



October 28, 2022

Media Advisory

Contact: Robert Herman
Communications Director
(559) 733-6606 – office
(559) 303-8568 – cell

Annual *Excellence in Education* winners to be honored at breakfast event Wednesday, November 2

WHAT: Winners, finalists and nominees in the annual *Excellence in Education* Awards program will be honored at an **invitation-only** breakfast event in the Visalia Convention Center Exhibit Hall. Over 200 friends, family members, and colleagues are expected to attend. This year, a total of 31 nominees were chosen to participate in the competition. The nominees were submitted by Tulare County school districts in three categories – Administrator/Manager of the Year, Teacher of the Year, and School Employee of the Year. A committee of Tulare County business and education leaders individually reviewed and scored each nominee to determine the winners, which were announced in April.

WINNERS:

Administrator/Manager of the Year

LEANNE CERDA

Principal, Cutler Elementary School (now Administrator of Early Childhood Education)
Cutler-Orosi Joint Unified School District

Leanne Cerda was selected as the 2022 Tulare County Administrator/Manager of the Year for her work as principal of Cutler Elementary, the school she attended as a child. She has worked for her district as a teacher, literary coach, and administrator for 17 years. This fall, she was named administrator of the district's Early Childhood Education program. Additionally, she is actively involved in her community, serving as a member of the local Lions Club.

In her six years as principal at Cutler Elementary, she transformed the campus with murals depicting various colleges and the message, "Your journey begins here." Cerda ensures that students know they can be anything they want to be and that they "have a vision for themselves." Through her leadership, Cutler Elementary has become the hub of the community with family social events, academic tutoring, and parent partner academies.



As Cutler Elementary's past principal, Cerda spent the majority of her day observing classroom instruction, celebrating great teaching, and supporting improvement. Yolanda Valdez, district superintendent, said that she had a laser focus on academic achievement and was intricately involved in all data analysis. Weekly, Cerda convened the school's reading specialist, instructional coaches, school psychologist, social worker, and learning director to ensure students are making both academic, and social and emotional gains. For her work in implementing the school's PBIS behavior support program, Cutler Elementary obtained the organization's highest designation – "platinum status" for 2018, 2019, and 2021.

Her nominators praised Cerda for her spirit and energy, which despite a significant health issue, she has maintained throughout the pandemic, "without missing a beat."

Teacher of the Year

NANCY WARKENTIN

Transitional Kindergarten, Wilson Elementary School
Dinuba Unified School District

Nancy Warkentin, now retired, was a teacher with Dinuba Unified for 37 years at Wilson Elementary. For the past 10 years, she was a transitional kindergarten teacher – helping four- and five-year-olds develop educational foundations and a love for learning inside and outside the classroom.

Warkentin's nominators praised the master teacher for her creativity in making the California standards fun for her students. Through the use of music, song, pictures, drama, art, and technology, she actively engaged her students in their lessons. At the core of her instruction was love, which she expressed to her students, valuing each and every one as her "beautiful children."

Warkentin also focused on students' social and emotional learning, continually collecting data, and making observations of their struggles, potential triggers, and what they valued. She used this data to adapt her instruction to their needs. Another foundational effort in her class was the establishment of model behavior. "Learning cannot effectively occur in chaos, so I establish a clear set of expectations and consistency in managing my classroom," she said. She shared that discipline is a teachable moment, not a punishment.

Warkentin was active on her campus, serving as the school site hospitality committee chair and Social-Emotional Learning Afterschool Group lead. She also coordinated performance opportunities for her students, including their annual Christmas caroling event at Covenant Care Center.



School Employee of the Year

BLANCA ESPARZA

Parent Liaison, Earlimart Middle School

Earlimart School District

Blanca Esparza is a proud grandmother to a 4-year-old boy and a 4-year-old girl. She grew up in a small town in California and has been a resident of Earlimart for over 20 years. She is a dedicated parent and has been involved in her children's education from the very beginning. She is also a member of the Earlimart School District Parent Liaison Committee and has been instrumental in many of the district's initiatives. Blanca is a hardworking and dedicated professional who is committed to the success of her students and the Earlimart School District.

et(w)2 () -2 o

Teacher of the Year

