CCSSO NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR PROGRAM

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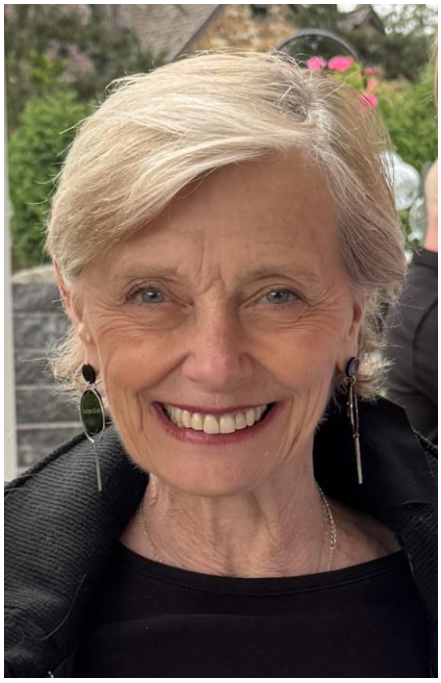
Application submitted by

2026 National Teacher of the Year

FINALIST



Linda Wallenberg

MINNESOTA

School: Eden Prairie High School

Subject: English

Grade: 9,12

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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.

"Why do we have to read a play written by an old white guy who died over 400 years ago? What does it have to do with me?"

Before addressing this question, I tell my students something surprising: "Swag," the 2011 Hip Hop Word of the Year attributed to rapper Jay-Z, was actually coined by William Shakespeare. "No way!" they exclaim—and suddenly, they're eager to dive into Romeo and Juliet.

Gholdy Muhammad's culturally and historically responsive education (CHRE) framework names five pursuits for learning. One of these is Identity—teaching students to see their own lives and heritage as integral to the curriculum. When students see their stories reflected in what they study, they engage with greater depth and purpose.

The biggest obstacle I've faced in teaching Shakespeare is student assumption: he's old, boring, irrelevant, outdated, and has nothing to do with me. How do I overcome these assumptions? By meeting students where they are.

I begin by inviting students to share their fears. Lily, who has dyslexia, admitted Shakespeare felt intimidating. Nico, a Hispanic student, confessed that he thought literature wasn't valued in his culture. Naming these fears helps break them down, and students see they are not alone.

I strive to honor students' experiences and create a classroom grounded in grace, kindness, and belonging. My passion is reaching every student—especially those who feel like outsiders. Great books, even those written centuries ago, can open windows into our own lives and bridge the two worlds of home and school.

My Romeo and Juliet unit aims to break down barriers and make this 400-year-old text accessible—especially for emerging English language learners and students from immigrant families. The play's feuding families, who don't even remember why they hate each other, mirror the divisions students see today. When Juliet asks, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" students learn that "wherefore" means "Why are you Romeo Montague—

a name I've been taught to hate?" This opens conversations about how identity markers like names, gender, or religion can define—or devastate/shatter/break/crush/destroy/confine—us. Students eagerly draw parallels to their own experiences and current events.

Next, I ask them to explore the meaning of their own names. They interview parents or caregivers and research their names' origins. Through journaling and discussion, they share their "name stories." We listen to songs like Shawn Mendes's "I Don't Even Know Your Name" and talk about naming traditions around the world. I share from my Swedish heritage, where everyone celebrates their "name day," much like a birthday.

We also read Jani Rosado's poem "What's in a Name?" and linger over these lines:

"Off to school I went into a world of English-speaking teachers
With little or no patience for ethnicity . . .
It was enough that they had to learn all our names, but to say them correctly?
File under: Not important."

Many students relate to Rosado's frustration. They, too, have been dismissed or misnamed. Year after year, this activity sparks empathy and openness. As I watch Yusef, Amalie, Jake, and Isheen share the meanings behind their names, something transformative happens.

Once they tell how their parents chose names to honor ancestors or confess the pain of repeating them for teachers who can't pronounce them, trust deepens. A student once silenced by bullying told me the project helped him reconnect with his heritage and "transform years of silence and self-doubt into a platform that might help others." He had felt "small and unheard," struggling with low self-esteem and distanced from his cultural identity. Now he hoped sharing his story might help others "feel seen."

