



2015 NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINALIST



SHANNA PEEPLES

2015 TEXAS TEACHER OF THE YEAR

PALO DURO HIGH SCHOOL
AMARILLO, TX

SCHOOL PROFILE: URBAN

DISTRICT SIZE: 31483

SCHOOL SIZE: 1990

SUBJECT AREA: ENGLISH

GRADE LEVEL: 11

YEARS IN TEACHING: 12

YEARS IN POSITION: 4

II. Educational History and Professional Development Activities

Educational History

Dates	Institution and Location	Degree
2011-2013	University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington	M.Ed. Curriculum & Instruction
1994-1997	West Texas A & M University, Canyon	B.A. English
1990-1994	Amarillo College, Amarillo	A.A. Liberal Arts

Employment History

Dates	Institution and Location	Position
2008-present	Palo Duro High School, Amarillo	English IIIAP teacher, English Dept. Chair, Instructional Coach, FLEX English (night school)
2002-2008	Horace Mann Middle School, Amarillo	7th grade English Language Arts

Professional Association Memberships, Offices Held, and Other Relevant Activities

2013-present	English Department Chairperson, PDHS
2013-present	Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD) member
2012-present	Springboard Official Pre-AP Program from College Board trainer
2012-present	National Honor Society co-sponsor
2011-present	Golden Key Honor Society, Graduate School (University of Texas, Arlington)
2010-present	National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) member
2010-present	Texas Council of English Language Arts (TCTELA) member
2009-present	Abydos Learning International/ALI II literacy trainer
2009-present	Committee member, ELA Standards for AISD secondary
2009-present	D-FORCE (campus Positive Behavioral Support team) committee member
2003-present	National Education Association member
1997-present	Kappa Delta Pi International Honor Society in Education
1995-present	Phi Theta Kappa International Scholastic Order

Staff Development Leadership Activity and Leadership in Training Future Teachers

(Section II. continued - Educational History and Professional Development Activities)

- Current: Instructional Coach for English department, student teachers, and interns at PDHS
- 6/30/14 Co-Trainer, Abydos Learning International Three-Week Writing Institute, (for Vernon ISD, Burkburnett ISD, and Alvord ISD), Burkburnett, Texas
- 2/22/14 Abydos Learning International Annual Conference (formerly New Jersey Writing Project in Texas) San Antonio, TX Presenter: "Growing Into Knowing: Job-Embedded Professional Development Through Inquiry Groups and Instructional Coaching"
- 8/22/13 AISD Secondary English Conference, Focus Session Presenter: "A Pen and a Purpose: How to Use Writing Workshop"
- 1/18/13 Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts Annual Conference, Dallas, TX Presenter: "The Wise Man Built His House Upon The Rock: What Buddha, Baptists and Bullriders Can Teach Us About Tackling the EOC"
- 1/21/11 TCTELA Annual Conference, Galveston, TX Co-presenter: "Mission Possible: Using Digital Narratives in the ELL Classroom"
- 4/2/11 Abydos Learning International Annual Conference, Dallas, TX Presenter: "Read, Think, Talk: One Teacher's Journey Across Indolence, Indifference and Inattention"
- 3/2012 West Texas A&M University's "ESL Cruise" co-presenter for teacher candidates, AISD Education Support Center
- 8/2010 Region 16 Annual Literacy Conference, Amarillo ISD Presenter: "Read With Your Feet: Action Strategies for Literacy"
- 4/2008 Abydos Learning International Annual Conference, Austin, TX Presenter: "Writing As A Spiritual Practice in the Public Schools"
- 11/20-23/2008 National Council of Teachers of English Annual Conference, San Antonio, TX Presenter: "Writing As A Spiritual Practice in the Public Schools" poster session; Co-presenter: "Hour Kids Bad Speling Is Macking Us Loose Hour Mines"

Awards and Other Recognition

- 5/2013 – Finalist, AISD Secondary Teacher of the Year

III. Professional Biography

- A. What were the factors that influenced you to become a teacher? Describe what you consider to be your greatest contributions and accomplishments in education.

