



*Application submitted by*  
**2025 National Teacher of the Year**  
**FINALIST**



**Mikaela Saelua**  
**AMERICAN SAMOA**

**School:** Leone High School  
**Subject:** English Language Arts  
**Grade:** 10-12



**Mikaela Saelua** teaches English to seniors, juniors and sophomores at Leone High School in the villages of Vailoatai and Leone in the Western District of American Samoa. Saelua holds a Bachelor of Arts in political science from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a Master of Education in curriculum studies from the University of Hawaii, Manoa. As a former Executive Leadership Development Program fellow and National Pacific American Leadership Institute fellow, Saelua brings a depth of experience and dedication to education leadership.

Currently, Saelua serves as the department head for the English Language Arts Department and as chairperson of the school's Western Association of Schools and Colleges self-study team. Additionally, she advises the senior class of 2025, leads the school's professional learning community and serves as the advisor to the Forestry Club and Peer Leaders Club, as well as being a volleyball coach.

As an educator, Saelua believes learning should be fun, engaging and rooted in place-based education. By connecting students with their local environment, she strives to make learning relevant and meaningful, encouraging students to explore social, environmental and cultural aspects of their community. This approach empowers students to address real-world challenges and fosters a sense of environmental stewardship that inspires lifelong learning.

### **Application Questions**

- 1. Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning? Show how your deliberate instructional decisions create student learning and reveal your beliefs about teaching and learning.**

One lesson my students look forward to each year is our Samoan song translation project. It's a favorite because it combines what they know best—the Samoan language—with what we're working on in English. Samoan, especially in music, is beautifully poetic and packed with figurative language, but translating it into English without losing its soul is a challenge. This project lets students tap into that challenge, maintaining the “feel” of Samoan lyrics while crafting poetic English translations. Since all my students are ELL learners with Samoan as their first language, they instantly connect with this assignment, knowing they're bringing something important from their own lives into the classroom.

The project starts with students choosing a Samoan song that they feel a connection to. Once they have a song, they work together to translate the lyrics, focusing on how to preserve the emotional and poetic feel in English. Naturally, some students begin by translating the lyrics



word-for-word, which usually leads to awkward or flat phrasing. That's where the lesson really starts to come to life. I guide them to think creatively, asking questions like, "How else can we say this?" or "What's another way to capture this meaning?" By playing with figurative language, students learn to express the same ideas in English without losing the Samoan heart of the words. This back-and-forth builds their English vocabulary and gives them a chance to be playful and get creative with language.

Since it's a group project, every student takes on a role that suits their interests and skills. Each group divides the song into sections, with each student translating a part. This setup ensures everyone's involved, and each student's unique perspective on the lyrics adds to the richness of the translation. Within each group, roles vary—some students become "meaning checkers," making sure the translation lines up with the emotional intent of the original Samoan lyrics. Others jump into the technical and creative roles, like director or video editor, handling the logistics of creating a music video that will bring their translated lyrics to life. Directors keep everyone on track, planning out scenes and coordinating with actors, while video editors get hands-on with technology, learning basic editing to add subtitles and transitions. For students who thrive with leadership or love getting creative with tech, these roles give them a chance to shine.

I set up the project this way because I believe every student should have a way to participate that feels right for them. Not everyone is going to feel confident with translation, and not everyone is drawn to tech, so this project lets students play to their strengths while still contributing to the group's final product. By using Samoan in an academic setting, we're also showing students that their language and culture are valued here. They aren't just learning English by replacing Samoan; they're learning how to express what's meaningful to them in English too. For students who might find English intimidating, this assignment provides a welcoming way in, connecting what they're learning to their own lives.

The best part of this project is the final product—the music video. When students see their work in video form, they feel a real sense of accomplishment. They've collaborated, they've used their language skills, and they've learned practical skills like filming and editing. These are things they can use outside the classroom too. More importantly, the project shows them that their cultural identity is a strength in learning English.

This project reflects what I believe about teaching: that it should be meaningful, connected to who students are, and empowering. The goal isn't just to teach them English; it's to help them appreciate and express themselves in a way that feels true to who they are. Teaching isn't just about the curriculum for me—it's about showing students the power of their own voices, in



Samoan and in English.

Through this project, I see students go from translating words to understanding the artistry behind language, both in Samoan and English. It's a journey that helps them recognize the beauty and complexity of their native language while building confidence in a new one.

