

Forty-Four Years of Honoring Teaching Achievement 2025-26





In Honor of Teaching Achievement



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:

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

Evelyn Lam, Temple City HS Senior

Masters of Ceremonies:

Ray A. Castillo Official In-Arena Host for the L.A. Lakers and Game Day Host for the L.A. Rams

11:10 a.m. California TOY Speeches:

Arby Jean Wolkov, LAUSD Matthew Winheim, Palmdale SD (State National Nominee)

11:20 a.m. Presentation of the 16 County Teachers of the Year

12:15 p.m. Lunch

1:15 p.m. Presentation of the 54 District Teachers of the Year

2:15 p.m. Door Prizes and Grand Prize

2:20 p.m. Adjourn

Announcement and Awards Luncheon Friday, September 19, 2025 Hilton Universal City and Towers

The 2025-26 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.



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 70 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 23% 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.

[&]quot;Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit." -John Steinbeck



California Teachers of the Year

Since our program began in 1983, 52 Los Angeles County teachers have gone on to be selected as California Teachers of the Year.

1985	Evaline Khayat Kruse, LAUSD	2012	Florence Avognon, LACOE
1987	Shirley Rosenkranz, Temple City USD		Ken LaVigne, Whittier UHSD
	Lorna Mae Nagata, Alhambra SD Patricia Baltz, Arcadia USD		Rebecca Mieliwocki, Burbank USD (National Teacher of the Year)
	(State National Nominee)	2013	Veronica Marquez, LAUSD
	Edward Riegler, Alhambra SD	2014	Michael Hayden, Manhattan Beach USD
1994	Beth Cassford, Little Lake City SD	2015	Maggie Mabery, Manhattan Beach USD
1995	Richard Chapleau, Antelope Valley UHSD		(State National Nominee)
	(State National Nominee)		Lovelyn Marquez-Prueher, LAUSD
	Rhoda Paulette Coleman, Lennox SD	2016	Daniel Jocz, LAUSD
1996	Cedric Anderson, LACOE	0017	(State National Nominee)
	Sandy Fleishman, Las Virgenes USD	2017	Isela Lieber, LAUSD
	Javier Gonzalez, Whittier UHSD	2018	Kirsten Farrell, LAUSD
4007	(State National Nominee)	0010	Erin Oxhorn-Gilpin, Castaic Union SD
	Carole Firestone, Las Virgenes USD	2019	5 ,
	Linwood C. Thompson, Bellflower USD		Kimberlee Holz, Manhattan Beach USD
1999	Ingrid Boydston, Saugus Union SD	2021	Jim Klipfel, William S. Hart UHSD (State National Nominee)
2000	Marilyn Whirry, Manhattan Beach USD (National Teacher of the Year)	2022	Virginia Vasquez, Alhambra USD
2001	Adele Prince, Glendora USD		Catherine Borek, Compton USD
2001		2020	Bridgette Donald-Blue, LAUSD
	Paul McLaughlin, Walnut Valley USD		Jason Torres-Rangel, LAUSD
	Kim Labinger, Glendale USD		(State National Nominee)
2005		2024	Hannah Rodriguez, Duarte USD
2000	Kelly Jean Hanock, LAUSD		Drew Lewis, LAUSD
2007	Dawna Countryman, Saugus Union SD		Casey Cuny, William S. Hart UHSD
2007	Helen Papadopoulous, Walnut Valley USD		(State National Nominee)
	Alan Sitomer, Lynwood USD	2025	Matthew Winheim, Palmdale SD
2008	Lewis Chappelear, LAUSD		(State National Nominee)
2000	(State National Nominee)		Nicholas Westfall, LAUSD
	Michael Allen Long, South Whittier SD		Arby Jean Wolkov, LAUSD
2009	Jose Navarro IV, LAUSD		

2011 Beverly Gonzalez, Baldwin Park USD

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 2025-26 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.



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

Welcome to the 2025 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 and dedication that educators across Los Angeles County bring to their classrooms every single day.

As the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools, I'm honored to host this event recognizing the ingenuity and impact of our teachers. In a time when education continues to evolve and face new challenges, their unwavering commitment to student success is nothing short of inspiring.

Each Teacher of the Year nominee represents the very best of our profession, leaders who go above and beyond to ensure every student feels seen, supported and empowered.

Today, we shine a spotlight on 16 exceptional educators who have earned the title of Los Angeles County Teachers of the Year. Their dedication and impact are nothing short of remarkable, and we wish them continued success as they advance to the state competition. Let's take this moment to celebrate their achievements, share in their joy and express our heartfelt gratitude.

Congratulations to each of you. You are the reason our schools thrive and our students soar!

Superintendent



James Cross Board President Los Angeles County Board of Education

It's hard to overstate the impact that teachers have on students' lives. They are, in many ways, the true first responders, often the first to notice when something isn't quite right. From Pre-K to first grade to first period, teachers are on the frontlines, spotting changes in behavior, identifying signs of distress and offering care and support long before anyone else does.

This role has never been more critical. In a world that feels increasingly uncertain, our students face growing mental health challenges, academic pressures and economic disparities. Through it all, teachers continue to show up with compassion, creativity and resilience — adapting to new technologies, bridging learning gaps and doing everything they can to meet students where they are.

Most of us can name at least one teacher who changed our lives. Someone who saw us when we felt invisible. Someone who believed in us when we didn't yet believe in ourselves. For me, it was Ms. McGill, a teacher who handed a struggling seventh grader his first real book. She didn't just introduce him to Mark Twain; she opened the door to a whole world of adventure, curiosity and confidence.

