



EXCELLENCE  
IN EDUCATION  

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MERCED COUNTY

2024

Thursday, October 3, 2024

# Steve M. Tietjen, Ed.D.

**MERCED 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. Those honored tonight represent the best in education. Their contributions not only benefit students, parents and educators, but education 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 an opportunity for us to come together to recognize and celebrate the many outstanding teachers, school employees and administrators in Merced County. This annual event honors their achievements and their commitment to making a difference in the lives of schoolchildren throughout the region. EECU has proudly co-sponsored the awards ceremony since 2006 and it is our pleasure and privilege to be part of this very special event. Congratulations to all of the nominees, finalists and winners on this well-deserved recognition of the positive impact they have on their students and their communities.

# Schedule of Events

**Steve Tietjen, Ed.D.**

*Merced County  
Superintendent of Schools*

**Opening Comments**

**Cub Scout Pack 96**

**Presentation of Colors**

**Abby Samuelson**

*El Capitan 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**

**Paul Loeffler**

Master of Ceremonies

**2024 Recognitions**

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

# Employee Honorees



**Elivier Valenzuela**

**Bilingual Instructional Assistant  
Atwater Elementary School District**

Elivier is a Bilingual Instructional Assistant at Mitchell K-6 Elementary School. She began her educational career as an elementary school teacher in Mexico. Not only does she participate in school events and translate during conferences, but she also communicates with Spanish-speaking parents. Elivier's own experience as a second language learner gives her the compassion and perspective to connect with others.



**Sarah King**

**Instructional Aide  
Delhi Unified School District**

Sarah is an Instructional Aide at Schendel Elementary School. In addition to working with students during the school day, she also helps with the morning drop-off program and teaches an after-school tutoring group. One thing that stands out the most about Sarah is her ability to build relationships with her students. They respect her and look forward to working with her.



**Lisa Conger**

**College and Career Technician  
Dos Palos-Oro Loma School District**

Lisa is the College and Career Technician at Dos Palos High School. Lisa dedicates herself to empowering students throughout their educational journeys and helps them prepare for successful careers. For Lisa, her role extends beyond providing students with essential information. She strives to inspire them to recognize their full potential and hopes to establish continuous growth in every student she serves.



**Lee Vang**

**Administrative Assistant  
El Nido Elementary School District**

Lee is an Administrative Assistant for the El Nido Elementary School District. Lee approaches her role with responsiveness and dedication. Her help to develop efficient, person-first systems for the district is among one of her greatest professional qualities, including her initiative to transition the district to digital archives. Additionally, her energy and joy are infectious and add to the positive impact the district provides for each student.

# Employee Honorees



## Elodia Sanchez

### **Food Service Worker Gustine Unified School District**

Elodia is a Food Service Worker at Romero Elementary School. As a member of the food service staff, Elodia gets to connect with students and staff every day. She believes that schools should have safe spaces where students can feel acknowledged, not just in their studies, but in every aspect of their school life. Thanks to Elodia, the school cafeteria has become one of those spaces for everyone at Romero Elementary.



## Lucero Vera-Sanchez

### **After-School Program Counselor Le Grand Union High School District**

Lucero is the Program Counselor for the Le Grand Union High School District. Lucero stands out for her devotion to her students' success and her ability to keep operations running smoothly. She oversees all after-school activities and staff, checks in on student clubs and is actively involved in her community. Lucero approaches everything with kindness, empathy and a genuine desire to make a positive impact.



## Rosalva Esquivel

### **Bilingual Office Clerk McSwain Union Elementary School District**

Rosalva is the Bilingual Office Clerk at McSwain Elementary School. Rosalva facilitates communication between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking members of the school community. She is the bridge that connects the bilingual gap at the school and, through her abilities, ensures that all students, families and educators have equal access to information and resources. She demonstrates professionalism, dedication and the remarkable ability to make everyone feel welcome.

