

2021 CALIFORNIA
TEACHERS
OF THE **YEAR** ★
Gala



PRESENTING SPONSOR | CALIFORNIA CASUALTY

March 10, 2021

Making Connections - Agents of Change

A Message from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction



Welcome to the 2021 California Teachers of the Year Virtual Gala!

I extend my congratulations to our 2021 California Teachers of the Year—Jim Klipfel, Allison Cyr, Keisa Brown, Laura E. Gómez Contreras, and Nora Wynne. A special shout-out goes to Jim, who is California's nominee for the National Teacher of the Year Program.

Tonight, we are recognizing our five California Teacher of the Year honorees and seven finalists for their remarkable accomplishments. In a year that's been challenging in more ways than we could have ever imagined, these exceptional teachers have demonstrated resilience, creativity, strength, and compassion as they have gone above and beyond to ensure that they are building connections with their students and their families and that their needs are met.

These amazing individuals represent the best of the best in the teaching profession and the diversity of our great state. They are committed to equity and are working to close the opportunity gap among a diverse group of students and employ innovative strategies to increase academic success. All of these teachers are making a huge difference in their schools by creating a culture of high expectations, respect, and trust and shaping their students to be critical thinkers, active participants in democracy, and the leaders of tomorrow.

They are great ambassadors for the profession as we deal with teacher shortages. They serve as role models who motivate and inspire others and highlight the joys and rewards of being an educator. Great teachers are the core of a great educational system and have the power to change lives, one by one.

My thanks and appreciation go to our sponsors, who help support our educator and school recognition programs. I would especially like to acknowledge our Presenting Sponsor, California Casualty, as well as the California Teachers of the Year Foundation, for our continued partnership.

Finally, to all the educators at this event, whether you are newer in the profession or a seasoned veteran, I want to thank you for all of your hard work and dedication in serving the students of California.

Sincerely,
Tony Thurmond, State Superintendent of Public Instruction



A Message from the Presenting Sponsor California Casualty

COVID-19 introduced California educators to challenges never seen before. And in the spirit of their profession, these extraordinary individuals focused on the well-being of their students and overcame disruption of such magnitude with collaboration, adaptation, ingenuity, and grit.



This evening, we honor the 2021 California Teachers of the Year and Finalists for their contributions and accomplishments in bringing their students, schools, and communities together when it felt like the world was falling apart. They represent the thousands of men and women who remain committed to teaching in the great state of California despite the pandemic's impact on their way of life.

These champions of education have gone above and beyond to educate, inspire, and empower those around them. We echo the sentiments of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Thurmond, who said, "I'm proud that these educators are receiving this prestigious honor for their continued effort to rise above the challenges and connect with students even during unimaginable circumstances."

These nine individuals demonstrate the heart, mind, and strength needed to foster community involvement, encourage learning success, and elevate the teaching profession.

California Casualty has been supporting and working with educators since 1951. As a proud Presenting Sponsor of the California School Recognition Program, we congratulate the 2021 California Teachers of the Year.

We appreciate you and thank all educators for the tremendous work that you do.

Sincerely,
Joe Volponi, FCAS
President and CEO



Greetings From The Chair of The California Teachers of The Year Foundation



Tonight is a very special evening, as we honor five very talented and dedicated teachers who have been chosen as our 2021 California Teachers of the Year. We will also be honoring seven outstanding finalists who also stood out among their peers as primary examples of what exemplifies teaching.

As our world turned upside down in March of 2020 with the onset of a global pandemic, teachers across the state came together to find new ways to stay connected to their students. This year has brought upon all of us great challenges in the classroom, and at home, in trying to bring students a high-quality education through a virtual world. California's teachers are working overtime to create innovative and thoughtful lessons that engage our students within this great state.

As the selection process began, by reviewing these outstanding applications through a virtual lens, the level of professionalism and preparation our teachers displayed as they created an environment and safe space for learning was inspiring. We were awed and humbled by their passion, commitment, and dedication to their students. These educators were creating innovative and compelling lessons each day and engaging students through unique virtual learning opportunities. This evening, as you hear the words of these five extraordinary teachers, I am confident that you too will "see" their unique contributions to their students and to the profession, and you will feel the magic that these life-changing individuals bring each day to their classrooms.

