

Tulare County  
Office of Education

*Tim A. Hire, County Superintendent of Schools*

news  
galleryweek

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## Winners in the 30th Annual Excellence in Education Awards program announced



On Friday, April 19, Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire surprised the three winners named in the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Tulare County Excellence in Education Awards program. The three winners notified were Alexa Barba-Tepper (2024 Administrator/Manager of the Year), Kristy Caesar (2024 Teacher of the Year), and Lisa Kruger (2024 School Employee of the Year).

“The winners are all phenomenal educators, creatively addressing the needs of their students and the communities they serve,” Hire said.

In March, a selection committee of Tulare County business and education leaders met to review the nominees in each of the three categories. A total of 30 nominations were received this year

from Tulare County school districts. Each nomination was reviewed and scored individually by every member of the selection committee.

## **ADMINISTRATOR/MANAGER OF THE YEAR**

### **Winner**

#### **Alexa Barba-Tepper**

Assistant Principal, Redwood High School  
Visalia Unified School District

A woman who wears many hats, Alexa Barba-Tepper has served the students of Redwood High School since 2007, first as a school counselor and – since 2011 – as the assistant principal of Student Services. Under her leadership, she has built a comprehensive counseling department with systems to increase student A-G course achievement and college and career readiness. She also oversees the special education department and assists with student government activities and the Link Crew Program. On many instances, she has connected marginalized students to a club or activity, increasing their engagement on campus.

Barba-Tepper plans many school events, including Round-Up for upperclassmen, freshman orientation, eighth-grade visits, the end-of-year assembly, and Redwood's graduation ceremony. Through these activities and others, she serves as the custodian of the school's cherished traditions. In giving back to her profession, Barba-Tepper is a coach for administrative services credential candidates through the Tulare County Office of Education iLead Program, Fresno Pacific University, and her district's Clear Administrative Services Credential program.

### **Finalists**

Evan Halstead  
Counselor, Dinuba High School  
Dinuba Unified School District

Shanelle Herrera  
Assistant Principal, Tulare Union High School  
Tulare Joint Union High School District

## **TEACHER OF THE YEAR**

### **Winner**



### **Kristy Caesar**

Transitional Kindergarten Learning Facilitator, Lincoln Elementary School  
Lindsay Unified School District

Kristy Caesar is a transitional kindergarten learning facilitator at Lincoln Elementary School in Lindsay. Her nominators called her, “a model of boundless energy and passion for teaching, leading, and learning.” Caesar has worked for Lindsay Unified since 2012, previously serving the district as a literacy coach, reading specialist, after school literacy learning facilitator for the Migrant Education program, and a kindergarten learning facilitator. In her classroom, Caesar creates unique experiences to ignite children’s imaginations – a real tractor to learn about agriculture or a homemade yellow submarine to transport learners to the depths of the oceans.

Caesar is a board member for the Dollars for Scholars not-for-profit program, which provides scholarships to Lindsay students. She also serves as a mentor teacher for both the district’s Teacher Residency Program and the Lindsay Pipeline, coaching, training, developing, and mentoring the next generation of educators. She has participated in the Tulare County Office of Education Community of Practice for Transitional Kindergarten and the Universal PreKindergarten Work Group. School psychologist Barry Sommer said, “Everyone who knows early education knows and wants Kristy.”

### **Finalists**

#### **Tarek Elsharkawy**

Chemistry Teacher, Golden West High School  
Visalia Unified School District



## **Mary Pauls**

Music Teacher

Monson-Sultana Joint Union School District

## **SCHOOL EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR**

### **Winner**



## **Lisa Kruger**

Administrative Assistant, Linwood Elementary School

Visalia Unified School District

Lisa Kruger has served Linwood Elementary School as an employee for 18 years and even longer as a parent volunteer. As the school's administrative assistant, she is the "first to step up when any staff member or student needs support," said Principal Mike Yates. Kruger organizes school assemblies for students and their parents, intramural sports programs at lunchtime, and Linwood's "Giving Tree" donations program for families in need.

In addition to her duties as the principal's assistant, she has developed or assumed responsibility for numerous special programs. As an artist, Kruger volunteered 21 years ago to teach art and art history in the school's new afterschool program. That program continues today and includes an annual Art Show to showcase student artwork. Kruger also coaches teams for Odyssey of the Mind – an international creative competition – for 15 years at Linwood Elementary, La Joya Middle School, and El Diamante High School. Her teams have competed at Odyssey of the Mind World Finals for six years, placing fourth one year and in the top 20 all other years.

### **Finalists**

**Rita Leon**

Special Student Services Administrative Assistant  
Dinuba Unified School District

**Gene Mendes**

Character Education Facilitator  
Tulare County Office of Education

**Recognition Ceremony**

The winners, finalists, and nominees will be honored at an invitation-only breakfast event on October 30, 2024 in the Redwood Conference Center. A video profiling the winners will be shown and posted to the Excellence in Education webpage at [www.tcoe.org/Awards](http://www.tcoe.org/Awards).