That's what we're here to celebrate today. We're here to say thank you; to recognize the profound difference you make every single day. Thank you for inspiring minds, nurturing hearts and empowering the next generation to thrive and contribute to their communities. You are the reason so many students find their voice, their strength and their way forward.

James Cross **Board President**

Los Angeles County Board of Education



A Message from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Welcome to the 44th annual Los Angeles County Office of Education Teachers of the Year Awards! Congratulations to the extraordinary teachers who are being recognized for excellence in teaching.

Each of today's honorees demonstrates the very best of a profession dedicated to improving and enriching the lives of our children. These teachers are instrumental in providing them with a high-quality public education and changing their lives, which can also transform outcomes for a whole family and a whole community as these students grow to be productive citizens and leaders in society. Our honorees step up to serve their students every day, and that is how we move the needle for student achievement.

This is not an easy time in education or in our world. More than ever, our students need opportunities to build skills that will help them compete and succeed. Events like today's celebration offer a chance to honor these exceptional individuals, whose dedication and mentorship enable our youth to learn, become more socially conscious, and thrive in a twenty-first-century global economy. I especially want to acknowledge the incredible strength and resilience of our Los Angeles area educators who have been working to keep their school communities whole following January's devastating wildfires.

As we work to highlight the teaching profession and recruit more educators, I encourage all of you to join in our efforts. Help inspire others to become teachers and share the joys of working with our students so they can also make an impact and help change lives.

Congratulations again to our exceptional teachers! I hope you enjoy this opportunity to celebrate and network with other educators who are determined to innovate and achieve. Thanks to all of you for working together to enhance and support student learning and inspire educational excellence across the county. Have a great evening!

Sincerely, Tony Thurmond State Superintendent of Public Instruction



Evelyn Lam 12th Grade Temple City High School **Member of the Los Angeles County Superintendent Student Advisory Council**

Evelyn Lam is a high school senior from Temple City where she serves on the City Council's Youth Committee. As a firm believer in the power of storytelling to drive change, she leads public speaking and civics workshops at local community centers, captains her school's debate team and edits opinion pieces for her school newspaper. Evelyn plans to study political science and is especially passionate about educational policy. She is excited to return for her second year on the LACOE Superintendent Student Advisory Council.



Forty-Four Years of Honoring Teaching Achievement





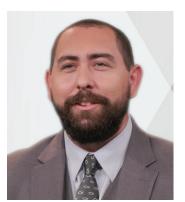
Christina Kwon Loose

Alhambra Unified School District

Martha Baldwin Elementary School - Seventh Grade: English Language Arts, Social Studies

When Christina first started teaching, she did not picture herself with middle schoolers, but now she feels it is her calling. "It offers a unique opportunity to teach about navigating friendships, managing emotions and hormones, and fostering empathy."

A former student confides, "I can't count how many times Mrs. Loose was there for me when I needed her. I would always go to her with any problems I didn't understand."



Seth Johnson

Antelope Valley Union High School District

Lancaster High School - 11th - 12th Grades: Civics, Economics, Dual Enrollment U.S. History, AVID IV, A.P. U.S. History

Years Teaching: 10

Teaching isn't just instruction, Seth is convinced. "It's presence. It's about modeling patience, fairness, humility and integrity in a world that often overlooks these values. It's about giving students curiosity and confidence, not just for tests but for life."

Quote of Note:

A principal's praise, "Mr. Johnson provides all students the opportunity to expand their education beyond the classroom with organized learning opportunities and college trips. Students have attended college and changed career paths due to these trips."



Julie Chen

Bassett Unified School District

Edgewood Academy - Seventh Grade: English Language Arts, Social Studies, Journalism

Years Teaching: 24

Julie, an immigrant from Taiwan, was a quiet student until a pivotal A.P. History experience empowered her voice. Inspired by that very teacher, she became an educator. "That's the magic of a great teacher, who sees potential before you do and creates the space for you to grow into it. I wanted to be that teacher for someone else."

An administrator writes, "Ms. Chen is a teacher who leaves a lasting impact, not just for a school year, but for a lifetime. She brings passion and purpose to her work every day."



Kara Clark

Burbank Unified School District

John Burroughs High School — 9th - 12th Grades: CTE Arts, Photography, Yearbook

Years Teaching: 9

When she started teaching. Kara's goal was to provide her career-tech high school students with abundant opportunities in photography both on and off campus. Accomplishing those goals, she states, "has been the greatest joy of my life."

Quote of Note:

A student shared, "You are someone that I feel safe with. For years I didn't know what I wanted to do with myself and what I was good at. But then I took your class. Photography has become my passion and love. I have found a way to express myself. You saved my life."



Rene Romero

Covina-Valley Unified School District South Hills High School — 11th - 12th Grades: English Language Arts

Rene is emphatic in proclaiming teaching as "the greatest profession in the world, a tangible way of changing the world by creating game changers." It also offers him a way of paying forward the inspiration of "several great teachers I was lucky to have."

Quote of Note:

During COVID-19's online school, one student recalls, "Mr. Romero's classes made me feel less alone. His passion for teaching and care for his students never wavered."



Marylou Escobar

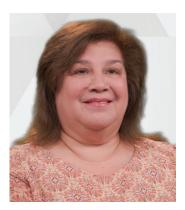
Glendale Unified School District John Muir Elementary School — Kindergarten: Spanish DLI

Years Teaching: 38

Marylou experiences joy in her thriving Dual Language Immersion Spanish kindergarten classroom watching her students' skills grow day by day. "No matter what is going on in my life," she writes, "I know my little piece of heaven is waiting for me there."