On behalf of the California Teachers of the Year Foundation, thank you to the sponsors, and to all of you who have joined us to celebrate and honor these incredibly talented teachers, whose positive influence will impact future generations in ways that will bring out the best in our teaching profession.

Greg Gardiner
Chair, California Teachers of the Year Foundation



"Unexpected kindness is the most powerful, least costly, and most underrated agent of human change."

Bob Kerrey

Mistress of Ceremonies

Melissa May is a Broadcast Media teacher at Inderkum High School in the Natomas Unified School District. Prior to joining the teaching profession, Melissa (professionally known as Melissa Crowley) was a television reporter and personality for more than 15 years, working as a reporter in Nashville and Texas before moving to California. Melissa also covered politics and education policy as a reporter for KVIE/PBS in Sacramento. Melissa served as a traffic anchor and reporter for ABC 10, the ABC affiliate in Sacramento. Melissa also co-hosted a marketing program for two years called Sacramento and Company.



In 2016 Melissa decided to share her extensive communications experience and passion for broadcasting with the next generation of media professionals and became a Career Technical Education teacher. Melissa worked with the NUSD school district to create the first Broadcast and Media Arts Pathway and played an integral role in developing the curriculum and class structure.

Melissa was inspired to be a reporter after the experience with her high school media program and always enjoyed sharing more about the career field with students before becoming a CTE teacher.

Melissa has been the emcee of the statewide California School Recognition Program Awards Ceremony for many years in the past while in the media and is thrilled to participate in a program that recognizes the accomplishments of teachers.

Melissa lives in Sacramento with her husband and two daughters.

*Communication is merely an exchange of information,
but connection is an exchange of our humanity."*

Sean Stephenson



California Teachers of the Year Virtual Gala

Reception

5:30 - 6:00 p.m.

Program

6:00 - 7:30 p.m.

Special Music

Bach Cello Suite No.1 in G Major, Prélude
Campbell Gardiner, Senior, Orange County School of the Arts, Santa Ana Unified

Greetings

Daniel Thigpen, Deputy Superintendent, California Department of Education

National Anthem

Angelo Rodriguez High School Choir, Fairfield-Suisun Unified

Special Guests

Former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin
Former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell

Welcome

Dr. Stephanie Gregson, Chief Deputy Superintendent,
California Department of Education
Greg Gardiner, Chair, California Teachers of the Year Foundation

Sponsor Greetings

Lisa Almeida, California Casualty, Presenting Sponsor
Doug Ismail and Art Weiss, California Masonic Foundation, Silver Sponsor
Suzi Umemoto, Office Depot, Inc, Silver Sponsor

Special Remarks

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond

Presentations

2021 California Teachers of the Year Finalists
2020 California Teachers of the Year in Review
2021 California Teachers of the Year

Presenting the 2021 California Teachers of the Year

Keisa Brown, Allison Cyr, Laura E. Gómez,
Jim Klipfel, Nora Wynne

Keisa Brown

**Seventh and Eighth Grades
Introduction to Spanish and AVID 8
University Heights Middle School
Riverside Unified School District
Riverside County**



Keisa Brown's middle school Spanish and AVID students enter a "warm, Zen-like calm space, created by soft lighting and mellow music" each day, knowing that their teacher is fully there for them. She believes that teaching is about building relationships and letting her students know that she cares about each one of them. Their class mantra is, "Scholars First," and the day begins with a brief energizing activity and "Food for Thought" with the goal of getting students engaged. They end the class period by sharing a "call and response" inspirational moment.

Keisa's "calling," began when she was a mentor and tutor in the AmeriCorps Program, which developed in her a passion for education. As a first-generation college student and educator, her aspiration was to be a guiding light of hope and encouragement for youth. She now delivers a rigorous, yet culturally responsive curriculum to ensure equity and accessibility, and create sustainable change. Paying it forward in her school community, with AVID practices that are utilized in school-wide systems of student support, as are her many community service projects, is one of Keisa's goals. She advocates for AVID exposure for all students, and a schoolwide culture of college and career readiness. In doing so, her AVID team committed to addressing students' academic performance and brought their schoolwide pass rate from 27% to 43%, with her AVID elective students achieving a 63% pass rate.

