

Tulare County Office of Education
CHARACTER COUNTS! Week 2026
Visalia Times Delta Weekend Ad



Student Name: Xaiden Hernandez

School: Cutler Elementary School, Cutler

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Megan Thiessen

Statement:

I want to recognize Xaiden this year for the pillar of caring. While Xaiden is an academically exceptional student, his true leadership shines in how he proactively supports his peers—most notably, our two students who need extra support. This deep compassion is nothing new; Xaiden has consistently demonstrated this dedication throughout his elementary school years. Back in third grade, he would quietly sit alongside a classmate to offer a comforting, calming presence whenever they felt overwhelmed. In fourth grade, he took the initiative every single day to visit another classroom just to check in on his peers and ensure they were doing well.

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Student Name: Chris Gallardo

School: Dinuba Community Based Instruction, Dinuba

Pillar: Citizenship

Nominator(s): Krista Cisneros

Statement:

Chris exemplifies outstanding citizenship through his steadfast commitment to keeping his school and community clean. He is always quick to pick up trash, pull weeds, and care for his surroundings. Taking true pride in maintaining a tidy and welcoming environment, Chris sets a wonderful example for everyone around him.

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Student Name: Ramses Hernandez

School: Dinuba High School, Dinuba

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Martha Macias

Statement:

I would like to recognize Ramses for demonstrating outstanding character and compassion toward his peers. He has naturally stepped into a supportive role, ensuring a classmate understands classroom assignments and consistently including him in everyday conversations. With remarkable patience, Ramses gently encourages him to step outside his comfort zone—even inviting him to try new foods. Above all, he treats his classmates with genuine kindness, respect, and friendship. Ramses exemplifies what it means to be caring and inclusive, serving as a wonderful reminder of how small acts of kindness can make others feel truly valued.

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Student Name: Aileen Hernandez

School: Dinuba Intermediate School, Dinuba

Pillar: Respect

Nominator(s): Gloria Valencia

Statement:

Aileen is a dedicated student who has participated in Zero Period for two years while maintaining exceptional grades and perfect attendance. She is also making school history as a charter member of DIS's first-ever water polo team. Consistently respectful and polite to everyone around her, Aileen models outstanding character, and we are proud to recognize her remarkable accomplishments.

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Student Name: Catalina Ulloa Pacheco

School: Grand View Elementary School, Dinuba

Pillar: Citizenship

Nominator(s): Natalie Verduzco

Statement:

Catalina demonstrates excellent citizenship by consistently being responsible, helpful, and respectful within our classroom community. She willingly assists others, follows classroom expectations, and does her part to foster a positive, welcoming environment for everyone. Always ready to lend a helping hand, Catalina sets a wonderful example for her classmates every day.

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Student Name: Jose Villicana

School: Jefferson Elementary School, Dinuba

Pillar: Trustworthiness

Nominator(s): Alice Flores

Statement:

Jose exemplifies honesty and trustworthiness at the highest level, possessing a rare standard of integrity that is truly exceptional and commendable. When sharing information, he communicates with clarity and composure, maintaining a natural posture, steady eye contact, and relaxed presence. Jose speaks the truth with conviction—even when it isn't easy—and stands firmly by it. His authentic leadership inspires and sways other students to be truthful as well. Dependable, reliable, and remarkable, Jose serves as an outstanding role model for our entire school community.

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Student Name: Faith Coyac

School: John F. Kennedy Elementary School, Dinuba

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): James Dial

Statement:

I would like to nominate Faith for the Character Counts pillar of Caring, a quality she embodies every single day. Throughout the school year, she consistently demonstrates remarkable kindness and helpfulness toward her classmates and the entire school.

In our classroom, Faith creates an inclusive and welcoming environment. She actively listens to others, ensures no one feels left out during activities, and treats everyone with genuine respect and warmth. Her gentle nature and positive attitude set a wonderful example for her peers, inspiring those around her to be more thoughtful and considerate.

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Student Name: Ernesto Quinones

School: Lincoln Elementary School, Dinuba

Pillar: Responsibility

Nominator(s): Rich White

Statement:

Ernesto is a standout fifth-grader who consistently demonstrates exceptional responsibility, reliability, and maturity in everything he does. Throughout the school year, he has proven himself to be a trustworthy student who takes his academic and social duties seriously, making him an outstanding role model for his peers.