Quote of Note:

According to an administrator, "Mrs. Escobar's students are immersed in a rich bilingual experience and a learning space filled with love, care and high expectations."



Ty Kastendiek

Los Angeles County Office of Education Camp Glenn Rockey — 8th - 12th Grades: Math and Science

Years Teaching: 32

Ty began his classroom career as a substitute teacher at L.A. County's Central Juvenile Hall. As a champion for at-promise students for the past 32 years, he's had his students study rocketry, start small businesses and go on field trips to local colleges, beaches and museums.

Quote of Note:

From one admiring student, "Learning is serious business in Mr. Ty's class, although he makes it fun. He's definitely the most engaging and funniest teacher I've ever had."



Monika Heidi Duque

Los Angeles Unified School District Rosewood STEM Magnet, Urban Planning and Urban Design — First Grade

Years Teaching: 24

Monika describes her first-grade classroom as "the best kind of messy and wild." with plenty of wondering, questioning, art and silliness along the way. She cultivates a joyful, "home away from home" learning environment, prioritizing Social Emotional Learning and deep connections within her school community.

Quote of Note:

A fellow teacher writes, "Monika's passion for education has empowered students to find their voices and confidence while inspiring teachers across our school and district."







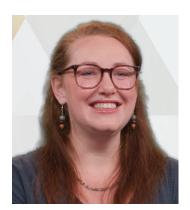
Martin Rodriguez

Los Angeles Unified School District Ramon C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts — 9th - 12th Grades: Theatre

Martin Rodriguez uses theatre to nurture both artistic and emotional growth, creating inclusive spaces in and beyond the classroom. He brings his 11th-grade students to elementary schools to build leadership and empathy. Inspired by his own teacher, Martin sees theatre as a transformative tool that prepares students for life and helps shape well-rounded individuals.

Quote of Note:

Thoughtful praise from a parent, "If Mr. Rodriguez sees a student who is not confident about participating, he finds time to work with them to discover their strengths."



Maddie Hutchinson

Manhattan Beach Unified School District Mira Costa High School — English, Link Crew

Years Teaching: 10

After graduating from college, Maddie felt uncertain about her future until a roommate asked a powerful question: Not what do you want to achieve, but what impact do you want to leave? That question led her to teaching, where she now inspires students to engage deeply, nurturing both a love of learning and a strong sense of community. Her dedication has earned her a reputation as a trusted adult and passionate advocate.

Quote of Note:

A former student's lucid compliment, "Whether she's teaching mythology, Shakespeare or vocab, Ms. Hutchinson's passion inspires her pupils to become lifelong learners."



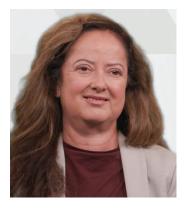
Heather Povinelli

Monrovia Unified School District Bradoaks Elementary Science Academy — Second Grade

Years Teaching: 22

For Heather, every day is a great day as long as her second graders leave feeling braver, tired from giving their best effort and excited to share their enthusiasm with loved ones. She firmly believes that every student can succeed when given what they need, even if that looks different for each child. Her approach fosters both personal growth and a strong sense of belonging.

An administrator writes, "When a devastating fire forced her to relocate her classroom, with grace and determination, Dr. Povinelli established a welcoming new space where students continued to thrive."



María Lugo-Valladares

Palmdale School District Barrel Springs Elementary School — Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 18

Maria believes in the truism that education is the great equalizer. She doesn't focus on her fifthgraders' ZIP codes, backgrounds or status, only on reminding them daily of their worth and opening doors to a bright future. As the daughter of immigrant parents, she empowers students to become independent learners in a safe, respectful and collaborative environment.

A former student writes, "Mrs. Lugo not only makes learning fun and exciting in many different ways but also makes me feel confident, like I am seen and have a voice."



Nicole Bottomley

Paramount Unified School District Odyssey STEM Academy — 11th Grade: Biochemistry

Years Teaching: 11

Nicole Bottomley's path to education began with a childhood passion for science, sparked by a desire to cure cancer after losing a loved one. At her STEM high school, students are called "scholars," and it's not uncommon to hear a cheerful "Hi, Nicole" or even "Hey, Nikki" from her biochem students as she walks by. Her goal is to ensure every scholar feels empowered and cared for in her classroom.

Ouote of Note:

A colleague notes, "With over a decade of experience in both biotechnology and education, Nicole brings unmatched depth, perspective and enthusiasm to her work."



Emily Smith

South Pasadena Unified School District Arroyo Vista Elementary School — First Grade

Years Teaching: 18

Emily believes every student deserves to feel seen, heard, valued and empowered, "especially the ones who stretch your patience and make you question your choice in career." The focus of her morning meetings is on building community, practicing empathy and embodying radical hope.

Quote of Note:

Heartfelt words from a parent, "Mrs. Smith embraces each child, not as a challenge to overcome but as a learner to honor. Inclusion isn't a checkbox but a way of being!"



Lacey Scanlan

Temple City Unified School District Emperor Elementary School – K - 6th Grades: Visual and Performing Arts

Years Teaching: 9

For Lacey, the first day of any performing arts class, whether kindergarten or sixth grade, starts with the same message. Students sit together and promise: "We will be kind, so you can be brave and we can all have fun." As an itinerant theater and dance teacher, she creates a safe, joyful space where students build confidence and discover their unique voices.

A parent expresses gratitude, "Mrs. Scanlan has played an especially great role in our daughter's passion for the performing arts. We are excited to see what the future holds."