It's the toughest job you'll ever love, the ad said about the Peace Corps, but it's also a perfect slogan to describe my relationship with teaching and learning. Teaching chose me, but I tried everything I could think of to avoid its call: disc jockey, medical assistant, pet babysitter for the rich, journalist, and finally, finally a teacher.

Down deep, I knew I would love teaching in a way that would break my heart, like all things that truly matter will do to us. And my heart has shattered in funeral homes as I've tucked letters from classmates into the coffins of their dead friends, as I've seen the once bright and shining boy scowling in an inky mug shot, as I've signed drop papers for children who found more hope on the killing floor at the slaughterhouse than in school.

And yet, sometimes my heart has swelled to see these scenes: Tin, a Burmese refugee who'd shown me a picture of her as a toddler being handed over a razor wire fence into a UN refugee camp bound for America, crossing the stage to get a diploma, or Viet, who overcame crippling social anxiety, now wearing the T-shirt Harvard gave him with his admission package as he speaks to high school students; and Kayla, who'd spent most of her childhood gingerly stepping past prostitutes and meth addicts outside her front door, now holding a Gates Millennial Scholarship letter that would take her through Oklahoma University and into a public health fellowship at the University of Kentucky.

Part of my fear of teaching was a fear of connecting to pain in my own life. Because I had teachers who gave me books and encouraged me to write, I learned that there was a world outside of alcoholism and domestic violence. Mrs. Belton, my only African-American teacher, taught me to write when I wanted to scream, when I wanted to hit back, and when I wanted to quit. She taught me that it was possible to read and write my way into another life. Becoming a teacher, I felt, would mean that I would have to take up her work and face the darkness in my students' lives.

Parker Palmer wrote that "by remembering ourselves, we remember our students." This means that when I see a student with his head down on the desk, it might be because he needs a

(Section III. continued - Professional Biography)

teacher who remembers not sleeping on school nights when neighbors called the police to break up my parents' fights. Or that a girl who suddenly stops turning in work may need a teacher who knows how hard it is to turn in your homework when the electricity's been shut off. And even if I don't know why students are struggling, I remember that Lucille Clifton once said "every pair of eyes facing you has probably experienced something you could not endure."

My students, survivors of deep and debilitating trauma, have shaped the kind of teacher I am. They have taught me to never make a promise I can't keep because so many already have learned to see the world through suspicious eyes. To be the best teacher to them, I have to remember this and honor their background. I remember so I can gain their trust because I want them to read and write their way out of where they are. I have to remember that my best teachers put books and paper in front of me and showed me that words can take you up and out of the worst situations. They gave me poetry as a light, as a definition of hope, like the words of Rubín Alves: "the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress us is not the last word...the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual."

And so, in a sense, I sell hope to my students. I want them to know that writing, if you go deep enough, can help you forget. And I want them to know that they aren't alone – that so many others have faced similar problems. Even if the story seems old and familiar, we can find ways to fight monsters with help from Beowulf, from Steinbeck, and even the Brothers Grimm. My favorite fairy tale is Hansel and Gretel and it's one of the books that I use to close the school year. I tell students that, to me, the story is about how we can be our own heroes. Books, I tell them, help us to find our way out of the forest, so to speak, and help us to make peace with our past while showing us the promise of a multitude of futures. At graduation, I see this promise begin to come true as student after student reaches for a diploma that will take them to places they can't even begin to imagine.

IV. Community Involvement

- A. Describe your commitment to your community through service-oriented activities such as volunteer work, civic responsibilities and other group activities.

My father was a salesman and I am his daughter in so far as I “sell” literacy in as many venues as possible. I am driven by the words of Sherman Alexie which I’ve paraphrased as, “I [teach writing] to give them weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters.”

Most of my community involvement is aimed at promoting literacy, particularly to those who feel shut out of the process. This includes the inmates at the Nathaniel J. Neal Unit where I’ve been a keynote speaker at their G.E.D. graduation ceremony, the members of the newly formed Burmese Buddhist temple who’ve received books we’ve collected for adult literacy, the various people meeting to think and argue big questions as part of a Socratic Café group that meets weekly, and to the students competing in Academic Decathlon and speech and debate tournaments at city high schools where I’ve served as a judge.

