
March 30, 2026

Dear Dr. Graff and the St. Peter School Board,

I am requesting consideration for a half-day, half-year sabbatical leave for the 2026-2027 school year. I have been given the opportunity to work as a graduate assistant to Dr. Stephanie Rollang Yoon at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Our work will center around The National Writing Project, specifically, getting southern Minnesota's site, the River Valley Writing Project established during its first year.

As a teacher, I believe in constant evolution and growth. While I have never felt the call to transition into an administrative position, I have never stopped improving my craft, exploring new methodology, and deepening my impact in the classroom. Last spring, as our ELA department began our curriculum review, we started by "bundling" the new standards. I had been working with and therefore, had "bundled" my standards several summers before our review started. Call me a nerd, but I am a lifelong learner, and am motivated by new challenges. As long as my teaching is moving forward, I feel as if I am moving forward.

No doubt this experience will benefit me, personally and professionally, but I feel as if the work I will be engaged in will also benefit the district, especially as AI continues to be a challenge and as the ELA department continues to revise curriculum based on the 2020 standards. The professional development I will help to create could definitely be of use to teachers in District #508, so this is a symbiotic opportunity. Thank you in advance for considering my proposal.

Sincerely,

Paulette Topel, English Teacher

Paulette Topel

English Department

2025-2026 Courseload: MSU Literature 110, a concurrent enrollment course (11th grade), Creative Writing (9-12th grade)

Sabbatical Leave Request Proposal

March 30, 2026

OVERVIEW

This year I am celebrating my 25th year of teaching in the district. I have never been on a sabbatical leave, but I did serve as a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) from 2017-2020. Because I have accepted a graduate assistant position at Minnesota State University, Mankato for the 2026-2027 school year, I am requesting a part time, half-year sabbatical leave.

As a graduate assistant I will work with Dr. Stephanie Rollag Yoon to establish The River Valley Writing Project (RVWP) at Minnesota State University, Mankato as it begins its first year. The RVWP is a local site of the National Writing Project, a nonprofit committed to providing teachers with professional development to improve writing outcomes for students.

The semester of leave, for me, can be flexible; I would defer to the counseling office and whatever would be easiest for them to accommodate and schedule, and what would put the least amount of pressure on my colleagues. This year, I taught four sections of MSU Literature 110 and two sections of Creative Writing. If my course load were similar, it's possible that a substitute may not be needed.

DESCRIPTION OF PREPARATION FOR LEAVE

June 2026

I will be attending the River Valley Launch event (attached). The event and the course will allow me to network with other teachers in southern Minnesota to share curriculum and instructional strategy.

I have registered for a related summer course, ENG 555: Advanced Writing Workshop. The course itself will be modeled after tenets used by the National Writing Project. As a student, I will participate in interdisciplinary writing, critical reading and thinking,

argumentative writing, library research, and rhetorics of inquiry. Not only will this course help to refine my teaching, but experiencing the learning struggle that my students experience has and will continue to make me a more empathetic teacher.

July 2026

I will attend the *Fragile Freedoms: Regional Perspectives on US WWII Confinement Sites Education Project* training in San Francisco. The River Valley Writing Project was one of ten National Writing Project sites in the United States to be selected for this opportunity. According to the National Writing Project, "This project is specifically designed to engage a new generation of teachers to model and develop creative and thought-provoking lesson plans to ensure our constitutional freedoms are protected for all." This training will be instrumental in designing professional development for teachers in southern Minnesota during the fall of 2026 (see below).

DESCRIPTION OF LEAVE

As a graduate assistant, I will be helping Dr. Stephanie Rollag Yoon establish the River Valley Writing Project as it starts its first year at MSU, Mankato, and taking graduate courses.

Courses

Fall 2026: ENG 501: Topics in Writing Studies- Digital Media Literacies

Spring 2027: TBD

Activities

I expect to gain training and experience in grant writing, something that is completely new to me.

Projects

After attending the *Fragile Freedoms: Regional Perspectives on US WWII Confinement Sites Education Project* training in July, Dr. Rollag Yoon and I will develop professional development for 20 teachers in our region. Because of our area's history with the Dakota people and our proximity to the Nicollet County Historical Society Treaty Site History Center and Fort Snelling, I imagine our professional development might be more locally positioned.

Additionally, Dr. Rollag Yoon proposed using the existing National Writing Project curriculum for narrative writing to support pre-service and beginning teachers.