Academically, Ernesto approaches his work with great dedication. He completes all classroom assignments and homework on time, always putting forth his best effort. When faced with challenging tasks, he perseveres by asking thoughtful questions and using available resources to find solutions. His organizational skills are evident in how he manages his materials, keeps his desk tidy, and tracks his daily assignments independently. Ernesto takes full ownership of his learning and thrives during independent projects.

Beyond academics, Ernesto shines as a responsible classroom citizen. He is always willing to support his teachers and classmates, frequently volunteering to distribute materials or organize the classroom library. He treats school property and his peers with the utmost respect. During group work, he ensures everyone has a turn to contribute while reliably fulfilling his own responsibilities to help his team succeed. Furthermore, he models excellent digital citizenship and takes great care of his physical environment.

Ernesto also demonstrates high accountability for his actions. His self-discipline and positive attitude contribute significantly to a productive, welcoming classroom environment, and he can always be counted on to follow school rules—even when an adult isn't watching. Ernesto exemplifies what it means to be a responsible student, and his strong work ethic, dependability, and respectful nature make him a true joy to teach.

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Student Name: Cassidy Peek

School: Roosevelt Elementary School, Dinuba

Pillar: Respect

Nominator(s): Rosa Popp

Statement:

Cassidy demonstrates respect through the quiet, thoughtful moments that make our classroom feel warm and welcoming. She actively listens to her peers and patiently gives classmates who need extra time the space to think and process. When others need support, she guides them with gentle encouragement.

Cassidy's consideration extends beyond simple interactions: if a classmate leaves early, she makes sure their computer is plugged in and their headphones are put away. She even lifts the chairs at empty desks to assist our custodian with vacuuming. Cassidy simply notices what needs to be done and takes action without needing to be asked or seeking praise. While nominated for Respect, her kindness, responsibility, and integrity shine just as brightly. By helping build an environment where everyone feels valued, Cassidy serves as a wonderful role model for her peers.

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Student Name: Dakota O'Bryan

School: Sierra Vista High School, Dinuba

Pillar: Citizenship

Nominator(s): Mark Newlin

Statement:

Dakota is being recognized for the pillar of Citizenship. She frequently volunteers her time with both her church group and her school, generously contributing her time to support the well-being of others. Notably, Dakota serves in her school's food distribution program to help get meals to families in need and regularly dedicates time to civic events in her community.

Always friendly and ready to lend a helping hand, Dakota brings a bright, positive outlook to everything she does. In the classroom, she is a hardworking, respectful, and pleasant student to be around. Dakota consistently displays honesty and integrity in all her actions, making her a true asset to our school and community.

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Student Name: Ariel Pando

School: Washington Intermediate School, Dinuba

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Autumn Kekaulua

Statement:

From the very first day of school, Ariel stood out for her genuine kindness. Her demeanor is consistently warm, welcoming, and respectful, creating an environment where everyone feels comfortable and seen. She makes a deliberate effort to learn the names of her classmates and teachers—a gesture that may seem simple, but speaks volumes about her character. Where many students default to addressing teachers simply as "Miss," Ariel took the time to learn my Hawaiian last name, Kekaulua, and makes a point to use it when speaking with me. That small act reflects the deep level of care and respect she extends to others.

Ariel also leads quietly by example, maintaining high standards for her own behavior regardless of her surroundings. When classmates become distracted or off-task, she remains focused and grounded. Without ever needing to utter a word of correction, her composed presence naturally encourages those around her to follow suit.

Though I have only had the privilege of teaching Ariel for a few weeks, I gained deeper insight into her character during our "My Story" yearbook project. Throughout her presentation, one message stood out above all else: kindness is her core value. Ariel wrote, "Every day I try my hardest to be a kind, welcoming, and understanding person towards everyone. I wouldn't want to be someone's reason why they don't want to come to school or attend a function because they are being mistreated or feeling left out." What makes those words so meaningful is that Ariel truly lives them. This was not written merely for a good grade; it is who she is. Ariel notices people, actively includes others, and ensures everyone around her feels valued and welcome. I see it in her daily interactions with her peers, and I experience it myself as her teacher.

