

Why We Teach



SACRAMENTO COUNTY
DISTRICT TEACHERS OF THE YEAR 2026

Philosophies of Teaching

From the Sacramento County Office of Education



We're pleased to provide this copy of *Why We Teach*, an anthology of essays written by the exceptional teachers who took part in this year's Sacramento County Teachers of the Year program.

As part of the process of selecting two county winners, District Teachers of the Year complete a comprehensive application packet, including an essay on their teaching philosophy.

Their insightful and inspirational words are included here, along with classroom photos provided by the school districts and teachers.

I am proud of the outstanding teachers who help ensure our young people have the opportunity to achieve greatness, both personally and academically. Congratulations to all these teachers on a job well done!

David W. Gordon
Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools

About the County Teachers of the Year Program

The Sacramento County Office of Education has coordinated the Sacramento County Teachers of the Year program for more than 50 years, recognizing and celebrating high-quality teaching. Local education agencies each follow their own selection process, but are invited to nominate teachers to participate in the county program each year.

District winners advance to the Sacramento County Teachers of the Year competition where they submit written essays and are interviewed by a panel of education professionals and previous Sacramento County Teachers of the Year. The panel seeks candidates who are engaging, well-spoken, and demonstrate leadership and innovation. Two teachers are selected to win the Elinor L. Hickey Award of Merit (the highest honor bestowed by the Sacramento County Board of Education). The names of the two teachers are also inscribed on perpetual trophies awarded by the Sacramento Scottish Rite. Winners become eligible to advance to the state competition.

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Dawn Dodson

Center Joint Unified School District
Arthur S. Dudley Elementary School
3rd Grade

As an educator, I believe that teaching is not just about delivering content—it's about nurturing the whole child through inclusive, equitable, and empathetic instruction. At the heart of my philosophy is the conviction that every student, regardless of background, ability, or learning style, deserves access to high-quality learning opportunities and a classroom environment where they feel safe, valued, and inspired to grow.

One lesson that exemplifies my commitment to equity, inclusion, and empathy is an ongoing unit centered on "Community Heroes." In this unit, students explore individuals from diverse cultural, racial, and ability backgrounds who have made meaningful contributions to their communities. This lesson includes biographies of leaders such as Dolores Huerta, Judy Baca, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Through read-alouds, cooperative group work, and art-integrated activities, students learn about the varied challenges these heroes faced and the empathy-driven choices they made to help others.

The instructional decisions I make are deliberate and rooted in the belief that student learning thrives in environments that affirm identity and encourage voice. I differentiate instruction to meet diverse learning needs, providing scaffolds like sentence stems, visual supports, hands-on activities, and choice-based assessments. I use flexible grouping so students learn to collaborate across differences and develop empathy for varied perspectives. Through formative assessment and active listening, I adjust pacing and content to ensure that all learners are engaged and challenged. I integrate social-emotional learning into my daily routine because I value the emotional and interpersonal development of students as deeply as their academic progress.

Creating a safe and welcoming learning environment is foundational to my teaching practice. I begin each year by co-creating classroom norms with my students, emphasizing respect, kindness, and inclusion. I use morning meetings to build community, check in on student well-being, and create space for student voice. I intentionally incorporate books, materials, and visual displays that reflect the identities and lived experiences of my students. I strive to be culturally responsive in my instruction, honoring students' home languages, traditions, and ways of learning. Through regular communication with families, I build strong partnerships that support a shared sense of belonging and purpose.

One of the greatest rewards I find in teaching is witnessing students discover their own strengths and feel empowered to use their voice. Seeing a student who once struggled with self-confidence proudly share their work, or watching students collaborate across differences to solve a problem, affirms why I teach. It is these moments—of transformation, connection, and joy—that sustain my passion and purpose as an educator.

Engaging students of all backgrounds, abilities, and levels requires a mindset of curiosity and high expectations for all. I maintain a goal-based approach to teaching, viewing each student as capable and full of potential. I integrate Universal Design for Learning principles to provide multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. I regularly incorporate student interests into the curriculum to make learning relevant and meaningful. Whether through choice boards, inquiry-based projects, or peer teaching, I create multiple entry points so every learner feels they have something valuable to contribute.

A lesson that defines me as a teacher is an inquiry and writing project called “Design a Better World.” In this project, students identify a real-world problem—such as reducing classroom waste or creating more accessible playground equipment—and use the design thinking process to develop solutions. This lesson reflects my core values: *equity*, because every student’s ideas are heard and validated; *inclusion*, because students collaborate across groups and incorporate diverse perspectives; and *empathy*, because the project begins by considering the needs of others. As students engage in the project, my hope is that they learn how to be compassionate problem-solvers within their school and larger communities.

In everything I do as a teacher, I aim to cultivate a learning space where all children can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. I believe education should be a liberating force—one that opens doors, broadens horizons, and nurtures young people’s capacity to create a more just and caring world. I am committed to continuous reflection and professional growth, always striving to better understand my students and meet their evolving needs.

Teaching is both a responsibility and a privilege. It is an act of hope and a commitment to equity. And every day, I strive to live out that commitment by empowering students to learn with confidence, lead with empathy, and imagine possibilities beyond what they ever thought possible.





Bethany Hancock

Elk Grove Unified School District
Elk Grove Elementary School
3rd Grade

“Rigor—raise my thinking and keep it challenging. We never give up!” This is a choral response my students give me when I say our signal word “rigor” to them. My students know that I expect them to challenge themselves and to use growth mindset. Creating a safe and welcoming learning environment for all students is my greatest strength and why people who visit our classroom say it is such a special place. To be fair, I have had students so challenging that they do not buy into my system for quite some time, but I am very proud that I have transformed these students into kids who want to learn and who want to please me and impress their classmates over time. I find my work endlessly fulfilling, and although I love the ease of teaching a group of students who are self-motivated learners, I find the challenge of getting those defiant and resistant learners to join in even more rewarding. I also make sure to involve each student’s family in our daily goings on and make sure to send home positive messages for all students. I use the Class DoJo app for this task and, through trial and error, have found it to be the most effective tool to create community for students and their families. The families of my students often tell me how much they appreciate my messages and photos on this app so that they feel connected to the classroom and have instant topics to talk to their children about.

