

Tulare County Office of Education

Tim A. Hire, County Superintendent of Schools

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Media Advisory

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Tulare County Office of Education Announces:

Countywide Excellence in Education Winners Announced

Administrator/Manager of the Year, Teacher of the Year and School Employee of the Year selected in annual awards program

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This afternoon, Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire surprised the three winners in the 28th Annual Tulare County Excellence in Education Awards program. The three winners notified were Leanne Cerda (Tulare County Administrator/Manager of the Year), Nancy Warkentin (Tulare County Teacher of the Year) and Blanca Esparza (Tulare County School Employee of the Year).

Earlier this month, a selection committee of Tulare County business and education leaders met to review the nominees in each of the three categories. A total of 31 nominations were received this year from Tulare County school districts. Each nomination was reviewed and scored individually by every member of the selection committee.

“Each winner has a heart for seeing students grow into successful young adults, and for collaborating with community partners and district resources to support their vision,” Hire said.

WINNERS:

Administrator/Manager of the Year

LEANNE CERDA

Principal, Cutler Elementary School
Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified School District

Leanne Cerda serves as principal of Cutler Elementary, the school she attended as a child. She has worked for her district as a teacher, literary coach, and administrator for 17 years. Additionally, she is actively involved in her community, serving a member of the local Lions Club.

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In her six years as principal at Cutler Elementary, she has transformed the campus with murals depicting various colleges and the message, “Your journey begins here.” Cerda ensures that students know they can be anything they want to be and that they “have a vision for themselves.” Through her leadership, Cutler Elementary has become the hub of the community with family social events, academic tutoring, and parent partner academies.

Cerda spends the majority of her day observing classroom instruction, celebrating great teaching, and supporting improvement. Yolanda Valdez, district superintendent, says that she has a laser focus on academic achievement and is intricately involved in all data analysis. Weekly, Cerda convenes the school’s reading specialist, instructional coaches, school psychologist, social worker, and learning director to ensure students are making both academic, and social and emotional gains. For her work in implementing the school’s PBIS behavior support program, Cutler Elementary obtained the organization’s highest designation – “platinum status” for 2018, 2019, and 2021.

Her nominators praised Cerda for her spirit and energy, which despite a significant health issue, she has maintained throughout the pandemic, “without missing a beat.”

Teacher of the Year

NANCY WARKENTIN

Transitional Kindergarten, Wilson Elementary School
Dinuba Unified School District

Nancy Warkentin has been a teacher with Dinuba Unified for 37 years at Wilson Elementary. For the past 10 years, she has been a transitional kindergarten teacher – helping four- and five-year-olds develop educational foundations and a love for learning inside and outside the classroom.

Warkentin’s nominators praised the master teacher for her creativity in making the California standards fun for her students. Through the use of music, song, pictures, drama, art, and technology, she has her students actively engaged in their lessons. At the core of her instruction is love which she expresses to her students, valuing each and every one as her “beautiful children.”

Warkentin also focuses on students’ social and emotional learning, continually collecting data, and making observations of their struggles, potential triggers, and what they value, so she can adapt her instruction to their needs. Another foundational effort in her class is the establishment of model behavior. “Learning cannot effectively occur in chaos, so I establish a clear set of expectations and consistency in managing my classroom,” she said. She shared that discipline is a teachable moment, not punishment.

Warkentin is active on her campus, serving as the school site hospitality committee chair and Social-Emotional Learning Afterschool Group lead. She also coordinates performance opportunities for her students, including their annual Christmas caroling event at Covenant Care Center.

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School Employee of the Year

BLANCA ESPARZA

Parent Liaison, Earlimart Middle School
Earlimart School District

Blanca Esparza is proud to give back to the community where she grew up and received her education. Working in Earlimart School District's student services department, Esparza serves as a liaison between families, schools, and the community, and assists district-wide to bolster parent involvement.

Nominators noted that she is skilled at empowering parents to engage in their children's education. She creates opportunities for parents to attend evening classes, school meetings such as the School Site Council and the English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC), and social events. "I've often worked with parents who don't believe they have a voice in their child's education," she said.

Esparza's principal, Scott Staton, said that she is a sounding board for middle school parents. "This has helped create a school community where parents are able to ask for clarification on important issues and be heard," he said.

Esparza, a Spanish speaker, provides translation services for parents at meetings. She also routinely tutors them on navigating the school's Aeries program, which tracks grades and attendance.

Just as she is a resource for parents, she supports her school's students with an open door policy before school, during lunch, and after school for those seeking academic assistance or advice.

Her support of Earlimart families extends far beyond her campus. Esparza is involved in numerous organizations that benefit Earlimart's youth, including the local Rotary Club, Earlimart Youth Cheerleading, Earlimart Youth Foundation, Earlimart Park Project, Earlimart Youth Football Organization, and the Earlimart Town Council.

FINALISTS:

In addition to the winners, the selection committee chose two finalists in each category. The finalists in the 2022 Excellence in Education Awards program are:

Administrator/Manager of the Year

Lisa Majarian, Principal, Royal Oaks Elementary, Visalia Unified School District
Melanie Matta, Superintendent/Principal, Hope School District

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Teacher of the Year

John Boydstun, Industrial Arts Teacher, Lindsay High School
Paige Williams, Science Teacher, Green Acres Middle School, Visalia

School Employee of the Year

Elsa Avila, District Custodian, Tulare City School District
Mary Ward, Router/Bus Driver, Visalia Unified School District

RECOGNITION EVENT:

28th Annual Tulare County Excellence in Education Awards

Wednesday, November 2, 2022 (by invitation only)

7:30 – 9:15 a.m.

Visalia Convention Center Exhibit Hall, 303 East Acequia, Visalia, CA

The Excellence in Education program is a partnership between the Tulare County Office of Education and EECU.

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