



Los Angeles County
TEACHERS
of the **YEAR**

Forty-Five Years of Honoring
Teaching Achievement
2026-27



**Los Angeles County
Office of Education**

In Honor of Teaching Achievement



Los Angeles County
TEACHERS
of the **YEAR**
2026-27

Agenda

10 a.m.	Arrival and Check-In / Open Reception
11 a.m.	Opening Ceremony: Elizabeth Graswich, Ed.D., Executive Director of Public Affairs and Communications, LACOE Welcoming: Debra Duardo, M.S.W., Ed.D., Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools Student Carolina Marinovich, Senior at La Cañada High School Masters of Ceremonies: Ray A. Castillo Official In-Arena Host for the Los Angeles Lakers Game Day Host for the Los Angeles Rams In-Stadium Host for the FIFA World Cup 2026 Los Angeles
11:10 a.m.	California TOY Speeches: Rene Romero, Covina-Valley Unified School District Heather Povinelli, Ed.D., Monrovia Unified School District
11:20 a.m.	Presentation of the 16 County Teachers of the Year
Noon	Lunch
1 p.m.	Presentation of the 56 District Teachers of the Year
1:45 p.m.	Door Prizes
2 p.m.	Adjourn

Announcement and Awards Luncheon
Friday, September 25, 2026
Hilton Universal City and Towers

The 2026-27 Teachers of the Year are outstanding ambassadors for education. By word and by example, they have inspired many young people to consider teaching as a career. For this we thank them.

An Official Publication



9300 Imperial Highway,
Downey, California 90242-2890

Debra Duardo, M.S.W., Ed.D., Superintendent

Los Angeles County Board of Education
Theresa Montañó, Ed.D., President
Yvonne Chan, Ed.D., Vice President
Michele Breslauer, Esq., CWLS
Laura Cantú, Ed.D.
James Cross
Margaret Granado
Stanley L. Johnson, Jr., Ph.D.

Acknowledgments

Participants

The Los Angeles County Office of Education and the Los Angeles County Board of Education wish to extend their thanks and gratitude to all the school districts that took part in this year’s Teachers of the Year program.

We applaud those in the districts — administrators, coworkers, students and parents — who took the time to write letters in support of their district’s Teacher of the Year.

Finally, we congratulate every 2026-27 Teacher of the Year. They have all gone above and beyond in compiling information and writing at length about their lives and careers, their hopes and dreams and their students. Without their considerable effort in the nominating process, the Teachers of the Year program would not be possible.



LACOE Signature Fund @GLAEF
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The Teacher of the Year Program

The Teachers of the Year program is the nation’s oldest and most prestigious recognition program to focus public attention on excellence in teaching. The California Teachers of the Year program, which began in 1972, is part of the National Teacher of the Year program, sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers in partnership with Scholastic, Inc.

District – County

The process begins at the school level. Among teachers nominated or chosen by their colleagues at various schools, one is selected to represent their school district in the Los Angeles County Teachers of the Year program, sponsored by the L.A. County Office of Education. (Because Los Angeles USD is a larger district, it is allowed more than one selection.) This year, the county has 72 district-level Teacher of the Year representatives.

County – State

Each county in California is invited to submit the name(s) of its Teacher(s) of the Year to the California Department of Education (CDE) for the California Teachers of the Year competition. The state annually receives 50-60 nominations — including the 16 that are submitted by Los Angeles County because of its large population. (Los Angeles County has approximately 22%* of the state’s K-12 enrollment.)

State – National

Although a CDE selection committee selects five of the state’s finest teachers to be California Teachers of the Year, the national program permits each state to submit only one name for consideration as National Teacher of the Year.

The Flag of Learning and Liberty



The Flag of Learning and Liberty’s stylized flame with red, blue and gold elements represents learning, liberty and the foundations of education: high expectations, effective teaching, responsible families and involved communities.

The flag was developed in the public interest by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) in cooperation with the Southland Corporation.

Teacher Christa McAuliffe carried 200 Flags of Learning and Liberty aboard the Challenger space shuttle in 1986. One of the flags recovered by NASA was presented to the NSPRA in 1987.

“One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world.” – Malala Yousafzai

*DataQuest 2025-26 Enrollment Statewide 5,731,260 L. A. County 1,272,816

California Teachers of the Year

Since our program began in 1983, 54 Los Angeles County teachers have gone on to be selected as California Teachers of the Year.

