

Tulare County  
Office of Education

*Tim A. Hire, County Superintendent of Schools*

news  
galleryweek

March 11, 2026

## Winners announced at Tulare County Science & Engineering Fair



Six projects are eligible for state after stellar performances at the 41st annual Tulare County Science & Engineering Fair.

Held Saturday at the annual STEAM Expo, the fair featured student exhibits that addressed real-world issues. This year, students in elementary, middle, and high school worked to create 45 projects. Students applied the scientific method to explore issues in Physical Sciences, Life Sciences, Earth & Space, Engineering & Mathematics, and Behavioral & Social Sciences.

The Tulare County students advancing to the California State Science & Engineering Fair, being held in Thousand Oaks on April 11-12, are:

**Ionic Propulsion Aircraft - Alternatives to Ground Vehicles** by Jose A. Dorado of Harmony Magnet Academy (Strathmore)

**A Cost Effective Filter Made From Accessible Materials to Reduce Contaminant Levels in Tulare County's Water** by Karolina Quirarte of Lindsay High School

**The Impact of Multitasking on Cognitive Performance** by Mary Awad of Exeter Union High School

**Healthy Soil, Healthy Farm** by Pete Lara of Westfield Elementary School (Porterville)

**Chasing the Sun** by Ari Navarro and Lea Navarro of Westfield Elementary School (Porterville)

**Saltbush Saves Salty Soils** by Morgan Driver of Monache High School (Porterville)

In Saltbush Saves Salty Soils, Driver proved his hypothesis correctly that saltbush could remove salinity from the soil. He found that it decreased salinity by 70%.

Driver, who was one of four students to earn a \$500 Calgren Carbon Educator Scholarship, said that he enjoyed working on a project that was in his area of interest.

"I'm definitely interested in agriculture and sustainable agriculture, and native plants," he said.

Along with Driver, Dorado, Quirarte, and Lara also received \$500 scholarships.

The only duo heading to state are twins, Ari and Lea Navarro, whose project findings will help their dad with the angle in which to put solar panels on his new shop roof. The two said they were happy to help their dad with his own project and earn a spot at state.

“Only six projects are going out of a lot of projects, so it does feel exciting,” said Ari. “And also, it’s in LA.”

A complete list of winners is available at <https://tcoe.org/STEAMExpo/fair/results>.

Photo above:

~ Monache High School's Morgan Driver received first place, a \$500 Calgren scholarship, and a trip to state for his project Saltbush Saves Salty Soils .

---

## Nicole Lopez is the 2026 Tulare County Spelling Champion



A seventh-grade student from Carl F. Smith Middle School in Terra Bella, Nicole Lopez, was crowned the 2026 Tulare County Spelling Champion on Thursday at the Tulare County Office of Education.

Lopez went head-to-head from Rounds 8 to 20 with Summer Lee, a fifth-grader from Heartland Charter School. In Round 20, Lopez spelled "execrable" to win the competition then hugged Lee who took second place.

"It was so stressful," Lopez said. "We kept going back-and-forth. And with the short study sessions I had, I was very unsure that I wasn't going to win. But to win, makes me feel so happy, and I feel really proud of myself, because I didn't think I was going to make it this far."

Wiping away tears along with Lopez was her coach, Noemi Silva Bedolla. Bedolla, who was emotional during the last rounds, said that Lopez had only missed a few words from the thousands that they had studied so she knew she had the potential to win.

"It was amazing the whole time," Bedolla said about watching Lopez on stage. "I'm very proud of her."

As the champion, Lopez is eligible to compete in the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C., May 26-28.



There was a three-way tie for third place between Jason Anthony, an eighth-grade student at Valley Life Charter School in Visalia, Vedant Pandey, a seventh-grade student at Oak Grove Elementary in Visalia, and Dean Wong, a seventh-grade student from Sequoia Middle School in Porterville.

Elementary and middle school students from 100 Tulare County schools competed this year.

Since its founding, the Tulare County Spelling Championship has been a partnership between the Tulare County Office of Education and the Visalia Times-Delta.

Photos above:

~ Nicole Lopez (above) competes in the 2026 Tulare County Spelling Championship.

~ The first- (center), second- (left) , and third-place (right) finishers in the 2026 Tulare County Spelling Championship pose for photos with their trophies.