Another student from India confided about her impending arranged marriage to a boy in Mumbai whom she had never met, adding tearfully, "But I'm in love with a hockey player here." For her, Juliet's words about love and family expectations suddenly became personal.

This naming activity not only brings Romeo and Juliet to life, but also sets the tone I want for my classroom. One former student later told me, "Our experiences and selves were as deserving of exploration as the 'classics' we were reading."

Students come to see that Shakespeare's questions still matter: How do names and labels shape us? Why do prejudice and division persist in 2025 when he illuminated their dangers so clearly in 1595?

By connecting their names and identities to Shakespeare's timeless themes, students learn that their stories—and their cultures—belong in the literary conversation.

And when they ask, "Can we ever overcome prejudice?" I answer, "Let's begin here. Right in this classroom."

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

When I was invited to join Eden Prairie High School's Site Improvement Plan (SIP) team to craft a new vision statement, my first thought was "Again?" After nearly five decades in education, I'd seen countless mission statements come and go. So, I was tempted to say, "Been there, done that, and I've got the notebooks to prove it."

I do still have a binder full of "Connections Activities" on a shelf somewhere. Years ago, to combat student disengagement, we launched Connections—a reimagined homeroom where small groups of students shared stories, built empathy, and created trust. What started as an experiment transformed school culture. Teachers began integrating collaborative learning strategies and replacing rows with table groups–all to center connection before content.

In my own classroom, centering connections led me away from "coverage." Up to that point, I "covered" the curriculum, testing every comma rule. My students scored well, but didn't own the material. I realized that by "covering" the curriculum, I had been burying it. Instead, I learned to let student voices lead.

Over time, the Connections initiative faded, and I became its last remaining founder. So, when I was asked again to help define a new vision for belonging, I considered dusting off my old binder of Connections curriculum, "mic dropping" it onto the table, and walking out of the SIP meeting.

Then I remembered Dr. Brad Johnson: “Culture isn’t created by a mission statement on the wall; it’s created by the relationships within the walls.” Seeing my younger colleagues’ enthusiasm inspired me. I also recognized that while the core need for belonging doesn’t change, this generation of students is facing unique challenges of digital distraction and isolation.

So, I joined the SIP team —this time as the “elder,” offering history, hope, and a belief that the wheel is always worth reinventing if students are at the center. In fact, students led the way in the SIP team by expressing their hopes for a schoolwide culture of acceptance, inclusivity, safety, and respect. Guided by Brad Johnson’s work on connection in an age of isolation, Gholdy Mohammed’s culturally responsive teaching, and Zach Mercurio’s research on the power of mattering, we crafted a new vision: “At EPHS, we inspire joyful learning, foster deep belonging, and empower each student to rise to meaningful challenges.”

Someone designed a logo, and we called it "EP3." Two years into EP3, the spirit is already deeply rooted around the school and in my own classroom. I’ve proven to myself that I’m never done adapting and inventing to create connections.

While I’ve been doing team building activities for many years, I've recently added classroom table groups that shift by unit—sometimes grouped by learning style, interest, or chance. Students develop group norms, take on roles like leader or recorder, and discover common ground.

While I’ve been doing content anticipatory sets since the old Connections, I’ve developed daily group check-ins that center relationships before rigor. We begin with “questions of the day," like, Beach or mountains? Morning or night person? Considering deep belonging has pushed me to look for questions that cross culture and personality.

While I’ve been having students pair up as study partners for years, now our work often unfolds in community circles, inspired by Indigenous traditions of shared power. My classroom talking piece–a stretchy fidget toy in the shape of an eagle–ensures every voice is heard; a rotating “circle keeper” guides discussion. Once students understand the rhythm, I often join as an equal participant, or simply listen—as students lead. These circles have become powerful spaces for students of all backgrounds and abilities.

And the students confirm EP3 practices work!

Lily: “As someone with dyslexia, AP classes seemed intimidating, but here I found hope. Through our circles, I learned to be kinder to myself. Every day, I had to decide whether to speak or stay silent. I chose to share.”

Nico: “As a Hispanic student, I once thought literature didn’t belong to me. But this class felt like a family. We came to lean on each other—and I started writing poetry again.”