1985	Evaline Khayat Kruse, LAUSD	2012	Rebecca Mieliwocki, Burbank USD <i>(National Teacher of the Year)</i>
1987	Shirley Rosenkranz, Temple City USD		Florence Avognon, LACOE
1988	Lorna Mae Nagata, Alhambra SD		Ken LaVigne, Whittier UHSD
1993	Edward Riegler, Alhambra SD	2013	Veronica Marquez, LAUSD
	Patricia Baltz, Arcadia USD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>	2014	Michael Hayden, Manhattan Beach USD
1994	Beth Cassford, Little Lake City SD	2015	Lovelyn Marquez-Prueher, LAUSD
1995	Richard Chapleau, Antelope Valley UHSD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>		Maggie Mabery, Manhattan Beach USD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>
	Rhoda Paulette Coleman, Lennox SD	2016	Daniel Jocz, LAUSD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>
1996	Sandy Fleishman, Las Virgenes USD	2017	Isela Lieber, LAUSD
	Cedric Anderson, LACOE	2018	Erin Oxhorn-Gilpin, Castaic Union SD
	Javier Gonzalez, Whittier UHSD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>		Kirsten Farrell, LAUSD
1997	Carole Firestone, Las Virgenes USD	2019	Kimberlee Holz, Manhattan Beach USD
1998	Linwood C. Thompson, Bellflower USD		Michael Henges, Redondo Beach USD
1999	Ingrid Boydston, Saugus Union SD	2021	Jim Klipfel, William S. Hart UHSD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>
2000	Marilyn Whirry, Manhattan Beach USD <i>(National Teacher of the Year)</i>	2022	Virginia Vasquez, Alhambra USD
2001	Adele Prince, Glendora USD	2023	Catherine Borek, Compton USD
2002	Mary Eileen Geer, West Covina USD		Bridgette Donald-Blue, LAUSD
2004	Paul McLaughlin, Walnut Valley USD		Jason Torres-Rangel, LAUSD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>
2005	Kim Labinger, Glendale USD	2024	Hannah Rodriguez, Duarte USD
2006	Kelly Jean Hanock, LAUSD		Drew Lewis, LAUSD
	Denis Cruz, Whittier City Elementary SD		Casey Cuny, William S. Hart UHSD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>
2007	Alan Sitomer, Lynwood USD	2025	Nicholas Westfall, LAUSD
	Dawna Countryman, Saugus Union SD		Arby Jean Wolkov, LAUSD
	Helen Papadopoulos, Walnut Valley USD		Matthew Winheim, Palmdale SD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>
2008	Lewis Chappellear, LAUSD <i>(State National Nominee)</i>	2026	Rene Romero, Covina-Valley USD
	Michael Allen Long, South Whittier SD		Heather Povinelli, Monrovia USD
2009	Jose Navarro IV, LAUSD		
2011	Beverly Gonzalez, Baldwin Park USD		



Debra Duardo, M.S.W., Ed.D.
Los Angeles County
Superintendent of Schools

Welcome to the 2026 Los Angeles County Teachers of the Year Awards Luncheon!

It is a true privilege to be with you today as we celebrate the heart and soul of education, our extraordinary teachers. This event is a tribute to the passion, creativity, resilience and dedication that educators across Los Angeles County bring to their classrooms and education communities each and every day.

As the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools, I am honored to host this event recognizing the profound impact our teachers have on the lives of our students. This year’s celebration is especially meaningful as we mark the 45th anniversary of the Los Angeles County Teachers of the Year Program, a proud tradition honoring educational excellence and the remarkable educators who inspire generations of learners. Today, we celebrate that enduring legacy and the teachers who carry it forward with passion, purpose and heart, expressing our deepest gratitude for the lasting difference they make in students’ lives every day.

Each Teacher of the Year nominee represents the very best of our profession. They are innovators, mentors, advocates and leaders who go above and beyond to ensure every student feels valued, supported and empowered to reach their full potential. Through their dedication, they help shape students’ academic achievement, confidence, character and hope for the future.

Today, we proudly shine a spotlight on 16 exceptional educators who have earned the distinction of being named Los Angeles County Teachers of the Year. Their accomplishments reflect the excellence found in classrooms throughout our County, and we wish them continued success as they advance to the California Teacher of the Year competition.

Congratulations to each of you. Your passion transforms lives, strengthens communities, inspires the next generation and helps our students soar.

Debra Duardo, M.S.W., Ed.D.
Superintendent



Theresa Montañó, Ed.D.
Board President
Los Angeles County Board of Education

As I write this expression of appreciation for your dedication as teachers, I am reminded of my own first day in the classroom. I felt hope, idealism and a profound sense of responsibility as I entered room 113 at Stevenson Junior High School in East Los Angeles. As a proud graduate of Los Angeles public schools, I aspired to create an environment where students could learn, succeed and become proactive members of society. I also hoped to help others like me earn the esteemed title of *la maestra*, a term of deep cultural respect and significance. Today, the term *maestro/a/x* encompasses so much more. You serve as counselors, social workers, friends, confidants, nurses and coaches.

Paulo Freire stated, **“education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage.”** This perspective frames teaching as both a professional responsibility and a deeply personal, ethical and transformative endeavor. In a world where socioeconomic status and educational attainment often determine life outcomes, and where students face persistent inequities, injustices and significant academic pressures, you encourage them to think critically, pursue educational opportunities and develop a sense of empowerment. Your daily efforts sustain hope in public education, so that ultimately all children — regardless of family circumstances, place of residence, birthplace, appearance, identity or language — have the right to an education that enables them to reach their full potential.

Within the Mexican community, addressing someone as *maestra* or *maestro* is a cultural symbol of respect, expertise and recognition of professionalism. Throughout our lives, we encounter many teachers, but only a few become true *maestros*, *maestras* or *maestrxs*. Thank you for embodying these roles. Today, we honor and thank you for inspiring minds, nurturing hearts and educating the next generation.

Theresa Montañó, Ed.D.
Board President
Los Angeles County Board of Education



A Message from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Welcome to the 45th annual Los Angeles County Office of Education Teachers of the Year Awards! It is my sincere pleasure to offer my congratulations to each of the honorees and celebrate the remarkable work they do every day on behalf of our students.

These honorees represent the very best of the teaching profession. Through their dedication, compassion and commitment to their students, they provide more than a high-quality education — they inspire young people to believe in themselves and reach their full potential. Their daily commitment makes a lasting difference in the lives of students, families and communities.

This is a challenging time in education, and our teachers continue to meet those challenges with remarkable resilience. They adapt, persevere and continue to put students first. Today, we celebrate these extraordinary educators for the dedication, strength and care they bring to their classrooms and school communities every day.

As we celebrate these exceptional teachers, we should also recognize the importance of supporting and strengthening the teaching profession. We need talented, caring people to see education as a rewarding and meaningful career. I encourage all of us to share the stories of educators like today’s honorees and help inspire the next generation of teachers to join this important work.

