

Educators of the Year announced as part of the Chinese Cultural Center's 27th Annual Confucius' Birthday Celebration

After a three-year break, the Central California Chinese Cultural Center has partnered with the Tulare County Office of Education (TCOE) again to honor teachers through the Confucius' Birthday/Educators of the Year Awards.

Yesterday afternoon, Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire and Wendy Jay, a member of the Chinese Cultural Center's Board of Directors, surprised three Tulare County teachers with the news that they had been selected as Educators of the Year.

Chinese people around the world mark the occasion of Confucius' birthday in late September by recognizing exemplary teachers. Each year, members of the Chinese Cultural Center hold a dinner celebration at their event center in Visalia to honor one elementary, one middle, and one high school teacher.

"This year's winners are exceptional teachers who have a gift for engaging students in real world learning," said Hire. "The positive difference they make in the lives of their students will be remembered for years to come."

The winners of the 2023 Educators of the Year Awards are:



Renee Carson, Sixth-Grade GATE Teacher

Westfield Elementary School, Porterville Unified School District

A veteran educator with 31 years of teaching experience, Renee Carson is a sixth-grade GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) teacher at Westfield Elementary School in Porterville. She is able to uniquely challenge her students each day, working together with them to make sense of the content and have robust discussions on a wide array of topics. Although Mrs. Carson is a veteran teacher, she continues to expand her craft for the benefit of her students. She has the same expectations of herself as she does for her students – continue to learn and share that knowledge with others. As a result, parents feel they have a true partnership in educating their children with Mrs. Carson.

Mrs. Carson is the driving force behind Westfield Elementary students' success in the annual Tulare County Science & Engineering Fair. She works with students, beginning in the fourth grade, to develop projects that are often award winners. She also serves as a coach for the school's Reading Revolution team.

Mrs. Carson also has a heart for service. Her administrator reports that she is among the first to suggest to others how to support a student, family or colleague in need. As an example, she offered the use of her home to her principal and her family when they were without water and electricity during the March 2023 flooding in Springville.



Monica Robles, Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Mathematics Teacher
Burton Middle School, Burton School District

A teacher for 13 years, Monica Robles serves as a seventh- and eighth-grade mathematics teacher at Burton Middle School in Porterville. Administrators praised her for her engaging teaching methodologies, which are different from what students might expect to see in a middle school mathematics classroom. Ms. Robles loves teaching for the “aha” moments she sees in her students as they realize new concepts.

Considered a master teacher in lesson planning, understanding data, the learning needs of her students, and transition times, Ms. Robles uses real life, hands-on lessons involving cooking and model building to engage her students. Students are up and out of their seats, taking control of their learning and opening themselves to a growth mindset. Through this type of instruction, Ms. Robles is able to bridge learning gaps. Students in her classrooms have shown the greatest academic gains in mathematics across the school site as she continues to push herself to grow as an educator.

This year, Ms. Robles is the department lead of the mathematics team. She supports her colleagues with mentorship, department structure, and a focus that all of her peers appreciate. Ms. Robles’ colleagues consider her teaching abilities with the highest regards.



Renee Thornburg, Agriculture Teacher

Woodlake High School, Woodlake Unified School District

A graduate of Woodlake schools, Renee Thornburg returned to teach at Woodlake High School (WHS) in 2019. Since her return, she has helped the agriculture program consistently grow in size and student interest, refining its course pathways to meet student and school needs. She has also taught dual enrollment classes at WHS through College of the Sequoias and serves as the FFA (Future Farmers of America) advisor, traveling with students throughout the state and to the national convention.

Her classrooms are dynamic and exemplify great instruction, combined with numerous hands-on activities that consistently motivate and encourage students. Additionally, Mrs. Thornburg builds solid relationships and finds ways to reach all students, even those who have struggled in other classes. Students who have had behavior issues in other classes routinely have no issues in Mrs. Thornburg's class, and often use success in her class as a springboard to greater educational success. If she notices a student is unproductive, unmotivated, or disruptive, instead of viewing them as a problem, she thinks, "how do I reach this student and make a difference?"

Additionally, Mrs. Thornburg serves as a mentor for new teachers. Outside of the classroom, she often volunteers to be part of any committee that will improve student learning at Woodlake High School.

Recognition Event

“The Chinese Cultural Center chose to celebrate local educators on Confucius’ birthday as one of its community service events and to honor the greatest educator the world has known,” said Jay. “We, as members of the board of directors, believe that education holds the key to our future. Confucius’ message of knowledge, benevolence, loyalty, and virtue not only guides the daily lives of many people in China, but other parts of the world as well.”

The Confucius Birthday/Educators of the Year Awards event is not open to the public. A tribute video profiling the three honorees will be shown at the Confucius’ Birthday dinner September 21 and available on the TCOE website afterwards. For more information on the Confucius’ Birthday/Educators of the Year Award, contact Marlene Moreno at marlenem@tcoe.org.

Photos above – (top) Renee Carson of Westfield Elementary School in Porterville (center) is the Elementary Educator of the Year. (middle) Monica Robles of Burton Middle School in Porterville (second from right) is the Middle School Educator of the Year. (lower). Renee Thornburg of Woodlake High School (center) is the High School Educator of the Year.

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