Their words affirm that when relationships lead, learning follows. This type of culture—not test prep or sophisticated tech—is the deep belonging of our new EP3 vision statement. I haven’t thrown out my old Connections binder, but I am glad I realized the work was not finished. For our school and for me, “joyful learning, deep belonging, and meaningful challenge” is not a platitude that lives on a wall. It’s a living practice.

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 deliberately impact student learning and success.

I got a postcard in the fall of 1986 with a magic word for an English teacher and lifelong theatre lover—HAMLET. The card from Park Square Theatre’s education director landed in my mailbox before lunch, and I could hardly wait to call, hoping there were tickets left for my seniors to see Hamlet live!

Then, like Hamlet, I hesitated. I saw so many barriers: forms, funding, buses, subs. However, I’ve always believed school prepares students for life beyond school. I recalled a student saying, “I need to learn to ‘do life,’ not just learn in a classroom.” Why not start now? Why not see Hamlet—just as Shakespeare intended?

Park Square offered an unprecedented immersion by inviting students backstage to explore trap doors, try stage makeup, learn swordfighting with actual rapiers, meet lighting designers, and join actors for warm-ups and a postshow Q&A. Magical! Even my most hesitant students returned to the classroom fired up, brimming with curiosity. Tasting learning from the inside out made them risk-takers in discussion and writing. Those classroom walls had dissolved!

Thus began a 37-year partnership with Park Square. Multiply that 37 by the 300 or so students I brought each year, and it adds up to thousands of joyful hours of learning sans desks.

Even within school walls, community means more than one classroom. From past seniors, ninth graders receive personal welcome letters filled with encouraging advice: “Do the things YOU love. Talk to your teachers. You’re never alone. Go to pepfests. Laugh. It goes fast.” Some even offer their emails for mentoring. Seniors, in turn, receive letters from AP graduates who offer tips for writing college essays, navigating “senior slide,” and “slaying” senior year. When current ninth graders meet with seniors to revise essays, both groups report increased confidence, belonging, joy. Together, they form a lineage of learners.

Beyond our building, students connect with younger learners by reading folktales to first graders, tutoring middle school writers, and exchanging pen-pal letters with students in Seoul, South Korea. These encounters show students that their voices carry meaning across ages and continents.

We also experiment with “Days of Autonomy.” Seniors receive a homework-free day to explore a self-chosen curiosity: composing a guitar arrangement, researching the Japanese art Kintsugi, finding Gatsby references in a Taylor Swift song, and finally finishing Becoming. The next day, we celebrate–sharing how what we learned outside of class connects with our learning inside the room.

I collaborate with colleagues to create cross-disciplinary projects–strengthening our web of community. When reading Frankenstein, students explore William Blake’s paintings, debate philosophies of Romanticism, and listen to Beethoven’s symphonies. I point to one of my favorite words on the vocab wall–serendipity–when those connections align with the students’ work in art, history, and music classes.

Our greater community also enters (or “Zooms in”) the classroom. Former colleague, now state senator, Steve Cwodzinski joined us to “perform” his own “7 Life Lessons” mirroring Polonius’ advice in Hamlet. When we studied Beowulf, former student and paralympic medalist Melissa Stockwell spoke about losing her leg in Iraq and rebuilding her life. Students’ definitions of “hero” shifted from mythical to deeply human. Guest speakers–poets, swordmasters, and even professional screenwriters–have transformed abstract lessons into lived experience.

Family and culture form another circle of connection. Harvard’s Elizabeth Ross says education “is love-work—you must love fully the families and communities you serve.” I take that to heart. Students interview family members about defining life moments—immigration stories, births, honors—and record them as family history. One Somali grandmother narrated her first day in America; another parent shared, “No one ever

asked me to tell my story before." These school-to-home bridges deepen understanding between generations and cultures while building pride and empathy.

Perhaps the boldest "community connection" in my career unfolded in 2025 when I led seven students–none had ever left the United States–on a spring break study tour of England and Scotland. We followed our curriculum paths: reciting Shakespeare beside his grave in Stratford, studying Gothic architecture at Edinburgh Castle, and comparing settings in Pride and Prejudice to grand countryside estates. Ella called the trip "life-changing," Sohum decided to study abroad, and Khadija said she finally understood what it means to see through another culture's eyes.