I hope you enjoy this opportunity to celebrate your accomplishments, connect with fellow educators, and take pride in the difference you are making across Los Angeles County. Tonight, we celebrate you — and we thank you for all that you do to help our students learn, grow and thrive.

Sincerely,
Tony Thurmond
State Superintendent of Public Instruction





Travis Arroyo
Alhambra Unified School District
LIFT (Learning Independence for Transition) – Special Education

Years Teaching: 13

An early experience of working with an energetic 11-year-old boy with autism became a major turning point in Travis' teaching life. It gave him so much joy and fulfillment that he at once began researching special education credentialing programs.

Quote of Note:

A district program administrator shared, "Mr. Arroyo developed an onsite gym that provides access to many kinds of exercise to students of all abilities on campus."



Heidi VanKooten
Burbank Unified School District
Luther Burbank Middle School – Eighth Grade: Social Science

Years Teaching: 15

A passion for history and child advocacy led Heidi to choose teaching over law school. As a middle school social science teacher, she brings history to life through creative lessons, including having students write and perform skits called "The Real Housewives of the Middle Ages" to explore the evolving role of women in 16th-century Europe.

Quote of Note:

A student shared, "More than once I have found myself looking for documentaries and historical reenactments that Mrs. VanKooten has recommended to the class."



Linda Lai
Centinela Valley Union High School District
R.K. Loyde Continuation High School – 12th Grade: English, Career Planning

Years Teaching: 23

When Linda realized that many students viewed academic struggles as personal failures, it transformed her approach to teaching. Since then, she has dedicated her career to creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel seen, valued and embrace their greatness.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, "Ms. Lai not only teaches English, she empowers students to find their voice, believe in themselves and envision a bright future."



Gagik Galfayan
Glendale Unified School District
Woodrow Wilson Middle School – 7th-8th Grades: History, Yearbook

Years Teaching: 13

Gagik assigns oral history projects to help his students connect history to their own lives. As part of the assignment, students interview an individual in their family or community about their life experiences. These history lessons often become a personal encounter with the past.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, "Mr. Galfayan constantly creates immersive learning experiences that make history come alive with a lasting impact."



Lauren Romero-Bush
Lawndale School District
Lucille Smith Elementary School – Transitional Kindergarten (TK): Multiple Subjects

Years Teaching: 24

What began as a college course in child development became a lifelong calling for Lauren. Since discovering her passion for teaching in a kindergarten classroom, she has dedicated her career to empowering students to see themselves as capable, important and worthy.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, "Lauren's classroom is designed for playful learning. There are problems to solve, materials to manipulate, books to write, stories to tell."



Henree Haitkin
Los Angeles Unified School District
Luther Burbank Middle School Arts/Tech/Community and Police Academy Magnets – 6th-8th Grades: Physical Education

Years Teaching: 10

With her principal's blessing, Henree introduced nontraditional lifestyle activities into her PE classes. She started with yoga, then expanded to skateboarding, cycling, pickleball and combatives. The result has helped athletes and nonathletes alike.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, "I shadowed Henree during an eighth-grade skateboarding lesson and marveled at the way she broke down complex skills into accessible, detailed steps."



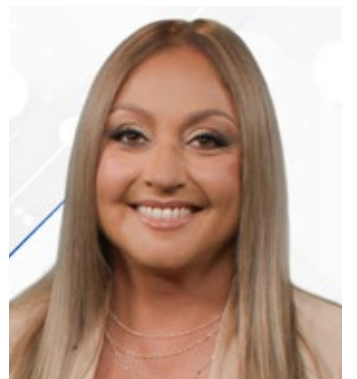
Latrese Martinez
Los Angeles Unified School District
Wilmington Park Elementary School – Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 34

When Latrese was little, she would sit her younger siblings down and teach them their colors and shapes. Later, in kindergarten, she was the only black child. That indelible memory led her to found an African American Girls Club in her current school.

Quote of Note:

A principal shared, "Latrese is the kind of educator who raises the bar for the entire school community."



Kareli Rodriguez
Los Angeles Unified School District
Stoner Avenue Elementary School – Fifth Grade: Dual Language

Years Teaching: 17

As a proud Mexican immigrant, Kareli strives to be the teacher her fifth-grade dual-language students need – someone who believes in them and challenges them, reminding them they are capable of far more than the world may expect of them.

Quote of Note:

A former student-teacher shared, "From the moment I stepped into her dual language kindergarten classroom, I was inspired by her passion for education."



Kathleen Thomas Butiu

Lynwood Unified School District

Marco Antonio Firebaugh High School – AP English Literature, Theatre and Advanced Theatre

Years Teaching: 20

Kathleen recalls with pride watching one of her theater students, who struggled with social interaction, perform confidently at a local arts festival. It showed her what is possible when students are given space to develop into their own “main character.”

Quote of Note:

A former student shared, “Ms. Thomas’ class taught us that literacy is not simply the ability to read and write, but to analyze the world around us.”



Julie Wright

Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District

Gardenhill Elementary School – Third Grade

Years Teaching: 29

Growing up in a family of educators, Julie learned early that teaching is more than a profession, it is a calling. Inspired by a beloved aunt and her own experiences tutoring elementary students in college, she has dedicated her career to creating classroom communities rooted in kindness and belonging.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “In the 20 years of our professional association, Mrs. Wright has been the most optimistic, hardworking, energetic teacher I’ve ever worked with.”



John Buda

Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District

Palos Verdes Peninsula High School – 8th-12th Grades: Math, Algebra 2 and Algebra 2 Honors

Years Teaching: 8

As a child, John would play teacher to stuffed animals. Before long, his toys would be replaced by two younger sisters. In high school he became a peer tutor. And for the last eight years he’s had a dream job, teaching math at his own high school alma mater.

Quote of Note:

A former colleague and administrator shared, “John is one of the few teachers who is both beloved on campus and has high expectations for his students.”