**2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in that deliberately creates culture in your classroom or school. Describe how you build and use relationships to collaborate and to teach students of all backgrounds, abilities and identities. What is the status of the project today?**

As a co-founder of our school's Forestry Club, I'm incredibly proud of how this initiative has become a meaningful force for environmental stewardship and hands-on learning. My colleagues and I started the club to create a space where students could actively engage with environmental issues in a real, impactful way. It has since grown into a cultural presence at our school, offering students of all backgrounds and abilities a place to connect with each other, their community, and the environment.

In our first year, we received a \$10,000 Land Grant, which allowed us to launch forestry-related projects focused on sustainability. We planted trees around campus to provide shade for future generations, adding informational signs next to each one to educate students about the unique characteristics and environmental contributions of each species. Our campus became a mini arboretum, allowing students to engage with the island's ecology in a personal, daily setting.

To broaden our reach, we organized a school-wide Earth Day competition with the History, Art, and English departments. Students submitted poetry, raps, and artwork with environmental themes, and the turnout was phenomenal. We celebrated the winners in a school assembly, where environmentally friendly keychains and bracelets were distributed to the entire student body. More than a simple contest, this event highlighted our collective commitment to environmental awareness, fostering pride and unity in the school around this shared mission.

Our students also participated in an island-wide informational wave in partnership with local government agencies focused on environmental protection. Through field trips to hydroponic farms and a Samoan herbal garden, they witnessed sustainable agricultural practices firsthand. These experiences connected students to Samoan traditions, with a local herbalist demonstrating the making of healing oils and soaps, bridging environmental stewardship with cultural pride.



The success of our first year opened new doors, and in our second year, we secured a \$20,000 grant from Land Grant, which expanded our impact. We partnered with NOAA Planet Stewards to tackle the invasive lead tree issue across the island. This year-long project introduced students to data collection and ecosystem management, teaching them about the importance of removing invasive species to protect native plants. Students took ownership of this work, realizing their role as active stewards of the environment.

We also extended our outreach by planting trees at two of our feeder schools, bridging the gap between our students and younger students in our community while promoting environmental stewardship beyond our campus. It reinforced that the work we do has ripple effects, benefiting future generations and encouraging other schools to join in caring for the environment.

Now in our third year, the Forestry Club has become a vital part of our school's culture, and we're planning an exciting trip to Samoa to connect with students there who are also engaged in environmental projects. This trip will provide a cross-cultural perspective on environmental stewardship, reinforcing our shared responsibility. Our Forestry Club has grown into more than an extracurricular activity; it's a space fostering pride, connection, and hands-on engagement. By bringing students of all backgrounds and abilities together with a shared purpose, we're building a foundation of environmental consciousness that will shape our community for years to come.

**3. Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. Show how these community connections dissolve classroom walls and are used to impact student learning and success.**

For the past two years, I've worked closely with our counseling office to implement Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) activities that connect students with the community, raising awareness and creating real-world impact. Each month features a new theme relevant to our students and community. In October, for example, we focus on substance abuse and bullying, with activities that culminate in a wave where students hold informational posters along the road for passing motorists. This initiative is designed to educate both students and the community, showing students that they have a role in spreading awareness and creating positive change.

Each monthly theme also brings in local organizations and government agencies involved in social work, such as community health agencies and substance abuse counselors, who share insights directly with students. By meeting with these professionals, students gain exposure to



career pathways and see how community advocacy works in practice. These partnerships break down classroom walls, bridging what we discuss in class with what's happening locally.

My Peer Leaders Club adds another layer of community engagement, partnering with the Alliance for Strengthening Families and Intersections non-profits. Together, we address challenging topics like abuse and suicide, holding team-building and character-building workshops that encourage open dialogue and resilience. Each year, the club participates in an annual retreat featuring conference-style workshops led by non-profits, community speakers, and organizers. This retreat provides a safe, supportive space for students to tackle tough issues, building a sense of purpose and community awareness that extends beyond the classroom.

Throughout the school year, I also work with students to develop leadership skills by planning events and engaging community stakeholders. Last year, our school had a full WASC accreditation visit, and as the coordinator for our self-study, I guided students in preparing for this important milestone. They reached out to alumni, the PTA, and elected officials, coordinating efforts across our network to ensure everyone's involvement. The WASC Committee praised their work in the final report, which contributed to our school's six-year accreditation renewal, showing students the real-world power of effective collaboration and community outreach.