I am especially grateful that Ariel is on our yearbook staff this year. In this role, she interacts with students and staff across our entire campus to capture stories and memories. Because of her position on the team, even more members of our school community will benefit from the quiet warmth and empathy she brings to every room. Ariel reminds us that caring does not require grand gestures. Sometimes it is learning someone's name, including someone on the sidelines, choosing respect when others do not, or simply ensuring another person feels like they matter. Ariel does these things naturally and consistently. She makes our school community better simply by being herself, and I cannot think of a student more deserving of representing the Pillar of Caring.

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Student Name: Ashley Mendoza Garcia

School: Ivanhoe Elementary School, Ivanhoe

Pillar: Citizenship

Nominator(s): Maria Botello

Statement:

I am proud to nominate Ashley Mendoza for demonstrating the Character Counts pillar of Citizenship. Ashley takes great pride in her school community and demonstrates it daily through her actions. She cares deeply about keeping our campus clean and frequently picks up trash on the ground—even when it isn't hers.

Ashley also extends caring and kindness to her classmates and teachers by treating everyone with genuine respect. She leads by example and serves as a wonderful role model for her peers, showing what it truly looks like to be a responsible and contributing member of our school.

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Student Name: Rene Garcia-Cazares

School: AcCel Orosi Community Based Instruction Orosi

Pillar: Responsibility

Nominator(s): Erin Elliott

Statement:

I am proud to nominate Rene for the CHARACTER COUNTS! award. It was hard to choose just one pillar for Rene because he truly exemplifies them all—he is an amazing person who is kind, full of joy, respectful, and responsible.

As a student in our Community-Based Instruction (CBI) program, Rene faces academic challenges with inspiring determination. Though reading and counting can be difficult for him, he is always the very first to volunteer and give his best effort. During our community outings, he has earned complete trust; he is thoroughly reliable and always eager to help with cleaning, sorting, moving items, and shopping. Beyond his strong work ethic, Rene is a wonderful friend who lifts up those around him and constantly strives to make everyone smile. He is a truly special student who brings light, heart, and character to our school every single day.

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Student Name: Elijah Rodriguez Reynosa

School: El Monte Middle School, Orosi

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Lisa Alvarado

Statement:

Last Year, in Language Arts class. Elijah went above and beyond to support another student in his class. He pulled out her chair, included her in group collaborations, helped her understand reading passages, and sat with her during lunch to ask how her day was going. His kindness and thoughtfulness helped her feel included, valued, and connected.

At El Monte Middle School, our Lobos “LEAD,” and the “A” stands for Accept Everyone. Elijah is a wonderful example of what it truly means to Accept Everyone. Through his everyday actions, he shows compassion, inclusion, and genuine care for others. Elijah truly represents what it means to be a Caring Lobo!

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Student Name: Camila Lupian

School: Golden Valley Elementary School, Orosi

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Raquel Barragan

Statement:

Camila is a true example of what it means to be caring. She has willingly and lovingly taken on the role of supporting a classmate, helping him navigate the school day with patience, kindness, and grace. During STEM, she holds his hand to reassure him that he is safe and supported. She meets him where he is, encourages his participation, and makes sure he feels included, connected, and valued. Camila's heart of gold reminds us that caring means helping others feel that they belong. Our classroom—and our world—is a better place because of young people like Camila.

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Student Name: Anthony Monodragon

School: Lovell High School, Orosi

Pillar: Citizenship

Nominator(s): Antonio Diaz and Julia Medina

Statement:

Antonio Diaz: Our school site wants to celebrate Anthony Mondragon for demonstrating what true citizenship, leadership, and perseverance look like at Lovell High School.

Anthony is an incredible leader who has shown that your past does not have to determine your future. There was a time when attending school consistently was a struggle and he was falling behind in his credits. But Anthony made a decision that changed the direction of his life: he decided not only to change his trajectory, but to become someone who could help others change theirs, too.

Today, Anthony attends school every single day with a purpose. He is working hard to catch up on his credits, accomplish his goal of graduating, and continue playing the sport he loves basketball through the end of his high school career. He is not doing this only to make his parents proud; he is doing it to prove to himself what he is capable of accomplishing.

What makes Anthony's growth even more powerful is that he has begun using his experiences to encourage others. Recently, he shared a simple but powerful message with seniors who are still struggling: *"Life is simple, but we make it complicated."* Those words carry meaning because Anthony has lived through the hard lessons behind them. He understands that sometimes the biggest change begins with a simple decision to do better, show up, and take responsibility for your future. Anthony also goes out of his way to encourage and support his classmates, sharing his experiences and reminding others that they, too, have the ability to overcome their challenges and create a better future for themselves.