My Earth Day unit shows what I value as it shows how I deliberately incorporate character education into everyday lessons and how I blur lines between subjects for more meaningful learning. This year for Earth Day, we did a unit on alternative energy sources focusing on wind energy. We read three sources (articles) about wind power. For each source, we annotated, discussed, and summarized what we learned (rigorous reading comprehension strategies kids can apply), used “heads together” and told our teams (students are seated in teams with other students) important things we learned (oral rehearsal), and wrote about what we learned from the source (writing to increase reading comprehension). We also highlighted key vocabulary, making some new words “signal words” that we repeat throughout the day as a choral response with a friendly



definition and hand motion to increase retention of word meaning, and practiced using new vocabulary words in our writing. As we learned about wind power, we circled back to SEL concepts such as what it means to respect the Earth and keep it clean. We discussed gratitude for our planet’s resources to increase our happiness and sense of calm at school.

To prepare for state testing, wherein my third graders would be required to complete an ELA Performance Task and would be asked to read two sources on a topic and then write to a prompt for one of three purposes of writing—informative, narrative, or opinion—I designed prompts that would be similar to what I was expecting the state test to present to my students. We practiced using our sources on wind power to write multiple paragraph essays for each type of writing. Students were required to type these in our Google Classroom so that they would be ready to type a multiple-paragraph response on the state test. Students found these writing tasks challenging and long, but they were motivated to do well and wrote more than they previously thought possible. Growth mindset and perseverance were deliberately discussed for each writing task. I took their writing samples home and found exemplars that I could use in class as models; I used these exemplars to emphasize good writing, citing of sources, and excellent demonstration of each type of writing (such as using a hook and a clearly stated opinion in opinion writing tasks). During state testing, my students felt prepared and confident doing a very difficult task. This perseverance and effort from my students is a great reward for my efforts and planning.

This unit shows much of my philosophy of education and teaching: to create students who love to read and write; to inspire all students of various abilities to believe they CAN do a task through constant weaving in of MTSS tier 1 strategies, SEL strategies, and the concept of growth mindset; and by designing my lessons to be stepping stones to difficult assessments and milestones so that students feel that they accomplish hard things.





Steven Ramsay

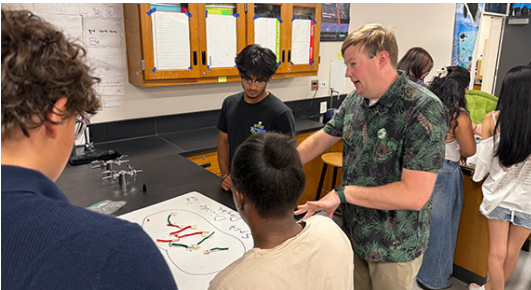
Elk Grove Unified School District
Laguna Creek High School
Science

What is the closest living relative to a dolphin? To set up the lesson on evidence for evolution, we look at pictures of dolphins, dogs, hippos, and fish and ask the simple question, “Who is this dolphin’s closest living relative?” Students are given DNA sequences, images of fossils, images of embryos, and skeletal structures to decide between dogs, fish, or hippos as the closest relative to a dolphin. The data is labeled only with what is absolutely necessary, and it is up to the learner to use that information to create a Claim Evidence Reasoning (CER) response. The students then break apart into their random groups with the folder of data to write on one of the vertical whiteboards around the room. I love to see them engage with each other as well as collaborate, and I believe learning happens most when there is conversation between students. During this activity there is often a lot of arguing, and since it is early in the year when I do this activity, I offer suggestions such as, “Do you have evidence to back that up?,” “What makes you think that?,” and “How would you prove it?” I use questions to prompt them to use academic language and scientific reasoning to build their responses. From day one we set out to answer questions, build up scientific skills, and collaborate together.

When students show up to my classroom, I greet them by name at the door and let them choose a card for their random group of the day. By doing random groups every day, it allows for students to meet new peers and learn from everyone. It takes the pressure off any one individual in a group by providing them a fresh start each day without preconceived notions about how capable they are and helps students see that everyone has value to add in discussions. Greeting students at the door helps them feel welcome and encourages a sense of belonging. Often I will have some sort of fun question to help me learn about them. The non academic conversations help build a safe foundation for the arguments about the dolphin’s relative and gives students the courage to share their ideas. The vertical whiteboards where students write their responses allow for movement of knowledge around the room. When students are stuck they can turn to their peers first. They can look to see what others thought of the seemingly random pictures of something called Pakicetus and see that others are confused as well about the thing that is probably a fossil but looks nothing like a dolphin. Seeing others struggle helps students understand they are all in it together.

Once every group has decided on their answer with reasoning, we take turns sharing out as a class. Students listen to each other, and we summarize what the key takeaways are from the lesson to allow everyone to be on the same page before we leave.

I have used a version of the dolphin story lesson in both regular biology and International Baccalaureate Biology over the years. IB Biology is a two-year, university-level course taken in junior and senior year with a high level option and a standard level option. Over the past eight years, I have been able to increase enrollment in the course by spreading the word about IB Biology and its accessibility. I truly believe all students can benefit from taking college-level courses and, with the right support, can achieve success. I offer multiple tutoring opportunities each week and have an open door policy, where students are welcome to drop by and study or just relax. Most mornings, I have somewhere between five to twenty students hanging out working while I prep for the day or chat with the students. This atmosphere fuels me as well, because I enjoy knowing that I have a room where students feel like they can come and be safe. I also try to do inquiry-based activities to engage students with the material and build understanding. This gives them ownership and helps facilitate a deeper knowledge of the material. These problem solving skills set students up for success in the future in their careers, relationships, and daily lives. I love the end of the lesson when I reveal that the hippo is the closest living relative to the dolphin and I hear students exclaim, "Yes! We got it right!" Helping students learn is the best feeling.





