



EXCELLENCE
IN EDUCATION

MERCED COUNTY

2026

Merced Theatre

Thursday, October 1, 2026

Steve M. Tietjen, Ed.D.

COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS



Welcome to the Excellence in Education awards — an evening that celebrates exemplary teachers, school employees and school administrators from across the county. The individuals honored tonight represent the best in education. Their contributions not only benefit students, families and communities, but the entire education system as a whole.

The Merced County Office of Education gratefully acknowledges Educational Employees Credit Union's sponsorship of this event and its commitment to education.

Elizabeth J. Dooley

PRESIDENT/CEO EDUCATIONAL EMPLOYEES CREDIT UNION



The Excellence in Education awards ceremony is a wonderful opportunity for us to come together to recognize and celebrate the exceptional educators and school staff throughout Merced County who educate, mentor and inspire our youth.

EECU has proudly co-sponsored this awards ceremony since 2006 and it is our honor to be part of this special event to acknowledge the efforts and contributions of the many dedicated individuals who guide our students toward a bright future. Congratulations to all of the nominees, finalists and winners on this well-deserved recognition.

Schedule of Events

Steve Tietjen, Ed.D.

*Merced County
Superintendent of Schools*

Opening Comments

Marcella Beltrán

Merced High School

National Anthem

Beth Dooley

President/CEO EECU

Remarks from EECU

Steve Tietjen, Ed.D.

*Merced County
Superintendent of Schools*

**Introduction of
Master of Ceremonies**

Ryan Heller

Master of Ceremonies

2026 Recognitions

- Selection Committee
- EIE Committee
- Employee Honorees
- Administrator Honorees
- Teacher Honorees

Employee Honorees



Marycela Renteria

**Community Outreach Coordinator
Atwater Elementary School District**

Marycela has an incredible gift for connecting with students and families. Her genuine care, guidance and encouragement help students feel supported as they celebrate successes and navigate personal challenges. That same encouragement extends to the entire school community. Through her work with the School Site Council, Parent Club and her support of school events, Marycela consistently leads with kindness, dedication and a generous spirit.



Tony Caballero

**Senior Network Engineer
Delhi Unified School District**

Since joining the Delhi Unified School District in 2006, Tony has grown into an essential member of the district. As Senior Network Engineer, he ensures the reliability, security and efficiency of the district's technology infrastructure. His expertise, adaptability and proactive approach to cybersecurity help support daily operations and promote the district's long-term sustainability. With a positive attitude, willingness to help and genuine concern for others, Tony exemplifies the best of what it means to serve in education.



Chad Eyo

**Tech Support Technician
Dos Palos-Oro Loma Joint Unified School District**

Chad is known for his kindness and willingness to help wherever needed. From supporting teachers with troubleshooting issues or assisting students in the classroom, he approaches every task with dedication and a positive attitude. Beyond his technical skill, Chad also regularly volunteers his time at sporting events, including running the scoreboard for high school games. Whatever he does, he makes sure everything is running smoothly so that students have the best chance to be successful.



Joanna Martinez

**Special Education Instructional Aide
Gustine Unified School District**

For the past six years, Joanna has served as a Special Education Instructional Aide, where she continues to bring care and intention to her work with students. She understands that each student has unique needs and knows how to respond with patience, flexibility and respect. Her calm demeanor and positive outlook helps create an environment where students feel comfortable, supported and ready to participate.

Employee Honorees



Ashley Farmer

Administrative Secretary
Merced County Office of Education

As Administrative Secretary for the Special Education Program, Ashley keeps daily operations running smoothly, anticipates the needs of staff and students and provides consistent, dependable support across all aspects of the program. She interacts regularly with students and has become a trusted and supportive adult presence on campus. Her ability to build meaningful rapport with students, particularly those who struggle emotionally or socially, is especially impactful. Ashley approaches every aspect of her role with compassion, professionalism and dedication.