Through Ms. Brown's leadership, a culture has been created where all her scholars leave with future orientation, and many now see college as an option that was considered unattainable previously. She wants her students to have a voice, and sees herself as planting the seeds of giving and caring, in hopes of "sowing compassionate citizens with character and integrity."

"'Scholars First' is our mantra. I tell them, when you enter this space, you are amazing, wonderful, important, cared for, smart, extraordinary, strong, kind, loved, safe, brave, respected, special, and understood. You're the reason I'm here."

Keisa lives "Ubuntu," which is a Bantu term meaning humanity. She says, "I am who I am because of who we all are."



Allison Cyr

**Multiple Subject - Third Grade
Lyndon B. Johnson Elementary School
Desert Sands Unified School District
Riverside County**

Third grade teacher, Allison Cyr, describes herself by saying, “I am not only a teacher, but a custodian, counselor, mailman, DJ, lawyer, banker, cook, and more, but the catch is that I play all those roles within the first twenty minutes of my day, and I would not trade any of them for anything.”

Every single day in Allison’s class begins with a greeting that includes telling her students that they are loved. High expectations for each student’s success in the safe space of her classroom are paramount. Although COVID-19 has changed her classroom “space,” Allison knows that learning continues because she and her students are a team, ready each day to take on whatever challenges come their way. Ms. Cyr’s belief that teachers are “life givers” was put to the test when, at the age of 20 she gave one of her beloved high school teachers a kidney. “To deny life to a teacher so committed to helping students finish school wasn’t a choice for me,” she explains. During her student teaching, she created a nonprofit known as “Twenty4Change, \$20 or 20 minutes to change a life.” She continues this program so that her students learn to be “doers” and have the courage to take care of those they may have never met. And, sometimes, it means taking care of each other as well.

At the core of Allison’s classroom is a dedication to reading instruction, but also to reading for comprehension and pleasure. She is committed to differentiating instruction, taking each child from where he or she is, to the next step. She wants to be the “teacher who teaches literacy” and shares Frederick Douglass’ quote that, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”

“A teacher’s job never stops at the bell. The bell is just the beginning. Who would you be today if it weren’t for a teacher? Chances are, you wouldn’t be you.”

Allison asks, “Who would you be today if it weren’t for that person who believed you could do anything you set your mind to achieve?” This tenacious, creative, caring teacher practices what she preaches, and her students experience her caring every day and know that she will always be their advocate, coach, and support person.

Laura E. Gómez
Multiple Subject - Third Grade
Martin Elementary School
Santa Ana Unified School District
Orange County



Laura Gómez describes herself as a “passionate third grade teacher who has dedicated 25 years to helping students of all language designations and abilities achieve their goals.” Her classroom exemplifies this creative passion, from students donning construction vests and hats as they measure student-sized polygons and determine area and perimeter of classroom floors in their role of “engineers,” to designing, building, and testing a battery-operated wiggly-bot. Ms. Gomez has created her classroom culture to be one of trust, high expectations, rigorous activities, individualized learning, and fun, engaging experiences that she believes foster higher student achievement.

As an English Learner, Laura said that it was easy for her to feel invisible. She remembers feeling “seen” for the first time in her French teacher’s class in tenth grade. This nurturing teacher gave her the confidence to begin her journey as an educator, as she puts it, “with a box of donated books and a tremendous desire to help.” As an immigrant and first-generation college graduate in her family, she knows the value of education, and fostering parent-school relationships. Among other things, Laura has hosted parent nights for the English Learners at her school in math, family literacy, and science, and has trained her students to lead the games and projects.

Keeping her students learning and their families interacting during the COVID-19 pandemic is a priority for Laura. During distance learning she re-imagined student engagement in the classroom. She discovered that many lack a quiet, consistent learning space and have only intermittent access to Wi-Fi hotspots. So, Ms. Gomez remains flexible, makes phone calls home, and writes postcards to keep students engaged. As Laura puts it, “We may lack resources for comprehensive wraparound services, but we can help our students beat the odds by addressing their family’s needs.”