Julie Nittler

Folsom Cordova Unified School District
Peter J. Shields Elementary School
3rd Grade

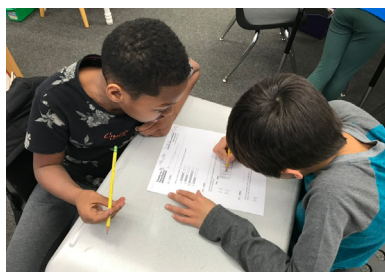
As an educator, my role is to create a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment where all students—regardless of background, ability, or prior knowledge—feel empowered to explore, engage, and excel. Within this supportive space, I've discovered one of my greatest passions: teaching math. I aim to build a math community where students not only understand the content but also find joy in the learning process. To make this possible, it's essential to establish clear, collaborative norms from day one. This helps promote risk-taking, respectful dialogue, and a shared belief that everyone can grow as a mathematician.

I am committed to fostering a growth mindset in all of my students. Math is not about innate ability, but about effort and perseverance. I hold my students to high standards, encouraging them to take risks, ask questions, tackle challenges head-on, and express their ideas.

My belief is that students learn mathematics best through active engagement and hands-on experiences. I incorporate manipulatives into every lesson to help students explore concepts concretely and make meaningful connections. I emphasize the Standards for Mathematical Practice to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning skills. I also believe in the importance of a well-structured progression of skills, ensuring that each concept builds logically. This approach provides students with a strong foundation and the confidence to tackle increasingly complex mathematical ideas.

To meet diverse needs, I scaffold instruction by using screeners and data-driven instruction to understand students' readiness levels and tailor my teaching accordingly. Through RTI (Response to Intervention) and tiered instruction, I provide targeted support for students who need additional help and challenge those who are ready for more advanced content. My goal is to meet each student where they are and guide them toward their full potential.

As a third-grade student, three-digit addition is an important step in the progression of adding. In second grade, students learned to add within 20 and in third grade, they will work toward fluently adding within 1,000. Before each lesson, we always review the norms and expectations in order



to protect our math community. To start, I always begin with engaging number talks. For this lesson, I use problem strings. I start with single-digit addition like $3+4$ and progress to problems like $23+14$ and $33+15$. This process allows for mental addition practice with place value understanding.

Next, we will review two-digit addition with place value using the expanded algorithm. I display problems on the Promethean board, and students work diligently on their mini whiteboards. I check on each student, noticing who understood it and who needs prompting. For the students who are stuck, I provide encouragement and in-the-moment support. Students are able to go up to the board, explain their thinking, and answer any questions from the class. Learning from one another encourages collective learning.

After review, we move on to three-digit addition. Students find their math partner and grab place value discs. I will start with a three-digit plus two-digit addition problem and model how to use the place value discs to add, breaking each number into expanded form and combining the place value discs. This is done under the document camera or with virtual manipulatives. This hands-on activity builds on what the students just worked on in our review. Students will work with their partner to model various problems with the place value discs. My role is to stop by each student pair and check on their progress. I ask or answer questions, look for misconceptions, correct manipulative use, and check to see if students can combine the expanded form into a final sum. I make note of students that need extra review during WIN time or RTI. At the end of the lesson, students have a “check in” problem to complete on their own. For students who got it correct, they go to a fluency center to practice their math facts. For those who did not, they will work with me for additional practice.

I aim to help students develop not only their mathematical knowledge but also a lifelong love of learning. I want students to walk away from each lesson not only with new math skills but also with the belief that they can achieve anything they set their minds to. The greatest reward I experience as a teacher is when students say, “That was easy!” after a lesson or write personal notes like “I love math.” These moments affirm my purpose as a math teacher.





Megan Ehnat

Galt Joint Union High School District
Galt High School
Social Science

Students thrive best when they are given the opportunity to not only feel comfortable, but safe in a given space. In that space, they should be encouraged to make connections between the world they know most (their home-lives) and the world they're most curious about. But to say that the latter "looks" the same for all students is to discount student curiosity, and to curb student engagement and interest before it even has a chance to blossom.

For 11 years, I have had the privilege of teaching world history to sophomores in high school. In my world history classes, I do not ask students to set aside everything they know of American living, but to make comparisons and take risks to explore how American lifestyles may be the same as lifestyles in other parts of the world. Methodically speaking, there are two means of teaching history: chronologically and categorically. While most history courses are chronological (arguably the most sensible option), I choose to teach my courses categorically, where students are able to make these comparisons most easily. In my world history course, I teach a unit based on world revolutions, beginning with the American Revolution and the core beliefs and foundations of democratic nations and evolving into an exploration of how this likens to the French Revolution, differentiates from the Russian Communist Revolution of the early 1900s, and finally, inspires the Mexican Revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Within this unit, students meet standardized expectations of learning about world revolutions, covering what topics most inspire the beginnings of revolutions, drawing on core tenets of individualism vs. federalism, separations of powers, systems of checks and balances or lack thereof, and more. But what they are really doing in my class is laying the groundwork for an understanding of how governments across the globe (and history) have evolved and learned from one another—both in success and failures. They are learning how America is intended to value their growth and development as citizens to the nation, and how the American precedent of the 1800s inspired generations of freedom-fighters to seek the same precedents for themselves. Similarly, as we proceed throughout this unit, I encourage students to draw the same comparisons to themselves by giving them opportunities to be masters of their own educational domain. I assign projects in the coursework that give them free rein to choose the subjects of their work in order

to match their own interests as much as possible. I allow them as much of a say in classroom norms and routines as much as possible, and I am always trying to do my best to ensure students feel at home in my classroom, to be their truest selves (away from fears of judgment, scrutiny, or admonishment by their peers or adults).