My passion is for writing groups and I’ve seen how writing helps people. At Polk Street United Methodist Church, where I’m a member, I have facilitated “Writing As a Spiritual Practice” classes for Midweek services. This form of writing has been gratifying to me and others when presented in Sunday School classes of senior adults. Teachers from various schools have joined me to modify this technique to write reflectively and deepen their professional practice.

Finally, I’ve used my classroom as a safe space after school for informal writing and discussion groups. Whether they’re students who’ve just come out of jail, or a group of teens who call themselves “The Ivy 5” because they are working on admission essays for ivy league colleges, or a group of teachers teetering on the edge of burnout, they’ve all found the deep sense of satisfaction, purpose and renewal that comes from writing and then sharing that experience with others. This is a privilege for me to promote, and I am deeply grateful for the courage and communal wisdom of these writers.

V. Philosophy of Teaching

As the freak October snow began to fall harder outside, my panic rose. Not only were some of my students' cars sliding their way into school, but the auditorium where we invited everyone to watch presentations had been struck by lightning the night before, frying the lights. Karen burst into tears, Melissa broke a heel, and Jenny's laptop crashed. It was a Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day for my students to present nine weeks' worth of work but, as we learn in teacher training, we "monitor and adjust" and try not to cry in front of the students when everything falls apart. After a quick huddle, we moved to my classroom.

They were living out a real-life "Understanding by Design" unit that helped them acquire skills and information, make meaning, and then transfer those skills to a new and unpredictable situation. This experience was our attempt to recreate what Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe envisioned in creating the UbD process. We also experienced what Tony Wagner writes about in *The Global Achievement Gap*, and what Daniel Pink writes about in *A Whole New Mind* and *Drive*: authentic problem-based learning. I want my students to have practice in Wagner's "seven survival skills": critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, adaptability, initiative, communication, analysis, curiosity and imagination. In addition, I agree with Pink when he argues that students need active practice in autonomy, mastery, and purpose. This helped influence my guiding philosophy: the person doing the work is the person doing the learning.

With help from my mentor, I used UbD's backwards design to create a real-world scenario where my students could practice and refine their powers of analysis, persuasive speaking and writing. "Thank You For Arguing" became a nine-week unit that required students to choose a team and choose one of three scenarios: An advertising team in charge of creating a campaign of positive change for our school, a legislative team in charge of proposing a new student rule or regulation to administrators, or a social change team in charge of proposing a partnership with an existing social service and design the terms of service using PD students. Broadcast and print journalists, marketing managers from banking and city planning, the Chamber of Commerce and the school board, judged students.

(Section V. continued - Philosophy of Teaching)

Two of the teams created work that lived beyond the nine weeks: Viet Tran, now a Harvard junior, used his experience with the project as his entrance essay to the university, and Stephanie Mercado, now a Presidential Scholar at Amarillo College, created ABC Mentoring and Tutoring for PDHS using a cadre of high-achieving seniors as tutors for low-performing students.

Another team, led by Adilene Lara and Lucia Castanon, created a campaign to raise awareness about breast cancer aimed at North Amarillo residents. Lara and Castanon's team of bilingual students, in partnership with the Amarillo Area Breast Health Coalition, presented breast health information in Spanish and English at several venues to help underserved women. Their work was given an Outstanding Youth Group award at the Champions of Breast Health Breakfast and became the school branch of Wise Women, a service organization aimed at promoting women's health. Sponsor Denise Rayford said, "One of the women we signed up had a malignant lump, and the coalition has since gotten her the help she needs."

Because of our new curriculum and testing realities, I've modified the delivery of the lesson, but not the rigor or accountability. My ESL classes of refugees from Burma and Africa produce digital narratives of their experience and write dual-language books that include MP3 files in English and their native languages, for classrooms, our library and for access online by new refugee families. My AP students recreate social science experiments in the power of gratitude as well as those probing hidden prejudices and the willingness to hug a stranger, code their own video games, work with feeder elementary and middle schools to create writing projects, and sign up to teach lessons in class using the Japanese "Pecha Kucha" model.