Lindsey Glick

Redondo Beach Unified School District

Adams Middle School – 6th-8th Grades: Special Day Class: English and Social Studies, Athletic Director

Years Teaching: 15

Lindsey comes to work every day wanting to give her special needs students what they deserve – a place where they are valued, challenged, and celebrated for exactly who they are. Their progress, even their tougher days, inspire her more than she can say.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Ms. Glick goes above and beyond in supporting families – offering guidance, reassurance, and practical strategies during challenging times.”



Deborah Fleming

Rosemead School District

Encinita Elementary School – Second Grade: English, Dual Language – Mandarin Immersion

Years Teaching: 29

After nearly 30 years in the classroom, Deborah’s philosophy of teaching has evolved, with new strategies and approaches. What hasn’t changed is the most important part of her personal mission statement – to show students that she truly cares about them.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “Whenever Deborah is asked to take on a district-level challenge, she goes all-in with a positive energy that elevates everyone around her.”

Scott Barton

San Marino Unified School District

San Marino High School – 10th-12th Grades: AP Physics, AP World History

Years Teaching: 21

Scott came to education after successful careers in engineering and marketing. But it was experience in coaching youth sports that showed him he liked working with kids. Even after two decades in the classroom he’s still excited about his “third career.”

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “What sets Scott apart is his remarkable ability to engage students while maintaining an exceptionally high level of academic rigor.”



Jennifer Velez Simon

South Pasadena Unified School District

Arroyo Vista Elementary School – Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 10

After spending 12 years in the entertainment industry, Jennifer followed her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher. Her own struggles as a student inspire her to help children recognize that their strengths and potential matter far more than their challenges.

Quote of Note:

A parent shared, “From the very beginning, Mrs. Simon created a classroom where my daughter felt safe, valued and genuinely excited to learn.”



Amber Feldman

William S. Hart Union High School District

Saugus High School – 11th-12th Grades: U.S. History, AP Psychology

Years Teaching: 12

Although she grew up in a family of educators, Amber spent years trying to avoid becoming a teacher herself. After exploring other careers, she discovered that her true passion was helping others learn and grow, leading her to a career dedicated to inspiring students to believe in their own potential.

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “Amber sees the unique potential in every student who walks through her door and works tirelessly to help them achieve it.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

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**Kari Owens**

Acton-Agua Dulce Unified School District

Vasquez High School – 9th-12th Grades: English, Honors English, AP Literature and Composition

Years Teaching: 20

Volunteering at a local elementary school ignited Kari's passion for teaching, prompting her to switch careers. She loves hearing from former students about their academic and personal successes because they are aware that she has high expectations for their futures.

Quote of Note:

A former student shared, "Every student who passes through Ms. Owens' classroom doors becomes 'one of her kids,' a title that reveals how deeply she cares about them."

**Gavin McElroy**

Antelope Valley Union High School District

R. Rex Parris High School – 11th-12th Grades: English, Ethnic Studies, College and Career Preparation

Years Teaching: 26

Gavin has taught the full range of high school courses – from support classes to AP. In his classroom he strives to create an environment where students are seen and heard, where their ideas matter and they can practice the skills needed beyond high school.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, "Gavin works to give students tools that stick: how to organize their thinking, advocate for themselves and engage in real conversations."

**Kevin Sherrill**

Arcadia Unified School District

Arcadia High School – Marching and Concert Band, Color Guard

Years Teaching: 26

A musician at heart, Kevin never intended to become a teacher. Yet each opportunity to work with students reinforced his love of helping others learn, ultimately leading him from engineering to a career inspiring young musicians to achieve more than they thought possible.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, "Whether students are highly accomplished or beginners, Kevin looks for the best way to address their needs and help them improve at every level."

**Stacy Muñoz**

Azusa Unified School District

Magnolia Elementary School – Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 33

"Teaching asks a lot of us," Stacy writes, "but gives back even more." For her, it is about the quiet moments in the classroom, the look on a child's face when they finally understand something they once thought impossible. Or the laughter they share.

Quote of Note:

A parent shared, "Mrs. Muñoz has shown concern for my family and remembers them, and offers advice to parents to inspire learning at home."

Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Kris Jensen
Baldwin Park Unified School District
Sierra Vista High School – Physical Education 1 and 2, Weight Training

Years Teaching: 26

With more than a quarter-century in the classroom, Kris believes teachers need to be versatile. He writes, “We have to serve multiple roles as a mentor, coach, counselor, educator and trusted adult all in the same day. We have to be so much for so many.”

Quote of Note:
A colleague shared, “One of Kris’ accomplishments was creating an Athletic Intervention Class designed to provide academic and behavioral support for student athletes.”



Manuel Israel Gutierrez
Bassett Unified School District
Bassett High School – Music: Choir, Band, AP Music Theory

Years Teaching: 18

One of Manuel’s favorite parts of his teaching career is seeing former students return to help his band program. It reminds him that music education is not just about performing. It’s about building a community that students still care about after they graduate.

Quote of Note:
An administrator shared, “I’m impressed by Mr. Gutierrez’ work ethic. I live across the street from Bassett and hear the band practicing late into the evening year-round.”



Sjondrala Hill
Bellflower Unified School District
Ernie Pyle Elementary School – Sixth Grade

Years Teaching: 30

The values Sjondrala used to raise her own children – honesty, integrity, accountability, merit and respect – are the same ones she requires in her classroom. Additionally, she strives to ensure her sixth-graders feel safe to try, to fail, to ask questions and to relax.

Quote of Note:
Her principal shared, “Sjondrala’s impact is evident not only in student performance but in the confidence and resilience her students carry with them long after they leave her classroom.”



