

## 2021 Excellence in Education Award winners selected

Last week, Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire surprised three school employees, telling them they had been selected as 2021 recipients of Excellence in Education Awards. The winners are Administrator/Manager of the Year Michael Akins of the Dinuba Unified School District, Teacher of the Year Manuela Silveira of the Tulare County Office of Education (TCOE), and School Employee of the Year Jeff Lemos of TCOE.

“During our presentations, it was heartwarming to hear each of the winners try to deflect the attention to other members of their teams,” said Superintendent Hire. “This speaks volumes about the character of these individuals and their care for their colleagues and those that they serve.”

Earlier this year, Tulare County school districts nominated 28 educators in the three categories – Administrator/Manager, Teacher, and School Employee of the Year. A selection committee of Tulare County business and education leaders individually reviewed and scored each nominee to determine the winners. Superintendent Hire is hopeful that the award winners, finalists, and nominees can be properly celebrated at an in-person awards breakfast in November.

### **Administrator/Manager of the Year**

#### **Michael Akins**

Director, Educational Technology and Instructional Program Analysis  
Dinuba Unified School District

Michael Akins has been an employee of Dinuba Unified School District for 27 years, serving as a special education teacher, regular education teacher, and an educational coach for technology integration. For the past 17 years, he has served in district leadership as director of Instructional Program Analysis & Educational Technology.

Supporters refer to Akins as “the MacGyver of Dinuba Unified.” His passion for finding creative solutions to technology integration was more than evident this year as he served on the district’s COVID Task Force. He was a key player in seeing that all students had a Chromebook ready to start distance learning in the fall. To support teachers, he helped plan and implement a three-day virtual technology conference, followed by individual coaching sessions.

Akins is committed to the district’s vision to end generational poverty through education. To aid in this vision, he works closely with district departments, including college and career readiness and the high school counselor teams, to provide them with valuable data to support their students and continuously improve their efforts. He also contributes his expertise to outside organizations, including the Tulare Kings College and Career Collaborative.



## **Teacher of the Year**

### **Manuela Silveira**

Special Education Teacher, Maple Elementary AcCEL Program  
Tulare County Office of Education

Manuela Silveira is a special education teacher with an extraordinary work ethic. She works with children in grades 3-8 at Maple Elementary in Tulare. Her career in special education began when she was a junior at neighboring Tulare Western High School and volunteered as an aide at Maple Learning Complex.

For the past 34 years, she has worked to develop happy, independent students, focusing on increasing their communication skills and abilities to take care of themselves. She believes that communication skills are key to their personal success. She regularly consults with a TCOE speech and language specialist, brainstorming ideas to support her students. In her work with students, she says, "The number one need is for them to know that I love and care for them. Once we establish this, everything else starts to fall into place."

A parent of one of the students in her classroom said, "Where most would see deficiencies, Mrs. Silveira has seen potential." The parent praised her for the progress she has helped her daughter realize – achievements that include walking, talking, and learning, despite contrary diagnoses from doctors.



## **School Employee of the Year**

### **Jeff Lemos**

Lead Custodian  
Tulare County Office of Education

"Calling Jeff dependable would be an understatement," said one supporter. "His character sets the example of how a TCOE employee should carry themselves." Jeff Lemos is the lead custodian for the Tulare County Office of Education's three main sites in Visalia – the Doe Avenue Complex, the Liberty Complex, and the 90,000-square foot Mooney Boulevard Administration Building and Redwood Conference Center.

Lemos schedules the full- and part-time custodians, and works alongside them to maintain, clean, and sanitize all three sites. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he has developed protocols incorporating state guidelines for social distancing and disinfecting. He constantly asks his team for feedback, giving them a sense of pride in their important work.

Lemos' "baby" is TCOE's 24,000-square foot Redwood Conference Center. With movable walls, the center can be configured in dozens of ways – from smaller rooms for trainings to one large room for special events. Jeff developed the capacities for every configuration, whether they are set for classrooms, banquets, or student performances. He personally meets with event coordinators utilizing the conference center to develop plans to best meet their needs. Prior to the pandemic, the conference center annually welcomed over 30,000 visitors.



