

# Tulare County Office of Education

*Jim Vidak, County Superintendent of Schools*

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## **For Immediate Release**

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**Tulare County Office of Education Announces:**

## **Countywide Excellence in Education Winners Announced**

**Teacher of the Year, School Employee of the Year and Administrator/Manager of the Year selected in annual awards program**

A selection committee of Tulare County business and educational leaders met recently to review the Tulare County Administrator/Manager of the Year, Teacher of the Year and School Employee of the Year nominations for 2016. The Excellence in Education Awards program, now celebrating its 23<sup>rd</sup> year, honors “the best of the best” in the three educational categories. A total of 26 nominations were received this year from Tulare County school districts. Each nomination was reviewed and scored individually by every member of the selection committee.

“The winners are dedicated to student engagement and success – particularly those students who may be at risk of becoming disconnected from school or who have struggled in the past,” said Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Jim Vidak. “Each of these creative individuals use the widest range of resources to see that students meet their greatest potential.”

Once the selection committee reviewed each nomination and the scores were tallied, County Superintendent of Schools Jim Vidak visited each of the winners to inform them of their award. The winners in the 2016 Excellence in Education program are:

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## **WINNERS**

### **Administrator of the Year: Luis Cobarruvias, Dean of Students, Mission Oak High School, Tulare Joint Union High School District**

Luis Cobarruvias serves as the Dean of Students at Mission Oak High School in Tulare – a position he also held at Tulare Union High School until earlier this school year. He serves as the administrative liaison and instructional coach to the school’s core departments, including mathematics, English, science, special education and World Languages. He also oversees discipline and counseling, at-risk students, English Learners and Migrant students, and has developed the school’s PIQE (Parent Institute for Quality Education) and the ELAC (English Learners Advisory Council).

Mr. Cobarruvias’ passion for students has led him to make connections to the school’s feeder districts of Pixley and Tipton. Through regular visits to these towns, he has made students feel welcome before they ever step foot on campus and made parents feel empowered and connected. In the short time that Mr. Cobarruvias has been at Mission Oak, participation in the school’s PIQE has grown nearly 400%. Under his supervision, Tulare Union’s PIQE has seen more graduates than any other high school in California.

Mr. Cobarruvias is the founder and past-president of the Tulare County Hispanic Leadership Network, a local network of professionals in the field of education who meet regularly to dialogue about best practices, hear from leaders in the field, and establish a network of educators. He has worked for the Tulare Joint Union High School District for nine years.

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**Teacher of the Year: Stephen Amundson, Teacher/Activities Director, Tulare Western High School,  
Tulare Joint Union High School District**

A champion for engagement at Tulare Western High School, Stephen Amundson works to develop the potential in all students. Whether he's teaching at-risk students through Reconnecting Youth, helping to pair freshmen and upper classmen through Link Crew, supporting students to become college-ready with study, organization and social skills through AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), or motivating student leaders through ASB (Associated Student Body), Mr. Amundson is inspiring them to be their best.

Mr. Amundson's motto, "Leadership starts with you, but it's not about you" perfectly reflects his focus on building servant leaders. Tulare Western's ASB has led the Soled Out for Kids campaigns, which afforded every elementary student at Roosevelt and Maple schools new shoes, as well as Operation Warmth, Feeding the Need, and numerous other community partnerships. Nominators praised Mr. Amundson for his tireless work ethic, which motivates students to create school spirit, generate a safe and bully-free environment, serve their campus and community, and highlight the achievements of others and not just their own. Through his example, students are gaining the leadership skills they will use in college or career.

Stephen Amundson lives by the philosophy, "A teacher's main objective is to become less and less needed in the lives of their learners." For the 2015-16 school year, he was named the Tulare Joint Union High School District's teacher of the year. He has served the Tulare Western campus for 12 years.

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**School Employee of the Year: Erik Gonzales, Student Advocate, John J. Cairns Continuation High School, Lindsay Unified School District**

As a student advocate for Lindsay Unified's three alternative education sites (John J. Cairns Continuation High School, Lindsay Community Day and Loma Vista Charter), Erik Gonzales supports students with social skills training, behavior modification and academic monitoring. He also provides parent outreach, including in-home and school site consultation and related assistance. Nominators praised Mr. Gonzales for helping to transform the culture at the alternative education programs through strong collaboration with students, parents, administrators and the community. He has helped to create motivating learning opportunities such as building a work-based internship program that connects students to real-world experiences.

Prior to joining the staff at Lindsay's continuation high school, Mr. Gonzales was a Reconnecting Youth specialist at Lindsay High School. There, he helped to create a culture of inclusion and acceptance, coaching staff on how to best create a learner-centered environment that supported the needs of at-risk learners. He brought the need for interventions to the forefront of staff discussion to support students' academic achievement.

Erik Gonzales has been employed with the Lindsay Unified School District since 2010. He has served the students at John J. Cairns Continuation High School and the other alternate programs since 2013. In his current position he says, "Every day I get to face new challenges and find solutions for every obstacle our learners face."

## **FINALISTS**

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Two finalists are selected in each of the three categories:

## **Administrator of the Year**

Lana Brown, Deputy Superintendent, Lindsay Unified School District

Brian Roberts, Theatre Company Director/Instructional Consultant, Tulare County Office of Education

## **School Employee of the Year**

Juana Gray, Guidance Counselor, Harmony Magnet Academy, Porterville Unified School District

Jeanette Medina, Instructional Assistant, Jefferson Elementary School, Dinuba Unified School District

## **Teacher of the Year**

Dr. Michael Allard, Orchestra Director, Harmony Magnet Academy, Porterville Unified School District

Benjamin Cooper, Third Grade Teacher, Alpine Vista School, Tulare City School District

## **RECOGNITION EVENT**

Award recipients, finalists and nominees will be honored at a recognition breakfast on November 2, 2016.

Event attendees will enjoy a video highlighting the work of the overall winners.

“We greatly appreciate the support of our partners in this event – the Educational Employees Credit Union, its President/CEO Beth Dooley, and board of directors,” says Jim Vidak. “Together, we have the privilege of recognizing the many talented men and women who devote their lives to educating children and young adults in Tulare County.”

For more information, contact Marlene Moreno, Administrative Assistant, at (559) 733-6302.

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