“The rewards are in every moment I can teach students to believe in their potential, dream, and create a brighter future for themselves.”

It is imperative to Laura that teachers, especially in vulnerable communities, provide a compassionate, culturally inclusive, and rigorous program in which “all students are valued and seen as assets in our classrooms.” She believes that forming genuine bonds with students creates a learning culture where they give their very best because they know she cares.



Jim Klipfel

**National Teacher of the Year Candidate
Ninth - Twelfth Grades
Social Studies and Athletics
Saugus High School
William S. Hart Union High School District
Los Angeles County**

According to his students, high school social studies teacher, Jim Klipfel is a “caring teddy bear” with high energy and serious intensity, who respects them as equals, shares his lunch, and listens to their problems. Jim sees himself as the teacher who says, “Be Toto and pull back the curtain,” the teacher who models sacrifice and service, and welcomes dissent and diversity.

Jim’s driving philosophy is Kaizen, a Japanese term meaning unrelenting improvement, and to that end, he and his like-minded colleagues designed a ninth-grade orientation that is now in its second decade. Over 50 older student mentors were recruited and trained, and given copies of Covey’s book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. Mr. Klipfel personally led sessions on character, organization, relationships, and hard work, in order to promote a successful high school experience.

Increasing classroom-community connections is one of Jim’s strategies for creating an effective school that is a haven for kids and a way to redirect students back into their communities. Taking his students into Los Angeles to visit the Central Library for a research project is always an exciting adventure for them, as many have never ridden public transportation, walked in Los Angeles, or used a large library. He believes that they cannot value community infrastructure if they are unaware of it. As Mr. Klipfel puts it, “Classroom-community relationships are critical arrows in my educator’s quiver.”

Jim believes that the mental health of the young is perhaps the top challenge facing educators. Each year he finds himself stepping back more often from content in order to teach kids about healthy living. In doing so, he tells them daily stories to help them get organized, take risks and recover from setbacks. He explains, “I’m famous for saying: ‘Be brave, not perfect.’”

“Inspiring and aiding students towards their dreams and leading colleagues towards professional success are my proudest legacies.”

A colleague says of Mr. Klipfel, “This is a teacher who goes to school before dawn with trays of muffins to fuel his students for morning study sessions. This is a teacher who doesn’t think twice about running out into an open quad during a school shooting because he sees students on the ground and he needs to save them. This is your Teacher of the Year.”

Nora Wynne
Sixth - Eighth Grades
Spanish
McKinleyville Middle School
McKinleyville Union Elementary School District
Humboldt County



Serving in the Peace Corps in Guatemala, where she learned that not every child has the chance to get an education, was a driving force behind Nora Wynne's decision to become a teacher. She saw teaching as an opportunity to make real and positive change, and because of these experiences, she is now a middle school Spanish teacher with a passion for active learning, social justice, and equity for all students. Her learning environment encourages her students to take risks with language as they actively speak, read, write, and listen in Spanish. She makes certain that "my students on the margins have an ally in me." She sees each student as multi-dimensional, unique, and valuable. Students in Ms. Wynne's class learn to be critical thinkers and active participants in our democracy, as they learn and experience diverse perspectives in a multilingual world.

Music is integral to her highly interactive classroom culture, and the students look forward to Wednesdays for *Musica Miercoles* and their song of the week. They eagerly discuss cultural elements within the song, and this connectivity exposes them to linguistic and cultural diversity. *Mania Musical de Marzo*, (March Madness of Music!) is a music tournament for the entire month. Students read and talk about the lyrics, watch the music videos, and then write about their opinions of the songs. Nora believes that music is a powerful motivator and relevant to her students who now enjoy Spanish beyond the walls of her classroom.

To guarantee her students are engaged with online learning, Nora reaches out to marginalized students through phone calls home, and serves as a needed translator and link to the non-English speaking families at her school.

