



# YOUTH CHALLENGE AWARDS

TULARE COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

JIM VIDAK EDUCATION CENTER

APRIL 8, 2026



**HHSA**  
Human Services

Tulare County  
Office of Education

*Tim A. Hire, County Superintendent of Schools*



## WELCOME

### Welcome to the 14th Annual Step Up Youth Challenge Red Carpet Awards!

Tonight, we come together to recognize something powerful: the talent, the dedication, and the spirit of teamwork that lives across Tulare County.

To each of you participating: thank you.

Thank you for stepping forward, for committing your time and energy to something greater than yourselves, and for engaging in work that challenges you to think, create, and lead.

Across our Valley, we face real challenges: homelessness, poverty, crime, and bullying.

But tonight reminds us of something just as real. The next generation is already rising to meet those challenges. You are not waiting for change. You are becoming the change.

Your ideas, your collaboration, and your willingness to lead will help shape a stronger, more connected Central Valley.

On behalf of the County of Tulare, it is an honor to learn from your work and to celebrate your efforts.

Congratulations to each of you for the role you played in making this event a success.

Keep going. Keep building. Keep leading.

**Eddie Valero, Tulare County Board of Supervisors - District 4**

### Congratulations Youth Challenge Teams!

Welcome to the 2026 Step Up Youth Challenge Awards! As you and your teammates walked the red carpet, I hope you realized something important: YOU ARE STARS!

The projects you've developed—addressing community needs such as access to essential resources, environmental responsibility, emotional well-being, mental health awareness, and the importance of feeling connected—truly deserve a standing ovation.

Through the Step Up Youth Challenge, you've built a strong foundation in community service, carrying out the same meaningful work as educators, social workers, faith-based leaders, and city officials across our nation. I applaud each and every one of you for your dedication and effort, and I hope to see you again next year. Tulare County is counting on you!

**Tim A. Hire**

**Tulare County Superintendent of Schools**



### **PHIL COX, DISTRICT THREE (2004 - 2016) TULARE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

Phil Cox served as a Tulare County Supervisor, representing District Three, which includes Visalia and unincorporated areas west of Visalia. He was a lifelong Visalia resident, attending College of the Sequoias, and later owning C&C Construction. Before being elected to the Board of Supervisors in 2004, Mr. Cox served as a Visalia City Councilmember. Supervisor Cox served the Board of Supervisors until 2016.

Supervisor Cox represented the Board of Supervisors on the Tulare County Association of Governments, the California State Association of Counties' Administration of Justice Committee, and the Tulare County First 5 Commission (Prop. 10). He served on several local and statewide committees including, the Consolidated Waste Management Authority, and was the Board of Supervisors representative on the Tulare County Gang Prevention Task Force, which launched the Step Up program.

# PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

Welcome

Youth Challenge Highlight Video

Awards

Community Collaboration Award

Impact Award

Project Presentation Award

Sustainability Award

Meeting the Need Award

Phil Cox Award



Scan to read about each school project

*Following the program, please join us for a reception*

## Youth Challenge

In 2011, the Step Up Executive Gang Task Force recognized the need to target their prevention efforts toward middle school aged youth. The Step Up Youth Challenge was created to provide an opportunity for middle school and high schools to engage a diverse group of students in a project-based learning challenge throughout the course of a school year.

Coordinated by the Tulare County Office of Education, the Step Up Youth Challenge takes place over the course of a school year, beginning in September and ending in April of each school year. Since 2012, teams of middle and high school students from large and small campuses around the county create service learning projects that have long-term positive effects at their schools and in their communities. Teams are encouraged to choose a project that addresses issues such as gangs, drug abuse, peer pressure, bullying, self-esteem, mental wellness, or suicide prevention.