Ellen Kwon
Beverly Hills Unified School District
Horace Mann Elementary School – Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 21

Ellen credits inspiring teachers for influencing her own career decision: an English teacher who made words come alive, a music teacher who was instrumental in helping her find her own voice and a chemistry teacher who gave her academic confidence.

Quote of Note:
A former student shared, “Thanks to Ms. Kwon, a group of us got to watch ‘High School Musical 2’ at the El Capitan Theatre, an experience that made us feel special.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Amanda Horner
Castaic Union School District
Castaic Middle School – 7th-8th Grades: Accelerated Math

Years Teaching: 13

Amanda wanted her math students to have a home away from home. “Like giving them a place to join a club,” she says, “with incentives and rewards so they’ll want to make good choices.” Her solution? She started a student-of-the-month program.

Quote of Note:
A former student shared, “Ms. Horner told me I had a gift for writing. That was a real turning point for me, the first time I saw myself as more than who I thought I was.”



Katherine Hertenstein
Claremont Unified School District
El Roble Intermediate School – 7th-8th Grades: English Language Arts, AVID, English Learner Support

Years Teaching: 34

Katherine practices a teaching style she calls “structure with compassion.” Students thrive when expectations are clear, support is consistent and relationships are strong. She wants them to leave her classroom knowing not only what to learn, but how.

Quote of Note:
A colleague shared, “As a middle school AVID coordinator, Katherine strives to build collaboration among teachers and create a strong college-going culture on campus.”



Jerry Sambrana-Potter
Compton Unified School District
Jefferson Elementary School – Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 32

A kind and understanding third-grade teacher greatly impressed Jerry with the important role a teacher plays in shaping a child’s future. From that moment forward, she knew she wanted to become exactly that kind of positive influence-maker in children’s lives.

Quote of Note:
A former student shared, “Throughout my time in her class, Ms. Sambrana-Potter supported me during both my highest achievements and my hardest struggles.”



Socorro Hernandez
Covina-Valley Unified School District
Manzanita Elementary School – 4th-5th Grades: Dual Language

Years Teaching: 12

As a child, Socorro loved bringing home her textbooks so she could play school and teach others what she had learned. As a bilingual educator and former English learner, she now creates welcoming spaces where students build confidence, embrace challenges and discover the joy of learning in two languages.

Quote of Note:
An administrator shared, “Through her classroom practices, Mrs. Hernandez’s students develop confidence in both languages and pride in their identities and culture.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Zaida Martinez

Culver City Unified School District
El Marino Elementary School – Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 43

Growing up in Colombia and later teaching in both the United States and abroad, Zaida discovered the transformative power of bilingual education. For more than three decades, she has dedicated her career to helping students embrace their languages, cultures and strengths while developing the confidence to succeed.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Zaida’s greatest accomplishment are the students she has touched. Their growth, achievements and confidence are the measure of her success.”



Abigail Jovel

Downey Unified School District
Carpenter Elementary School – Fifth Grade: Dual Language, International Baccalaureate

Years Teaching: 12

For Abigail as a Latina educator, teaching dual language classes was a dream job, especially at the elementary school she had attended and where the seed was planted for her career. The cherry on top was having her own children visit her classroom.

Quote of Note:

A parent shared, “Ms. Jovel’s dedication and unwavering support have made a profound difference in my son’s academic growth and personal development.”



Linda Alfred

Duarte Unified School District
Duarte High School – AP Literature and Composition

Years Teaching: 19

As the daughter of an African American father who came of age in the segregated South and a Thai immigrant mother, Linda hopes to serve as a visible reminder that higher education is attainable for every student, regardless of their background.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “The gender equality club Ms. Alfred advises raised funds for hundreds of hygiene kits that were distributed to people who were unhoused.”



Jasmine Ingram

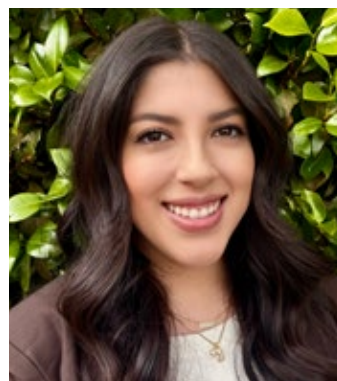
East Whittier City School District
STEP/Hillview Middle School – School Psychologist

Years Teaching: 8

Jasmine is proud of the relationships she has built throughout her district. One of the most meaningful forms of recognition is knowing that students, families and staff have come to view her as someone whose support is trusted, valued and effective.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “Ms. Ingram strives to ensure that students, particularly those with the greatest needs, are met with advocacy and compassion.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Grace Castillo

El Monte City School District
Durfee-Thompson Elementary School – TK-3rd Grades: Orthopedic Impairment

Years Teaching: 16

Grace’s work as an Orthopedic Impairment teacher centers on helping students develop communication skills through assistive technology. Watching them express a thought, preference or feeling for the first time is one of her greatest rewards.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “I have watched Ms. Castillo mentor and collaborate with staff on how to advocate for inclusive practices districtwide.”



Jorane Barton

El Monte Union High School District
Fernando R. Ledesma High School – 9th-10th Grades: English

Years Teaching: 19

Jorane, who comes from a family of hardworking educators, learned early that classroom teaching is a wonderful career for people who are creative, enjoy working with youth and who are able to embrace all those early mornings.

Quote of Note:

A fellow teacher shared, “Jorane endeavors to make her lessons fun for students, so they don’t feel like they are working while they learn.”



Aracely Valenzuela

El Rancho Unified School District
Rivera Middle School – 7th-8th Grades: Spanish and Dual Language Arts

Years Teaching: 33

Aracely’s plan was to work on behalf of children and families as an attorney. But a critical staffing need in her school district persuaded her to accept an emergency teaching credential. Three decades later she’s still working for children and families.