In teaching, I believe the greatest rewards we can reap as educators occur when students feel comfortable enough to take risks, ask questions, and allow themselves to enjoy the learning process—not just move through the motions. My aim as an educator is to create a curriculum that is not only culturally relevant, but based in an empathic viewpoint of history: that if we can understand the mindset of both the oppressed and the oppressor, the ruler and the subject, the democrat and the republican, and every other side involved in a crisis, that we can truly embody what it means to learn about history and avoid its mistakes.

My students tell me that in my class, they feel like they not only WANT to learn the curriculum, but often times develop a passion for history as a set of stories of the past—a method of learning they haven't yet been challenged to take on. Many of them are asked to consider perspectives with me they've never been challenged to consider before. But what I love most is that no matter what (especially in the exceptionally charged environment of 2025) or who a student is in my class, the greatest compliment I receive multiple times in a year from my students is that they are always encouraged to just be themselves, and that no matter their opinions, ideas, intelligence level, or background knowledge, they all feel genuinely and truly supported to grow.





Graciela Castañeda

Language Academy of Sacramento
(Independent charter school authorized by
Sacramento City Unified School District)

Middle School • Multiple Subjects

A priority as an educator is creating a safe and welcoming learning environment for all students. My objective during the first month of each school year is to build a relationship with my students, and I do this by incorporating my students' cultural beliefs and values into my lessons. I earn their respect, by giving them mine. I provide student choice by giving students opportunities to share their opinions and ideas when planning activities.

The greatest reward is seeing the academic and personal growth in my students. I am privileged to work with some of the students from sixth to eighth grade. It is evident in their work how much they have learned and matured over the years. Seeing the smiles on their faces when they pass a quiz or assessment that was challenging for them and seeing them celebrate growth in their benchmark assessments—that is rewarding.

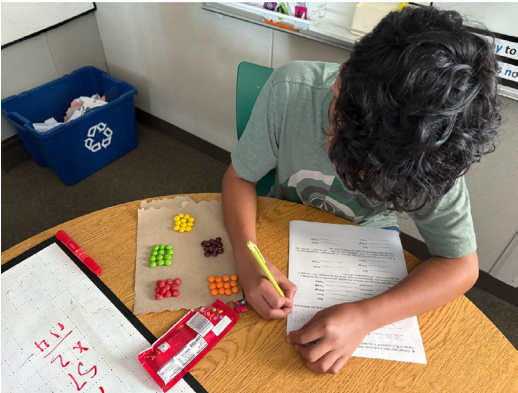
Personally, my goal is to ensure that I am equitable in my teaching style for all students to be successful. I teach students that "fair is not equal." Everyone has a different learning style, and my job is to ensure that I am providing all students with the necessary tools to reach their full potential. I do this by providing weekly agendas for all of my classes, graphic organizers, small group and one-on-one instruction, cloze paragraphs, sentence starters, audio books, and visuals. This allows my students multiple opportunities to practice what is being asked of them in each lesson. Tapping into the various learning modalities my students bring ensures that I keep my students engaged to meet their diverse needs.

In all of my classes, students can expect to read and write. Literacy is a foundational component embedded in all subject matter. In the language arts classes, I incorporate engaging reading units where students practice writing evidence-based responses. I analyze benchmark data to group my students based on their reading levels. During the class period, students work in small groups to read and analyze the text. Audios are provided for students to access the novel when completing assigned reading at home.

A unit that defines me as a teacher includes a novel that we read as a class in the seventh grade Spanish language arts class: *Adios a los cuentos de hadas* (translates to "Goodbye to Fairy Tales") by Elizabeth Cruz Madrid. Through this unit, I taught the Common Core State Standards for analyzing fictional text. Aside from applying state standards, this

unit taught themes such as online safety, empathy, change, friendship, and family. Many of my students can make connections with the characters in the novel. Through the thorough analysis of the book, students learned the dangers of accepting and speaking to strangers on social media platforms. The main character tragically loses her mother, and her father remarries. Students who have changes in their families or different family structures were able to make connections and empathize with the main character. Finally, students learned about friendship and what makes a true friend through the changes that the character faced while navigating the role of friendships throughout the story. This novel allowed for students to practice the literacy standards while making connections to real world situations. Teaching this unit gave me the opportunity to discuss topics that my students currently struggle with.

Given the various discussions and opportunities to fully engage and discuss the topics encompassed in the book, I was able to create and foster a safe learning environment for all my students. My teaching style was exemplified in this unit as I taught the mini lesson for the whole class, then through small groups, and finally at the personal level with students who needed further guidance. Through these groupings, I am confident that I was able to provide equitable learning experiences for all students.





Travis Murray

Natomas Unified School District

Natomas High School

Career Technical Education • Automotive

I am a CTE instructor, officially, a “teacher.” But to me, it’s more accurate to say that my job isn’t to teach, but to help students learn. I can’t force knowledge into anyone’s mind; I can’t magically transfer the lessons I’ve learned through years of experience and study. What I can do is spark curiosity, encourage exploration, and give students the confidence to try, fail, and try again. I can remind them that I believe in them, even when they don’t believe in themselves, and show them why caring about what they’re learning matters. That’s my real job.

I often say that high school is Adult Training School. Students will be legal adults within a few months after graduation, and society will expect them to act accordingly. If we treat them like children the whole time, we’re setting them up for failure. So, I set high expectations but also ensure the classroom is a safe place to push boundaries, make mistakes, and learn from them. I believe the best teacher is consistent failure while striving for a challenging goal. That’s why I tell my students: F.A.I.L. stands for “First Attempt In Learning.” Every misstep is a chance to grow.