Overall, I want all my students to feel down deep the words of Christopher Robin: "You're braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think."

VI. Education Issues and Trends - (two double-spaced pages)

- A. What do you consider to be the major public education issues today?
Address **one** in depth, outlining possible causes, effects and resolutions.

On the first day of school this year, I shared the following information with my AP English students:

- The U.S. Dept. of Labor estimates that today's learner will have 10 to 14 jobs by the time they're 38
- The top 10 jobs in demand in 2013 *didn't exist* in 2003
- We're currently preparing you for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet

And like any English teacher worth her salt, I asked them to reflect on this and write about it. As you might imagine, it's a little scary. More than just a gimmicky and dramatic beginning to the year, this fact flood is a way for me to position their learning within a relevant frame.

In 2014, public education is facing these same scary facts as we grapple with how to prepare our students for college and career readiness in a time when half, according to research from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, will need remediation and only 32% will graduate prepared to succeed in college. Adding to this alarm is recent government data showing the percentage of 25-34 year olds with a postsecondary degree rose only half a point from 38.8 percent to 39.3 percent. "America used to be No. 1 in the world for the percentage of adults with college degrees but has recently slid to 16th. President Obama has called for America to increase the number of degree-holders to 60 percent by the end of the decade," the U.S. D.O.E. report says.

The need to create innovative learners who, to paraphrase Google's hiring information, are team-oriented people who are great at lots of things, who can get things done by solving problems, comfortable with ambiguity, proactive, and collaborative, is critical. Unfortunately, by

(Section VI. continued - Education Issues and Trends)

one estimate, 80% of classroom study revolves around low-level factual recall with little to no opportunities to apply and transfer skills.

Graduates will face complex problems like poverty and climate change that will require them to be skilled in analysis and collaborative problem solving. Deeper learning, a term coined by the Hewlett Foundation, focuses on the key competencies of critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and self-directed learning. As I tell my students: the best way to prepare for an uncertain future is to become good at learning how to learn.

Our current assessments do a decent job of showing us what our students know, but not so much about what they can do, how they transfer skills, and collaborate. We need to shift to more portfolio-based assessments, more performance tasks like those suggested by the Understanding by Design lesson planning process, and more collaborative project-based lessons that help students hone their ability to learn and be metacognitive.

Structuring our curriculum and assessment to reflect student progress and mastery of these skills is where we should focus our time, money, and political will. Not only will this translate into more students prepared for success beyond high school, it will also help them to earn wages that will support families, and by extension, our economy.

Futurist Alvin Toffler captures this idea in a quote: In the future “illiteracy will not be defined by those who cannot read and write, but by those who cannot learn and relearn.” Shifting to deeper learning outcomes is our best hope to end the cycle of poverty that so many of my students have grown up in and which holds their neighborhoods hostage. It’s also the best hope for our democracy. The more we can graduate analytical problem-solvers who can work together, the better off we will be as a country.

VII. The Teaching Profession

A. What do you do to strengthen and improve the teaching profession?

B. What is and/or what should be the basis for accountability in the teaching profession?

After I wind up my second period English class, I grab my notebook and hurry down the hall. I try to sneak into a Socratic Circle discussion in room 204 without disrupting, or I'll ask if I can sit in on a guided reading group in room 206; sometimes I'll make it into room 210 in time to write with the writing groups. And after I wrap up co-teaching a remedial EOC class in sixth period, I'll run – if I'm going to beat the tardy bell – out to the science and math buildings. Sometimes, I even get to collaborate with students trying to word their understanding of a quadratic equation or prepare a lab report on habituation. At the end of the day, I'm back in my classroom to problem-solve with individual teachers, who might be English teachers from my department, or who might also be the choir teacher or the Latin teacher.

Many days, my work will move to the district level where I am a member of the standards team and a literacy trainer, where we collect and analyze data to determine district needs, plan training, and set curricular goals. Then, I'll move back to my campus to collaborate with my administrators, curriculum specialists, teachers, librarians and support staff. We work together to achieve district, campus and departmental goals while never losing sight of the fact that what we do affects the students inside each classroom.

