

## **Countywide Excellence in Education winners announced, educators in Porterville, Tulare, Exeter take top honors**

This week, Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire surprised the three winners named in the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Tulare County Excellence in Education Awards program. The three winners notified were Andrew Woodley (2025 Administrator/Manager of the Year), Heather Silva (2025 Teacher of the Year), and Joanna Woodyatt (2025 School Employee of the Year).

In March, a selection committee of Tulare County business and education leaders reviewed the nominees in each of the three categories. A total of 34 nominations were received this year from Tulare County school districts. Each nomination was scored individually by every member of the selection committee.

“The winners share a desire to give students the tools they need to be successful, both academically and socially,” Hire said. “It’s a pleasure to celebrate the winners, finalists, and nominees, who represent Tulare County education so well.”

## ADMINISTRATOR/MANAGER OF THE YEAR



### Winner

#### **Andrew Woodley**

Director of Curriculum and Instruction  
Porterville Unified School District

Andrew Woodley is the director of Curriculum and Instruction for Porterville Unified School District and Tulare County's Administrator/Manager of the Year. In his role of six years with the district, he oversees instructional programs to advance student achievement, including English language development and the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). Woodley also leads the district's instructional coaches and supports teachers to improve instructional practices, often modeling lessons in classrooms. Of his efforts, one district principal said, "our scores are increasing because of the collaboration with coaches and district support of curriculum and instruction initiatives."

In total, Woodley has been with Porterville Unified for 21 years, beginning as a teacher before moving to school site administration. One of his high school students who now works for the district in the communications department remembers him as "one of the best teachers I've ever had.... His class wasn't just about learning English – it was about learning how to think critically, communicate effectively, and express ideas with confidence."

Today, Woodley uses two foundational pillars to guide his work – systems and relationships. Within the instructional systems, he uses data to drive decision-making, saying, "If we cannot measure an outcome, we cannot replicate or improve it. Data provides us with direction, but it is our professional expertise and human judgment that allow us to turn numbers into meaningful action."

Lillian Durbin, president of the district's Board of Trustees, praised Woodley for leading the district to digital learning and supporting teachers during the pandemic.

## Finalists

### Dori Bingaman

Principal, Shannon Ranch Elementary School  
Visalia Unified School District

### Mathew Newcomb

Learning Director, Lincoln Elementary School  
Lindsay Unified School District

## TEACHER OF THE YEAR



## Winner

### Heather Silva

Eighth-Grade Teacher, Alpine Vista School  
Tulare City School District

Heather Silva is the 2025 Tulare County Teacher of the Year. She has taught at Alpine Vista School for the past 13 years, serving as a 1st, 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, and - currently - 8th grade teacher. In her current assignment, she teaches leadership, English language development (ELD), and computer science classes. Her classroom reflects her core



values that include student voice and choice, leadership opportunities, and a culture of kindness.

Silva is a champion for student engagement. In her computer science class, students are coding websites on topics that they are passionate about, while in her leadership class, students are producing weekly informational broadcasts and social media posts. This year, she stepped up as the ELD teacher to ensure the school's most vulnerable students feel welcomed, valued, and supported in both their academic and social development.

In addition, Silva has created a large number of clubs and ongoing activities, including the school's agriculture class and garden, Kindness Week, Back-to-School Car Show, annual school musical, Teacher Appreciation Week, and Eagles Care Project. She is also the school's Leader in Me/Lighthouse School coach. Her drive to create more opportunities for students to grow and lead stems from her teaching philosophy. "I believe that all students have genius within them, that everyone is a leader, and that we have the most fun in life when we take our genius and share it with others in order to better our communities," Silva said.

## Finalists

### **Megan Jensen**

Fourth-Grade Teacher  
Valley Life Charter School

### **Angela Leon**

World Languages Teacher, Exeter Union High School  
Exeter Unified School District

## SCHOOL EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR



## **Winner**

### **Joanna Woodyatt**

Registered Behavior Technician, Rocky Hill Elementary School  
Exeter Unified School District

Joanna Woodyatt is the 2025 Tulare County School Employee of the Year. As a registered behavior technician (RBT) at Rocky Hill Elementary School, she provides direct behavioral therapy to students, who often have autism or other developmental disorders. Additionally, Woodyatt assists with skills development for communication, social interactions, and daily living activities. She works to reduce the challenging behaviors, which often takes many years. She also supports teachers and staff with behavior strategies, and collaborates with families and caregivers.