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Anthony represents Citizenship because he is not only working to improve himself—he is becoming an example for others. His journey reminds us that making mistakes does not define us. What defines us is what we choose to do after those mistakes.

Julia Medina: I nominate Anthony Mondragon for Character Counts because he is an outstanding all-around student who consistently demonstrates responsibility, kindness, and a strong commitment to his education.

He takes pride in his work, cares about his grades, provides thoughtful and meaningful responses, and makes sure to turn in high-quality assignments. He is also caring and supportive toward his fellow students. He is always willing to help members of his group, actively participates in group and class discussions, and encourages others to be involved. He is an active listener who shows respect for different ideas and perspectives. Most importantly, he consistently brings a positive attitude to class every day.

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Student Name: Brandon Madrigal

School: Orosi High School, Orosi

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Manuela Delgadillo

Statement:

Having had the privilege of teaching Brandon in English last school year, the kindness he consistently showed his peers—and myself—still resonates with me today. Brandon was always willing to lend a helping hand, often stepping up to support others without ever needing to be asked. He was remarkably attuned to those around him, quietly offering help whenever he noticed someone in need.

What stood out most about Brandon was his patience and compassion toward his classmates, especially those who were struggling. His kindness was never performative or done for recognition; it was simply a natural part of who he is. Through his genuine care, he helped cultivate a safe, supportive classroom environment for everyone.

Brandon is the true embodiment of a kind and bright young man. Even though he has moved on from my classroom, the positive impact he left behind remains. He is exceptionally deserving of this recognition.

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Student Name: Kiara Barrera

School: Palm Elementary School, Oroshi

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Gabrielle McNealley

Statement:

I have had the absolute pleasure of working with Kiara in Mrs. Capistran's 5th-grade classroom four days a week. Every day when I enter the room, Kiara is always the very first student to transition to our small reading group.

She consistently takes initiative by ensuring that her group members arrive promptly and have all the materials they need to succeed. Whether she is gathering materials for her peers or offering gentle reminders, Kiara always leads with patience and kindness.

Beyond her daily helpfulness, Kiara possesses a rare level of empathy. Recently, during a Total Physical Response (TPR) activity that I was unable to perform, Kiara insisted that we modify the exercise so that I could fully participate alongside the group. For a 5th grader to demonstrate such remarkable forethought, inclusivity, and compassion truly touched my heart. Kiara's big heart and thoughtful nature make her deeply deserving of this recognition.

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Student Name: Julian Lilis Martinez

School: Monson-Sultana Joint Union School, Sultana

Pillar: Citizenship

Nominator(s): Jaqueline Montejano

Statement:

Julian is a student who never allows any circumstance to hold him back from succeeding academically, being a good friend, treating others with respect, and demonstrating deep care for those around him. He consistently embodies fairness, truthfulness, and what it truly means to be a stellar student.

Recently, Julian showed remarkable alertness and responsibility while waiting in the front office to be picked up due to an illness. He noticed a young primary student walk out of the office without first notifying a staff member. Although the little girl's mother was waiting just outside the door after signing her out, Julian immediately recognized the safety concern. Despite feeling unwell, he got up from his chair to keep a watchful eye on her, trailing behind while actively signaling to catch my attention. Julian's quick thinking, vigilance, and genuine concern for a younger peer reflect his outstanding character.

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Student Name: Bryan Lopez

School: Traver Joint School, Traver

Pillar: Caring

Nominator(s): Linda Navarro

Statement:

Bryan Lopez has always been a quiet, deeply caring student. Whenever help is needed, he is more than happy to step up and lend a hand—always with a warm smile on his face.

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Student Name: Jacob Ibarra Orozco

School: Goshen Elementary School, Visalia

Pillar: Responsibility

Nominator(s): Celeste Garcia

Statement:

Jacob is an amazing leader both inside and outside the classroom, consistently demonstrating Responsibility and initiative by stepping up to help without ever being asked. He anticipates what needs to be done and can always be counted on to set a positive, respectful example for those around him.