Ms. Wynne's students are encouraged to read local bilingual news. She engages them in cultural exchanges with students from Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua, Spain, and Ecuador, who give presentations to her classes. These real-world interactions help students delve into complex immigration issues and develop empathy for the less fortunate.

"This pandemic has allowed us the opportunity to reimagine long held educational practices. It is a moment to reconceptualize our education system."

Nora believes that her greatest accomplishments have been the "deep and lasting connections" she has made with many of her students, as she watches them go out into the world and make positive changes.

2021 California Teachers of the Year Sponsors



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gratitude goes to our sponsors**



2021 California Teachers of the Year Finalists

CINDY EVANS

Special Education
Sixth - Eighth Grades
San Jose Intermediate Campus
Marin County Office of Education
Marin County

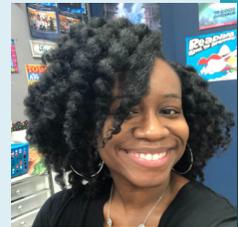


She states, “Children with special needs excel when they are side by side with their . . . peers and the . . . peers open themselves to begin to understand acceptance, commonalities, and compassion.”

Cindy works towards the mutually beneficial integration of students with special needs with their peers in regular school programs.

ERICCA DENT

Second Grade
Joaquin Miller Elementary School
Burbank Unified School District
Los Angeles County



She says, “I love to be silly and have fun which is how I am able to quickly build relationships with my students . . . Since I’ve established high expectations, we can easily have fun while completing quality work.”

Ericca strives to balance academic learning with helping her students be good people. By focusing on her students’ social-emotional needs, she builds student learning through relationships and classroom community.



FRANK KOROSHEC III

English

Eleventh - Twelfth Grades

San Marcos Senior High School
Santa Barbara Unified School District
Santa Barbara County

“As a beginning step in recognizing the beauty in others,” he asks that his students “consider a plurality of voices before formulating their own opinion.” He imparts his love of literature and language to demonstrate to students that “we read to write to live.”

Frank encourages students to approach literature—and life—with thoughtfulness and compassion.



HAZEL KIGHT WITHAM

English

Tenth - Twelfth Grades

Venice Senior High School
Los Angeles Unified School District
Los Angeles County

Through a closer look at LA, she calls on her students “to find common ground through the stories of our loved ones.”

Hazel has responded to the pandemic and students’ struggles by balancing compassion with academic rigor. She invites her students, often economically struggling, underserved, and underrepresented, to explore the history and events of their hometown, Los Angeles.

JAY TWEET

AP Macroeconomics and Honors Government
Twelfth Grade
El Capitan High School
Grossmont Union High School District
San Diego County



He says, “There is nothing more rewarding than helping a student realize they control their own destiny.”

Jay has a no-nonsense approach to learning. By bringing his experience in finance, emphasizing learning over making the grade, and grounding his teaching in real-world experiences, Jay has transformed his school site and students’ lives.

ROSS HAUSE

Multiple Subject
Fifth - Sixth Grades
Luther Burbank Elementary School
Santa Rosa Elementary School District
Sonoma County



He tells them, “We’re here to learn about the world, ourselves, and other people. We’re here to learn how to make a difference in the world and our community, to help and better understand those beside us, and to grow in our confidence and our belief in what is possible for ourselves and for our team.”

Ross emphasizes the value of understanding and acceptance to his students.





SHELLEY ANDROS

Coding, Femineers, Horticulture, and Robotics
Sixth - Eighth Grades
Buena Park Middle School
Buena Park Elementary School District
Orange County

Her classroom, in which she creates “opportunities for students to get involved in the community,” allows students to engage in real-life activities such as computing, fundraising, and decision making in a learning environment “built on trust and relationships.”

Shelley finds her teaching on the belief that students need to take control of their learning in a colorful and stimulating environment provided by teachers.

“No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.”