A veteran who served in the US Army, Woodyatt has worked for Exeter Unified for 16 years, first as an instructional aide in behavior management. Two years ago, the district created a behavior support team with Woodyatt first to be invited to join. She spent several months studying to earn her RBT certification. Lynn Skaff, school psychologist at Rocky Hill Elementary, said, "Whether it is a kindergartener struggling with behavior or a fifth grader needing emotional support, Joanna instinctively knows how to meet each child at their individual needs. Her ability to connect with students, see their strengths, and guide them with patience and understanding is a gift that cannot be taught, it is simply who she is."

Woodyatt is a member of the Tulare County Suicide Prevention Council, certified in the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), and is the district's Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) instructor. On the rewards of working in education, she said, "The work and care we put into our students lets them truly know and believe that they are capable of far more than they once thought."

## **Finalists**

### **Augustin "Auggie" Lopez**

Lead IT Specialist  
Dinuba Unified School District

### **Yesenia Lopez**

Counseling Secretary II, Tulare Western High School  
Tulare Joint Union High School District

## **RECOGNITION EVENT:**

An invitation-only awards event will be held the morning of Wednesday, October 22 at the TCOE Administration Building in Visalia to honor the winners, finalists, and nominees. The Excellence in Education program is a partnership between the Tulare County Office of Education and Educational Employees Credit Union (EECU).

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## Registration open for Tulare County Support Staff Conference, April 22 and 23



Registration is open for the 2025 Support Staff Conference, scheduled this month in TCOE's Administration Building in Visalia. Support staff can choose to attend either April 22 or April 23 – each day with a unique selection of breakout sessions.

Both days will feature an inspiring keynote presentation by Mike Robbins, a former college and professional baseball player (at Stanford University and with the Kansas City Royals). After an injury ended his playing career, Robbins transitioned from the sports field to the corporate world, founding his own consulting firm. Since then, he uses his energetic style, sense of humor, and practical wisdom to deliver keynote speeches. Robbins blends relatable stories with actionable advice, making complex concepts accessible and inspiring for diverse audiences. He is the author of five books, including his latest, *We're All in This Together*.

Following Robbins' keynote presentation, attendees will attend two breakout sessions on topics that range from mental health and having difficult conversations to financial planning and self-defense. Each day is unique. To register for the conference and see the breakout sessions offered April 22 and 23, visit [tcoe.org/SupportStaff](https://tcoe.org/SupportStaff). The deadline to register is April 11.

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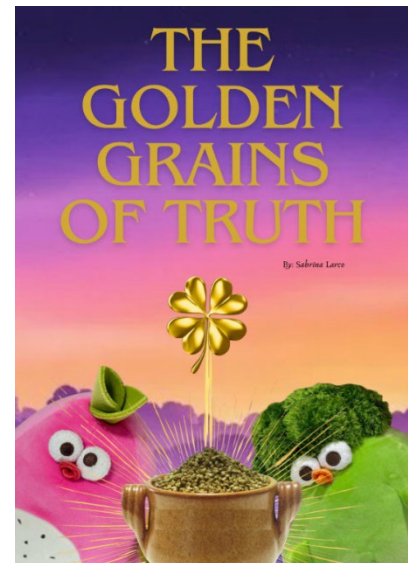
## Annual Young Authors' Faire books now online

Bea Calco was all set to start a new chapter in her young life – her first year at UCLA. But what she discovered in her dorm room was an adventure she could never have imagined. Falling into a world of strange creatures who knew her, she is led to defeat a monster, protecting others that she shares a special connection with. Bea is the main character in an imaginative story entitled “The Golden Grains of Truth” by Sabrina Larco, a seventh-grade student at Sycamore Valley Academy in Visalia.



“The Golden Grains of Truth” is among 74 creative books written and illustrated by 148 students from 12 Tulare County schools. These books are a part of Young Authors’ Faire (YAF) and can be enjoyed through the Virtual Book Gallery link at [tcoe.org/YoungAuthorsFaire](https://tcoe.org/YoungAuthorsFaire).

Every year, the Tulare County Office of Education invites students to participate in YAF. The event offers budding writers in grades K-8 an opportunity to showcase their writing and illustration work at the county level and be recognized in a variety of genres. Exemplary works will be recognized at the end of April in categories such as: fiction, non-fiction, class book, graphics/images, and hand-drawn illustration.



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## TCOE programs featured in upcoming edition of Children First, airing Sunday



On Sunday, two TCOE Special Services programs will be highlighted in the latest edition of ABC30’s Children First series. The program is entitled “Brighter Beginnings” and focuses on children’s developmental milestones and the early intervention programs that can assist in meeting them.

Featured on the program is a story about a child currently served by TCOE’s Bright Start Parent/Infant Program. In it, teacher Kate Lopez visits the home of her client to

work on his gross motor skills. The Bright Future Center in Porterville is featured in another segment, which includes four-year-old Fernando, who is getting support with his communication skills. The Bright Future center serves children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.