Another avenue for community engagement is my Forestry Club, where students connect with local experts in environmental and cultural fields. As a proponent of place-based learning, I arrange field trips where students learn directly from practitioners. This year, we're visiting Reggie Meredith, one of the last siapo masters, who will teach students about siapo-making, a traditional Samoan art form using natural resources for paper and ink. This experience connects students with Samoan cultural heritage and emphasizes the importance of preserving traditional knowledge.

We're also partnering with parent farmers to start a campus garden, inviting parents to contribute their agricultural knowledge. This collaboration is particularly meaningful because it allows parents who may not feel equipped to help with academic subjects to engage with their children's education in a hands-on, practical way. The project reinforces the idea that learning extends beyond academics, highlighting the value of family traditions and practical skills in a meaningful educational context.

These community connections shape nearly every aspect of my teaching, creating a learning environment that goes beyond classroom walls. Students become active participants and



leaders, understanding that education isn't limited to books or classrooms. By connecting with local organizations, professionals, alumni, and parents, students gain a richer, more practical understanding of what they learn in class and see firsthand how their efforts can make a tangible difference.

What I find most impactful about these community-based projects is how they bring out strengths in students who may not excel in traditional academic settings. Hands-on, real-world experiences provide these students with the chance to shine in ways that feel meaningful and relevant. Whether they're meeting cultural practitioners, planning events, or working with their parents, students build confidence and skills that translate to success far beyond school.

Today, these community-based initiatives continue to grow, offering students opportunities for learning, connection, and personal growth. Each month's SEL activities, every Peer Leaders Club meeting, and every Forestry Club project gives students the chance to experience their place in a larger community, helping them understand that learning and growth extend into the world around them. Through these connections, we're teaching students that they have a voice and the power to create positive change, equipping them with the skills and relationships that pave the way for academic, social, and personal success.

**4. Describe a time when you grew as a teacher leader and life-long learner as a result of being an advocate in your school, state or beyond. Describe your advocacy, how it helped you grow and how it impacted students.**

My role as a teacher leader and advocate has grown significantly through my efforts to support teachers, foster student initiatives, and build strong community ties. As the leader of our Professional Learning Community (PLC), I work to ensure that teachers have the skills and resources they need to succeed, especially since many are hired without a formal background in education. Through the PLC, I provide a collaborative space for both new and veteran teachers to learn effective teaching approaches and share challenges. This work has strengthened my role as a mentor and has helped to cultivate a supportive environment for growth among staff.

Recently, with AI becoming a popular tool for students completing assignments, it became clear that teachers needed guidance on effectively addressing this new reality. In our most recent professional development session, I led a workshop on ethical and productive AI use, focusing on how teachers can integrate AI as a writing and planning tool. Teachers learned how AI could help students refine their writing and serve as a planning resource that streamlines lesson preparation. This session helped demystify AI, giving teachers strategies that both respect



students' learning processes and promote ethical use.

Beyond instructional leadership, I work closely with our PTA and Alumni to advocate for essential resources and improvements at our school. As the self-study coordinator, I communicate our school's data, challenges, and successes to these stakeholders, strengthening their involvement in school growth. Through this advocacy, the PTA and Alumni have become strong partners, funding much-needed facility upgrades and supporting projects that directly benefit students. This experience has shown me the power of community engagement, which not only brings resources to the school but also strengthens a shared commitment to our students' success.

In my role on the school's leadership team, I work closely with the principal and administration to represent teachers' perspectives, voicing concerns about administrative decisions that may impact their workload or morale. This role enables me to support a positive work environment, promoting teacher well-being and job satisfaction. Additionally, I advocate for student-led initiatives that provide real-world experiences beyond the classroom, helping students gain valuable life skills and learn the power of taking initiative.

One example is the return of our school yearbook. With my guidance, students fundraised to revive this tradition, and I advocated to administration, parents, and community sponsors to support their efforts. Now in its third year, the yearbook project has expanded into a journalism endeavor, with students interviewing community stakeholders for our first school newsletter. By empowering students to lead, I've seen how advocacy can foster independence and community engagement, teaching students that they have the ability to turn ideas into impactful projects.

My Peer Leaders Club also serves as a platform for advocacy, where students develop their voices and leadership skills. Throughout the year, we work on public speaking, team building, and problem-solving, and students attend island-wide seminars to discuss sensitive issues like domestic violence and sexual abuse. By engaging with these challenging topics, students build resilience and empathy, preparing them to be advocates for change within their communities. This experience has shown me the importance of empowering students to confront real-world issues, helping them develop a sense of responsibility and courage.