Nicholas Patev

William S. Hart Union High School District Golden Valley High School — 9th - 12th Grades: Algebra 1, A.P. Calculus AB

Years Teaching: 19

Nick uses math to help students become resilient problem-solvers and critical thinkers. In his classroom, mistakes are part of the process, and effort is celebrated over perfection. His most meaningful moments come from students who once struggled but now pass Algebra 1, discover a love for math or proudly say, "I didn't think I could do this, but now I know I can."

Ouote of Note:

An administrator notes, "In Nick Patey's math classes, students aren't afraid to speak up when they're a little, or a lot, stuck. This is because they know they won't stay that way."





Kristina Waggoner

Acton Agua Dulce Unified School District Vasquez High School — 9th - 12th Grades: Culinary Arts and Work Experience

Kristina, a Vasquez High School alumna, sparks passion in her culinary arts students. After her cooking demonstrations, students eagerly dive into their own creations, often attracting hungry classmates hoping for a taste. She empowers students with skills, confidence and real-world experience, including securing food handler's cards.

Quote of Note:

A ringing endorsement from a colleague, "Kristina is collaborative, dependable and incredibly supportive - always willing to share ideas, lend a hand or offer insight."



Paul Kelly - Semifinalist

Arcadia Unified School District Richard Henry Dana Middle School - 7th - 8th Grades: Science, Industrial Technology, Digital Photography

Years Teaching: 12

"I didn't like science, but I enjoyed your class." Paul has heard those words more than a few times from students and takes it as a compliment. "It tells me that even if physics wasn't their favorite, the students still felt engaged, which means I did something right."

Heartfelt words from a former student, "In Mr. Kelly's Video Production class, I found a passion that continues to grow. Mr. Kelly sparked that interest and nurtured it."



Janet Hassard-Short

Azusa Unified School District Clifford D. Murray Elementary School - Third Grade

Years Teaching: 35

Depending on the current unit, you might find Janet's third-grade classroom filled with caterpillars turning into butterflies, growing plants, citrus fruit attached to branches, a weather station or replica documents of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. Known for her philosophy rooted in empathy, equity and inclusion, she nurtures the whole child: academically, linguistically, emotionally, physically and culturally.

Quote of Note:

High marks from an administrator, "Janet's thoughtful integration of identity, culture and community into her instruction has made a profound impact on her students' success."



Gerardo Gomez Jr.

Baldwin Park Unified School District BP STEM Academy — 6th - 8th Grades: Science

Years Teaching: 14

Gerardo credits his mom, who ran a licensed day care, for inspiring his love of learning and his path to education. She showed him how compassion, patience and understanding can change lives. That upbringing shaped his reputation for creating a kind, inclusive classroom that feels like home.

Quote of Note:

A colleague writes, "Mr. Gomez is a strong advocate for special needs students. The humor he brings and the joy in which he engages with his students defines who he is."

Tom William Philips

Bellflower Unified School District

Mayfair Middle and High School — 7th - 12th Grades: Instrumental Music

Years Teaching: 36

This year Tom concludes three and a half distinguished decades of teaching band, orchestra and jazz at three southeast area high schools. A final dream was creating the 605 All Star Band of 500-plus musicians that performed in this year's Rose Parade.

Quote of Note:

A former student band member offers a heartfelt salute, "Mr. Philips' long, prize-winning career as an honor band conductor is embodied in his favorite motto, 'Music is life."



Justin Klotzle

Beverly Hills Unified School District

Beverly Hills High School — 9th - 12th Grades: Instrumental Music: Band, Orchestra, Marching Band

Years Teaching: 8

With simple but profound words, Justin states his philosophy of teaching: "One of my greatest purposes – and greatest joys of my job – is to teach my students the love of music and provide them with the skills they need to enjoy it for a lifetime." He aims to foster holistic student growth and purpose through music.

Quote of Note:

Appreciative observations from a fellow teacher, "Through every kind word and proud look, it is obvious how much Justin loves his job and cares about his music students."



Katrina Weiner

Castaic Union School District

Northlake Hills Elementary School - Sixth Grade

Years Teaching: 30

Katrina always knew she wanted to be a teacher. Her first full-time pupil was her baby sister, teaching her everything she could. "My goal is to enable students to find their voice and soar, knowing they are part of a community that believes in their potential"

Quote of Note:

Touching testimony from a sixth grader battling with anxiety, "Mrs. Weiner didn't just teach me math, reading, history or science. She taught me how to believe in myself."



Stephanie Steele

Centinela Valley Union High School District

Centinela Valley Independent Study School — 9th - 12th Grades: English (Counselor on Special Assignment)

Years Teaching: 22

Stephanie acknowledges her greatest reward from teaching is what she learned from her own mother - that an education is something that cannot be taken from you and will go with you everywhere. She makes sure her own students learn this great lesson.

Quote of Note:

A former student's tribute, "I've had hundreds of teachers and professors, but Mrs. Steele is my favorite, the first to inspire me to go beyond what I thought was possible for myself."





Denise Klinovsky Claremont Unified School District Sumner Danbury Elementary School — Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 29

Denise puts the rewards of early childhood education into two sentences: "There's something incredibly special about watching a child's face light up when they realize they are reading for the first time. These moments remind me why I do what I do." Denise is dedicated to fostering curiosity, creativity and a love for learning in her inclusive, joyful classroom.

Quote of Note:

A kindergartner's eloquence, "Mrs. K is a great teacher. She is kind because she gives us 'Choices' time. Her middle name is fun! She makes everyone happy!"



Roxana Vargas

Compton Unified School District Clarence A. Dickison Elementary School — Third Grade: Dual Immersion

Years Teaching: 26

What made Roxana choose teaching as her profession? Her answer is emphatic: "From spending many childhood hours in my mother's classroom to the first time I stepped into my own room as a teacher, I knew I was where I was meant to be." As a Dual Immersion teacher, she empowers students to embrace bilingualism as their superpower.