## Finalists

In addition to the winners, the selection committee chose two finalists in each category. The finalists in the 2021 Excellence in Education Awards program are:

### Administrator/Manager of the Year

George Eddy, Exeter Unified School District  
Mark Martinez, Tulare County Office of Education

### Teacher of the Year

Genaro Casas, Tulare Union High School  
Matthew Green, Alila Elementary, Earlimart School District

### School Employee of the Year

Austin Monge, Exeter High School  
Imelda Santillan, Wilson Elementary, Dinuba Unified School District

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## Annual Summer Institute event for administrators set for June 16

Tulare County administrators are invited to register for the virtual Summer Institute scheduled for June 16. The event will kick off at 9:30 a.m. with a ceremony to honor the retiring district administrators, those who have been named administrators of the year through the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), and the Tulare County high school seniors who have received ACSA scholarships.

At 10:00 a.m., keynote presenter Tom Murray will deliver a heartwarming message about the challenges and rewards Tulare County administrators have faced this year. Murray serves as the Director of Innovation for Future Ready Schools in Washington, D.C. He has testified before the United States Congress and has worked alongside that body, the US Senate, the White House, the US Department of Education and state departments of education, corporations, and school districts throughout the country to implement student-centered learning. A best-selling author, Murray serves as a regular conference keynote. He was named the 2018 National/Global EdTech Leader of the Year by *EdTech Digest*, the 2017 Education Thought Leader of the Year by Texas Computer Education Association, and one of 20 to Watch by National School Boards Association in 2016. His best-selling book, *Learning Transformed: 8 Keys to Designing Tomorrow's Schools, Today*, co-authored with Eric Sheninger, was released in June 2017. His most recent book, *Personal & Authentic: Designing Learning Experiences that Impact a Lifetime*, was released in October 2019.



The cost to attend Summer Institute is free. Visit [tulare.k12oms.org/1529-203048](http://tulare.k12oms.org/1529-203048) and utilize the access code "Summer" to complete the registration process, which closes June 14. For questions about registration, contact Marlene Moreno at [marlenem@tcoe.org](mailto:marlenem@tcoe.org) or (559) 733-6302.

*Photo above:*

~ Award-winning author and education reformer Thomas Murray will be the keynote speaker at the virtual Tulare County Summer Institute June 16.

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## Journalist Nayirah Dosu joins Communications Department

Award-winning journalist Nayirah Dosu has joined Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire's staff this week. Dosu will serve as a communications specialist, having worked as the sports reporter for *The Porterville Recorder* since 2016.

Superintendent Hire has created the Communications Department, led by communications director Rob Herman, to better support TCOE programs through social media, print, video, and an upcoming new website. The Communications Department will also work to develop an intranet for TCOE employees and highlight significant news in Tulare County school districts.

Dosu, an honors journalism graduate from Fresno State University, learned recently that she won a fourth-place California Journalism Award sponsored by the California News Publishers Association. The award was given for a story she wrote previously about student and staff experiences with distance learning at Granite Hills High School.

"We are delighted to have Nayirah on board," said Superintendent Hire. "She brings a complementary set of skills to our new Communications Department, plus she loves interacting with students and sharing their stories. We look forward to seeing how we are better able to share the great things our programs and Tulare County schools are doing."





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## Theatre Company's spring show, *Our Father's Dragon*, now available on YouTube



In the production of *Our Father's Dragon*, the five children of Elmer Elevator tell the story of how their father, when he was a boy, befriended an alley cat who helped him plan a journey that would fulfill his dream of flying. On his journey, Elmer frees the cat's friend, a captive dragon, by outsmarting savage boars, monkeys, tigers, crocodiles, and other wild animals. As a reward for his kindness and bravery, the dragon takes young Elmer on a flight off his prison island.

The delightful production of *Our Father's Dragon* was the vision of Theatre Company choreographer Nicole Zweifel. It was written and directed virtually by Zweifel based on the beloved children's fantasy novel, *My Father's Dragon*, by Ruth Stiles Gannett.

This spring, a cast of over 30 Tulare County children performed the play virtually, their segments edited together with music and sound and visual effects to form the half-hour program. "It was a joy to watch these kids and their families work to bring this wonderful adventure to life," said Zweifel. "Working on creative projects during the pandemic has been hard on everyone. Every time I get to work with these kids on Zoom or look at a video they submitted, it helped me know that we all will get past this and keep doing beautiful work together!"

To view *Our Father's Dragon*, visit [tcoe.org/TheatreSpringShow](https://tcoe.org/TheatreSpringShow).

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## Lori Allan wins Brent Rast Award for outstanding service to children with special needs

There is no feeling out of place when Lori Allan is around.