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “For the past seven years, Ms. Valenzuela has served as district mentor guiding new teachers as they begin their own journeys in education.”



Elaine Tamura

Garvey School District
Richard Garvey Intermediate School – Eighth Grade: Math

Years Teaching: 28

Elaine knows that some of her math students will struggle, while others need more challenging tasks. By encouraging each group but offering differentiated instruction, educators can provide equitable support to meet the needs of all students.

Quote of Note:

A former student shared, “Mrs. Tamura truly wants every student to succeed and works hard every day to make a positive difference in their lives.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Katlyn Wagner

Glendora Unified School District
Cullen Elementary School – Transitional Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 12

During literacy block, Katlyn’s TK classroom comes alive with movement, music and delighted laughter. Children learn letters and sounds through songs, visuals and kinesthetic movements that help make learning memorable and engaging.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “Educators across our district regularly visit Katlyn’s classroom to observe her innovative practice, student-centered instruction and classroom design.”



Kristen Weir

Hacienda La Puente Unified School District
Wing Lane Elementary School – Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 29

Education was not part of Kristen’s original career plan. She dreamed of becoming an FBI agent and later considered a career as a child psychologist. In college, she took a job as a substitute teacher, discovered a passion for working with students and found her path in education.

Quote of Note:

A PTA parent shared, “Mrs. Weir made a lasting impact on my child and our family. Her influence remains just as meaningful today as it was during those formative years.”



Kimberly Burrows

Hawthorne School District
Zela Davis Elementary School – Second Grade

Years Teaching: 27

Kim credits the dedication and encouragement of several inspiring teachers in her educational journey for motivating her to pursue a career in teaching. She is committed to growing as an educator while helping her students reach their full potential.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Ms. Burrows organized our school’s first STEAM Night, which brought together students, families and staff for hands-on science and art activities.”



Maygan Orr

Inglewood Unified School District
Frank D. Parent Elementary School – TK-8th Grades: Resource Specialist

Years Teaching: 23

More than 20 years as a resource teacher have taught Maygan that every student’s path to success is different. She believes that when teens gain confidence in themselves, they are better positioned to reach their academic potential.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Ms. Orr possesses a high level of skill, knowledge and professionalism in her roles as a special education teacher and department lead.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Jill Zander

Keppel Union School District
Lake Los Angeles Elementary School – Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 29

After graduation, Jill wanted to teach right away and move out of the North Dakota cold. Her job at Lake L.A. Elementary in Palmdale fulfilled both desires. She loved the weather, the intimacy of the community and the wonderful people she worked with.

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “Ms. Zander truly walks the talk when it comes to building positive relationships and modeling kindness, empathy and respect.”



Juan Manuel Nunez

La Cañada Unified School District
La Cañada High School – 9th-10th Grades: Math

Years Teaching: 18

Believing that great teachers can change lives, Juan became an educator to give students the same encouragement, kindness and support he once received. His daily reward is being able to make positive contributions to the lives of young people.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Juan’s extracurricular contributions are abundant including advising clubs, before-school, lunch and after-school tutoring, and homework help sessions.”



Jamie Salcedo

Lancaster School District
Monte Vista Elementary School – Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 24

Jamie particularly enjoys mentoring student teachers. Her classroom is available to new teachers throughout the district to observe how she manages and teaches her students. This allows her to have an impact on student success far beyond her classroom.

Quote of Note:

A principal shared, “One of Jamie’s greatest strengths is her connection with families. In fact, families frequently request her for younger siblings.”



Kristen Dizon

Las Virgenes Unified School District
Agoura High School – 10th-12th Grades: Career and Technical Education, Life Sciences

Years Teaching: 13

For Kristen, teaching is about inspiring others, showing them their worth and proving to them that they can do great things. She wants every one of her students to know they have a voice in their education and can accomplish anything they set their minds to.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “You walk away from a conversation with Kristen feeling better about yourself as an educator and the job you are doing for your students.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Renee Tiedemann Maravel

Lennox School District
Lennox Middle School – 6th-8th Grades: Physical Education and Dance

Years Teaching: 34

Renee was recognized as Teacher of the Year by the National Pacific Islander Educator Network, where she has mentored and lectured students from Polynesian communities for more than 24 years. Her classroom motto is “Perseverance is the key to success.”

Quote of Note:

A fellow teacher shared, “Renee created an annual districtwide Ballroom Bonanza event featuring all of our elementary schools and Lennox Middle School.”



Gregory Scott Gunderson

Little Lake City School District
Lakeside Middle School – 6th-8th Grades: World History, U.S. History

Years Teaching: 21

For Greg, an important part of teaching middle-schoolers about World and U.S. history is to make ongoing reading growth a priority in his classroom. This essential skill, he believes, gives them the confidence they need to become who they were meant to be.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Greg is a dynamo. Besides taking our eighth-graders on their annual Washington, D.C. trip, he teaches an after-school guitar club and started our esports team.”



Denise Ramirez Anguiano

Long Beach Unified School District
Whittier Elementary School – Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 10

One of the greatest teaching rewards for Denise are the magical moments when students realize they are capable of more than they have been led to believe. After such moments, she often sees them discover a new identity, new strengths and voices.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “As a former English learner and daughter of immigrants, Denise brings lived experience that deepens her connection to students and families.”



Giovanni Boskovich

Los Angeles County Office of Education
Los Angeles County High School for the Arts – 12th Grade: English, AP Literature and Composition

Years Teaching: 17

A high school English teacher, who became a lifelong friend and confidant, pulled Giovanni aside one day to tell him she saw a certain potential in him that he was unaware of. This timely intervention motivated him to become a lifelong educator.