## STEP UP YOUTH CHALLENGE ORGANIZERS

### County of Tulare

Donna Ortiz, Tulare County - Agency Director, HHSA

Francena Martinez,

Tulare County - Director of Human Services, HHSA

Amy Shuklian,

Tulare County Board of Supervisors, District 3 –

Chairman

Dennis Townsend,

Tulare County Board of Supervisors, District 5 –

Vice Chairman

Larry Macari,

Tulare County Board of Supervisors, District 1

Eddie Valero,

Tulare County Board of Supervisors, District 4

Pete Vander Poel III,

Tulare County Board of Supervisors, District 2

### Tulare County Office of Education

Tim A. Hire, Tulare County Superintendent of Schools

Tony Rodriguez, President,

Tulare County Board of Education, Area 7

Mike Waters, Vice President

Tulare County Board of Education, Area 5

Judy Coble,

Tulare County Board of Education, Area 4

Tom Link,

Tulare County Board of Education, Area 3

Ruben Macareno,

Tulare County Board of Education, Area 2

Chris Reed,

Tulare County Board of Education, Trustee Area 6

Felipe Martinez,

Tulare County Board of Education, Area 1



## PAST AWARD WINNERS

### 2025

#### Middle School Awards

Phil Cox Award: Lincoln Elementary School (Lindsay)  
Community Collaboration: Traver School  
Impact: Kings River Union School (Kingsburg)  
Meeting the Need: Freedom Elementary School (Farmersville)  
Sustainability: Blue Oak Academy (Visalia)  
Presentation: Live Oak Middle School (Tulare)

#### High School Awards

Phil Cox Award: University Preparatory High School (Visalia)  
Community Collaboration: La Sierra High School Military Academy (Visalia)  
Impact: Lovell High School (Orosi)  
Meeting the Need: Mission Oak High School (Tulare)  
Sustainability: Accelerated Charter High School (Tulare)  
Presentation: Mission Oak High School (Tulare)

### 2024

#### Middle School Awards

Phil Cox Award: Kings River Union School (Kingsburg)  
Community Collaboration: Live Oak Middle School (Tulare)  
Impact: Carl Smith Middle School (Terra Bella)  
Meeting the Need: Reagan Elementary School (Lindsay)  
Sustainability: Traver School  
Presentation: Belleview Elementary School (Porterville)

#### High School Awards

Phil Cox Award: University Preparatory High School (Visalia)  
Community Collaboration: Lovell High School (Orosi)  
Impact: Countryside High School (Tulare)  
Meeting the Need: Accelerated Charter High School (Tulare)  
Sustainability: Golden West High School (Visalia)  
Presentation: Mission Oak High School (Tulare)

### 2023

#### Middle School Awards

Phil Cox Award: Traver School  
Community Collaboration: El Monte Middle School (Orosi)  
Impact: Pixley Middle School (Pixley)  
Meeting the Need: Belleview Elementary School (Porterville)  
Sustainability: Kings River Union School (Kingsburg)  
Presentation: Burton Middle School (Porterville)

#### High School Awards

Phil Cox Award: Golden West High School (Visalia)  
Community Collaboration: Accelerated Charter High School (Tulare)  
Impact: Countryside High School (Tulare)  
Meeting the Need: Eleanor Roosevelt Community Learning Ctr. (Visalia)  
Sustainability: Harmony Magnet Academy (Strathmore)  
Presentation: Countryside High School (Tulare)

### 2022

#### Middle School Awards

Phil Cox Award: Traver School  
Community Collaboration: Pioneer Middle School (Porterville)  
and Pixley Middle School (Pixley)  
Meeting the Need: Reagan Elementary School (Lindsay)  
Impact: Burton Middle School (Porterville)

#### High School Awards

Phil Cox Award: Tulare Tech Prep High School (Tulare)  
Sustainability: Accelerated Charter High School (Tulare)  
Meeting the Need: Eleanor Roosevelt Community Learning Ctr. (Visalia)  
Impact: Monache High School (Porterville)

**For 2021 - 2013 winners, see [www.tcoe.org/StepUp](http://www.tcoe.org/StepUp).**

*\*Phil Cox Award was previously known as Best Overall*

## STEP UP MISSION STATEMENT

### *Empower Youth!*

Working with partners, communities, stakeholders, youth and parents, Step Up seeks to address issues that affect all youth in Tulare County. Step Up redirects youth from truancy, suspension, and expulsion by improving grades, encouraging participation in positive activities, and extra-curricular involvement. Through collaboration, Step Up will diminish arrest/referral rates, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy by fostering positive associations and social networks.