When I plan my lessons, I assume every student is starting from zero. Together, we build a foundation of automotive skills. My students learn about cars, how they work, how to perform maintenance, and the theories behind different systems. But that’s not my real goal. I want my students to learn how to think, solve real-world problems, research independently, and motivate themselves. I use cars as the vehicle—literally and figuratively—to get them there.

Creating a safe and welcoming learning environment is my top priority. I greet each student by name and check in with them regularly. I want them to know I care about them as people, not just as students. I set clear expectations for respect and collaboration and model those behaviors myself. I establish my classroom as a place where students can take risks and ask questions without fear of judgment. The most significant rewards in teaching come from seeing students grow in confidence and capability. There’s nothing better than watching a student who once doubted themselves tackle a challenging problem,



persevere, and succeed. I also love seeing students support each other, celebrate each other's successes, and learn from each other's mistakes. That sense of community is priceless.

My teaching style is hands-on, student-centered, and flexible. I use a mix of demonstrations, group work, and independent projects to reach students with different learning styles and readiness levels. I encourage questions and welcome mistakes as learning opportunities. I provide individualized feedback and adapt my instruction to meet students where they are.

One unit that genuinely defines my philosophy is the six-week metal-working unit I teach at the end of the first year. Students learn to manipulate metal using dozens of techniques and tools, eventually mastering the basics of MIG welding and fabrication. Their final project is to create something out of metal that demonstrates their mastery of as many tools as possible. I provide the space, tools, time, training, and expertise. They provide the idea, design, and materials, with one catch: they can't spend any money. They have to upcycle, repurpose, or source materials for free, often by calling businesses to ask for scrap metal.

This project pushes students out of their comfort zones. If they buy new materials, they lose points. The point is to get them comfortable asking for what they need and finding creative solutions—skills they'll use in the real world. By the end of the unit, students have not only learned technical skills but also developed confidence, resourcefulness, and independence.

At its heart, my philosophy is simple: I make students aware of tools, show them why, when, and how to use them, and then have them demonstrate their skills. I use a "show, do, teach" method: I demonstrate, students show me they can do it, and then they teach the next student. When a student can help another learn, they've truly mastered the skill, and they value it more. The greatest gift a teacher can receive is when a student finds value in what they're learning.

Ultimately, my goal is to prepare students for life beyond the classroom. I want them to leave my class with automotive skills, yes, but also with the confidence, curiosity, and resilience to tackle whatever comes next.





Yrma Zevada White

Robla School District

Main Avenue Elementary School

Transitional Kindergarten/Kindergarten

Teaching is more than delivering content; it's about cultivating curiosity, community, and confidence. In my transitional kindergarten/kindergarten classroom at Main Avenue Elementary, I view each day as a chance to inspire students to see themselves as capable learners and compassionate peers. My teaching philosophy centers on the belief that all children—regardless of background, language, or ability—deserve to feel valued, challenged, and celebrated.

Creating a safe and welcoming learning environment is the foundation of everything I do. Each morning begins with a “Feelings Check-In,” allowing students to express how they’re feeling using words, visuals, or simple gestures. This not only encourages emotional literacy but builds trust. My classroom is filled with affirmation in English and Spanish, cozy reading corners, culturally inclusive books, and student-made art that celebrates identity. I make sure every child sees a reflection of themselves in our space. This environment says, “You belong here.”

One of the greatest rewards in teaching is watching a student take ownership of their growth, especially when they begin the year unsure or hesitant. I think of Mayerlis, an emergent bilingual student who was initially shy and quiet. Over time, through intentional scaffolding, visual support, and peer collaboration, she found her voice. By spring, she was leading a small group in a science investigation, proudly explaining how a seed grows. Moments like this reaffirm why I teach: to witness those sparks of transformation that ripple into lifelong confidence.

My teaching style is interactive, student-centered, and deeply rooted in relationships. I strive to be a facilitator of learning, rather than a dispenser of information. Whether we’re singing songs about syllables, exploring mathematical patterns and equations, or dramatizing a story during read-aloud time, I prioritize engagement and connection. I believe in being present with my students on the carpet with them, listening deeply, and adapting lessons in real-time based on their responses.



Engaging students of all backgrounds, abilities, and readiness levels requires intentional planning and flexibility. I use ongoing formative assessments to understand where each student is, then tailor instruction accordingly. This might mean offering sentence frames to emerging speakers, challenge problems to advanced learners, or movement-based tasks for kinesthetic learners. I also co-plan with our support staff to ensure that students with IEPs and language needs receive individualized strategies that still allow them to fully participate in the classroom community.

A lesson that captures my philosophy is our annual “Community Helpers” ELA Wonders unit. It blends literacy, social-emotional learning, and civic engagement—all through the lens of our local community. We begin by reading picture books about community helpers. Students then interview family members about people who’ve helped their community. We invite real-life “helpers” from Sacramento—nurses, sanitation workers, mail carriers, and school cafeteria staff—to speak to our class.

Students create posters, write thank-you letters, and even perform short skits about the roles these individuals play. This unit reflects my belief in culturally relevant teaching, student voice, and connecting learning to real-world purpose. It teaches empathy, responsibility, and pride in our community—all while building literacy and critical thinking skills.

Throughout this unit, my role shifts from instructor to coach and co-learner. I model curiosity by asking questions and sharing my own reflections. I invite multiple entry points to the learning—through drawing, storytelling, song, and movement—so that every student can contribute meaningfully. The joy and ownership students show during this unit remind me that the best learning happens when it is rooted in relevance and relationships.

In all I do, I strive to help students feel seen and empowered. I teach because I believe that every child has a gift to offer the world, and it’s our job as educators to help them discover it. My classroom is not just a place to learn letters and numbers; it’s a space where young minds learn to question, to wonder, and to care. That is the heart of my philosophy, and the reason I return each day with hope and purpose.