According to a district administrator, "Mrs. Vargas is an efficient, skilled professional who always presents with a spirit of helpfulness and an amiable and caring disposition."



Bianca Farina - Semifinalist

Downey Unified School District Columbus High School - Multi Subjects - Special Education, ASB Advisor

Years Teaching: 15

It was love at first sight between Bianca and school. She would go home and line up her dolls to be her students, and she would teach them everything she'd learned from the day. "Even then," she recalls, "I didn't just want to go to school, I wanted to be school."

Quote of Note:

A former student writes, "A good teacher teaches content. A great teacher changes lives. Mrs. Farina is that kind of teacher, one who sees each student as a whole person."



Andrea Stalder

Duarte Unified School District Maxwell Academy - Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 17

Andrea explains an essential lesson she's learned in 17 years of teaching kindergarten and first grade: "Teaching is not one of those jobs where you can leave work, close the door and go home. My students and their families become a part of my story."

Quote of Note:

A nicely worded endorsement from a fellow teacher, "Mrs. Stalder creates a safe and caring classroom environment where her little learners can grow and flourish."

Andrea Carlson

East Whittier City School District Murphy Ranch Elementary School — Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 25

Andrea calls kindergarten "my absolute heart." She likes to remind beginning teachers that all the moments they invest - the patience, the encouragement, the innovative lessons - will ripple outward and influence lives far beyond the classroom walls.

Quote of Note:

A colleague writes, "Andrea is a master teacher and an irreplaceable asset to our profession. I'm continually inspired by her tireless work ethic and compassionate heart."



Victor Williams - Semifinalist

El Monte City School District

Potrero Elementary School — 7th - 8th Grades: Music, Career, Technology Education

Years Teaching: 12

From a dozen years of teaching band, Victor shares his credo: "Music has a way of reaching students in ways words sometimes can't. I want every student to know they matter, their voice matters and that they have something unique to offer the world."

Quote of Note:

Verbal applause from a parent volunteer, "As a Band Mom, I can attest to the positive effect Mr. Williams has on both students and their parents, thanks to his dedication."



Sara Quezada

El Monte Union High School District El Monte High School — 10th - 11th Grades: World History, A.P. U.S. History

Years Teaching: 36

Teaching was not Sara's first career choice. After graduating from college, she needed a job and fell into the profession. Or, as she puts it, "Teaching found me. It gave me a greater sense of purpose. My students taught me as much as I taught them that year."

Quote of Note:

A former student, now colleague, recalls a key turning point, "As a newcomer to this country, Ms. Quezada noticed my strong academic performance and advocated for me to enroll in her A.P. U.S. History class-despite opposition from my counselor. That single decision changed the trajectory of my life-she planted the seed of empowerment through education."



Sean Cunningham

El Rancho Unified School District Durfee Elementary School — Third Grade

Years Teaching: 25

Sean's favorite part of the school year is the spring. This is when former students come back to visit and provide updates on what they are up to now. It means a great deal to him to hear former students tell him what a positive impact he has had on their lives.

Quote of Note:

A colleague testifies, "After more than a quarter-century in the classroom, Sean tells me that he's now teaching children of students who were in his classes years ago."





Teresa Delgado McDorman

El Segundo Unified School District El Segundo High School — 11th - 12th Grades: A.P. English

As the child of two dedicated educators, Teresa grew up spending summers helping set up classrooms. It came as no surprise when she followed in their footsteps and began teaching high school English just months after earning her bachelor's degree.

An administrator notes, "Ms. McDorman is valued for many campus leadership roles, including as English Department Chair and then as overall school Leadership Chair."



Ralph Love

Glendora Unified School District Whitcomb High School – 10th – 12th Grades: English Language Arts/Art Foundations

Years Teaching: 7

Ralph strives to develop critical thinking, literacy and creativity for his language arts students, plus an appreciation for daily disciplined practice. This formula, he believes, will provide a strong foundation of skills to prepare them for life beyond graduation. Ralph began his teaching career after serving in the U.S. Army Reserves, driven by a desire to help others and bringing with him a unique perspective.

Ralph shares, "I cultivate a positive classroom where close reading, analytical writing and thoughtful discussion empower students to become confident, articulate lifelong learners prepared for higher education, the workforce and beyond.."



Alejandra Lima - Semifinalist

Hacienda La Puente Unified School District Valley Alternative High School — 11th - 12th Grades: ELD, Ethnic Studies

Years Teaching: 29

Alejandra relies on her deep community roots and willingness to innovate to help her connect meaningfully with her continuation school students, English learners and others who have been expelled from traditional systems. She says, "I refuse to give up." She transforms narratives of failure into stories of empowerment, creating a classroom where every student feels seen, heard and valued.

Superlative words from an administrator, "Our students don't just pass Mrs. Lima's class. They leave with tools for learning and often, a stronger belief in themselves."



Silvia Castro

Hawthorne School District Ramona Elementary School — Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 12

Back in her native Guatemala, Silvia was inspired by her fifth-grade teacher's integrity, empathy and commitment to lifelong learning. These qualities kindled her own passion for learning, which eventually led to a career path to obtain her teaching credential.

Quote of Note:

A colleague notes, "In addition to everything else, Silvia gives back to her community by doing volunteer tutoring for school-age children and adults at our local public library."

Jorge L. De La Torre

Inglewood Unified School District Beulah Payne P-8 STEAM Academy — Third Grade

Years Teaching: 4

When Jorge was seven, a teacher, recognizing his enthusiasm for science, invited him to teach a lesson about the solar system to his classmates. "That powerful moment lit a spark in me," he recalls. "From that day forward, I knew I wanted to be a teacher."

