



## TEA Time: A Conversation with the 2018-2019 Texas Teacher of the Year, Jeff Wheatcraft – September 2018

**Narrator:** Welcome to TEA Time, a podcast about all things public education from the Texas Education Agency.

**Host:** Welcome to another episode of TEA Time. We're joined today by Jeff Wheatcraft, a STEM teacher at Alamo Heights Junior High School in the Alamo Heights ISD. Mr. Wheatcraft was also recently named the 2018-2019 Texas Teacher of the Year, as well as the Texas Secondary Teacher of the Year. Mr. Wheatcraft, welcome to TEA Time.

**Texas Teacher of the Year Jeff Wheatcraft:** Thank you.

**Host:** Talk to me first about this experience and what it's meant for you.

**Wheatcraft:** It's been an incredible experience. I really, when I started applying just to be teacher of the year at my district, I really did it just to see, hey, do people take what I do seriously? Is it something that people are really invested in? Because we've got people who say they're invested and this is something they support, but I wanted to see what that was like. And you know, based on what I've done for the past four or five years at the junior [high] school, is it something that's impactful, that people will see, oh, that's really a thing that's working and impacts students? I never would have thought it would have gotten this far, like I just figured, 'Hey, my district!' and then I'd be the representative. I had to give a speech at convocation and I was excited about that.

And then they told me at convocation that, 'Oh, by the way, you're our regional teacher and you're a finalist for state,' and I was just like, 'Oh, my gosh.' So – there are days it's very surreal, and the last week I'd say has been very much a roller coaster of emotions up and down, because you know, in my head I feel like I do a good job, but then again, I'm like, 'Do I really do a good job? Do I really deserve this honor?' So – but then there's days that kids do things and I'm like, 'Yes, it's great.' So just very excited to be a part of the whole process.

**Host:** Why did you become a teacher?

**Wheatcraft:** Really, it just kind of was something my wife wanted me to do. To be honest, I was originally a swing dance instructor, and I really wanted to open my own studio. That's what I really wanted to do. But then my wife and I got married and got pregnant on our honeymoon, and I was working kind of an odd job. And she was like, 'You know, you probably should make a little more money if you want to, you know, take care of a family.' And I agreed with her. And so I had a degree in art education, so I decided I would go, and randomly on our way back from finding out that we were pregnant, there was a sign that was like, 'Would you like to teach?' And my wife was like, 'See, it's a sign from God that you should be a teacher!'

I'm just thinking, okay, I can make it through a few years of teaching, and when we finally get to a place where we're good, I can go back and do this whole dance studio thing. And so then I taught, and I start off teaching as an art teacher, and then I transitioned into teaching science, which I really fell in love with. And now I really

can't see myself doing anything else but this. So it's amazing, the past twelve years have been, again, a journey of just, like, learning things and having experiences. But it was really just something that kind of fell into my lap, and now, again, I just can't see myself doing anything else.

**Host:** Now you started the STEM program at your school What went into your creation of that program and what does it look like? What do your students get to experience?

**Wheatcraft:** The funny thing was that when I originally did this about four years ago, I found this advertisement, I guess, or this leaflet, like 'Do you want a million dollars for your classroom?' And I was like, of course I want – what teacher doesn't want a million dollars? And it was for a classroom that was going to begin STEM initiatives. And so I went to my administration and I was like, 'We should totally write this. We could get this million dollars. This is something we should do.' So they mulled it over for about a week and then they came back to me and they said, 'Well, we don't want you to write for that, but we do want you to create a STEM program for our school, and we need something that has' – our high school program has a rocketry program that's outstanding. I mean, the juniors build rockets that break the sound barrier, and the seniors build a rocket that's about 25 feet long that they can only launch out in White Sands, New Mexico. So we wanted something to kind of funnel kids into that and get them excited and ready for those experiences at the high school.

They came to me and said, we'd like you to design a program. Well I just wanted the million dollars. So I decided, okay, I'll make a program, but it can't be a cookie cutter – I'm not going to go out and buy one. And in my head I'm thinking, I'm going to pick the most ridiculous things that you think a middle school kid could do. So I scoured the internet for problems that need to be solved, and I put it into this proposal thinking there's no way a board will ever approve this. I mean, one of the things our kids do, I go storm chasing and they help me do that. They predict, they communicate. And I'm like, there's no way that that's going to fly. No board in their right mind's going to – They approved the whole thing. And then now I'm like, I actually have to do this, I've created this monster.

We give them a problem and they try to find a solution for it. I purposely pick problems that have no known answer, so they couldn't just go Google it online real quick and write it up and say, 'Here, I'm done!' in ten minutes. And while at times it's very frustrating for them, and for me, because I hate – I don't hate to see kids frustrated, but it can be difficult. It's very rewarding when they get to a point when they realize, like, I see what the purpose is. I see where we're going with this. And then they're on board.

So a lot of my kids come from varied backgrounds. The STEM program is not for only smart kids or for G/T kids. It's open enrollment to any kid. So we have kids who are gifted that work with kids who have IEP and special education accommodations, because then in the design – we designed it so that kids could kind of find their niche or their purpose in the class. And everybody finds one. And they work together. It's amazing how they work.

**Host:** And kids who leave your program, they go into high school – what courses do they take?

**Wheatcraft:** It's varied. The great thing about it is, they pick up a skill set that prepares them for almost any industry. One of the people we've worked with in industry – we work with a cement company called Capitol Aggregates. And when I met with the CEO of that company, he is like, 'Look, I'm CEO. I run the company. I do business. But I have a degree in engineering.' He goes, 'The things I learned as an engineer help me do things by running a company, because it teaches you a certain skill set of problem solving, of analyzing, of critiquing, of how do you, you know, manage. You learn that through engineering.' So while I would say about maybe 20 percent of our kids enter the rocketry program, the kids that don't go into other fields where they're still

utilizing skills they learned in the class – only because they’re beneficial skills that every kid could use as they go through high school and college or trade school if they decide to go that way.

**Host:** When your kids leave your classroom at the end of any given day or at the end of a school year, what do they – what do you hope they’ve learned from you?

**Wheatcraft:** At the end of the school day, at the end of the school year, I hope my kids walk away with going, I have this skill set, and it works really good, and here’s how I can insert it into whatever thing or concept I’m working on, whether it be math or English or social studies or whatever. They have value.

**Host:** Mr. Wheatcraft, thank you so much for joining us on this episode of TEA Time. Again, Mr. Wheatcraft is the STEM director at the Alamo Heights Junior High School in the Alamo Heights ISD and will represent Texas this year as our teacher of the year in the National Teacher of the Year competition. Thanks for joining us on TEA Time.

**Wheatcraft:** Thank you.

**Host:** We’d also like to thank the Texas Association of School Administrators, which facilitates the Texas Teacher of the Year program, for providing us the opportunity to speak to Mr. Wheatcraft and the other 2018-2019 Texas Teacher of the Year finalists. We’ll bring you some of those conversations in upcoming TEA Time episodes.

**Narrator:** For more on this and other education issues, visit our website at [tea.texas.gov](http://tea.texas.gov). For more TEA Time episodes, visit [tea.texas.gov/podcast](http://tea.texas.gov/podcast) or look for us where you download your other podcasts. Join us again soon for another episode of TEA Time, a podcast from the Texas Education Agency.