Allan, the 2021 Brent Rast Award recipient, is currently a TCOE Special Services AcCEL teacher at Mt. Whitney High School (MWHS) and is well known for making everyone around her feel included.

Allan takes the time to get to know her students and their parents and understands the importance of positive relationships and communication between home and school. She is skilled at managing her classroom and making all students feel comfortable. In doing so, Allan's students are able to integrate into the high school environment in both classes and activities.

"With Lori's support, we have had TCOE students become members of various sports teams, cheerleading squad, and our dance team," MWHS principal Rick Hamilton said. "The list goes on and on. For students enrolled at MWHS through TCOE, there are few limitations to what they are allowed to participate in due in large part to Lori's work with the staff in coordinating supports and communication with families."

Hamilton noted that Visalia Unified School District general education students participate in the vocational education PIVET program, which places students in Allan's room to serve as tutors, mentors, and peers.

Allan began her career as a Special Education teacher for students with moderate/severe disabilities 29 years ago when she taught preschool at the Yettem Learning Center. After three years, she transitioned to a special day class at Valley Oak Middle School and was a valued staff member there for 16 years. From Valley Oak, Allan moved on to high schools and taught a very busy class at Exeter High School for seven years.

The Brent Rast Award is a memorial award named for a TCOE teacher of students with special needs who passed away over 25 years ago. The award is normally presented to an exemplary teacher at the annual Community Advisory Committee (CAC) luncheon. However, due to COVID, the luncheon was canceled and Allan was presented with the award at Mt. Whitney High School.



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## Monson-Sultana wins FNL Lip Sync competition



Students at Monson-Sultana Joint Union School showed off their creative sides and won first and second place while Oak Valley Union School placed third in the 32nd annual Friday Night Live Lip Sync Competition.

Monson-Sultana's video performance of *Corazón Espinado* by Carlos Santana featuring Maná won first place with eighth-graders Gilbert Camarillo and Elizabeth Quintero providing impassioned portrayals of Santana and Maná's lead singer, Fher Olvera, respectively. Margaret Vazquez, Justin Valdez, Alexa Solorio, and Yaritzi Jimenez also played Maná band members.

In second place, eighth-grader Aaliyah Costa gave it her all as Jon Bon Jovi in a lip-synced video performance of *Livin' on a Prayer*. She was joined by Delilah Velazquez, Kimberly Vazquez, Brianna Figueroa, and Layla Ramirez. In their performance, the group's black and white video transformed into a colorful serenade, complete with some "fans".

Monson-Sultana's videos were performed by members of the FUEL after school program. The groups were coached by Miley Corcoran, Catherine Diaz, and Valerie Burciaga. Burciaga also handled the videography.

Taking third place with a dance routine to Wayfarer's *Follow the Leader* was the Oak Valley Union dance and cheer team. The group's performance included a choreographed dance, as well as stunts.

The FNL Lip Sync Competition is open to grades 6-8 and includes three categories: lip sync, dance, and novelty. Due to COVID-19, the competition was held virtually using video submissions, and all categories were combined into one competition.

Friday Night Live creates opportunities for school-age youth to be involved in high energy, life affirming activities promoting abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, gang participation, and violence. Participation in this activity encourages the productive use of after-school time, develops students' talents and self-confidence, and recognizes their achievements.

Monson-Sultana's FUEL program manager, Catherine Diaz, said the lip sync performances provided students a way to break out of their shells and be a part of something.

"We call this the Lip Sync curse," Diaz said. "After a kid is in lip sync, they are loud and transformed. That is how Bon Jovi (Aaliyah) became Bon Jovi. She was a returning lip sync performer."

The competition was not held last year, but Monson-Sultana did win two awards in the 2019 competition as well.

To view the top three videos, visit [tcoe.org/LipSync](http://tcoe.org/LipSync).

*Photo above:*

*~ Monson-Sultana student Elizabeth Quintero lips syncs to Corazón Espinado by the Mexican rock band, Maná. The video won first place in the virtual Friday Night Live Lip Sync Competition.*

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## Distance Learning Resources

- [Arts All Around Us](#)
- [TCOE Learning at Home](#)
- [TCOE's Educational Resource Services Library](#)

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To receive *News Gallery Week*, visit [tcoe.org/GetTheGallery](http://tcoe.org/GetTheGallery), or contact Jennifer Fisher at [jenniferf@tcoe.org](mailto:jenniferf@tcoe.org) or (559) 733-6172.