---

## Palo Verde continues its winning streak at Anti-Tobacco/Marijuana Challenge Bowl



Last week, 23 teams of sixth and seventh graders battled it out in the annual Anti-Tobacco/Marijuana Challenge Bowl. The competitors participated in a game show-style event, answering questions about the harmful effects of tobacco and marijuana use, and the industries that promote their use.

Winning first place in the sixth-grade category was Palo Verde Union School (Tulare). The sixth-grade team from Pleasant View School (Porterville) finished second.

Palo Verde Union School won first in the seventh-grade category. The seventh-grade team from Rockford School (Porterville) finished second.



Teams also participated in the Project Soapbox competition, sponsored by the Tobacco Use Prevention Education (TUPE) program. Students created public service announcement (PSA) presentations, which were voted on by their peers. Winning first place were the seventh-grade team from Liberty School and the sixth-grade team from Kings River Union School. Project Soapbox PSAs will be shown live at the 2026 Lip Sync Battle on May 1 at the Visalia Fox Theatre.

Photos above:

~ First place in the sixth grade and seventh grade Anti-Tobacco/Marijuana Challenge Bowl categories went to teams from Palo Verde Union School. The seventh-grade team is pictured above, the sixth-grade team below.

---

## Around the County

---

### Six Tulare County high schools named Distinguished Schools by the California Department of Education

Yesterday, the California Department of Education (CDE) released its list of 408 middle schools and high schools selected for the prestigious 2026 California Distinguished Schools Program. For over 40 years, CDE has recognized exceptional schools that distinguish themselves on the basis of exemplary student outcomes.

From Tulare County, the following high schools received the California Distinguished Schools Award.



Exeter Union High School (Exeter Unified School District)

Lindsay High School (Lindsay Unified School District)

Harmony Magnet Academy (Porterville Unified School District)

Porterville Military Academy (Porterville Unified School District)

University Preparatory High School (Tulare County Office of Education)

El Diamante High School (Visalia Unified School District)

Award recipients were selected based on their success in three categories: Exemplary High Achievers, Achievement Gap Closers, and Beacons of Opportunity.

The 2026 California Distinguished Schools will be recognized at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim on April 24.

For a complete list of California schools receiving the honor and for more information on the program, visit [www.cde.ca.gov/ta/sr/cs/index.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/sr/cs/index.asp).

---

## Tulare County middle schools named “Schools to Watch”



Last week, Hope School and Monson-Sultana Joint Union School were recognized as 2026 California Schools to Watch at the California League of Middle Schools annual conference. This recognition identifies schools as models in academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and its organizational structures.

Pleasant View School's middle school was redesignated as a School to Watch.

As part of the honor, the Monson-Sultana administration team said that they will be attending and presenting at the National Schools to Watch Conference in Washington, D.C. in June. There, they will also receive the National Schools to Watch designation.

Photo above:

~ Superintendent Roberto Vaca of Monson-Sultana Joint Union School (third from left) poses with his team, having received a 2026 California School to Watch award at the California League of Middle Schools Annual Conference last week.

---

## Tulare Union, Orosi basketball teams fall in state regionals



The boys basketball season came to an end for No. 1 Tulare Union High School on Tuesday with a 74-66 loss to No. 3 San Juan Hills (San Juan Capistrano) in the CIF Southern Regional Division IV Championships.

Tulare advanced to the state playoffs by winning the CIF Central Section Division III championships in a 64-43 win over Central Valley Christian (Visalia) on February 28.

They earned the No. 1 seed in the state playoffs and home games throughout the regional tournament.

Tulare finished the season 31-5, which is the most wins in a single season of any boys basketball team in Tulare County history.



Orosi High School boys basketball team also won its CIF Central Section Division VI championship game, defeating Summit Charter High School 57-42 for the program's first section title since 1939.

Orosi earned the No. 5 seed in the CIF Southern Regional Division V tournament where they won the first game 59-35 over No. 12 Redlands Adventist Academy. The team lost its second game 41-40 to No. 4 Rowland (Rowland Heights) on Saturday to finish the season 26-8.

Photos above:

~ Tulare Union High School boys basketball pose for a photo after winning the CIF Central Section Division III championship.

~ Orosi High School boys basketball pose for a photo after winning the CIF Central Section Division VI championship. Photo courtesy of CIF Central Section Facebook

---

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

Contributors: Nayirah Dosu, Jennifer Fisher, Jaime Burnitzki, Paula Terrill, Annette Eickelberg, Brittaney Quinonez, Jeff Lynch

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.