Shavonne Wielandt

Resource Aide TK-3
McSwain Union Elementary School District

Shavonne's outgoing and approachable personality creates a welcoming, supportive environment for students and staff. She brings positive energy, flexibility and a genuine willingness to help in everything she does. Her knowledge and experience in special education allow her to adapt to the diverse needs and learning styles of students and meets them where they are. Shavonne provides meaningful, individualized support while ensuring each student feels valued, supported and capable of success.



Jeremy Spangler

Information Systems Specialist
Merced City School District

Jeremy keeps the district's digital environment secure, accurate and user-friendly so teachers can focus on students without technology getting in the way. He helped implement ParentSquare and Peachjar, which are now central to district communications. Jeremy also supports student events, including the STEAM Fair and Dinner with a STEAM Professional, where he created a cybersecurity escape room and taught students how to build ethernet cables. His skill, humility and thoughtfulness make him an invaluable member of the district.



Pahoua Lee

Payroll Technician
Merced Union High School District

As a Payroll Technician, Pahoua consistently demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that all employees are paid accurately and on time. She approaches her work with precision, high-standards and a strong sense of responsibility. Pahoua goes beyond the technical aspects of her role and provides compassionate and responsive support to employees, whether she's assisting with complex payroll questions, resolving discrepancies or guiding them through the payroll process.

Administrator Honorees



Laurie Havel

**Principal
Atwater Elementary School District**

Laurie considers herself an architect of the positive, vibrant campus that is Elmer Wood Elementary School. Under her leadership, the school implemented a system to combat chronic absenteeism, which helped reduce the absenteeism rate from 14.7 percent to 8.5 percent in 2025 and now to 4.5 percent. Laurie's confident, empathetic leadership inspires staff, empowers students and influences the broader community to help create a positive impact on student success.



Michael Phillips

**Athletic Director
Delhi Unified School District**

As athletic director, Michael oversees the coordination and schedule of athletic events across both middle and high school sports. His professionalism, leadership and commitment to student engagement have expanded the athletics program, which saw an increase in student participation and in awards, with multiple teams earning regional and state championships. Michael has built more than a competitive program; he has created opportunities for students to develop character, discipline and teamwork.



Rhonda Sullivan

**Director of Food Service
Dos Palos-Oro Loma Joint Unified School District**

The food service department at the Dos Palos-Oro Loma Joint Unified School District is more than a team, it's a family, largely thanks to Director of Food Services Rhonda. She understands the vital role food services play in student well-being and leads with the knowledge of that responsibility. Beyond her duties, Rhonda supports the broader school community through sports, extracurricular activities and staff events. Her positive presence, along with her staff, is felt throughout the entire district.



Paula Heupel

**Superintendent/Principal
El Nido Elementary School District**

Paula has a deep understanding of the challenges that face public education. Her ability to balance strong academic expectations with compassion has created a positive, productive school culture where both staff and students are inspired to succeed. Paula's focus on building partnerships with county and municipal organizations, local higher educational institutions and the Farm Bureau has helped strengthen the school community.

Administrator Honorees



Mark Gasaway

**Transportation/MOT Director
McSwain Union Elementary School District**

As the Transportation and Maintenance Manager, Mark considers himself a steward of a positive school environment. He oversees transportation systems that safely get students to school, maintains facilities that provide clean and secure learning spaces and leads operations that support uninterrupted instruction. Originally hired as Director of Maintenance, Mark quickly demonstrated his ability to oversee transportation as well. Though much of his work happens behind the scenes, his positive impact is felt every day.



Jose Munoz

**Principal
Merced City School District**

Jose helps students feel seen, included and supported. He recognizes their strengths and empowers them to pursue opportunities they may not have considered. His commitment to others goes beyond his administrative role, as he also coaches, encourages and supports the Gracey Elementary School community at every opportunity. Despite his accomplishments, Jose consistently shines the spotlight on others. Through his actions, he demonstrates a deep commitment to ethical leadership, community partnership and compassion.