Anda Robinson

Sacramento City Unified School District

Miwok Middle School

English

As soon as students walk into our room, my goal is for them to leave just a little better than when they arrived. I believe that every student deserves a safe, inclusive, and engaging environment where they can learn, thrive, and feel seen. My teaching philosophy centers on building authentic relationships, creating culturally responsive classrooms, and providing rigorous, equitable opportunities for all students to grow into the best versions of themselves.

That work begins immediately. I want students to see themselves in our space, whether that's through their work on the walls, pictures of their pets on our cabinets, or the diverse voices represented in our classroom library. At the front of our room hangs a simple but intentional sign: "Everyone Is Welcome Here." That message is not just decoration—it's a promise.

Real learning doesn't happen unless students feel emotionally safe and deeply cared for. That's why relationships are at the heart of my practice. I strive to meet each student where they are, academically, socially, and emotionally. I learn their stories. I do my best to show up to their events and performances. I check in regularly and intentionally. I want them to feel known, heard, and valued. When students feel loved, they take risks, lean into challenges, and discover what they're truly capable of.

In my career, I've taught intensive support classes, long-term English learners, on-level, and advanced groups. No matter the starting point, my goal is the same: to empower students to find confidence in their ideas, joy in their growth, and pride in their progress.

One way I bring this to life is through narrative writing—intentionally at the beginning of the school year. My goal is for students to leave eighth grade more confident in their voices as both readers and writers. We begin with six-word memoirs. Students tell their life stories in six words, often starting with quick journal lists and reflections. They are surprised to find they can write for sustained periods. These memoirs stay up all year as a visible reminder of who they are and how much they've grown.

From there, we move into more formal writing, aiming to balance engagement and academic rigor. I use technology tools like PearDeck and Padlet to review and practice essential narrative writing skills, such as punctuating dialogue, while also working to hone digital literacy skills in our ever-evolving digital world. However, I also prioritize human

connection and collaboration. Students work together on hands-on activities like poster creation and gallery walks to brainstorm ideas, and they build their creative writing skills through interactive games that involve describing and guessing different settings. Additionally, students work together to analyze mentor texts and generate their own narratives, where they are supported by structure but encouraged to explore their own creativity and narrative voice.

All of this leads to a defining unit in our year. Using the mentor text *Proud Americans: Growing Up as Children of Immigrants*, we explore narrative journalism. Students conduct interviews with family members, neighbors, and community members who have immigrated to the U.S. They write feature-style narratives that explore themes of identity, culture, and belonging. The final product is a printed and bound class “novel,” a collection of their stories, written and edited by students, that celebrates immigrant voices and challenges harmful stereotypes.

This unit not only strengthens reading and writing skills but also cultivates empathy and critical thinking. It allows students, particularly those from migrant backgrounds, to see their stories treated as literature. It humanizes experiences often overlooked, and it reminds every student that their voice matters.

Honing this unit with colleagues over the past couple of years has reinforced another core belief: great teaching doesn’t happen in isolation. It grows through collaboration with peers who not only share ideas, but also challenge each other to think deeper, grow professionally, and create better experiences for all students. That same spirit of community shapes how I lead and learn, whether I’m mentoring a student teacher, collaborating on a campus initiative, or pursuing professional development that helps me better serve my students.

At the heart of my philosophy is this: nothing worth doing can be done alone. I thrive in community with my colleagues, my students, and my school community. I’m committed to building a classroom where every child feels capable and cared for, and a campus where every student knows they belong. Because when kids feel safe, when they feel loved, when they feel known, that’s when real learning begins.





Derek Tahara

Sacramento City Unified School District

David Lubin Elementary School

3rd Grade

A prerequisite to creating a safe, welcoming, and holistic learning environment for all students to thrive requires us to step away from our role as a teacher, and instead play the part of understander. Having the ability to detach from our own experiences, innate reflex to impose our solutions, and just observe and listen filters out preconceived ideas about a student's home life, motivations, reasons for behaving in a certain matter, state of being, and reveals some hidden emotional mass that may be weighing them down.

Once students realize they are not being judged, assessed, or in a fish-bowl, they begin to swim freely with their school of peers, view our classroom as a welcoming safe space, experience a reduction in their affective filter, are more open to our ideas/suggestions, and trust pours the foundation for learning to start taking place.

Although there are numerous significant seeds of learning that germinate throughout the school year, the most extraordinary reward I find in teaching is when the students' self-esteem, self-worth, confidence to stand alone regardless of the social pressures surrounding them, and empathy for others start to take root within their personal self. To help foster this personal growth, we have open discussions about their feelings, thoughts, and tap into various resources to ensure all groups are valued, represented, and celebrated in our lessons. We communicate that we are all capable of doing amazing things if we just believe in ourselves, stay persistent in the face of failure and resistance, seek to understand rather than to be understood, and can justify our actions and ideas with substantial reasoning.

Our character development lessons and discussions about growth mindset, perseverance, empathy, gratitude, mindfulness, moods and attitudes, big challenges, respect, and positive thinking lay the foundation and mesh with projects created by our David Lubin Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee. We also extend our learning of other cultures and backgrounds in our Scholastic News publications and study guides and guest speakers that creatively cover topics of equity so students feel welcomed, acknowledged, proud, and accepted for who they are and their beliefs free of judgement, assumptions, and stereotypes.

When I teach, my goal is to carefully select and approach each lesson with the mindset that this may be their only exposure to the concept in their educational career. John Wooden said, “If you don’t do it right the first time, when will you have time to do it over?” All of this begins with one having the confidence and willingness to take risks and believe that they are capable of achieving amazing feats. The book *Mikey and the Dragons*, by Jocko Willink, sets the stage to kick off this mission. As the story opens, the King has died and left the young Prince, who is afraid of many things, to battle the dragons alone to protect the kingdom. The pursuit of self-empowerment and managing self-doubt are themes in the story as well as in many of our students’ lives. By the end of the story, the Prince learns that his worries and fears were inflated by his imagination and not as large as he made them out to be. In our classroom, we control what we can control, take one step at a time, and breathe and take comfort in the fact that regardless of the outcome, we must apply our full potential to become the best version of ourselves that we are CAPABLE of becoming.