The Excellence in Education program is a partnership between the Tulare County Office of Education and Educational Employees Credit Union (EECU).

Photos above:

~ Alexa Barba-Tepper (third from left) was selected as the 2024 Tulare County Administrator/Manager of the Year. She is the assistant principal at Redwood High School in Visalia.

~ Kristy Caesar (third from left) is the 2024 Tulare County Teacher of the Year. She is a transitional kindergarten learning facilitator at Lincoln Elementary School in Lindsay.

~ The 2024 School Employee of the Year is Lisa Kruger (third from left), the administrative assistant at Linwood Elementary School in Visalia.

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## TCSBA announces 2024 scholarship winners

For over 20 years, the Tulare County Office of Education has assisted the Tulare County School Boards Association (TCSBA) with its annual scholarship program. Each year, the association offers scholarships to seniors from every Tulare County high school, including comprehensive, charter, and continuation settings. Marlene Moreno and Jennifer Fisher from County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire's office coordinate the distribution of information to Tulare County high schools and the screening process with TCSBA board members. This year, the association was pleased to provide 25 scholarships of \$350 to the following students.



Below is a list of the winners:

**Daniela Maciel Navarro**, Summit Charter Collegiate Academy (Porterville)

**Emily Orosco Alberto**, Orosi High School

**Elizabeth Hernandez**, Dinuba High School

**Ashlyn Venegas**, Exeter Union High School

**Valeria Anaya-Alcaraz**, Farmersville High School

**Rosita Galvez Sanchez**, J.J. Cairns Continuation High School (Lindsay)

**Edgar Guzman-Contreras**, Lindsay High School

**Diego Corona Ibarra**, Granite Hills High School (Porterville)

**Robert Ikeda**, Harmony Magnet Academy (Strathmore)

**Gabrielle Sutherland**, Monache High School (Porterville)

**Allyson McLaughlin**, Porterville High School

**Jaden Thomas**, Strathmore High School

**Evelyn Swan**, Eleanor Roosevelt Community Learning Center (Visalia)

**Ruby Rodriguez-Barajas**, La Sierra Military Academy (Visalia)

**Tieu-Tam Bui**, University Preparatory High School (Visalia)

**Shirley Viera**, Accelerated Charter High School (Tulare)

**Mary Jose Sanchez Elias**, Mission Oak High School (Tulare)

**Carys Whitfield**, Tulare Union High School

**Isabella Zavaleta**, Tulare Western High School

**Mateo La Serna**, El Diamante High School (Visalia)

**Diana Gonzalez**, Golden West High School (Visalia)

**Luis Ubiedo**, Mt. Whitney High School (Visalia)

**Lindamaria Herrera**, Redwood High School (Visalia)

**Minerva Mendoza**, Sequoia High School (Visalia)

**Sierra Sherwood**, Woodlake Union High School

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## Around the County

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### California Military Department opens state's fifth STARBASE in Porterville

On Friday, April 19, members of the California Military Department (CMD) and administrators and board members from the Porterville Unified School District (PUSD) held an open house for the new STARBASE program, housed on the campus of the Porterville Military Academy. Through the military academy, PUSD has been collaborating with CMD and its Youth Community Programs Task Force.



Years in the planning, STARBASE Porterville is a hands-on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art & architecture, and math) program for elementary students. It is the fifth STARBASE in California and among over 80 in the U.S. STARBASE is federally funded by the U.S. Department of Defense. The Porterville program is unique in that it is located on a school site rather than a state or federal military base. While not a military recruitment program, STARBASE creators definitely hope to interest students in pursuing careers in STEAM-related fields.

STARBASE Porterville is designed to engage Tulare and surrounding county fifth-grade students in a weeklong introduction to the world of STEAM. At STARBASE, students will receive lessons in physics and energy, chemical reactions, robotics coding and circuits, computer-aided design (CAD), and applied mathematics, including measuring distance, volume, and angles.

For more information on STARBASE Porterville and arranging a visit, contact director Rene Martin at [rmartin6192@portervilleschools.org](mailto:rmartin6192@portervilleschools.org).

Photo above:

*~ At the open house for STARBASE Porterville last week, students utilized computer-aided design (CAD) to create a Martian exploration base. Those attending STARBASE in the future will enjoy a variety of applications and activities to learn STEAM topics.*

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Editor: [Robert Herman](#), Communications Director

Contributors: Nayirah Dosu, Marlene Moreno, Jennifer Fisher

To receive the News Gallery Week, sign up [here](#), or contact Jennifer Fisher at [jenniferf@tcoe.org](mailto:jenniferf@tcoe.org) or (559) 733-6172.