

Tulare County
Office of Education

Tim A. Hire, County Superintendent of Schools

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SoCalGas Challenge returns, engaging high school teams in business development for environmental good



The SoCalGas Challenge was created in 2007 as a competition for high school students to develop business plans for products and services needed in the Central Valley. The teams worked for months to create their plans, presenting them to a panel of judges who selected the top ideas for cash prizes provided by the Gas Company.

The original competition, which ran for over 10 years, returns this year thanks to renewed support from SoCalGas. The new challenge asks students to propose climate solutions within their communities. Coordinated by TCOE's College and Career Readiness program, the Challenge was held Tuesday evening with eight teams competing.

The teams representing Orosi High School, Harmony Magnet Academy (Strathmore), Mission Oak High School (Tulare), and Summit Charter Collegiate Academy (Porterville) presented projects that addressed climate change, including resilient energy solutions, clean air solutions, and municipal strategies to address local issues in Tulare and Kings counties.

In first place and receiving a \$1,500 check from SoCalGas was the Solar System team from Summit Charter Collegiate Academy in the Burton School District. The team's business proposal was a plan to modernize street lamps to address light pollution, which affects animal, plant, and human wellbeing.

Receiving second place and a \$1,000 check was team S.P.E.C. from Orosi High School. The team's goal was to lessen the use of fossil fuels and to help families and workers in the agricultural district by minimizing injuries and inefficiencies in the fields. They proposed a solar-powered electric cart to carry the harvested fruits/vegetables.

In third place and receiving a \$500 check was Harmony Magnet Academy from Strathmore. Their plan called for the development of an environmental consulting firm to help school districts become "zero energy schools." The consulting firm would conduct audits on energy usage and infrastructures in current buildings, and propose energy efficient and sustainable alternatives.

Special thanks to Miguel Ramirez, public affairs manager with SoCalGas, and to our judges, John Gonzalez from the Workforce Investment Board of Tulare County, Kristy Martin from the Porterville Chamber of Commerce, and Airica de Oliveira from the Tulare County Economic Development Corporation.

20th Annual Slick Rock Student Film Festival held last week

Congratulations to El Diamante High School and Clark Intermediate School – this year's Best of Show award winners for the Slick Rock Student Film Festival! Slick Rock was held at the Visalia Fox Theatre last Friday. The two films each took home the grand prize after winning in their respective categories.



Cultivating Community with Salt+Light won High School Documentary before being announced as the High School Best of Show winner. The film was created by Yixuan Liang, Bennett Martella, and Esmeralda Mejia of El Diamante High School in Visalia.

Embrace Your Ideas won both Middle School General Public Service Announcement and Middle School Best of Show. It was created by Riley Gentz of Clark Intermediate School in Clovis. This year, Slick Rock received over 470 films in 17 categories from middle and high school students across six Central Valley counties.



Below is a complete list of this year's Slick Rock winners:

Animation: *Life Itself*, Minarets High School (Cole Frausto)

Flavored Tobacco/Vaping Prevention PSA: *Don't Cloud Your Future*, Redwood High School (Hannah Johnson, Logan Blackmon, Elijah Ochs)

Blockbuster – High School: *Lurk*, El Diamante High School (Timmy Le, Michael Weaver, Noah Powell)

Documentary – High School: *Cultivating Community with Salt+Light*, El Diamante High School (Bennett Martella, Yixuan Liang, Esmeralda Mejia)

General Advertisement – High School: *Camero*, Redwood High School (Trey Amundson, Brooklyn Amstutz, Emma Harrell, Tanner Hoffman, Elijah Ochs)

General Public Service Announcement (PSA) – High School: *Be a Life Saver*, Redwood High School (Hannah Johnson, Elijah Ochs)

Blockbuster – Middle School: Bananas, Clark Intermediate School (Riley Gentz, Darcy Gentz, Logan Gentz, Lillian Garringer, Huxly Gentz)

Documentary – Middle School: Equestrian Riding, North Fork Elementary School (Kendra Holmes, Taylor Davis)

General Advertisement – Middle School: Minarets Youth Football, Spring Valley Elementary School (Tyler Virgi)

General Public Service Announcement (PSA) – Middle School: Embrace Your Ideas, Clark Intermediate School (Riley Gentz)

Music Video – Cover: La Vie En Rose, Clovis West High School (Trace Hartman, Katelyn Hartman, Landon Peckham)

Music Video – Original: On My Mind, Redwood High School (Eli Bradshaw, Juliet Prosser, Trey Amundson, Payten Ball)

News Broadcast: Jesse's Story, Redwood High School (Hannah Johnson, Ciera Alvarez, Grace Hyatt, Jesse Santellano, Autumn Batti, Elijah Ochs)

Nutrition and Physical Activity PSA: Eat Smart, Live Healthy, Redwood High School (Ashtyn Cripps, Hannah Johnson, Brooklyn Amstutz, Jennah Creason, Elijah Ochs, Logan Blackmon)

Opioids/Fentanyl and Marijuana Prevention PSA: Education Against Fentanyl, West High School (Hunter Burch, David Ramos)

Sports Highlights: Ranger Nation, Redwood High School (Hannah Johnson, Donya Hassanshahi, Trey Amundson, Erik Navarro, Brooklyn Amstutz, Grace Hyatt)

Suicide Prevention PSA: Help A Friend Break Free, West High School (Erik Webb, Ivan Perez, Aubrey Navarro)

For more information on Slick Rock and to see the winning films, visit tcoe.org/SlickRock/Winners.