# Employee Honorees



**Daisy Ramirez**

**Administrative Assistant  
Merced County Office of Education**

Daisy is an Administrative Assistant for the Merced County Office of Education. Daisy provides essential support to educators, families, providers and team members within the Early Education Department. In just three years, Daisy managed to learn and excel in every aspect of her role, from supporting the department's executive director to assisting staff and families with their diverse needs. Her contributions to both the department and the organization as a whole are invaluable.



**Martha Fuentes**

**School Secretary  
Merced Union High School District**

Martha is the School Secretary at Merced High School. Martha believes that as the first person visitors see at the school, it is her responsibility to set the tone for a positive environment. She makes people feel warm, welcomed and heard no matter what the circumstances of their visit might be. Every opportunity she has to connect with people radiates with kindness, helpfulness and positivity.



**Alejandra Garza**

**Principal's Secretary  
Weaver Union School District**

Alejandra is the Principal's Secretary at Weaver Middle School. Beyond Alejandra's outstanding administrative skills, she embodies the core values of the school community: integrity, reliability and a genuine passion for serving others. Her ability to make connections with families, prioritize safety and manage time makes her an inspiring role model for the entire school community.

# Administrator Honorees



**Anelle Kelly**

**Principal  
Atwater Elementary School District**

In her role as a Principal at Juniper Elementary School, Anelle takes on the responsibility to ensure that students are exposed to a wide range of career and educational opportunities. She works closely with local agencies, invites representatives to read to students and introduces them to future career possibilities. In addition to her commitment to student success, Anelle is known for her maturity and ability to handle any situation with grace.



**Sergio Salas**

**Director of Operations  
El Nido Elementary School District**

As the Director of Operations at El Nido Elementary School, Sergio manages various areas, including maintenance, transportation and nutrition services. In addition to his managerial duties, he also takes on the role of chef for the school and brings creativity and care to the school's meals. Students eagerly anticipate lunchtime each day and look forward to the annual Thanksgiving lunch. His dedication to the success and well-being of students is evident in everything he does.



**Veronica Villa**

**Learning Director  
Merced City School District**

Veronica is the Learning Director at Tenaya Middle School, where she views her leadership role as more than managing operations or making decisions, but about cultivating a sense of belonging for students, staff and the entire school community. Her high energy and enthusiasm uplift every conversation, as she creates meaningful experiences for both students and staff. Veronica inspires everyone around her to reach their full potential.



**Megan Cope**

**Principal  
Merced Union High School District**

Megan is the Principal at El Capitan High School. In response to a need for public sector career opportunities, Megan introduced the Public Service Career Pathway to the school. Her ability to make decisive, effective choices has inspired staff to embrace positive change and continues to leverage the school's existing strengths. The school continues to thrive under her leadership.

# Teacher Honorees



**Valerie Avila**

**Elementary Teacher  
Atwater Elementary School District**

Valerie is a Teacher at Aileen Colburn Elementary School. In her 38 years of teaching, Valerie has consistently exemplified a high standard of dedication and passion and has impacted more than 1,000 students who have entered her classroom. She possesses an unparalleled ability to recall not only faces, but also details of each student, making them feel remembered and valued, which speaks volumes about her as both an educator and a person.



**Adeline Amador**

**Agriculture Teacher  
Delhi Unified School District**

Adeline teaches Agriculture at Delhi High School, where she helps equip students with the skills to overcome challenges and thrive in modern society. Additionally, her lessons are structured to provide learning experiences that foster knowledge and practical skills for future success. Her position as the department chair and FFA advisor has enhanced the quality and functionality of the agriculture program and demonstrated her commitment to her students, colleagues and the entire school community.



**Mitzi Gonzales**

**Social Science Teacher  
Dos Palos-Oro Loma Joint Unified School District**

Mitzi teaches Social Science at Bryant Middle School. Mitzi is a passionate advocate for her students, but what sets her apart is her innovative teaching methods, including the use of technology and hands-on activities to promote student engagement. She successfully meets the diverse needs of her students and creates a dynamic classroom environment. Mitzi's impact goes beyond the classroom as she actively contributes to extracurricular activities and community outreach.