A colleague weighs in, "I've seen how hard Jorge works to foster a sense of belonging for every student and to encourage curiosity that extends far beyond textbooks."



Eric Ruiz

Keppel Union School District Daisy Gibson Elementary School — Sixth Grade

Years Teaching: 28

After almost three decades in the classroom, Eric finds some of his current students are children of his former third-graders. "This full-circle experience brings me great joy," he says. Eric strives to build strong, trusting relationships to make school a safe haven for his students and foster trust with their families.

Quote of Note:

An administrator notes, "In the wake of the pandemic, Mr. Ruiz was one of our teachers who went out of his way to ensure that all his students felt safe, loved and supported."



Laura Deans

La Cañada Unified School District

La Cañada Unified School District - Special Education Ninth Grade inclusion and Directed Studies

Years Teaching: 17

While Laura was volunteering at her son's elementary school, the principal encouraged her to apply for a paraeducator position. That role pushed her into a dramatic career switch. "I earned my education specialist credential and have never looked back."

Quote of Note:

An administrator notes, "Laura strives to create safe, supportive and engaging environments where students, regardless of ability, feel valued and empowered."



Karen Rosales

Lancaster School District

West Wind Computer Science Magnet School - Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 31

Karen speaks eloquently of the rewards of teaching: "As early elementary teachers we are the first to show our students how to hold a pencil, to work and play with others, to find wonders in books, transfer ideas into stories and begin thinking of their futures."

Quote of Note:

Testimony from a former student who went on to become a teacher, "I can say with full confidence that Mrs. Rosales is one of the main reasons that I chose this profession. I only hope to be half the teacher she was to me."





Suzanne Kirkhope

Las Virgenes Unified School DistrictWillow Elementary School — 4th - 5th Grades: Science

Years Teaching: 10

During her 10 years in the profession, Suzanne has observed that the best teachers are constantly asking, How can I do this better? "Self-reflection is second nature. We revise lessons, rethink strategies and adapt to meet the needs of every learner."

Quote of Note:

A colleague expresses her admiration, "Ms. Kirkhope has turned her classrooms inside out with roller coaster builds to teach force and motion and cooking experiments to teach temperature and state of matter"



Carol Lynn Zebley

Lawndale Elementary School DistrictWill Rogers Middle School — 7th - 8th Grades: English, Language Arts

Years Teaching: 41

For Zeb, teaching was never a career but a calling, "a deep responsibility to walk alongside young people as they navigate life." That journey has now spanned more than four decades, during which, as she says, "I always strove to go the extra mile."

Quote of Note:

An administrator observes, "Ms. Zebley's belief in every student's potential, and in the transformative power of education, continues to guide her every single day."



Norma Garcia

Lennox School DistrictLennox School District — TK - 8th Grade Assessment Specialist (TOSA)

Years Teaching: 24

From a very young age, Norma was inspired to make a difference and help others reach their full potential. Building on that inspiration, her many years in the classroom have given her a strong understanding of how students develop and learn at different stages.

Quote of Note:

An administrator notes, "As our district's Assessment Specialist, Ms. Garcia works with teachers on all grade levels to help them understand and use data to guide instruction."



Araceli Reyes

Little Lake City School DistrictWilliam Orr Elementary School — Transitional Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 17

Araceli spearheaded her district's first Dual Language Immersion program, advocating for bilingual education and celebrating her students' growth and pride in their bilingualism. Twelve of her students began the school year speaking only English.

Quote of Note:

High praise from an administrator, "Mrs. Reyes' professionalism, passion for bilingual education and tireless work ethic make her an inspiration to all who work with her."

Jules Rodriguez - Semifinalist

Long Beach Unified School District

Jessie E. Nelson Academy — 6th - 8th Grades: Integrated Science

Years Teaching: 10

During her years in business, Jules felt an unfulfilled need to impact her Native American community. Switching careers, Jules now inspires students' creativity, resilience and community with her own grandmother's truth - that "we are all threads in the great world tapestry."

A former student speaks out, "Mrs. Rodriguez's classroom is a space where every voice is heard, every question is valued and every mistake is treated as a steppingstone."



Jennifer Crockett - Semifinalist

Los Angeles Unified School District

Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies — 6th - 12th Grades: Physical Education

Years Teaching: 20

Jennifer became a teacher because someone believed in her. She remains a teacher because she believes in her students. She believes in classrooms where students feel empowered to take risks thanks to the heart of a committed and healthy teacher.

Quote of Note:

A principal's praise, "Ms. Crockett is the only female Head Coach of a boys' basketball team in the CIF, breaking barriers while leading them to league championships."



Juan Melendez

Los Angeles Unified School District

Los Angeles High School of the Arts — 11th - 12th Grades: Chemistry, Physiology

Years Teaching: 9

Like many teachers, Melendez is a passionate advocate for the profession, offering radical care to ensure all students feel seen, valued and capable of deep learning. "We are not just teachers," Melendez writes, "we are mentors, counselors, first responders, curriculum designers, community liaisons. We help students and families find hope."

Sincere words from a colleague, "As a student in Melendez's chemistry class I would feel strongly supported and know that my teacher was truly concerned about my success."



Lisa Picarella

Los Angeles Unified School District

Sun Valley Magnet School - 7th - 8th Grades: English, ELD, AVID Excel

Years Teaching: 28

Lisa passes along to new teachers some advice a professor gave her years ago: "Do not blame kids for what they do not have or know. Just take them where you find them and work to give them all the opportunities they have missed along the way."