Photos above:

~ Cultivating Community with Salt+Light, above, was created by El Diamante High School's Bennett Martella, Yixuan Liang, and Esmeralda Mejia. The film won Documentary - High School and Best of Show - High School.

~ Embrace Your Ideas, below, was created by Clark Intermediate School's Riley Gentz. The film won Middle School General Public Service Announcement and Middle School Best of Show.

Robert McCool selected as Brent Rast Award recipient



Described as an “angel on Earth,” Robert McCool’s selection as this year’s Brent Rast Award winner is a well-deserved honor, even if he won’t admit it.

“He’s the most deserving person to get that award,” said McCool’s mentee, AcCEL teacher Shiloh Lucas. To which McCool responded, “I don’t think so.”

McCool joined TCOE in 2012 as an AcCEL teacher at Golden Oak Elementary in Visalia, then later became a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) with Special Services in 2019. As humble as they come, McCool’s work ethic and kindness in his role as a mentor and support for new teachers in the Tulare and Porterville areas is the embodiment of the Brent Rast Award. The Brent Rast Award is a special award given to a teacher of students with profound needs at the annual Community Advisory Committee luncheon. Rast was a TCOE teacher for students with severe needs and the award honors his memory for establishing leadership and vision.

“His imaginative ideas are now fundamental parts of many of the AcCEL classrooms,” said Jill Santivanez, Special Services administrator. “If you are lucky enough to observe a morning meeting in an AcCEL elementary classroom, you are seeing parts of Robert’s enhanced learning activities. He is truly there to coach everyone to success. Robert’s mentees have described him as an angel on Earth.”

McCool’s morning meetings have become famous since he began at TCOE. They include singing and dancing, but since McCool doesn’t like to be at the center of attention to big crowds, you may never see him in action.

“When it was just me and my kids in my classroom, I actually would dance and sing,” he said. “I’d do it but the second someone walked in, I’d sit down.”

What McCool loves most about his work in Special Services is seeing both students and teachers succeed. In his role as a TOSA, McCool trains teachers, helps with lesson plans, provides an ear to hear teachers out, and much more. As a former teacher, he still remembers the impact his mentor, Jodie Wiens, had in his first years of teaching at Clovis Unified School District. He hopes to continue that impact with the teachers he mentors.



“She was always there for me and always a mentor to me,” McCool said. “That’s my favorite part about this job, too, is that I get to be that for our new teachers. Share in their struggles and share in their successes, and just guide them. “

But one of McCool’s favorite things about his work, is the students. He loves to see how strong they are, even if people don’t give them credit for it. He loves to see that they are driven, loving, and compassionate youth who keep a smile on their face even when they’re persevering to overcome challenges.

“I say this a lot to the teachers I mentor – we teach them a lot of lessons, but ultimately, the most important lessons? They actually teach us. They teach society as a whole with their drive and who they are.”

Photo above:

~ Robert McCool, right, works with mentee Shiloh Lucas, left, at the LB Hill Learning Center in Porterville before students arrive for breakfast.

~ At the LB Hill Learning Center in Porterville, TOSA Robert McCool (right) has been supportive of teachers David Huerta (center) and Adriana Mejia (left) in the creation of a garden. He says they did all the work, but he helped to get concrete in the garden and works with teachers on using the garden as a learning activity.

Helen Milliorn-Feller, Ed.D., selected as University Preparatory High School's new principal



Helen Milliorn-Feller, Ed.D., is no stranger to University Preparatory High School (UPHS). She has been with the school even before it was a school. In 2007, she met John Kelly, the school's founding principal, at Eleanor Roosevelt Community Learning Center, where Feller was homeschooling her daughter, Alexandra. Kelly shared his vision of creating a charter school that would help students who traditionally did not make it into college. The idea captured Feller's attention and when the school received its charter in 2008, she was honored to be chosen as the first English and journalism teacher.

UPHS welcomed its first class of freshmen and sophomores in fall 2009, students Feller helped to recruit. In the nearly 15 years that the high school has been open, she

has served as a teacher, department leader, school lead teacher, learning director, and interim principal. She has also helped to create the school's yearbook and many of the traditions and events the school offers. This year, "her courageous, caring, and steady hand helped navigate the school through the retirement of (principal) Eric Thiessen," said Julie Berk, assistant superintendent of Student Support Services.

Feller, a first generation college graduate, holds a degree in comparative literature with a minor in psychology and Spanish from University of California, Davis. She earned her master's degree in Reading/English as a Second Language and administrative credential from Fresno Pacific University, and her Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Instructional Design and Development from George Fox University. In 2014, she was named High School Educator of the Year in the Central California Chinese Cultural Center's Confucius Birthday/Educators of the Year Awards.

"I am very honored to continue the work of UPHS in providing students the opportunity to benefit from the early college experience we offer," said Feller. "I am also looking forward to transitioning UPHS to its new campus and offering students more options as they prepare for college and career."

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

Contributors: Nayirah Dosu, Marlene Moreno, Jennifer Fisher, Therese Arnold, Grecia Pacheco, Kathleen Green-Martins, Robert McCool, Jill Santivanez, Helen Milliorn-Feller

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