Each connection—whether a field trip across the metro to meet Hamlet or learning across generations, classrooms, continents, and centuries—teaches students to explore beyond the worksheet and the grade. By giving my students links to the wider world, I don't just teach English—I help students write the first pages of their own story.

4. Describe a time when you demonstrated teacher leadership and lifelong learning through your work in your school, state or beyond. Describe your work, how it helped you grow and how it meaningfully impacted students.

Several years ago, someone reviewing my taxes said, "Don't you know that there's only a $300 deduction allowable for teachers?" Of course I knew—and my travel receipts far exceeded that. Why isn't there an unlimited category for teachers? Even so, I began to plan my next study trip.

Boarding a plane isn't the only way to learn, but for me, it's worth every non-deductible penny. After I taught senior Brit Lit for decades, artists' renderings in a textbook just weren't enough. I had to see the Cliffs of Dover, the swans on the Avon, and the Globe Theatre on the Thames. So, I saved up for the expensive trip and accepted a three-month teaching position at Chaucer School in Canterbury. Not only did I experience my love of Chaucer through the eyes of native Brits, but I was asked to teach Huckleberry Finn and Maya Angelou's poetry–bringing the Mississippi into a literary confluence with the Thames.

When I returned, I brought Canterbury with me. Having "street cred" from walking the same roads as Chaucer's pilgrims, students wanted to "see" what I had seen. Ironically, as I gained more expertise in historical and geographical context, I became more willing to invite student voices in–letting them lead the learning. Inspired by Canterbury Tales,

they asked to create their own Eden Prairie Tales, modeling Chaucer's storytelling craft, creating memorable characters–warts and all–seeing literature as altogether human.

Then ninth-grade English appeared on my schedule; I was to teach To Kill a Mockingbird–a book set amid social turmoil–not a tranquil pilgrimage to Canterbury.

I'd noticed that many students were unaware of the social and racial complexities shaping the world around them, much less cared about the impact of global events on them. As a teenager of the 1960s, I'd grown up in an era of protests, war, and unrest. How could I help students connect history's injustices to today's realities? I knew I could teach the literature, but how would I get them to take lessons off the page and into their worldview?

To prepare, I enrolled in online courses at the Gilder Lehrman Institute and then traveled to Harper Lee's hometown of Monroeville, Alabama. There, I visited the courthouse where Lee's father practiced law, watched the local production of To Kill a Mockingbird, and interviewed neighbors who shared stories of their beloved "Jane Austen of Alabama." However–townmap in hand–I asked locals for directions to the "Blacks only" church and cemetery mentioned in the novel. No one knew. An Atticus Finch monument existed, but none for Tom Robinson or Calpurnia. I was troubled.

Upon returning, I gave students a more nuanced picture of injustices in modern Monroeville. After a colleague shared Bryan Stevenson's Just Mercy, I paired it with Mockingbird–linking historical and modern racial inequities. Students didn't just analyze Harper Lee's words; they examined companion texts, researched Jim Crow laws, Emmett Till, and debated criminal justice reform. Just Mercy moved them to question today's justice system instead of simply admiring my pictures of Atticus's courthouse.

Through this ongoing work, I grew as both a teacher and human being. Content expertise mattered less than my willingness to keep learning, questioning, and modeling curiosity for students. The more authentic I became, the more authentic they became.

Teacher leadership also means extending growth to colleagues. To this day, I share travel experiences and classroom transformations in department meetings and workshops–offering artifacts, images, and cultural insights to teachers who might not travel themselves. Together, we reimagine narrative writing units so students explore intersections of personal history, culture, and literature. Colleagues tell me they feel re-energized, bringing their own journeys and passions into teaching.

Mentoring early-career teachers is a key part of my leadership. I remind them that education's purpose is not to cover material but to uncover meaning; when we model curiosity, empathy, and courage, students follow. Through collaborative coaching, I've helped teachers see how literature can be both mirror and window–a way to understand oneself while understanding others.