My Forestry Club is another example of student advocacy in action. These students are passionate about environmental stewardship and regularly use their voices and actions to raise awareness within the community. Through activities like tree planting, farm visits, and partnerships with conservation agencies, my students gain hands-on experience in



environmental issues that impact our island. Their involvement fosters a strong connection with the community and reinforces their role as advocates for sustainability, demonstrating the impact they can have on their surroundings.

These roles have helped me grow as both a teacher leader and lifelong learner. Advocating for my colleagues, students, and community has strengthened my ability to listen, communicate effectively, and bridge gaps between different groups. I've come to appreciate the interconnected nature of our work—whether supporting teachers through the PLC, helping students publish a yearbook, or engaging in environmental initiatives, each effort enriches our school culture. This journey has deepened my commitment to lifelong learning and advocacy, inspiring me to continuously seek ways to support and empower others within the educational community.

**5. As the National Teacher of the Year, serving as the ambassador of education for the United States, you have been asked to give a speech to a large audience of teachers. This speech is being recorded and will be shared broadly with a larger audience. What is your message? What is the talk you give? [You may indicate a specific audience. For example, a “back to school” talk.]**

As a teacher, my core belief is that education is the most powerful tool for transformation—not only for individual students but for entire communities. If selected as Teacher of the Year, I would champion the idea that education must be a collaborative effort, focused on creating lifelong learners who are equipped to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

In today's world, education isn't just about facts and figures; it's about fostering critical thinking, adaptability, and resilience in our students. Our task is to prepare them to meet challenges we can't yet foresee, to equip them with the confidence to learn, unlearn, and relearn as the world evolves. This mission is too big for any one teacher to accomplish alone. It takes a collective commitment—across classrooms, schools, communities, and policy-making bodies. Together, we shape not just individual minds, but the future of our society.

One of my deepest passions is facilitating workshops and professional development that inspire my colleagues to innovate and improve. The teaching profession thrives when we collaborate, reflect, and grow together. As we face a rapidly evolving world, teachers need more than just encouragement—they need ongoing training, mentorship, and the tools to succeed in diverse classroom environments. This is why my message would stress the importance of investing in teachers as lifelong learners, continuously improving their craft. When teachers are given the



resources to grow, they pass that knowledge directly to students, creating classrooms where curiosity and skill-building thrive. After all, the best indicator of student success is an effective teacher.

To the teachers of our great nation, my message is simple: faamalosi. In the Samoan language, faamalosi means to stay strong, to persevere, and to carry on with courage and determination. As educators, we face immense challenges. We wear many hats, navigating constant changes, balancing planning with the emotional demands of our work. It can often feel overwhelming. We are at the heart of our communities, supporting students emotionally, mentally, and academically. And yet, despite our dedication, we are in the midst of a teacher shortage, with many passionate educators feeling compelled to leave the profession.

To those of you still here, I urge you to hold fast and stay the course. Our work is not only about the present—it's about the future. The future of our students, our communities, and our nation depends on us. The impact we make is immeasurable, and while the road may be difficult, remember that we are shaping the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and change-makers. Faamalosi—stay strong—because the future needs us, now more than ever.

To our communities and policymakers, my message is equally important: Education is a shared responsibility. Teachers are not the only figures responsible for shaping the future. Parents, community members, and policymakers must partner with us to ensure that students have the resources, support, and opportunities they need to succeed. This is not solely a teacher's duty; it is a shared journey that requires everyone's involvement.

Investing in education means investing in the future of our nation, and we all have a role to play in this journey. Policymakers have the power to shape funding, standards, and the overall infrastructure that supports our schools. Community members and local organizations can step in to offer mentorship, internships, or even after-school programs that enhance learning. Parents can reinforce what happens in the classroom by providing support at home, instilling in their children the value of education. When we work together in partnership, we can build a foundation that allows every child to thrive.

As educators, we know the difference it makes when students feel supported. They rise to meet our expectations, fueled by the knowledge that they have a team of people who believe in them. Imagine the impact if that support extended beyond the school walls, if every child in America felt that their community, their state, and their country cared about their future. This is what we can achieve when we unite our efforts.



As educators, our strength lies not in our individual classrooms but in our unity and shared commitment to our students and our country. It's something I see each day at Leone High School, where our motto reminds us: Unity is Our Strength. Let's hold on to that unity and continue this journey together—with purpose, pride, and a steadfast commitment to every student we are honored to teach.