Monica Sevilla

**Director
Merced County Office of Education**

Through her dedication to children and families, Monica has advanced to the role of Early Education Director, where she leads programs that serve more than 5,000 families. During the past four years, she has expanded access to early education services across Merced County while working to remove barriers families face when accessing critical child care. Her commitment, professionalism and leadership make her an outstanding administrator, role model and advocate for early education.

Teacher Honorees



Dina Brindeiro

**Special Education (10th Grade)
Delhi Unified School District**

Dina has a remarkable ability to see potential in students of all abilities. Through her advocacy, she ensures that every student, especially the most vulnerable, have the support and resources they need to succeed. Her commitment extends beyond the classroom through her leadership in the Associated Student Body (ASB), where she creates fun, inclusive events that bring students together. Through her compassion and dedication, Dina has become a beacon of school spirit and the heart of Delhi High School.



Anel Guereca

**Teacher (1st Grade)
Dos Palos-Oro Loma Joint Unified School District**

Anel welcomes students, parents and staff each day with respect, kindness and a cheerful smile. She brings lessons to life by connecting them to real-world experiences and often turns everyday moments into opportunities to learn. Beyond her classroom, Anel actively supports students at afterschool tutoring, Art Night and sporting events. Through her encouragement, guidance and strong values, she creates lessons that students carry with them long after they leave her classroom.



Yaneli Ledezma

**Spanish/ELD/AVID (9th - 12th Grades)
Gustine Unified School District**

Yaneli's impact extends well beyond her classroom. Her expertise as a Spanish teacher allows her to help students enhance their English Language Development, with many of her AP Spanish students exceeding national pass rates. As English Learner Coordinator, she strengthens support for students and families while collaborating across departments to improve effective ELD practices. Her unwavering support reflects her commitment to helping every student reach their fullest potential.

Teacher Honorees



Nora Peña

Social Studies (8th Grade)
McSwain Union Elementary School District

Nora believes classrooms are more than educational spaces, they're spaces where students grow into the people they will become as adults. In her classroom, Nora has created a calm, positive and respectful environment where students can feel safe and confident. As a leader, Nora guides instructional practices, supports a positive school culture and oversees the annual Washington D.C. student trip. Her ability to connect with students at such a pivotal stage in their educational journey reflects her skill as an educator.



Savannah Ramirez

Special Education Mod-Severe (K-2nd)
Merced City School District

Savannah teaches the district's only day class for students with moderate to severe special needs. Her students' success is rooted in Savannah's ability to care for, respect and challenge them. She is considered a vital resource for the campus and regularly collaborates with teachers to share practical behavioral intervention tools. Through thoughtful differentiation, data-driven instruction and an unwavering belief in every student's potential, Savannah ensures they have what they need to succeed in school and life.



Tisha McParland

Regional Occupational Program Instructor
Merced County Office of Education

Tisha has built a dynamic Culinary Essentials program that connects classroom learning to workforce opportunities for students. She also coordinates the Rise to Higher Grounds program, which provides youth on probation the opportunity to gain employment skills. Tisha knows that her work is more than just helping students develop employment skills, it is about creating opportunities for students to discover their abilities, develop pride in their work and gain skills that will support their future.

Teacher Honorees



Anel Ochoa

**Special Education Teacher
Merced Union High School District**

As a Special Education teacher, Anel has demonstrated an unwavering dedication to supporting students with diverse learning needs. She creates an inclusive and structured classroom environment where all students can feel empowered to grow academically and personally. Anel approaches each day with warmth, professionalism and care. Her dedication reflects the very best of the teaching profession and the positive impact educators can have on the lives of students.



Jamie Hillhouse

**Teacher (4th Grade)
Weaver Union School District**

Jamie's commitment to her students is at the heart of everything she does. She takes the time to understand their interests, brings those passions into the classroom and encourages them to embrace new experiences with confidence. That same enthusiasm extends outside her classroom through her involvement in initiatives like the Farmdale Elementary Garden and Foxtrotters Club. Jamie's positive energy and dedication make her a valued and uplifting presence throughout the school community.



EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR



YSABEL ESPINOSA

Instructional Aide II

El Nido Elementary School

El Nido Elementary School District

Ysabel approaches her role with the clear vision that a library is more than a room filled with books, but a hub for curiosity, creativity and community. As an Instructional Aid at El Nido Elementary School, she brings this vision to life through thoughtfully

curated displays and designs that help students feel seen and inspired to explore. She provides essential literary support, guides students as they navigate both print and digital resources and collaborates with teachers to align library technology and resources with classroom instruction. Her support with research, book selection and digital literacy has strengthened instructional practices across campus. Ysabel is deeply committed to student learning, especially reading comprehension. Through creative incentives, reading challenges and engaging activities, she motivates students to grow as readers and develop a lifelong love of reading. Thanks to Ysabel, the library has become the cornerstone of positive school culture on campus.



ADMINISTRATOR OF THE YEAR



ELIZABETH PHONESAVANH

**Associate Principal
Golden Valley High School
Merced Union High School District**

As the Associate Principal, Elizabeth's primary goal is always to provide the guidance, encouragement and practical support each student needs to reach their full potential.

She understands the power of community partnerships and works to connect students and families with resources that strengthen their support systems. Elizabeth has an exceptional ability to connect with students who are often considered the hardest to reach. She approaches each student with empathy, patience and authenticity, earning their respect while maintaining clear expectations and accountability. As an administrator, Elizabeth has been instrumental in leading support initiatives that ensure students receive appropriate, individualized tiered interventions. Her leadership has contributed to reduced suspension rates while increasing positive student behaviors and school connectedness. What stands out most about Elizabeth is her unwavering belief in her students. She never labels them as "bad kids." Instead, she looks beyond their challenges, acknowledges the good in each student and helps them recognize their own potential.



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TEACHER OF THE YEAR



RONALEE JOHNSON

Math Teacher

**Mitchell Senior Elementary School
Atwater Elementary School District**

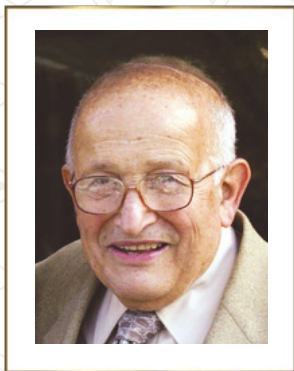
As a math teacher, Ronalee believes that when students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they become fully engaged. She intentionally created her classroom as a space of belonging and collaboration for students of all backgrounds

and identities. Her instruction connects to students' lives and interests, from incorporating their names into word problems to designing tasks around what they enjoy. Ronalee also serves as the district's director of Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a college-readiness program for K-12 students, and the California Junior Scholarship Federation, which promotes scholarship, service and leadership among seventh and eighth grade students. She often reminds her students that "mistakes allow thinking to happen," reinforcing that meaningful learning requires risk and trust. Ronalee believes every student deserves a classroom where they are deeply known, consistently challenged and fully supported.



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ABOUT OUR ARTIST



Clement J. Renzi loved his family, Central California, and the art of sculpting. A Visalia native and graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, he studied in Vienna at the Academy of Applied Arts, under Franz Knezl. From Vienna, the casting of bronze sculptures took Renzi to Italy, Spain and Mexico. He was especially fortunate to use the foundry of Lester Harry, a Central Valley bronze caster. Clement passed away on December 1, 2009 at the age of 84. Renzi's final work is a life-sized, three-figure sculpture titled "Commencement" that was installed in 2011 and adorns the entryway to the Merced County Office of Education.





SPECIAL THANKS

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Steve Roussos | Irene Beattie | Colton Dennis

AWARD ARTIST

Clement J. Renzi

NATIONAL ANTHEM

Marcella Beltrán - Merced High School

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Steve M. Tietjen, Ed.D.
County Superintendent of Schools



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