My work as an instructional coach has been the most challenging role I've ever taken on, but it's also been the most satisfying work I've ever done because I love working with teachers to hone our craft of becoming model learners. My dual role as classroom teacher and instructional coach allows me to respond to teachers' needs, co-teach, model and offer follow-up support as needed. All of my coaching is delivered in the natural setting of the teachers' classrooms and with their own students. We use video to study classrooms of other teachers whose schedules don't allow in-person modeling, and I am eager to implement walk-throughs of other classes with our

(Section VII. continued - The Teaching Profession)

teachers so we can better focus our entire campus on strengthening literacy practices across all content areas.

My work as a literacy leader allows me to serve teachers from diverse backgrounds and areas as a provider of professional development. I work within my district as well as outside of it as a literacy trainer, leading three-week intensive writing institutes for K-12 teachers, as a presenter of literacy methods through my regional education support center, a presenter at state-level literacy conferences, annual Abydos Learning International literacy conferences, and as a presenter at the National Council of Teachers of English conference.

“Coaching done well,” Atul Gawande wrote, “may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance.” A coach helps teachers create a clear picture of the current reality in the classroom, which is critical for improving instruction. Therefore, the basis of teacher accountability should be practices that create that clear picture. Walk-throughs with feedback from peers, studying video of each other’s practice, data from student achievement measures and student surveys collected in a portfolio assessment much like that required for National Board Certification has been proven by research to increase teacher effectiveness and student learning.

I know that I can’t always save a broken lesson or figure out certain problems (especially if they involve math), but I can commit to learning more today than I knew yesterday and strive to create that same commitment in the teachers I’m privileged to serve. My commitment to my classroom, campus, district, region, state, and nation is to do the hard work of supporting a culture of learning as a literacy leader.

VIII. National Teacher of the Year

As a teacher of refugee students, I've been privileged to see public education through the eyes of students from countries as diverse as Burma, Somalia, Ethiopia, Iraq and Cuba. I'm thinking of a student who taught me that public schools are so much more than a building – they are our culture's brightest gift to the world.

Lar Bway was a shy teenage girl who had little formal schooling and much suffering in her native Burma. One day, we had a snowstorm that shut down school. But, Lar Bway set off, trudging toward her school in blizzard conditions, clutching a backpack full of homework. Her friends had to find her and convince her that the school was indeed closed. But how is that possible? She asked them. School was always open, like the hospital.

We are, at my school and in schools all over America, in a sense, never closed. So many teachers stay after school to talk, to allow students to show their vulnerable hearts, to help them write college applications, or just let them draw on the whiteboards because we are stable, dependable adults.

For Lar Bway, school was special. We were her beacon, her stability, and her source of inspiration, dreaming, and hope. This is the commitment that America and its schools offer all of our students: we will be here and we will help you. This is no easy promise, and that is why so many families, refugee or native born, send us their most valuable resource: their children. They trust us to teach them no matter their abilities, behaviors or financial situations.

School is the place where so many of us learned to dream. Where we began the groundwork of our futures. This is repeated in classrooms all over America. Schools and their teachers are a stabilizing force in society and a fierce promoter and protector of our democracy. Public schools have given us astronauts, presidents, musicians, scientists. And public schools have given so many of us a vision of ourselves and what we might become. They help us to find the most treasured thing any of us have: personal meaning and our contribution to the common good. Public schools must always stay open because teachers' doors stay open, saying: come in, let's learn, let's hope, let's begin dreaming.

October 27, 2014

National Teacher of the Year Committee Members:

“I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.” -- John Steinbeck

Shanna Peeples is a reflective practitioner of the art of teaching. In choosing this medium, she commits not only to her students but to the struggle inherent in the learning process. Whether it is the challenge of an Advanced Placement class or an English as a Second Language course, she researches methods that will bridge the gaps between her students' abilities and grade-level content. Willing to take risks by modifying and implementing these strategies, she continuously assesses her students' understanding through a variety of formative assessments, modifying lessons for the individual or the class. Honing her craft, developing her art, Shanna is led by a passion rarely seen in today's classroom.