**Jasmin Corchado**

**Preschool Teacher  
Dos Palos-Oro Loma Joint Unified School District**

Jasmin is a preschool teacher at the Dos Palos Early Childhood Education Center. Jasmin exemplifies the qualities of an outstanding preschool educator, particularly in her ability to engage with young students and support each of their unique learning journeys. Her inclusive approach and utilization of assessment tools ensure that all students, regardless of their ability level, feel valued, supported and encouraged to reach their full potential.



# Teacher Honorees



**Andrea Beltz**

**Sixth Grade Teacher  
El Nido Elementary School District**

Andrea teaches sixth grade at El Nido Elementary School. With 21 years of experience in the district, Andrea has served in a variety of capacities. In all those years, Andrea has provided exceptional instruction to students and serves as a role model for other teachers. She shares her pragmatic and insightful lessons with her colleagues and likewise continues to seek improvement. She applies this same model in her classroom and encourages her students to practice patience, guidance and mentor younger students.



**Primavera Chavez**

**Fifth Grade Teacher  
Gustine Unified School District**

Primavera teaches fifth grade at Romero Elementary School. What truly sets Primavera apart is her genuine commitment to student success. She goes above and beyond to provide personalized support so that she can recognize and nurture the unique talents of every student under her guidance. Whether it's through small group mentoring sessions or extracurricular activities like Latino Family Literacy, Primavera consistently demonstrates a profound investment in her students' growth.



**Amber Spielman**

**Third Grade Teacher  
McSwain Union Elementary School District**

Amber teaches third grade at McSwain Elementary School. One of Amber's most notable qualities is her unwavering dedication to collaboration and teamwork on campus. She is always the first to volunteer her time and expertise, whether it's organizing school events, participating in curriculum development or mentoring new teachers, her willingness to share resources, ideas and best practices has enriched the educational experiences of both her colleagues and students.



**Claudia Becerra**

**Middle School Teacher  
Special Education - Merced City School District**

Claudia teaches seventh and eighth grade students in the Special Education Program at Tenaya Middle School. As an educator, Claudia understands and respects her role in shaping a positive culture, not just in the classroom, but also in the entire school community. Through her work with the Parent Teacher Club, she strives to cultivate a space where her students can develop their self-esteem and never miss out on opportunities.

# Teacher Honorees



**Maggie Spiva**

**Preschool Teacher - Special Education  
Merced County Office of Education**

Maggie is a preschool teacher at Miano Elementary School. Maggie is considered a true leader within the Special Education preschool team and demonstrates unwavering commitment to education, as well as the well-being of her students. What sets Maggie apart is her commitment to her students. Every decision she makes is guided by their needs and interests. Her passion for early childhood education shines through in everything she does.



**Patricia Verdone**

**Teacher - Educational Services  
Merced County Office of Education**

Patricia works for the Educational Services Department at MCOE, where she provides instruction for high-risk students and students enrolled in the Dual Language Immersion Program. In these diverse environments, Patricia has honed her ability to balance directness with encouragement. She is a genuine and empathetic teacher who builds meaningful connections with students and constantly encourages them to succeed.



**Alex Thengvall**

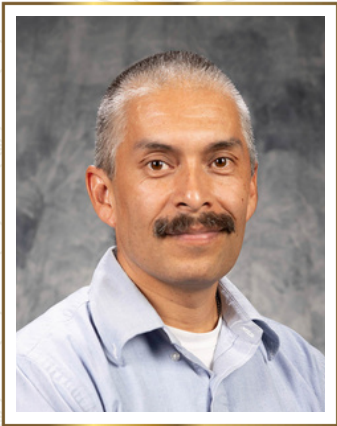
**Social Studies Teacher  
Weaver Union School District**

Alex teaches Social Studies at Weaver Middle School. Alex embodies the essence of a true leader. He serves as a department representative and actively participates in professional development. Alex has taken the initiative to support the schoolwide Student of the Month program and mentors the student-led weekly video announcements. With a cup of coffee in hand, he approaches each day with a calm demeanor and a genuine desire to uplift both students and colleagues.