Quote of Note:

An admiring colleague notes, "Ms. Picarella's dedication extends far beyond the classroom. During the pandemic, she personally made home visits to ensure that her students had all the resources they needed."





Dana Spadoni

Los Nietos School District Rancho Santa Gertrudes Elementary School — SDC 1st - 3rd Grades

Taking her father's college econ class inspired Dana to earn several degrees, including a special education credential. She loves to encourage, support, challenge and cheerlead students with special needs, as she believes they deserve every opportunity possible.

A colleague writes, "Dana is a pedagogical marvel, the way she is able to plan and teach several levels of individual learning paths while meeting or exceeding IEP goals."



Angelica Guzman

Montebello Unified School District La Merced Academy — Second Grade: Dual Language

Years Teaching: 29

Angelica has spent her entire teaching career, nearly 30 years, at the same school. She still loves what she does and approaches each day as a new challenge to meet the needs of every student.

A happy parent shares this, "Under the caring guidance of Ms. Guzman and the school's Dual Academy, our son is now learning in two languages and loves it!"



Ana Rodriguez

Mountain View School District

Monte Vista School — 3rd - 6th Grades: Special Education

Years Teaching: 12

Seeing her mom teach at their church inspired Ana to work with children. Becoming a teacher has allowed her to honor that legacy. As a special education teacher, she has the privilege of seeing students achieve milestones once thought unreachable.

A colleague shares this, "It has been a privilege watching Ms. Guzman mentor future educators, guiding them through the complexities and rewards of special education."



Alison Boisseranc - Semifinalist

Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District

Morrison Elementary School — Fifth Grade: Science, Academic Language Development

Years Teaching: 9

Alison believes every student can learn and embraces the challenge of making sure they do. In her fifth-grade science class, her students know participation is expected, curiosity is encouraged and thinking is something "we do out loud."

Quote of Note:

A grateful parent writes, "On their return from Mrs. Boisseranc's four-day science camp, all the kids were glowing with happiness and filled with so many stories to share."

Karla Jeanne Vestal

Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District Point Vicente Elementary School — Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 29

Karla comes from a family of educators - mother, father and especially an aunt who, as a kindergarten teacher, showed her how crucial early learning is to a child's future. Karla lives for those light-bulb moments when learning clicks and young eyes light up.

Quote of Note:

An administrator notes, "Ms. Vestal is keenly aware of the incredible opportunity early childhood educators have to help shape the beginning of a child's educational journey."



Martin Dorado

Pasadena Unified School District James Madison Elementary School - Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 8

Martin fosters a strong sense of community in his fifth-grade classroom, encouraging participation from every student. Guided by the belief that "not all who wander are lost," he sees each person as having a pivotal role in the world. He champions a student-centered approach, valuing experiential knowledge and building meaningful connections to the curriculum.

Quote of Note:

A candid comment from a former student, "Mr. Dorado makes jokes in class to help us better understand things, and I have to admit that his jokes are kind of funny."



Matthew Maizel

Pomona Unified School District Diamond Ranch High School - 9th - 12th Grades: Special Education w/Extensive Support Needs

Years Teaching: 19

As an educational support specialist, Matthew believes every school day holds the potential for something magical. Among his students with extensive support needs he is always delighted to see the wonder of learning. "And these are the moments that bolstered my belief that all students want to learn, all we have to do is provide them the opportunity."

An administrator offers this thoughtful tribute, "Mr. Maizel has a calm demeanor in the classroom, which helps him intervene with challenging behaviors efficiently."



Nicholas Sklarenko

Redondo Beach Unified School District Redondo Union High School — 10th Grade: Social Studies, A.P. European History

Years Teaching: 15

Nick, who promotes rigorous learning and critical thinking, recalls an all-day power outage when students hoped for a break. But, he says, by breaking out pens and paper, "we all made that day meaningful together." By the time each class left, no one even remembered the power was out.

Quote of Note:

Notes from a fellow teacher, "If you walk by Nick's room, you might hear him burst out in a Russian accent, or see students in full costume reenacting the French Revolution."





Annemarie Phillips
Rosemead School District

Emma W. Shuey Elementary School — Kindergarten

Years Teaching: 27

Memorable teachers, combined with her lifelong love of children, inspired Annemarie to pursue a career in education – a choice she has never once regretted. She also loves guiding and supporting new teachers as they navigate their first years in the profession.

Quote of Note:

An administrator weighs in, "I've been particularly impressed by Ms. Phillips' work as an Induction Mentor, helping new educators find their way and build their confidence."



Stephanie Vidal Ayers

Rowland Unified School District Ybarra Academy of Arts and Technology — Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 12

Stephanie considers teaching Spanish Dual-Immersion for six years as one of the highlights of her career. She uses her students' backgrounds and perspectives to support them in their learning journey so they can become what they aspire to be.

Quote of Note:

A colleague notes, "I was so inspired by Stephanie's commitment to providing an equitable education to all her students that I've been following in her footsteps."



Gabriel Cabrera

San Gabriel Unified School District Washington Elementary School — Fourth Grade

Years Teaching: 21

To make learning relevant and engaging for his fourth-graders, Gabriel has been known to do character voices during read-alouds, dances in class and even plays basketball with students. He has also led several teams to gold in the L.A. County Science Olympiad.

Quote of Note:

An admiring colleague writes, "Gabriel is everywhere at once, from facilitating after-school robotics to serving on PBIS committees to working on our school's garden."