Dr. James Comer

2021 California Teachers of the Year County Nominees

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Sarah Clancy- San Ramon Valley Unified School District
Courtney Konopacky- San Ramon Valley Unified School District

HUMBOLDT COUNTY

Nora Wynne- McKinleyville Union Elementary School District

IMPERIAL COUNTY

Norma Villicaña- El Centro Elementary School District

KERN COUNTY

Nicole Negron- Bakersfield City School District

LOS ANGELES

Daniel Calma- Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District
Rhiannon Chavez- Los Angeles Unified School District
Ericca Dent- Burbank Unified School District
Timothy Green- Antelope Valley Union High School District
Hazel Kight Witham- Los Angeles Unified School District
James Klipfel- William S. Hart Union High School District
Anna Marie Paliza- Keppel Union Elementary School District
Wendy Payan- Baldwin Park Unified School District
Maria Sims- Azusa Unified School District
Leslie Spainhower- Redondo Beach Unified School District

MADERA COUNTY

Andrea McCord- Madera Unified School District

MARIN COUNTY

Cindy Evans- Marin County Office of Education

MONTEREY COUNTY

Andrew Rodriguez- Salinas Union High School District

ORANGE COUNTY

Shelley Andros- Buena Park Elementary School District
Laura E. Gómez- Santa Ana Unified School District
James Dickson- Irvine Unified School District
Allison Goodlander- Tustin Unified School District
Kathryn Reardon- Westminster School District

PLACER COUNTY

Jamie Albracht-Halsey- Dry Creek Joint Elementary School District





RIVERSIDE COUNTY

Anne-Marie Bravo- Perris Elementary School District
Keisa Brown- Riverside Unified School District
Allison Cyr- Desert Sands Unified School District
Krysten Gonda- Coachella Valley Unified School District

SACRAMENTO COUNTY

Lynda Bettencourt- Elk Grove Unified School District
Belinda Foster- Twin Rivers Unified School District

SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY

Camille Dahnke- Redlands Unified School District
Vanee Matsalia- San Bernardino City Unified School District
Debra McMurtey- Yucaipa-Calimesa Joint Unified School District

SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Arah Allard- Del Mar Union Elementary School District
Christine Escovedo Hill- Ramona City Unified School District
Jose Melo- Valley Center-Pauma Unified School District
Paula Richardson- San Diego Unified School District
Jay Tweet- Grossmont Union High School District

SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY

Rachel Hernandez- San Joaquin County Office of Education, SELPA

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

Philip Deichler- Lucia Mar Unified School District

SANTA BARBARA

Frank Koroshec III- Santa Barbara Unified School District

SOLANO COUNTY

Katherine Reyes- Solano County Office of Education

SONOMA COUNTY

Ross Hause- Santa Rosa Elementary School District

VENTURA COUNTY

Eva Cheerie- Ventura Unified School District

YOLO COUNTY

Sarah Renee Graves- Woodland Joint Unified School District

2021 Selection Committee and Gala Planners

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Letty Kraus, California Department of Education
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Dalynn Malek, Saddleback Unified School District (Retired)
Clay Mitchell, California Department of Education (Retired)
Karen O'Connor, Poway Unified School District (Retired)
Erin Oxhorn-Gilpin, Castaic Union School District
Ann Park, Oakland Unified School District
LaShauna Smedley, California Department of Education

Musical Performance

Campbell Gardiner is a cellist inside of the Orange County School of the Arts (OCSA) and currently studies with Dr. David Garrett, LA Philharmonic Cellist. He was selected to perform Shostakovich's Cello Concerto no.1 op. 101 with the Philharmonic Society of Orange County Youth Symphony. He currently holds the principal position of the cello section at the Orange County School of the Arts. Through ambition, perseverance, and collaboration Campbell has attended Interlochen Summer Arts Program and was a part of the prestigious World Youth Symphony Orchestra, with the WYSO he performed with the Detroit Symphony Players in a side by side concert. Campbell has been conducted under Adam Glaser, Jung-Ho Pak, Daniel Alfred Wachs, Christopher Russell, and JoAnn Falletta. He is an avid orchestral player and currently performs with American Youth Symphony conducted by Carlos Izcaray. He plans to become a professional orchestral cellist inside of a major symphony orchestra. Campbell believes in the power of music and how it allows people to portray their truest selves.



*"The best teachers are those who show you where to look,
but don't tell you what to see."*

Alexandra K. Trenfor



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*"A teacher nourishes the soul
of a child for a lifetime."*

