

AFMTE Board of Directors

Dr. Shannon Johnson | Creative Light School of Massage Therapy | Billings, Montana

1. What projects or committee work have you been engaged in as an Alliance member this past year?

My focus this past year has been deeply embedded in the regulatory and educational landscape of massage therapy. I have been actively engaged in Montana state board proceedings, including presenting formal testimony opposing an apprenticeship licensure pathway that I believe undermines educational standards. I also completed a significant relocation and expansion of my NCBTMB-approved school, which kept me closely attuned to the practical implications of accreditation standards on real working schools.

2. How have you found the time commitment for Alliance activities this past year? What level of commitment could you make over the next few years if you were a Board member?

Five to ten hours a month is honestly a comfortable baseline for me — I already operate at that level of engagement for causes I believe in. Between running a school, maintaining my clinical practice, and doing fractional consulting work, I have learned to protect time for high-value commitments. If I am on this Board, I am on this Board. I do not show up halfway.

3. Please reflect on your experience(s) in a leadership role(s) in another organization(s) and what this experience could help you contribute to the Alliance Board now.

I have been a member of the Breakfast Exchange Club of Billings for eight years, and beginning in July I will be stepping into the role of President. In that capacity I am also currently building their new website, so I understand what it means to steward both the culture and the infrastructure of a community organization. That experience has given me real fluency in organizational governance, member engagement, and the kind of consensus-building that volunteer-led organizations require.

More directly relevant to this board, I have been running Creative Light School of Massage Therapy as owner, director, and lead instructor — which means I live at the intersection of education policy, business operations, and professional standards every single day. I also hold a Master of Healthcare Administration, so I understand organizational structure, compliance, and strategic planning at a systems level.

Prior to my current work, I served as a Regional Director for rural clinics, and if you look across my resume, the majority of my positions have been leadership roles. Serving on the AFMTE Board would be a natural extension of a career that has consistently been oriented toward building, leading, and improving systems that serve people.

4. Can you talk about your strengths and weaknesses and how they could impact your work as a member of the Board?

My strengths are research, advocacy, and plain-language communication. I can take a complex regulatory or educational issue, build a rigorous case, and present it in a way that moves

people. I am also not afraid of unpopular positions when I believe the evidence supports them — that matters on a board.

My weakness is that I experience genuine frustration when organizations fail to follow their own bylaws, rules, or governing laws — and especially when leadership declines to act on fraudulent behavior or allows unlicensed individuals to operate without consequence. I take the integrity of this profession seriously, and watching it be undermined without accountability is difficult for me. I am working on channeling that frustration productively, because I know that lasting change requires strategy and relationship-building, not just moral clarity. But I will also never apologize for caring deeply about the standards that protect both practitioners and the public.

5. In your opinion, what are the current strengths and weaknesses of the AFMTE? Of the Board of Directors?

The Alliance's greatest strength is that it exists at all — there is a genuine need for a body that advocates for massage therapy education specifically, not just the profession at large. That niche is important and underserved.

Where I see opportunity is in becoming more visible and more vocal at the state regulatory level. The apprenticeship debate happening in Montana is not unique to Montana. If the AFMTE is not in those rooms — or at least equipping school directors to be in those rooms — we are ceding ground that is very hard to recover.

I also want to name something that I think is a significant gap in our regulatory landscape more broadly: in Montana, school owners are not permitted to sit on the state Board of Massage Therapy. That means the voice of educators — the people who are actually training the next generation of practitioners — is entirely absent from the regulatory table. Students deserve to enter this industry under teachers and educators who have integrity. They deserve protection from diploma mills, from fraudulent transcripts, and from instructors who were not even licensed themselves before they began teaching. The AFMTE has an opportunity and, I would argue, an obligation to advocate loudly for the inclusion of school owner and educator voices in state-level governance.

6. What unique role could you play in helping the organization develop over the next two years?

I sit at a rare intersection: I am simultaneously a clinician, a school director, a healthcare administrator, and someone with active regulatory advocacy experience. I can speak credibly to all three audiences — students, practitioners, and policymakers.

Beyond regulatory affairs, I believe I could contribute meaningfully to making our educational curriculum more robust — specifically by building bridges between the medical and energetic sides of massage therapy in a way that is credible and evidence-informed. I am currently pursuing my PhD in Integrative Medicine, and part of that work involves developing curriculum that takes the energetic dimension of bodywork seriously. There is substantial research available to support the physiological and psychological mechanisms behind energetic response in the body — but too many people in this industry either dismiss it entirely or embrace it without grounding it in science. I am working on curriculum that helps students become more intuitive practitioners, attuned to the ways that emotion and experience are stored in the tissues, while remaining anchored in credible research. I would love to bring that perspective to the Alliance's educational standards work.

7. How would you ensure you are accessible and open to membership input?

I believe in direct communication — not newsletters that disappear into inboxes, but genuine dialogue. I would like to use whatever channels members actually use, show up at events, and make it normal for members to reach out with concerns before they become grievances. My door has always been open at Creative Light, and I would carry that same culture into board service.

8. What are the responsibilities/limits on Board members speaking for the Board or the Alliance as a whole?

A board member has to really understand the vision of the organization so that they are always representing it in alignment with that vision and mission — in order to help drive it forward in a positive direction. Board members speak for the organization on matters of adopted policy and position. Personal opinions, especially on contested regulatory or political questions, stay clearly labeled as personal. The moment a board member blurs that line, they create confusion for the membership and undermine the credibility of the organization. I take that seriously.

9. What is your long-term vision for the AFMTE?

I want to see the AFMTE become a much stronger and more recognized presence as a professional organization for massage therapy education — one that people actively seek out to strengthen their work. Honestly, right now the AFMTE is not as well known as it deserves to be, especially compared to other organizations that are not doing the same meaningful work we are. That needs to change.

Building credibility with policymakers, producing research and position papers that carry genuine weight, and ensuring that every massage therapy school director in this country knows the Alliance is in their corner when educational standards are threatened — that is the work. The profession's future depends on the quality of its educational pipeline, and the AFMTE should be the organization that state regulatory boards call before they draft legislation — not the one scrambling to respond after. That is worth fighting for.