Amanda Howard

Saugus Union School District James Foster Elementary School — Sixth Grade

Years Teaching: 16

As a second-grader, Amanda was shy and struggled with reading. Her teacher helped her develop a love for books, and she took off from there. Educators throughout her journey, all the way through college, nurtured her love of learning and recognized her gift for helping others. "To be a teacher is to be a difference-maker, sometimes invisibly, but always unforgettably."

Quote of Note

An administrator voices support, "Amanda is also a tireless supporter of our PTA, working hand-inhand with parent leaders to build a more connected community."

James Lee

South Whittier School District South Whittier Elementary School — General Music, Five District Schools

Introducing music education to his district's youngest learners and special education students has been transformative, for them and for James. His classroom features instruments such as boomwhackers, egg shakers, desk bells, digital and acoustic pianos, rhythm sticks, recorders and ukuleles. He is dedicated to fostering kindness, creativity and respect in his students.

Quote of Note:

A difficult job superbly done says this administrator, "Traveling among five schools is no small feat, yet Mr. Lee brings energy, warmth and purpose to every campus he serves."



Shannon Gaunt - Semifinalist

Torrance Unified School District

Joseph Arnold Elementary School — 1st - 5th Grades: Moderate to Severe Special Day

Years Teaching: 25

As Shannon explains, in special education no two days are the same and no two students are the same. But one thing that never changes is her commitment to helping her students overcome their challenges and making the world a more accessible place for them.

Quote of Note:

A mother's poignant words, "Shannon gave me hope for my child's future. She was a mom, too, and had walked with her own child in the same shoes that I was walking in."



Dao Liu

Valle Lindo School District

Dean L. Shively Middle School - Sixth Grade: Math, Science, Physical Education

Years Teaching: 25

Dao discovered early the joy of helping young minds grow and knew teaching was the path she was meant to follow. She's continually reminded that she chose this profession to make a lasting impact just as her own teachers did for her.

Quote of Note:

A fellow teacher shares her observations, "I've observed Dao's commitment to help each of her students succeed, whether in class or through after-school math support."



Tina Moffa

Walnut Valley Unified School District Collegewood Elementary School — Third Grade

Years Teaching: 26

Here's what Tina would tell anyone considering teaching: "Come join us. Join us if you want to make a difference that lasts far beyond the last bell. Join us if you believe in potential and in the power of showing up. Teaching is not just a job, it's a legacy."

Quote of Note:

A colleague's tribute, "Tina hosts regular 'lunch bunches' with current and former students as opportunities for real conversations that build lasting connections. Her students know she sees them as whole people, not just names on a roster."





Nicholas Sanchez - Semifinalist

West Covina Unified School District Edgewood High School — 9th - 12th Grades: English, ELD, Ethnic Studies

Despite coming from a family of educators, Nick intended to take a different path. But when a colleague called during a staffing emergency, he stepped into a classroom—and found his true calling. Inspired by literature that reflected his identity, he now focuses on fostering inquiry, human connection and self-discovery through a student-centered approach.

Quote of Note:

A former student who went on to graduate high school and then college offers eloquent testimony, "I see Mr. Sanchez as not only my former teacher but a wonderful mentor."



Juliana Maldonado

Westside Union School District Esperanza Elementary School — TK - 6th Grades: Resource ELA, Math Support

Years Teaching: 10

Juliana teaches special education because she believes every child deserves someone in their corner. As an English learner and neurodivergent individual herself, she creates safe, inclusive classrooms where differences are celebrated and persistence is the norm. "Their struggles," she said, "remind me of my own."

Quote of Note:

A mother expresses heartfelt appreciation, "Thank you for seeing the potential in my son and helping him bring it to life. We are so blessed to have you in his corner."



Cesar Covarrubias

Whittier City School District Katherine Edwards Middle School - 7th - 8th Grades: Mathematics

Years Teaching: 23

Graduating with a math degree, Cesar wondered what to do with it. He figured maybe, with a bit of help, he could teach kids math. A mentor-teacher provided that help, and twenty-plus years later Cesar is not only teaching but mentoring new math teachers.

Quote of Note:

An administrator notes, "Cesar's math leadership roles now include his being named District Math Coach (TOSA), supporting both new and experienced math teachers."



Laurie Thomas

Whittier Union High School District California High School — 10th - 12th Grades: Science

Years Teaching: 40

For the past 18 of her 40 years in education, Laurie has led teams of teachers and guided more than 1,000 students in exploring health care careers, developing skills and earning certifications. Many of those students have gone on to pursue high-level roles in the medical field.

Quote of Note:

A fellow teacher writes, "When Laurie came back to teach after a stint in nursing school, our high school wisely rewarded her by making her coordinator of our Health Academy."

Rebecca Zeckzer

Wilsona School District

Vista San Gabriel Elementary — Kindergarten - 2nd Grades: Reading, Math Intervention

Rebecca never planned on being a teacher. But something clicked when she started volunteering in her daughter's classroom. She found herself excited to be there. "I loved supporting the students and seeing the joy on their faces when something made sense."

Quote of Note:

A parent's thoughtful comment, "Mrs. Zeckzer's calm and respectful attitude encourages children to ask questions and express their thoughts without any fear of judgment."



Dina Stern - Semifinalist

Wiseburn Unified School District Aviation Elementary School — Fifth Grade

Years Teaching: 22

Motivated by her own shy, insecure childhood, Dina chose this profession to become the teacher she once needed. She empowers students to find their voice, advocate for change and embrace lifelong learning. She explains, "I want every student to feel noticed, valued and supported, regardless of how quietly they may show up."

Quote of Note:

An administrator recalls, "Partnering with Mrs. Stern during the pandemic gave me firsthand insight into her adaptability, creativity and commitment to student success."





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