clear and direct manner. I can trust him to shield us from external and unverified information so that we can focus on our jobs. I can also trust him to level with us if he doesn’t have an answer. I can trust him to seek input from his teaching staff before making difficult decisions. And most importantly, I can trust him to follow through with what he says he will do.

Mr. Michael takes his responsibility as a building leader very seriously. He frequently tells staff, students, parents, and stakeholders that it is his responsibility to ensure that staff and students are safe and that students are learning. He centers every decision he makes around this responsibility. Mr. Michael will not make the decision that is the easiest, or the most popular - he will make the one that allows him to fulfill his responsibility to keep his students and staff safe and to make sure his students are learning. He will not be swayed by special interests, and he does not give one answer to one group of stakeholders and another answer to a different group. This year has called for several difficult and unpopular decisions regarding mask mandates, learning models, and teaching responsibilities, and Mr. Michael has made each one by considering what is best for student learning and student and staff safety. He has also borne the burden of the blowback from those unhappy with decisions, and kept it from reaching his teachers.

The pillar of fairness is perhaps the one that Mr. Michael best embodies in his daily life. When I say that he operates with a sense of fairness, I do not mean that he treats people “equally” or does things “the same” for all involved, but rather that he makes every decision with equity in mind. I had the honor of working with Mr. Michael on the Critical Consciousness Committee for the past two years. In this committee we took a hard look at systemic inequities in our school system and what can be done to disrupt them. During that period, I developed enormous respect for his dedication to equity and anti-racist education. I also became acutely aware of both his great knowledge in this area as well as his willingness to continue to learn more. He was instrumental in bringing in an additional assistant principal with a focus on equity and inclusion, and together they have instituted several building-wide initiatives such as participating for the first time in the Black Lives and School Week of Action this year.

It has been a privilege to know this brilliant and dedicated leader and humanitarian. I strongly support his nomination and ask that you please call on me if I can further assist you in this regard.

Sincerely,
Genya Coffey
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