The National Writing Project's predominant philosophy is teachers teaching teachers. As a teacher myself, I know my colleagues and I have been struggling with our students' use of AI. We know that AI is not going away. We also don't think that AI should replace students' ability to think and write for themselves. I do not think that this issue will be solved in a year, but I believe some solutions to this problem lie in the types of writing assessments we engage our students in and the scaffolds to instruction that we provide. I hope to utilize this time to work with my colleagues on meaningful professional development to address the issue of AI in the classroom.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF LEAVE

Personal Outcomes

This leave will allow me to gain skills and experience that will help me be more effective for my students. First of all, as a graduate assistant I will be expected to take classes. In addition to gaining new knowledge, I will be able to earn enough credits (or close to it) to have my 18 credit endorsement to teach concurrent enrollment as well as be qualified to be an adjunct faculty, if the opportunity arises. Concurrent enrollment courses also offer a benefit to the district, ultimately saving money that can be lost to our Post Secondary Education Option. Additionally, our students have benefited from the additional rigor and challenge that so many concurrent enrollment classes have provided. Ironically, it was when Advanced English 11 became MSU Literature 110 that I began the process of taking classes to meet MNSUM's requirements to be qualified to teach, that I met Dr. Rollag Yoon, which ultimately led to this opportunity.

District Outcomes

The most basic answer is to have learned more in order to improve the writing instruction in my own classroom and that of other teachers, hopefully many within our own district. Improving reading scores has been a primary focus for our district, as it should be, but writing instruction goes hand-in-hand with reading instruction. Writing of all genres should be interdisciplinary and embedded at every level. If I can support even a few teachers at a few grade levels, empowering them in their own classrooms to make our students better writers (who refrain from feeling the need for AI), I will have made a positive impact.

Fragile Freedoms: Regional Perspectives on US WWII Confinement Sites Education Project

Overview

This project, titled *Fragile Freedoms: Regional Perspectives on US WWII Confinement Sites Education Project*, was awarded to The National Japanese American Historical Society, in partnership with the National Writing Project, the National Park Service, and Japanese American community organizations. *Fragile Freedoms* seeks to increase and improve teaching about Japanese-American Confinement during World War II in grades 4-12 and will span six National Park Service Regions and 13 states. The period of performance for the overall *Fragile Freedoms* grant is September 2025 to August 2028.

The project will address the Essential Question “*How did the WWII exclusion and incarceration experiences of Japanese Americans affect their responses to the loss of their human and Constitutional rights?*”

This project is specifically designed to engage a new generation of teachers to model and develop creative and thought-provoking lesson plans to ensure our constitutional freedoms are protected for all.

As a partner in *Fragile Freedoms*, the National Writing Project will engage a set of writing project sites to take the lead on local professional development in their service area. Local sites will designate 2 project leaders who will be supported to lead workshops and classroom-based inquiry for at least 40 colleagues over the course of the grants’ period of performance. This work will be supported through a launch event in the summer 2026, two years of site grants ending in August 2028, and monthly national meetings.

A detailed overview of the NWP grant years include:

Year One (Now-August 2026): Writing project sites will send two project leaders to San Francisco for a launch event in the summer 2026. This learning experience will be led by BAWP TCs Stan Pesick and Grace Morizawa in collaboration with the NWP and SF-based National Japanese-American Historical Society.

Year Two (Sept ‘26- Aug ‘27): In September 2026, participating sites will be eligible for a \$16,000 grant from the NWP. This grant is meant to support the Year 1 leaders to design and implement a professional learning experience for 20 of their colleagues in their writing project’s service area. Regular national project leader meetings will support these local efforts; interim grant reports will be collected.

Year Three (Sept '27 - Aug '28): In September 2027, participating sites will be eligible for a second \$16,000 grant from the NWP. This grant is meant to support the sites' leaders to refine and implement the professional learning experience for 20 additional colleagues. Regular national project leader meetings will support these local efforts.

Also in the final year of the grant, local project leaders will be asked to contribute to the development of shared curricula, professional development agendas, and other materials to be disseminated across and beyond the Writing Project Network. Final grant reports will be collected.

THE MINNESOTA RIVER VALLEY WRITING PROJECT LAUNCH EVENT
HOSTED BY MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO ENGLISH DEPT

BUILDING CONNECTIONS IMAGINGING FUTURES

Join teachers from across Minnesota to:

- Write
- Connect and recharge
- Be inspired

MONDAY, JUNE 22

WHEN: 1:00 – 4:00 PM

WHERE: CSU at Minnesota State University, Mankato

REGISTER \$25/person: <https://link.mnsu.edu/buildingconnections>



GUEST SPEAKER DR. NICOLE MIRRA

Nicole Mirra, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Education and Faculty Director of the Teacher Education Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. She uses participatory design methods in classroom, community, and digital spaces to collaboratively create learning environments with teachers and youth that disrupt structures of injustice and creatively compose liberatory social futures. She previously taught secondary literacy and debate in Brooklyn, New York and Los Angeles, California, and is a proud member of the National Writing Project network.



minnesota
river valley
writing
project



MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dear Dr. Graff and the St. Peter School Board,

Recently, I've been offered an amazing professional opportunity- a graduate assistant position for the 2026-2027 school year at Minnesota State University Mankato. In order to best fulfill my obligations and commitments both in St. Peter and beyond, I would very much like to be granted a part-time, half year sabbatical for the 2026-2027 school year.

