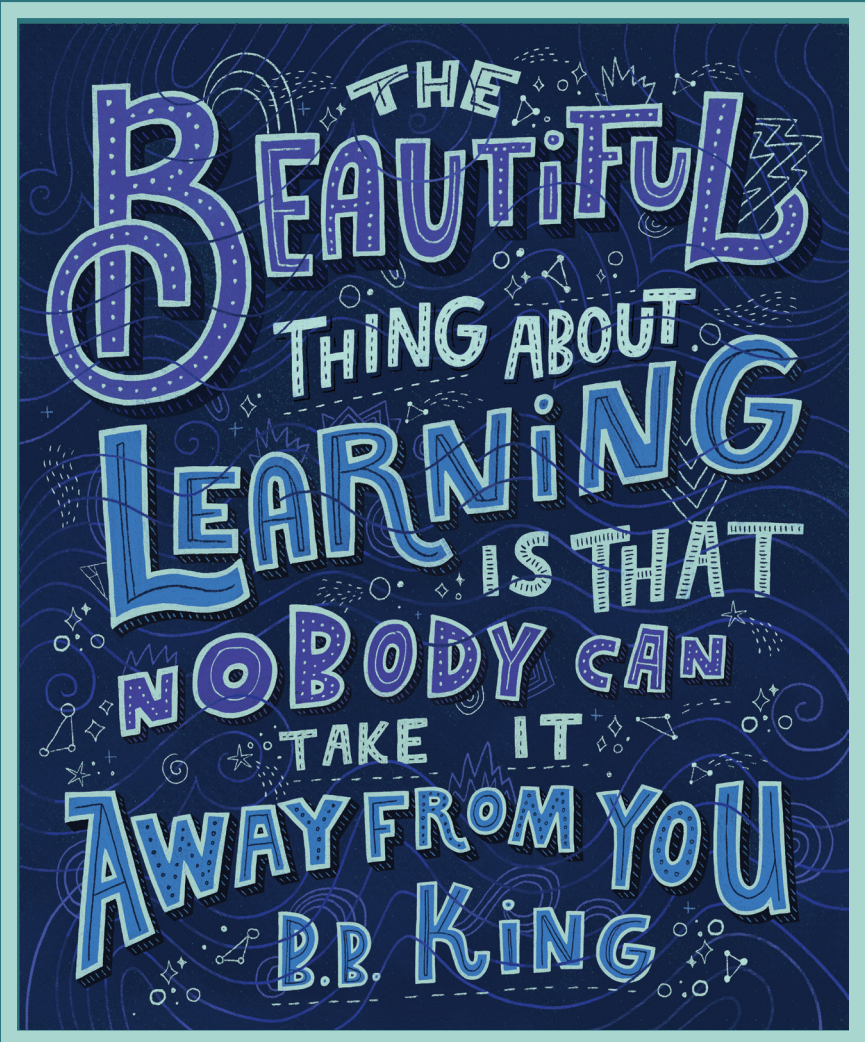


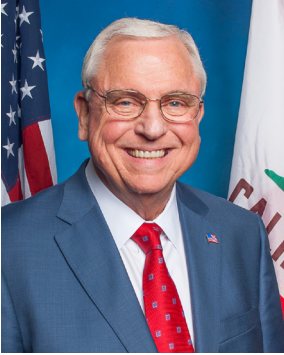
Why We Teach



SACRAMENTO COUNTY
DISTRICT TEACHERS OF THE YEAR 2025

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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Megan Bence

Center Joint Unified School District
McClellan High School
10th–12th Grades • Social Sciences

My philosophy as a teacher boils down to creating a “culture of care.” This is the foundation of the work I have been doing for Restorative Justice. The focus of this philosophy is building relationships and having interactions with students that are culturally appropriate. To accomplish this, I cultivate a safe and welcoming environment in everything I do—from the way I greet students at the door, to getting to know them through my warm-up questions, and constantly wandering the room during class to check in with them. I rarely, if ever, sit down at my desk. I want to be with the students because I think it’s important for them to see a teacher who is engaged.

While I teach, I’m walking around. As I pass students, if I see a cell phone, I gently tap on their desk. While they work independently or in small groups, I check in with each individual student at least three times during a class period to see how they are doing on their work and ask if they need anything from me. Every student participates during lectures and class discussion because participation plays a large role in my grading system. Students have a voice in my classroom, and they know that from the very beginning. I want them to share every day, tell me if they’re having an off day, tell me if they get stuck, and ask questions without fear of judgment.

Working in alternative education, setting this foundation of a culture of care is crucial for student success. As Rita Pierson once said, “Children don’t learn from people they don’t like.” According to our iReady data, I have students who read at grade level, and I have students who read at a first or second grade level. Without establishing the relationships that I do early on, and without showing my excitement and engagement in what I teach (as well as a whole lot of scaffolding throughout my lessons), I would lose their attention.



The relationships that I build with my students are the biggest reward I find as a teacher. We just held graduation on the 30th of May, and our Field Day on the 31st. Students came and played for hours. We laughed together and smack-talked each other when competing. Those two events always feel so special to me because you can feel the hard work that has been put into building those relationships. The next day, I sat down at my desk to clean up everything from the year. When I checked my email, I had one message from a student who just graduated. It was titled "I MADE IT IN!!!" She wanted to inform me that she was accepted into the medical assisting program she applied for, thanking me for helping her get there and making the application process easier through what we learned in my Life After High School and Personal Finance classes.