Jessie Storrs

Sacramento County Office of Education
El Centro Jr./Sr. High School
Library/Media

Our library is a bright, welcoming space filled with color, knick-knacks, LED lighting, music, and comfort items—a vibrant contrast to its austere surroundings. It's more than a cozy room; it's a deliberate third space where students can breathe, connect, and grow. Seeing residents engage here gives me the energy I need every day.

My philosophy of teaching begins with one belief: every young person deserves to be listened to, believed in, and given access to the tools of possibility—books, creativity, connection, and hope. This belief guides how I teach, how I design learning spaces, and how I show up in both classroom and library settings.

Transformative Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is foundational to my work. Many of our students carry significant trauma and have rarely engaged with content in ways that honor their emotions and lived experiences. I've created a transformative SEL curriculum that integrates the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) standards into daily instruction, adapted for our unique context: lowtech, high-trauma, and high-potential. From one-on-one literacy coaching to enrichment programs and SEL units, I help students name emotions, build empathy, regulate reactions, and develop resilience.

I co-teach regularly with core subject teachers, designing lessons in digital literacy, STEAM, research, and reading. I support academic growth using tools like Achieve 3000, aligned with Sacramento County READS, while also monitoring students' emotional development. My instruction is designed with multiple entry points and universal design, ensuring that learning is never out of reach, whether students are decoding simple texts or analyzing abstract concepts.

A program that best represents my teaching philosophy is our Social Emotional Board Game initiative, Game Changers. I use high-strategy tabletop games like Azul, Splendor, Machi Koro, and MicroMacro during instructional time



to blend Common Core standards, CASEL competencies, and Sean Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. Each game is chosen not just for engagement, but for its alignment with habits (like Habit 2: "Begin with the End in Mind") and SEL targets (like self-awareness or decision-making). For example, Splendor teaches resource management and long-term planning, connecting to math standards and Habit 2.

While students play, I facilitate reflection and coaching. We discuss strategy, teamwork, frustration tolerance, and growth. The games offer a safe, structured way to practice emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience—all while reinforcing academic content.

These experiences help students see themselves succeed, manage impulsivity, and persist through challenges. One student said, "I didn't even know I could focus for that long—I thought I was bad at stuff like this." Another said it "felt like practice for life, not just school." My favorite quote remains: "This makes my brain feel bigger!"

Creating a classroom culture rooted in joy, structure, and emotional safety is one of the greatest rewards of teaching. My style is relational, adaptive, and grounded in radical empathy. I model the behaviors I hope to see and show up consistently, even on the hard days. That's why I still do book and movie deliveries on Fridays. That's why I keep playing the same game of Splendor (and lose) five times a week. That's why I make classroom visits even after the formal lesson ends.

In the end, my philosophy is about meeting students where they are, creating spaces where they can be fully themselves, and walking beside them as they become who they're meant to be. And if I can do that with a good book, a board game, and a little Lo-Fi in the background, then I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.





Haley Zerr

San Juan Unified School District

Will Rogers Middle School

U.S. History

My teaching philosophy centers on preparing students to create a more just and empathetic future. My passion for teaching is driven by my desire to teach justice, empathy, critical thinking, and understanding to our children. I want students to see themselves reflected in our country's history so they know there is a place for everyone in our world and that every human can make a difference. Our future society is built on the foundations we're laying today.

My teaching style has evolved significantly over two decades, transforming from teacher-centered delivery to an approach emphasizing mastery, growth, and equity. I now focus on inquiry-driven learning with student choice and creativity, recognizing that students care more about history when they find personal connections that matter to them.

Creating a safe and welcoming environment begins at my door, where I greet every student by name, calling them "friends" to foster connection. My classroom features natural lighting, soft instrumental music tied to our current studies, and personal touches that make the space feel human and approachable.

Daily routines reinforce inclusion. We begin with a mindful minute and planner time, followed by clear agendas and learning targets that explain what and why we're learning. Success criteria are always visible, so students understand expectations. I acknowledge diverse cultures through multilingual posters, learning phrases in students' home languages, and incorporating diverse historical perspectives.

When conflicts arise, I believe in fairness and second chances. I offer conflict mediation and will stop lessons to address insensitive comments with impromptu social emotional learning, teaching the history behind hurtful words and emphasizing that public apologies matter.

My approach to engaging all learners reflects my commitment to equity. I use AI to adjust reading levels for struggling readers and identify cultural references unfamiliar to students from different countries. Daily vocabulary quizzes provide multiple opportunities for rote learning, freeing students to focus on the how and why of history rather than the who or the what. Every lesson incorporates reading, writing, listening, and speaking opportunities, with visual elements and student illustrations helping me assess true understanding.

The greatest rewards in teaching come from witnessing students develop into thoughtful future citizens. When they make authentic connections between historical events and current issues, when they engage in genuine dialogue that forces me to say “we’ve gotten so side-tracked making great connections,” I know learning is happening at its deepest level.

My philosophy is exemplified in my abolitionists unit, where deliberate instructional decisions create meaningful learning. Beginning with students’ background knowledge, I plan backward from desired learning demonstrations, incorporating my “4 Cs”—comprehension, collaboration, creativity, and communication—while providing choice in learning modalities.

Students begin with a “thin slide” activity, choosing one word and image to represent their learning, then delivering 10-second presentations. After vocabulary development, students research specific abolitionists to become experts on while their classmates take notes. Primary source analysis using slave narratives and escaped slave advertisements helps students understand regional differences in anti-slavery sentiment.

The culminating assessment offers choice: “sketch and tell” presentations about four abolitionists or designing an imaginary dinner party, explaining seating arrangements and predicting conversations between historical figures. This choice acknowledges different learning styles while maintaining rigorous historical thinking expectations.