Watching her teach is like watching a skilled conductor: She knows the score, yet has an ear for each musician's strength or weakness. Not only will she use a children's book to tackle a difficult concept, layering levels of difficulty to create clarity for advanced students, but she can also take a difficult passage or test prompt and provide her ESL students with a set of tools to deconstruct the text and make meaning. Few teachers have such a wide range, and that is her gift. She can process a task metacognitively and design a lesson that challenges her students at their levels of readiness. This is the true definition of rigor – having the belief that her students can gain access to difficult material through her guidance and expertise.

As teaching partners, we have team taught on many occasions: during the school year, in an experimental ESL class we designed together; during an ESL Summer Academy; as co-presenters at state conferences; and as co-presenters at district writing training. As a collaborator, she complements any partnership with her goal-oriented vision. She sees the big idea, as well as the long and short-term goals and challenges. Her expertise, gained through a dedication to the latest in professional reading and master's coursework in literacy and curriculum design, provides her lessons with research-based legitimacy. Some of my best work as a teacher has come through collaboration with my professional partner. The opportunity to work with Shanna Peeples is a master class in the art of teaching and what it truly means to be a professional educator.

Shanna also has the ability to clarify difficult concepts for her peers and model methods that improve lesson delivery across grade levels. Whether showing our staff how to modify writing strategies for varied audiences and purposes, instructing us how to write leveled questions to increase critical thinking, or presenting an implementation model for a Socratic seminar across content areas, this articulate and confident educator has gained the attention, the trust, and the respect of her peers within our school district and our state.

My forty-two years of experience in public education, all in Title I schools, have given me the perspective to assess what exceptional teaching looks like. Shanna Peeples demonstrates what a master teacher should be and do every day, often in the most challenging circumstances. Never complacent, fiercely dedicated to learning and developing her craft, this consummate professional is most deserving of the National Teacher of the Year Award.

Sincerely,



Elaine Loughlin, English teacher, Flex co-teacher, and former English Department Chair

Dear National Teacher of the Year Committee,

Below is the story of how Ms. Shanna Peeples changed my life.

It was the night before Christmas, and the darkness seemed to be closing in faster than my conscious mind could process. The desire to sleep, to give up on the college essays I was working on and let my eyes rest, was all too strong. My English teacher, Ms. Peeples, was one of the biggest reasons I was able to resist slipping into sweet sleep, away from the frightening deadlines that filled my waking hours. Over the course of the Christmas break, through email correspondence and calls, she had critiqued all my essays down to the last feeble word and encouraged me through the darkness. She sacrificed what little time off she had, precious moments with her family, just to help a student chasing his dream of a college education.

Leading young minds through the darkness of uncertainty is something Ms. Peeples does often as an AP English and English as a Second Language teacher. At a school where nearly 12.9% of the student body is ESL, it was a feat in itself that she was able to give me so much one-on-one time outside of class to discuss new ideas for my college essays only a few weeks before the Christmas break. I remember her hectic schedule well because as I worked on my essays until 6:00 p.m. nearly everyday in the school's library she would be there beside me, working away at her lesson plans and managing the students who were a part of my high school's accelerated graduation program. Despite months of switching between 2-hour blocks with ESL students whose families range from Kenyan to Cambodian – all here to pursue the "American Dream" at local meat factories – and her AP classes, she still managed to be patient and humorous. She would tell me after reading through my essays for the umpteenth time to go home and watch cute otter videos on YouTube to recollect myself before working again. Above all, though, I remember how much trust I and all her other students had in Ms. Peeples.

She seems to have an innate ability to understand where her students come from, their personal stories and cultural history, and make that a part of how she teaches and advocates for them. While writing an essay about the tutoring program I started for the at-risk students in my school's math and science departments, I would listen hear her talk about the diversity that is both a blessing and a curse to our school. The topic ranged from the cultural food her students ate to the different home lives that inevitably affected how they performed at school. More than once, Ms. Peeples has synthesized all of her work advocating for impoverished children struggling in a strange land to form powerful presentations for her peers at teacher conferences, campaigning for a change in the educational process for other ESL students. She has even changed the way AP English is taught at our struggling high school - to better prepare her students for college. No matter how large the achievement gap, the path out of poverty is one that Ms. Peeples continuously patrols, filling in the holes and guiding her students to a higher education.