Quote of Note:

A former student shared, “My friends often note how Mr. Boskovich brought us out of our shells, turning our AP classroom into an explorative and inquisitive environment.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Bao Cao

Los Angeles Unified School District
Edwin Markham Middle School – Sixth Grade: Physical Education

Years Teaching: 23

Arriving from Vietnam at age 10, Bao was awkward at everything, including playing sports – except martial arts, at which he was surprisingly good. In fact, his sensei made him an instructor, which led to a successful career as a sixth-grade PE teacher.

Quote of Note:

A former colleague shared, “The Students Run LA Marathon program has never been more successful than this year due in large part to Mr. Cao’s leadership.”



Ann Erynna Yap

Los Angeles Unified School District
Multnomah Street Elementary School – First Grade

Years Teaching: 14

Without a standardized test, Ann is convinced the academic year would resemble a casual drive without a destination. Instead of lowering the bar, she believes we need to empower struggling students with a positive mindset to bridge their academic gap.

Quote of Note:

A room parent shared, “My son was hesitant to write, but in Mrs. Yap’s class he wrote his own ‘I Have a Dream’ poem and presented it in front of everyone.”



Christine Cuellar

Los Nietos School District
Rancho Santa Gertrudes Elementary School – Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 21

Because Christine did not always feel connected to school as a child, she makes it a priority to build meaningful relationships with all her students, letting them know they are valued and welcome members of their fourth-grade classroom community.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “Ms. Cuellar is known for taking pride in helping her students achieve meaningful academic growth within a supportive classroom environment.”



Stephanie Hubbard

Manhattan Beach Unified School District
Pacific Elementary School – Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 21

Stephanie works hard to connect with her fifth-graders. Every Monday they begin by sharing joys from their weekends. Her students celebrate everything from scoring a soccer goal to spotting a hummingbird or spending time with grandparents.

Quote of Note:

A parent shared, “My son would come home excited to share what he’d learned in Ms. Hubbard’s class: Revolutionary War stories, ecosystems, even subtracting fractions.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Rebecca Alarcon

Monrovia Unified School District
Wild Rose School of Creative Arts – TK-1st Grades: Special Education

Years Teaching: 17

Rebecca’s journey to becoming a special educator required perseverance and dedication, and she is grateful for every step along the way. She lives for those transformative moments when a student’s self-doubt gives way to confidence, resilience and a growth mindset.

Quote of Note:

A parent shared, “Mrs. Alarcon does not see her students as children with special needs. Instead, she sees their curiosity, their humor, their strengths, their spark.”



Maribel Hernandez

Montebello Unified School District
Montebello Park Elementary School – Preschool: Special Education, Early Transition

Years Teaching: 19

Inspired by her early experiences working with children, Maribel found her calling in education and has spent nearly 20 years helping students grow and thrive. As an early intervention special education teacher, she believes every child can succeed when provided with the support, encouragement and opportunities they need.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “One of the joys of Maribel’s career is watching her students make progress in all areas of development. She says every milestone is worth celebrating.”



Jim Morentin

Mountain View School District
Parkview School – 7th-8th Grades:: Math

Years Teaching: 36

Jim reveals what keeps him going, day after day, year after year. “Coming to school with a welcoming attitude. Recognizing that each new day brings a new freshness, a fresh kindness, an attitude of reaching out to all youth and making connections.”

Quote of Note:

A student shared, “Some of my best moments were in your class. The room was always filled with laughter, and the lessons you brought us were meaningful and memorable.”



Janelle Steinhurst

Palmdale School District
Ocotillo Elementary School – Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 27

Janelle brings an infectious enthusiasm to her teaching. Her excitement and passion for education are visible, and she draws upon them intentionally to inspire her students through her energy, creativity and commitment to lifelong learning.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Janelle’s relationship-building skills and community outreach have resulted in an increase in parent involvement, communication and support.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Marianne Leon

Paramount Unified School District
Odyssey STEM Academy – 11th Grade: Humanities, U.S. History Honors, Ethnic Studies

Years Teaching: 11

Marianne realizes that the students she works with are our future, and her job is to help them become the best versions of themselves. In her words, “Teaching inspires me, challenges me and reminds me daily that I am doing what I was meant to do.”

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “Beyond the classroom, Marianne demonstrates extraordinary dedication through her leadership of the Tree Huggers Club.”



Michael Birnbryer-Lao

Pasadena Unified School District
Blair High School – 6th-12th Grades: Music

Years Teaching: 20

An accomplished saxophonist whose career bridges education and professional performance, Michael has played a central role in Blair High’s music program, expanding it to include modern and concert band, orchestra and music production.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “In addition to his classroom work, Michael has helped secure more than \$200,000 in grant funding from major cultural and educational organizations.”



Mireya Jiménez

Pomona Unified School District
Westmont Elementary School – 5th-6th Grades: Spanish, Language Arts

Years Teaching: 32

A personal journey of overcoming language barriers and finding pride in bilingualism led Mireya to her dream career as a dual-language educator. For more than three decades, she has inspired students to celebrate their cultures, value their voices and recognize the power of being bilingual.

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “Mireya’s service-driven mindset and commitment to social justice make her a trusted and influential educational leader.”



Olivia Vasquez

Rowland Unified School District
STARS Adult Transition – Special Education

Years Teaching: 22

A childhood dream of becoming a teacher came full circle when Olivia accepted a position in a special education preschool classroom and quickly discovered her purpose. She helps students develop independent living, communication and mobility skills through activities such as writing, drawing and dancing.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Olivia’s impact extends beyond the classroom walls. She helps her students become more social, confident and connected with the world around them.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Melissa Monique Romero
San Gabriel Unified School District
Gabrielino High School – Music

Years Teaching: 18

A love of music and the influence of exceptional teachers inspired Melissa to pursue a career in education. As a music educator, she is dedicated to helping students grow as musicians, leaders and collaborative learners while creating a culture of excellence and pride.