Every instructional decision reflects my core beliefs: that students learn best when they see relevance to their lives, when they have voice and choice in their learning, when they collaborate as a community of learners, and when they engage with authentic historical materials. By using lesson frames rather than one-off activities, students develop transferable skills while exploring any historical content.

Through this approach, I’m not just teaching history—I’m developing critical thinkers who understand how the past shapes the present and who feel empowered to shape the future. Every lesson is an investment in tomorrow’s citizens, equipped with the justice, empathy, and understanding our world desperately needs.





Mirna Flores-Perez

Twin Rivers Unified School District
Madison Elementary School
Dual Immersion

I begin each school year by building strong relationships with my students and their families. I strive to create a classroom culture of trust and belonging, where students feel valued and respected for who they are and what they bring. Because my students are learning in both Spanish and English, I emphasize the importance of celebrating bilingualism and biculturalism. I use greetings, songs, and community-building circles to make sure every student feels seen. One of my priorities is to create a space where students are excited to learn, take risks, and support one another.

I teach in a 50/50 dual language immersion program. That means my students are not only learning academic content but also developing biliteracy in both English and Spanish. To support this, I create lessons that build on students' linguistic strengths and that connect to their cultural backgrounds. I use strategies such as sentence frames, partner talk, and visuals to help all students access complex texts and express themselves confidently.

I use a variety of formative and summative assessments to monitor student learning. During lessons, I check for understanding through whiteboard responses, thumbs-up/thumbs-down, exit slips, and student talk. I use this data to adjust instruction and to reteach concepts in small groups. I also give more formal assessments, such as reading inventories, writing samples, and math tests, which I analyze to identify trends and gaps. I meet regularly with my grade-level team to review data, reflect on student progress, and co-plan interventions. One example of this is our math data meetings, where we noticed that many of our fourth graders were struggling with place value and decimals. Based on this, I designed targeted small group lessons and incorporated daily spiral review, which helped improve student outcomes. I also involve students in self-assessment and goal setting so they can take ownership of their learning.

I build positive relationships with students by being consistent, empathetic, and fair. I make sure students understand classroom expectations and why they matter. I use positive reinforcement, model respectful communication, and hold restorative conversations when conflicts arise. When a student is having a hard day, I check in privately to see how I can support them. One student, for example, frequently shut

down during writing time. I learned through conversation that writing felt overwhelming, so I worked with her to set small goals, provided sentence starters, and celebrated her progress. Over time, she began writing independently and even asked to share her work with the class. I also stay in close contact with families through weekly newsletters, ClassDojo, and phone calls, so that we can work as a team to support each child's well-being and success.

One of the most rewarding moments of my career was when a former student returned to tell me how my class helped her feel proud of being bilingual. She had struggled with confidence in the past, especially when switching between languages, but in our class, she saw bilingualism as a superpower. I had shared my own journey of learning English and invited students to share their stories. We read books with bilingual characters and wrote bilingual poetry. This reminded me that teaching is not just about standards—it's about identity, voice, and belonging.



Acknowledgments

ESSAYS

District Teachers of the Year

DESIGN

SCOE Communications Office

Classroom Photos Provided by
Participating Districts and Teachers

PRINTING

SCOE Printing and Production Services

SPECIAL THANKS

SCOE School of Education

District Teachers of the Year Coordinators

Selection Committee Members

Photos and video from the
Teachers of the Year Awards Ceremony
will be published as part of a news article
on the Sacramento County Office of
Education website:

www.scoe.net/sactoy

About the SCOE School of Education

Special thanks to SCOE's School of Education for coordinating the Teachers of the Year Selection Committee. It offers a wide variety of professional learning opportunities and programs that support teachers and leaders across the region as they earn their teaching and administrative credentials and develop their leadership capacity. It is accredited by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and is comprised of three divisions:

TEACHING DIVISION

The **Teacher Intern Program** supports candidates during their mandatory pre-service and as full-time teachers during their two years in the program. Successful completion of both the pre-service and intern programs earns candidates a preliminary teaching credential. The **Teacher Residency Program** is an innovative, accelerated teacher preparation program centered around a year-long student teaching placement. The **Teacher Induction Program** provides a two-year course of study enabling teachers to clear their General Education or Education Specialist Credential. Participants in the Teacher Intern and Teacher Induction programs have the opportunity to earn a master's degree through a partnership with UMass Global. The **Designated Subjects Career Technical Education (CTE) Credential** provides a two-year course of study enabling industry professionals to earn a Clear Credential in 15 Industry Sectors, and 58 Pathways.

LEADING DIVISION

The Leadership Institute's one-year **Preliminary Administrative Services Credential Program** provides the opportunity to earn a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential. Candidates also have the opportunity to earn a master's degree in Applied Leadership through a partnership with National University. The two-year **Clear Administrative Services Credential Program** focuses on the development of newly hired administrators through assessment, coaching, and professional development. The **21st Century CA School Leadership Academy (21CSLA)** supports teacher, site, and central office leaders through professional learning opportunities aimed at developing their capacity to lead for equity, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

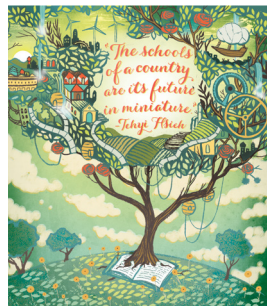
TECHNICAL SUPPORT DIVISION

The Technical Support Division provides **recruitment and retention support**, including a regional job fair for classified and certificated employees. It also serves as a regional hub for the **Statewide Residency Technical Assistance Center (SRTAC)**, which provides expert advice and support to education leaders across the region as they work to attract and retain diverse cohorts that reflect the communities they serve.

For more information, contact the SCOE School of Education at
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Cover Illustration by Sarah Watts
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/one-world-posters>





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