We are at risk of losing our students' trust that what we do in schools truly matters. Yet, authenticity—rooted in experience and continuous growth—is the surest way to regain it. Every journey—whether to Canterbury or Monroeville—renews my calling: to keep learning, lead with purpose, and cultivate students to think critically, care deeply, and act intentionally.

Teacher contracts don't come with travel vouchers, and that tax deduction hasn't increased—but "on-site" remains my favorite classroom for lifelong learning. I can bring back so much more than postcards for my students and colleagues.

5. As the National Teacher of the Year, you will serve as an ambassador of education for the United States for a year. You have been asked to deliver remarks at an event for aspiring teachers and their mentors. What is your message?

Good morning, aspiring educators, and a heartfelt thank you to your mentors!

I am so humbled by this honor to speak with you all today—in my 50th year of teaching! Not a day goes by that people don't ask me, "Wally, when will you retire? You're still grading hundreds of essays? Are you crazy?" Perhaps. But the real question is why I still teach.

I became a teacher because I fell in love, and I get to fall in love over and over again every day…with the calling, the classroom, the kids.

I fall in love when a student asks "why," and we discover the answer together, when I overhear two students who barely knew each other before they had to do an English project together are now planning to meet up to play Fortnite, when I get to call a parent to say, "Today your child stood up for someone who was 'othered.'"

Become a teacher because you love to fall in love. That love has kept me teaching for half a century.

Don’t become a teacher to be a trend-setter—be a table-setter. Last week, I ran into a student I hadn’t seen in 25 years. When I asked what she remembered from English 9, she said, “I remember being invited to the table. I felt seen.” One small comment I write in the margin of a student’s journal might be the only time they feel seen all day.

With information so readily available online, people ask if we can get rid of the classroom.

No!

We need classrooms more than ever. It never was and never will be solely about content—it’s about connection.

Despite polarization, intolerance, and mistrust, our sacred work is to help young people feel safe enough to find hope.

The learning relationship in the loving classroom is our hope. There is no better act of resistance to the forces that threaten our young people’s hope than to offer them a safe space where they are seen, heard, and empowered–learning to trust their own voices, to think critically, to rise—and, someday, to fly on their own.

Over the decades, I’ve seen curriculum come and go. I’ve seen desks rearranged, standards rewritten, and technology transform—from the Apple IIe to AI.

But what hasn’t changed are the hearts sitting in those desks.

Whether they were listening to Led Zeppelin, the Backstreet Boys, Taylor Swift, or K-pop, students want to belong, to matter, to find purpose—to feel hope and love.

There is no better place than our classrooms to harvest this hope. That’s why they are sacred spaces, and why WE CANNOT SURRENDER THE CLASSROOM.

WE CANNOT SURRENDER THE CLASSROOM to those who would settle for a less literate, less critically thinking, more easily manipulated society.

WE CANNOT SURRENDER THE CLASSROOM to hate, prejudice, or cynicism.

WE CANNOT SURRENDER THE CLASSROOM to those who make us believe we are powerless. Anyone who can face 100 kids a day, love 100 kids a day, and hold the hearts of 100 kids a day can do anything.

WE CANNOT SURRENDER THE CLASSROOM to social media or AI or to the idea that humanity does not matter. Students discover what it means to be human in classrooms every day.

WE CANNOT SURRENDER THE CLASSROOM to despair.

There have been moments when I wanted to give in to despair—when I lost my father, my mother, my sister. And then, I lost my precious 24-year-old son to depression. There were mornings I couldn't imagine walking back into a classroom, much less teaching or helping students find hope when I felt so lost.

But I did. Because my students and colleagues lifted me and loved me when I could not, my grief softened into gratitude.

One of my son's favorite sayings was, "A ship is safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are built for." And so—with the love of my fellow teachers—I sailed back out. Because that's what teachers do. We carry each other and our students through heartbreak. Together, we are beacons of light and protectors of hope.

And that's my simple message to all of you aspiring educators: HARVEST HOPE!

So, when people ask when I'll retire? Carpe Diem! I've got nearly 30 years left until I'm 100—and the truth is, as long as there is hope to harvest, I'm not done.

I'm still in love. And my hope for you, aspiring educators, is that you will always be in love, too.