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “I’ve had the privilege of witnessing the extraordinary impact Ms. Romero has made on students, families and our broader community.”



Ana Rios
Saugus Union School District
Tesoro del Valle Elementary School – Transitional Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 27

In Ana’s TK classroom, play is the primary mechanism for academic enrichment. It drives independent learning, while allowing her to meet every child at their own level. “They are the center,” she says. “Their wonder and curiosity guide this important work.”

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “Ana’s talent and expertise make her classroom magical for her TK students so that they thrive throughout the year.”



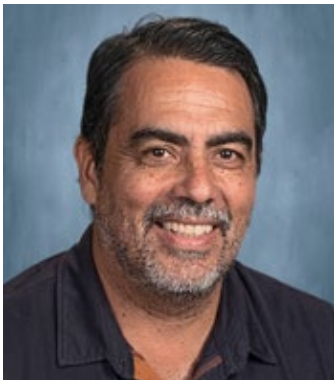
Olegario Acosta
South Whittier School District
Los Altos Elementary School - Sixth Grade: Dual Immersion

Years Teaching: 29

Raised between Tijuana, Compton and Bassett, Olegario entered school speaking no English and struggled to find his place in the classroom. Drawing on his own journey, he now helps students see their potential and understand that where they begin does not determine where they can go.

Quote of Note:

An administrator shared, “His approachable, energetic and caring nature fosters a sense of belonging and joy among students.”



Baltimore Pineda
Temple City Unified School District
Temple City High School – Specialized Academic Instruction

Years Teaching: 13

Known for truly caring about every student, Baltimore encourages his students to believe in themselves, embrace challenges and recognize the value they bring to their community. He strives to make a lasting impact in the lives of each of his students.

Quote of Note:

A district administrator shared, “As a special education teacher, Mr. Pineda brings patience, joy, compassion and unwavering support to his classroom every single day.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Sharon Jaeger-Parkins
Torrance Unified School District
Magruder Middle School – Sixth Grade: English Language Arts and Drama

Years Teaching: 28

Believing that students never forget how a teacher makes them feel, Sharon is committed to creating a supportive environment where every child feels seen, heard and capable. By blending literacy with opportunities in drama, athletics and student government, she helps students find their voice and reach their full potential.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Sharon teaches that words, actions and commitment carry immense weight by giving students opportunities to lead and help others.”



Rebecca Chai
Walnut Valley Unified School District
Walnut High School – English Language Development (ELD) 1

Years Teaching: 18

A passion for literature and a deep belief in the power of connection led Rebecca to a career in education. Through her work with newcomer English learners, she helps students overcome challenges, build confidence and find a sense of belonging.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “Ms. Chai was born to be a teacher. She spends extra hours ensuring no student feels like an outsider at Walnut High School.”



Bill Martinez
West Covina Unified School District
Hollencrest Middle School – 6th-8th Grades: Music: Instrumental and Vocal

Years Teaching: 31

Growing up surrounded by music, Bill developed a lifelong passion for performance. In college, he discovered a second passion for teaching, and he has since dedicated his career to helping students succeed, connect and find their place through music.

Quote of Note:

A band parent shared, “Both of my sons gained a lifelong love of music due to Mr. Martinez’s dedicated teaching and his clear belief in the importance of music.”



Venessa Smith
Westside Union School District
Anaverde Hills Elementary School – Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 12

Venessa remembers a kindergartner who struggled to use a computer mouse because the muscles in her hands were still developing. Through playdough activities designed to strengthen those muscles, the student gained the skills needed to use the mouse and the confidence that came with that success.

Quote of Note:

A colleague shared, “This recognition speaks volumes about her dedication, her passion for teaching and the incredible impact she makes on her students every day.”



Los Angeles County District Teachers of the Year 2026-27

Mark Taylor
Whittier City School District
Katherine Edwards Middle School – Physical Education

Years Teaching: 33
Mark teaches his PE students that success comes from effort, responsibility and a positive attitude. He applauds their progress and reminds them of their potential. That’s why he considers himself a teacher of life as much as middle school physical education.

Quote of Note:
A former student shared, “I told Mr. Taylor that one day I would return to teach alongside him, and I am proud to say that I fulfilled that promise.”



David Carter
Whittier Union High School District
La Serna High School – Choir, Theater Arts, Music Studies

Years Teaching: 37
While studying music in college, David discovered a sense of purpose and belonging through choral performance. For nearly 40 years, he has created meaningful music and theater experiences that inspire students to embrace creativity, confidence and artistic expression.

Quote of Note:
A colleague shared, “The training and opportunities David provides for his students also give them a love for music and theater such that they crave the arts in their lives.”



Rebecca Nelson
Wilsona School District
Vista San Gabriel Elementary School – Pre-K-TK Grades: Early Childhood Special Education

Years Teaching: 26
As play is often a child’s first way of socializing, learning and developing, Rebecca encourages play-based learning in her special education preschool classroom. Her students can often be found making pizza in the play kitchen or a pretend birthday cake.

Quote of Note:
A parent shared, “My son began to thrive in Mrs. Nelson’s class. In one year he became verbal, an above-level reader and developed an interest in music.”



Brandy Garcia
Wiseburn Unified School District
Wiseburn Middle School – Eighth Grade: Math

Years Teaching: 9
Raised in an immigrant family that valued education as a path to opportunity, Brandy learned early on the power of perseverance and possibility. Today, she helps students discover their own potential by building strong relationships, setting high expectations and encouraging them to lead with confidence.

Quote of Note:
A colleague shared, “In everything she does, Brandy is constantly looking to elevate the voices of those around her and make sure everyone has an equal seat at the table.”



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