Whether leading his table group, participating in discussions, assisting a classmate, or helping me, Jacob approaches every task with an eager and positive attitude. His leadership comes naturally—he does the right thing simply because of who he is, never for recognition. His classmates look to him as a trusted role model because he is dependable, respectful, and always willing to do his part. Jacob makes our classroom a better place every day, and I am incredibly proud to nominate him for the Kids of Character Award!

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Student Name: Alex Tafoya

School: Castle Rock Elementary School, Woodlake

Pillar: Responsibility

Nominator(s): Carolina Serna

Statement:

Alex is a self-directed learner who consistently manages his time effectively, turns in high-quality assignments on or ahead of schedule, and takes proactive initiative without ever needing reminders. He approaches each school day fully prepared and engaged—arriving equipped with all necessary materials, listening actively during lessons, and contributing thoughtful insights to class discussions.

Beyond his personal academic dedication, Alex serves as an outstanding peer role model. He keeps his workspace neatly organized, reliably upholds classroom expectations, and actively helps foster a focused, positive, and supportive learning environment for his classmates.

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Student Name: Alina Hernandez

School: Francis J. White Learning Center, Woodlake

Pillar: Responsibility

Nominator(s): Erin Tierce

Statement:

Alina Hernandez is an exceptional example of what it means to demonstrate true Responsibility. Each day, she arrives at school prepared, organized, and eager to learn—often being the very first student to the carpet each morning with a bright, positive attitude. The moment she sits at her desk, her tools are out and she immediately dives into her work with focus and diligence.

Alina's sense of responsibility also shines in how she cares for others. She thoughtfully and respectfully reminds her teacher and classmates when tasks need to be completed, and she can always be counted on to do her part and lend a helping hand.

Her dependability extends far beyond the classroom as well; Alina takes immense pride in helping her mother and caring for her younger brother at home. Even at a young age, she understands the deep value of being reliable, prepared, and kind. Alina's maturity, organization, and willingness to serve others make her an outstanding role model, and I have no doubt she will continue to accomplish great things and make a positive difference wherever she goes!

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Student Name: Barbara Garcia-Velasquez

School: Woodlake High School, Woodlake

Pillar: Responsibility

Nominator(s): Lisa Perez

Statement:

Barbara is an outstanding student whose character shines through in everything she does. Now in her fourth year in the dance program, she serves as an exceptional leader in our CTE Advanced Folklórico class, consistently choosing to do what is right and treating everyone around her with warmth, kindness, and respect.

Barbara balances an extraordinary schedule with unwavering dedication—working exceptionally hard to maintain excellent grades while competing on both the WHS Lady Tigers wrestling team and a competitive traveling team. Beyond her own drive for excellence, Barbara possesses a rare leadership quality: she naturally inspires those around her to reach higher and do their best. Through her responsibility, caring heart, and respectful spirit, Barbara sets a high standard for her peers and stands out as a true role model in our school community.

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Student Name: Maddox Castellanoz

School: Woodlake Valley Middle School, Woodlake

Pillar: Citizenship

Nominator(s): Misty Correa

Statement:

Maddox has been an outstanding member of the Woodlake Unified community over the past three years, eagerly embracing every opportunity and making a lasting, positive impact both inside and outside the classroom.

His achievements reflect a remarkable dedication to excellence across disciplines. As a key member of the Woodlake Robotics Team, he helped qualify the team for championships in both Boston and Long Beach—earning prestigious awards and official recognition from the School Board. On the field, he demonstrated exceptional athletic talent and sportsmanship, earning a well-deserved spot on the inaugural All-Star baseball team in 2025.

Beyond these accomplishments, he consistently models what it means to be a true leader. He proactively steps up whenever he sees an opportunity to make a difference, offering a helping hand without ever needing to be asked. Leading by example through responsibility, integrity, and a genuine commitment to supporting those around him, he represents Woodlake with immense pride and serves as an inspiring pillar of our school community.

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Student Name: Adam Rodriguez

School: AcCel Yettem Learning Center, Yettem

Pillar: Responsibility

Nominator(s): Debbie Michaelian

Statement:

Adam Rodriguez is an exceptional young man who truly exemplifies the Character Counts pillar of Responsibility. He consistently does what is expected of him, holding himself to high standards in everything he undertakes.

Adam approaches every challenge with perseverance, a strong determination to succeed, and an enthusiastic willingness to learn. His dependable work ethic and commitment to personal growth make him a fantastic role model for his peers and deeply deserving of this honor.