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a nonprofit group centered around improving student writing outcomes by providing support and professional development to teachers. Minnesota State University Mankato (MNSUM) will launch The River Valley Writing Project in June, when they become the official local project site for the NWP in southern Minnesota. My position as a graduate assistant will help Dr. Stephanie Rollag Yoon, who teaches preservice English teachers and other classes in the English department, to establish The River Valley Writing Project at MNSUM. What exactly this position will entail is difficult to say. At the core of the NWP's philosophy is the belief that teachers should guide their learning, so much of the professional development provided is tailored to teachers' needs. In this position, I will help plan professional development and events, including a youth writing workshop during the summer of 2027, and I will work with teachers to improve their writing instruction, which ultimately helps students. With the timing of the district in a curriculum review cycle, I am hoping I can be of service to my own department and assist teachers in the district as a whole.

As a graduate assistant, I would be expected to take college courses. This summer I will finish the last of my nine credits MSUM insisted I take to be qualified to teach Literature 110, the concurrent enrollment course I am teaching now. (I believe these credits will put me at the top of the pay scale). A complete certification is 18 credits, which I would be able to complete during the 2026-2027 school year if I were granted this sabbatical. I have found the two courses I've taken so far to be incredibly helpful in my teaching, and while the full certification will not help me financially, I believe it would benefit my future teaching, and therefore my future students. Having some time off to complete these courses would be incredibly helpful and appreciated.

I have worked in the St. Peter School District since 2001, when Mrs. Engeldinger went on maternity leave. What was only supposed to be a year turned into a lifetime, and I couldn't feel more blessed to be a part of this district. I love my job, my colleagues, and my students. And I also love learning. I am a hard worker and will uphold all of my responsibilities and commitments. A short sabbatical will really help me be my best while I have this opportunity to expand my professional learning. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Paulette Topel
ptopel@stpeterschools.org
507.995.6816



College of Humanities & Social Sciences
English Department
230 Armstrong Hall, Mankato MN 56001
507.389.2117 | 800.627.3529 or 711 (MRS/TTY)
mnsu.edu

March 24, 2026

Dr. Jon Graff
Superintendent
Saint Peter Public Schools

Dear Dr. Graff,

It is my pleasure to write a letter of endorsement for Paulette Topel to receive a sabbatical for the 2026-2027 school year. I have been fortunate to work with Paulette as her faculty advisor for Concurrent Enrollment courses at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and as a co-presenter at the National Council of Teachers of English conference. Paulette's strong teaching and enthusiasm for learning make her the ideal teacher-leader to help us shape the [Minnesota River Valley Writing Project](#), housed at MSU, Mankato, over the next year.

During the 2026-2027 school year, Paulette will serve as the Graduate Assistant for the Minnesota River Valley Writing Project (MRVWP). In this capacity, she will attend trainings from the [National Writing Project](#) on the teaching of writing across grade-levels and content areas. From there, she will help develop and implement professional development for K12 teachers on the teaching of writing. The National Writing Project emphasizes the importance of teachers teaching teachers, which makes Paulette an ideal person for this role. After her experience with the MRVWP, Paulette will be able to share her new knowledge with colleagues and the students she teaches in St. Peter. Additionally, she will work on grants, which have the potential to provide funding and other professional development opportunities for herself and her colleagues.

While Paulette is serving in this role, she will also continue her studies in the MA in English Education program. She will take courses around digital and media literacies, teaching college-level literature, and research around English Education. This course work will benefit her own teaching, as she continues to learn new strategies and curriculum, which she can bring back to her colleagues and students.

It is an honor to have the opportunity to work with Paulette. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Stephanie Rollag Yoon'.

Stephanie Rollag Yoon, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English Education
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Minnesota State University, Mankato
Email: stephanie.rollag@mnsu.edu
Phone: 612-210-8284

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Jennifer Maldonado, and I am an English teacher and PLC Leader at St Peter High School. I am writing a strong endorsement for my English colleague Paulette Topel's request for a part-time sabbatical at Minnesota State University, Mankato, working on professional development in the area of writing. I believe her sabbatical will have numerous benefits for the St Peter School District.

If you have met Paulette, you know that she has a passion for lifelong learning. She is constantly discussing, creating, and improving curriculum and pedagogy. This is also evidenced by her years as an Instructional Coach and numerous presentations at conferences and for staff development in our own district. This opportunity at MNSU Mankato will allow her to deepen her expertise in writing pedagogy, ultimately enhancing the quality of instruction she provides to her students.

In addition, Paulette's work will support the English department at the high school as she develops new units aligned with current writing standards. During her sabbatical she will be putting together professional development for teachers with a writing focus. As we develop our new standards and units in many types of writing, it would be extremely helpful to have Paulette's knowledge and utilization of her professional development for our department.

Beyond her own classroom and department, Paulette's impact has the potential to reach educators across the district. By sharing the professional development she creates on a broader scale, she can support teachers in multiple content areas in integrating effective writing instruction into their courses. I believe that granting her sabbatical would benefit students, our English department, and teachers throughout our district. Her sabbatical would be helpful to many.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Maldonado

jmaldonado@stpeterschools.org

651-283-5844