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# EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR



## OCTAVIO UGALDE

**Lead Custodian**

**Maintenance and Operations**

**Merced City School District**

With more than 20 years of experience, Octavio has established a high standard for his peers and significantly improved the Merced City School District through his extensive knowledge, professionalism and leadership. His unique combination of

technical expertise and genuine passion for his work allows him to go beyond his job duties, actively sharing his experience and supporting his colleagues. Prior to his current role, Octavio was part of the team that helped Peterson Elementary School achieve the California Distinguished School Award, which highlights his commitment and desire to watch others succeed. What truly sets him apart is his exceptional work ethic and dedication to going the extra mile in every task he undertakes. His work to coordinate substitutes during absences, train and mentor new custodians and consistently help schools solve issues not only contributes to a safe and welcoming school environment for students, but also earned him the trust and respect of the entire school district.



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# ADMINISTRATOR OF THE YEAR



## DANA REYES

**Principal**

**Bryant Middle School**

**Dos Palos-Oro Loma Joint Unified  
School District**

Dana brings 12 years of experience as a former social worker to his role as the Principal at Bryant Middle School. Although discipline plays a large part in one of Dana's roles, he approaches everything from a place of positive encouragement and support.

His work with the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports team, along with his oversight of the Student Attendance Review Team, has cultivated a culture of responsibility, respect and accountability among students. Under his guidance, discipline management has significantly improved, resulting in a reduction in suspension rates. Dana's ability to build strong relationships with students, staff and parents has helped create a positive and inclusive learning environment for everyone. As an invaluable member of the Bryant Middle School community, Dana not only enhances student outcomes but also serves as a source of pride for the school, inspiring both students and educators to strive for excellence.



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# TEACHER OF THE YEAR



## AMBER KIRBY

**Theatre and Film Teacher**  
**Golden Valley High School**  
**Merced Union High School District**

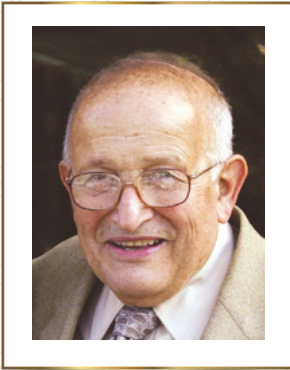
As the Theatre and Film teacher at Golden Valley High School, Amber has a unique talent for encouraging even her most introverted students to engage and participate in her classes. This skill, combined with her own expertise in theatre production and direction, helped elevate the school's theatre

program to the heights it exists in today, including a steady increase in student participation each year. Amber's commitment to inspiring her students to pursue their dreams is unwavering. She even received her certification in special effects makeup to ensure she teaches them the latest industry standards. Additionally, she has taken the initiative to lead College, Trade, and Industry Tours, guiding groups of students through visits to prestigious schools in the Theatre and Film industry. The enthusiasm she brings to every project and the genuine interest she shows in her students' journeys inspires them to dream big and work hard. As a the heart of collaboration and creativity at Golden Valley High School, Amber not only cultivates talent but also instills confidence in every student who passes through her class.



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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

## **SELECTION COMMITTEE**

Steve Roussos | Irene Beattie | Colton Dennis

## **AWARD ARTIST**

Clement J. Renzi

## **PRESENTATION OF COLORS AND NATIONAL ANTHEM**

Cub Scout Pack 96 | Abby Samuelson - El Capitan High School

## **EDUCATIONAL EMPLOYEES CREDIT UNION STAFF**

Nicole Franzen | Mark Perez | Joe Doyland

## **MERCED COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION**

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Tim Razzari | Frank Fagundes | Geneva Brett

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Stacie Arancibia | Patricia Espinoza | Odessa Osby

## **MCOE COMMUNICATIONS**

Nathan Quevedo | Dylan McMullen | Nate Gomes  
Hector Ramirez | Kathleen Ochoa  
Jaime Ramirez | Diego Cerventes



— MERCED COUNTY —

# Office of Education

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



# EECU

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