

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:

Educators of the Year to be honored at the 24th Annual Confucius' Birthday Celebration at Chinese Cultural Center September 21, 2017 • 6:00 p.m. • Chinese Cultural Center • 500 S. Akers St., Visalia

On September 21, three Tulare County educators will have a special night with family, friends and colleagues celebrating their unique talents and accomplishments. The evening honors are part of the annual teacher recognition partnership with the Central California Chinese Cultural Center. Known as the Confucius' Birthday/Educators of the Year Awards, the program celebrates three teachers on the birthday of Confucius – an occasion Chinese people around the world often use to recognize exemplary teachers. “This year’s winners go above and beyond to support the students they serve,” said Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Jim Vidak. “What makes the winners so special is that their expectations are high and they are creative in accessing resources to see that their students succeed.

The winners in the elementary, middle and high school categories are:

Yesenia Martinez, Transitional Kindergarten Teacher, Woodville Union School

Mrs. Martinez has the only class of transitional kindergarten (TK) students at Woodville Union School near Porterville. The district has entrusted the veteran teacher with its youngest learners for good reason.

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“Mrs. Martinez has a passion for her profession and is a true professional who is highly respected by her peers,” said Woodville Superintendent Jesse Navarro. “Her devotion to her students is unmeasurable.

Mrs. Martinez is not only responsible for laying the academic foundation for her students – most of whom are four years old – but also helping to develop their social and emotional skills. “In addition to academics, we focus on getting them used to the structure of the school setting – learning to share, listen and work together as a class.” Mrs. Martinez has a class of 24 students; 13 of them are English language learners.

Mrs. Martinez has been a teacher for Woodville Union School District since 2001. Her own academic journey included graduating from California State University, Bakersfield in 2000 and receiving her teaching credential in 2002. Since that time, she has also earned a Master of Arts Degree in Education with a concentration in Multicultural Education.

Yesenia Martinez will admit that she is a competitive person. “I don’t like to hear that my students can’t be expected to do or learn certain things,” she said with a smile. She has established the ambitious academic goal that her students will be reading at level four by the end of the school year. Her standard is the same as kindergarten teachers working with students one year older.

In addition to her TK teaching assignment, Mrs. Martinez dedicates her time to Woodville’s after school migrant intervention classes, as well as a variety of activities geared toward motivating all Woodville students. She is a key player in the success of many noontime activities, the school’s “Night at the Museum” and the annual Cinco de Mayo celebration. During the summer, she served as a teacher for the Tulare County Migrant Education Program home base labor camps in Ducor.

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Joel Muller, Sixth-Grade Teacher, Columbine School

Teacher, coach, theater director, academic activities facilitator and yearbook advisor – Joel Muller wears many hats at Columbine School. Mr. Muller has taught at Columbine School for 17 years. For the last five years, he has been the small school's sixth-grade teacher.

“I absolutely love the sixth-grade curriculum,” said Mr. Muller, who teaches all subjects. “Of course, it's the year students get to go to SCICON, but we also study ancient civilizations, which exposes them to the world of the past. I also enjoy that students are showing greater independence as learners, but at times need my guidance.”

In addition to his classroom responsibilities, Joel Muller is a busy coach. Mr. Muller coaches Columbine's A boys teams in football, soccer and basketball, and assists with the A baseball team. He also coaches the school's track team. “He teaches skills in all of these sports by demonstrating and having students actively participate,” said Columbine Superintendent Tim Jones. “His players learn excellent techniques which enhance their athletic abilities.”

Each year, Mr. Muller teams with fifth-grade teacher Mrs. Taylor to present *The Naughty Little Kids of Christmas*, a play he and Mrs. Taylor co-wrote. The play has become a popular event with parents and a positive experience for Columbine students developing their self-confidence and oral language skills with an audience.

Mr. Muller also coaches Columbine's Odyssey of the Mind team as a noontime activity. His teams frequently place first or second at the regional level. At the state level last year, his team placed tenth. Mr. Muller also

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supervised Columbine's yearbook club the last two years. Student participation has escalated, with seventh and eighth graders helping with the book's design and photography.

"Not all students want to be great athletes," he said. "By offering them other academic and enrichment activities, we ensure that they are engaged and developing as well-rounded learners," said Mr. Muller.

Jodi Fortney, Teacher, Severely Handicapped, Tulare County Office of Education

Jodi Fortney grew up in Visalia, attended Redwood High School and graduated from the University of Calgary with a Bachelor of Commerce degree. Although education may not have been Mrs. Fortney's first choice for a career, she fell in love with the idea after spending six weeks student teaching in a special needs classroom.

In 1987, she joined the Tulare County Office of Education (TCOE) Special Services Division and has been inspiring students, families, and peer educators ever since. "Enthusiastic, energetic, compassionate, loving, hopeful, creative, and nurturing are all words that come to mind when I think of Jodi," said TCOE Assistant Superintendent of Special Services Tammy Bradford. During the last 30 years of her career, Jody Fortney has taught students with special needs from pre-school through high school. She has been a teacher at Mt. Whitney High School in Visalia since 1999.

In addition to her passion for the classroom, Mrs. Fortney has inspired teachers around the state with her approach to adapting and delivering curriculum. Three years ago, she was given the opportunity to work with the California Department of Education, and National Center and State Collaborative on how to teach students with significant cognitive disabilities. As a result of her involvement, she was selected to be a part of a field test through the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. The findings from that study supported the

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belief that students with significant intellectual disabilities were tremendously successful in learning grade-level material. Due to these significant findings, Mrs. Fortney was invited to present her experience at a national conference in Washington, D.C. With the use of a variety of visual response strategies and teaching modalities, Jodi's students are interacting and answering questions to novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Pearl* – once again proving that with high expectations, great things can be accomplished.

At Mt. Whitney, Mrs. Fortney's students are an integral part of campus culture. "What makes this school so special is that we are part of the family," said Mrs. Fortney. "There is a unique and longstanding partnership between the teachers, general education students and the kids in my classroom." Each year, dozens of general education students apply to be aides in her classroom. "From this experience, I know we have had several former Mt. Whitney students decide to pursue careers in special education," she added.

For more information about the Confucius Birthday/Educators of the Year Awards, call Marlene Moreno at (559) 733-6302.

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