The special will feature other stories about Central Valley programs serving young children.

News anchors Jason Oliveira and Jessica Harrington will host “Brighter Beginnings,” airing Sunday, April 6 at 6:30 p.m. and streaming on [www.abc30.com](http://www.abc30.com).

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## Jaime Burnitzki joins TCOE administration team

This week, Jaime Burnitzki joined the administration team as an administrative assistant to Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Tim Hire. Burnitzki shares the position with Jennifer Fisher, who has served the county superintendent since 2011. She moved into the administrative assistant position in January.





Brunitzki was welcomed to the administration team from Foster & Homeless Youth Education Services at the Dream Center, which he joined in 2016. In total, he has served various TCOE programs since May 2005, including Services for Education & Employment (SEE), Bright Start/Bright Future, and Human Resources/Credentials.

Together, Fisher and Burnitzki support the day-to-day operations of the county superintendent's office and coordinate with staff throughout TCOE. Additionally, their duties include organizing special events such as the annual Support Staff Conference and Convocation, assisting the Tulare County Board of Education and the Tulare County Office of Education Foundation, collecting and distributing information to Tulare County school districts and other government agencies, and responding to inquiries from the general public.

"We are delighted to welcome Jaime to the team," Hire said. "We appreciate his broad range of experience with various TCOE programs and the energy and enthusiasm he brings to every challenge."

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## Migrant Education hosts Student Leadership Conference



Last Saturday, Migrant Education Program Region VIII hosted its annual Migrant Student Leadership Conference at the Tulare County Office of Education. Sixty-five students from 14 districts across Tulare and Kings counties were in attendance for the first in-person conference since the pandemic.

The conference began with a panel featuring past migrant students, community advocates, and leaders, including Eddie Valero (Tulare County Supervisor, District 4) Viviana Yvonne (KSEE24 and CBS47 reporter), Luz Rincon (Department of Justice representative for the Fresno Education & Leadership Foundation), Jocelyn Yanez (educator and past migrant student), Francisca Vega (educator and past migrant student), and Alma Davila (educator and past migrant student).

The conference also gave students an opportunity to learn more from workshops covering topics on mental health, breaking generational traumas, community empowerment, and career guidance. Speaking during the workshops were Valero; Sarahi Ovalle, Cynthia Hinck, and Kiara Ocampo from the nonprofit Nuevo Comienzo; Michelle Vasquez, social worker from Visalia Unified School District; Veronica Gonzalez and Virginia Long, counselors from Visalia Unified School District.



For more on the Migrant Education Program, visit [tcoe.org/migrated](https://tcoe.org/migrated).

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## Around the County

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### Five Tulare County schools named 2025 California Distinguished Schools

Last week, the California Department of Education announced the 2025 California Distinguished Schools, which included five schools from Tulare County. A total of 336 elementary schools were selected for the prestigious recognition program that

recognizes two categories of exceptional schools: those Closing the Achievement Gap and those demonstrating Exceptional Student Performance.

The five schools selected from Tulare County were:

Golden Valley Elementary School, Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified School District

Roosevelt Elementary School, Dinuba Unified School District

Rocky Hill Elementary School, Exeter Unified School District

Three Rivers Union School, Three Rivers Union School District

Mountain View Elementary School, Visalia Unified School District

“It is my pleasure to honor and recognize these 336 elementary schools for their efforts to provide exemplary public education to all students. Excellent elementary schools play a critical role in the life outcomes of our young people,” State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond said.

For the complete news release from the California Department of Education, visit <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr25/yr25rel18.asp>.



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## El Diamante's Chris Creason wins national championship

El Diamante High School's Chris Creason went 7-0 to win the 160-pound title in the 36<sup>th</sup> annual National High School Coaches Association Wrestling Nationals on Sunday in Virginia. The junior from Visalia won the match in a 10-0 major decision.

Earlier in March, Creason won his school's first individual state championship, a 157-pound title, at the CIF State





Championships in Bakersfield. He was the 14th wrestler in Tulare County history to win an individual state championship.

For more on Creason, visit <https://www.visaliatimesdelta.com/story/sports/high-school/2025/03/31/el-diamante-tulare-county-chris-creason-wins-national-wrestling-championship/82747143007/>

Photo above:

~ Chris Creason of El Diamante High School in Visalia, is recognized as the winner of the boys 157-pound championship match at the CIF State Wrestling Championship held at Mechanics Bank Arena in Bakersfield. Photo courtesy of Manny Santoyo

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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.