Like so many of the young people she works with, I am the first in my family to attend and graduate high school. I now have a full scholarship at Harvard. My mother and father—barely able to speak English—know little of the process that my teacher guided me through. They know only that they are proud, proud to have a son who has a chance at something great. My parents probably think that their long days doing nails or hacking through meat were so that I could go to school, get good grades and then maybe, just maybe, get into a great college. But if they knew of everything that Ms. Peeples has done for me and so many of her other students, they would understand that their struggle bought me so much more. She encouraged me to realize my ambitions and make use of all my God-given skills. There is little I can do or say that will fully express how indebted I am this amazing person who has been my teacher, a second mother, and above all, a friend. Ms. Peeples helped me reach for the true American dream, and for that, I am forever grateful.

Sincerely,



Viet Tran

806-570-7614

508 Winthrop Mail Center
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Dear National Teacher of the Year Selection Committee:

Having been in the business of education for thirty-four years, I can attest that Shanna Peeples is unlike any teacher I have known. She possesses the same traits of many excellent teachers; however, she has rare qualities that truly set her apart.

The hallmark of greatness is the courage and willingness to step outside of comfort zones to face challenges ahead. Teaching is not for the faint-hearted, and Shanna forges ahead, leaving indelible and remarkable footprints behind.

Palo Duro High School is a Title I campus that proudly serves students from many cultures and backgrounds. We teach the largest refugee population in the city; in fact, Amarillo has the largest refugee population per capita in the state. Thus, we have challenges as we strive to meet the educational and socio-emotional needs of all students.

Peeples does not shy away from challenges; she embraces them as opportunities to grow and learn as a teacher, illustrating that a great teacher is first and foremost a learner. She passionately seeks to improve her craft as a teacher, challenging us to continually and collaboratively evolve as professionals. Recently, she encouraged her inquiry group to research the use of Socratic Circles, challenging them to videotape their classroom practice in order to debrief implementation through use of a safe, structured conversational protocol. This practice led her team to a deeper, more thoughtful use of Socratic Circles.

Furthermore, Shanna's colleagues seek her expertise. As a balanced literacy and Abydos trainer, she is leading the ELA department into figuring out how to utilize reading and writing workshop in a high school classroom. Under her leadership, the teachers are not afraid to take risks or fail momentarily as they try to implement this best practice...one that is easier to read about than to incorporate. Doing the right thing is harder than knowing the right thing. Peeples is also an instructional coach on our campus so that she can model and encourage inexperienced or struggling teachers. One teacher told me that he was sinking until Shanna came to his rescue.

More importantly is the impact that Shanna has in our students' lives. Shanna proves that a good teacher can teach anyone. Not only do her AP students excel in her classroom, but ESL refugees thrive under her tutelage. Shanna knows that she must facilitate learning, helping students move past plateaus and climb mountains. Some teachers want to teach the "gifted" students; Peeples believes all students have gifts. Whether she spends her Christmas break helping students apply to be Gates Millennium Scholars or whether she spends her summer assisting refugee students to write their priceless, gut-wrenching stories or whether she spends her night motivating at-risk students to complete their credits and reach dreams of graduation, Shanna brings the same enthusiasm and expertise that allows all of these students to succeed.

Knowing that "kids don't care what you know until they know that you care," Shanna works to develop positive relationships with students, often being the critical adult in their lives. She respects the different cultures of our students and genuinely cares about their personal lives. She even responded to student invitations to a Burmese New Year's, the opening of Buddhist temples, and a Somali wedding. She affords every student and family the respect they deserve. Shanna epitomizes Parker Palmer's statement that "good teaching cannot be reduced to a technique, -- good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."

I commend Shanna Peeples to you as the National Teacher of the Year. You will not find a more deserving candidate to represent the United States of America.

With warmest regards,



Sandy Whitlow
Principal, Palo Duro High School