Life After High School is an elective survey course where students decide what they want to learn about for their life after they graduate high school. They have the opportunity to add to our list of subject matter topics throughout the trimester. This past trimester, students wanted to learn about building credit, health insurance and different forms of coverage, investing, and the process to rent an apartment for the first time. We also brought in a group (Pro Youth and Families) that focuses on building healthy relationships in young adults' lives. It was over the course of several weeks where a guest facilitator would come in twice a week to work with our students. The foundation of their work was building a healthy relationship with yourself first, and then dove into popular topics and points of contention for students in relationships (love versus lust, infidelity, privacy – sharing locations and giving your partner access to your passwords, etc.).

My unit on building credit is one I teach in both Personal Finance and Life After High School because it is incredibly valuable for them to learn before they go out on their own. I want my students to be prepared for life, largely because many of our students come from low socio-economic backgrounds. This unit and this course have my highest student engagement. As I have previously stated, students have a voice in my classroom, and I love having the opportunity to give them the platform to decide what they want to learn.





Lisa Bjorgum

Elk Grove Unified School District

Pleasant Grove High School

9th–12th Grades • Math

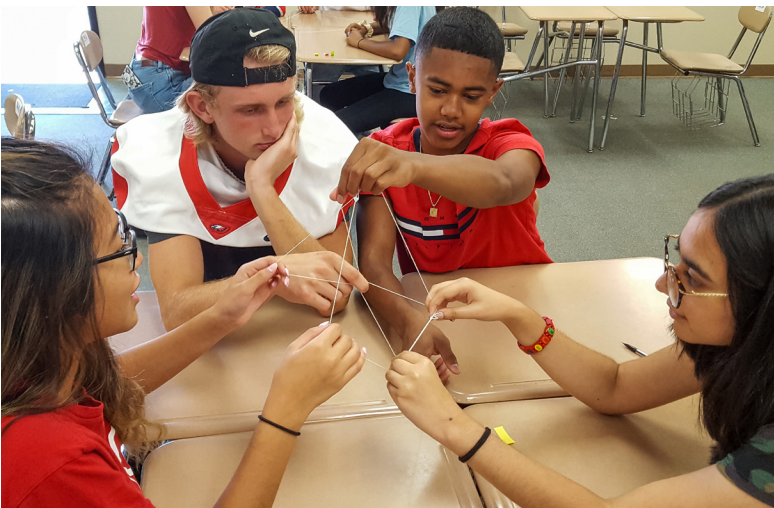
I believe that every student can learn math. A content lesson that exemplifies my philosophy as a teacher would involve numerous opportunities for student discourse and thinking. For example, after students explore on graphing calculators the effect that “a,” “b,” and “c” have on the transformation of functions such as $y = a \sin bx + c$, students would be placed in groups of three up at the vertical white boards that surround my classroom walls. Students would be prompted to write everything they have discovered about the effect of the three different variables with their small group. After five minutes, students would be asked to walk clockwise past two groups’ boards and read what another group has written down. After three minutes, they would return to their own vertical board and adjust/add to their thinking based on what they just read.

All students learn best in an environment where they feel welcome and safe. This begins the moment they enter my classroom. Students are expected to put away their phones and answer a check-in question that I pose to their groups to engage and get to know other members of their group. During the lesson, I utilize questioning strategies that promote safety, encourage participation, validate student responses, and demonstrate that making mistakes helps fire neurons in the brain to help us learn. Questions such as:

- Can someone tell me what part I need to clarify? (Instead of “Are there any questions?” This allows students to ask questions without feeling that they are weak students. It focuses the clarity on what I did as a teacher.)
- How many of you heard something in your group that you are willing to share? (Validates someone’s thinking in the group.)
- How many of you think it’s close to ___? (When a student is incorrect.)
- Who can relay what ___ just said? (To promote listening to others.)

- ____, can you please call on the next hand? (To get someone quiet involved in the discourse and ensure that all students are engaged.)
- How many people are still making progress? (Instead of "Who needs more time?" This phrasing allows students who do need more time know that it is ok to take the time needed to continue their thinking.)
- How many of you agree with what ____ said? (Validates a student's response since they can see others thinking something similar.)
- How many people noticed something similar?
- Can someone tell us the first step to solving this? (Allows for an easy entry point to solve the problem and prevents one student from sharing the entire process.)
- How many of you are ready for a more challenging question? (To make students more curious.)

To engage all students, I make my lessons relevant. I use information that they would be interested in or that may be a part of their daily lives. For example, when we were manipulating sine waves, we connected those to sound waves. We discussed how manipulating "a" is an amplitude modulation while "b" is a frequency modulation and connect these to AM versus FM radio waves. Students then shared their experiences with radios while traveling in their vehicles. Another way that I engage all students is to always give them time to process information or solve a problem on their own, then discuss with their group, and then discuss with the whole class. This process gives all students the opportunity to check in, share, help, or get help from their small group before opening themselves to share or discuss with the class. All these strategies build a safe and comfortable learning environment for students of all backgrounds, abilities, and readiness levels.





Lori Osborne

Elk Grove Unified School District
Zehnder Ranch Elementary School
6th Grade

A teaching philosophy is described as a “written description of your values, goals, and beliefs regarding both teaching and learning.” Being a veteran teacher and having taught hundreds of diverse learners, one thing is consistent. My teaching philosophy drives my core beliefs about the educational process. After 27 years in the profession, my teaching philosophy has evolved and expanded. It now encompasses a multifaceted approach to educating children and lifelong learners. While education may not be society’s great equalizer, it does create opportunities to catapult student learning when deliberate and equitable instruction decisions are made.

I take pride in creating and maintaining a safe and welcoming learning environment. Every day at arrival my students are greeted at the classroom door with eye contact and a smile. As they enter, I visually scan them for any noticeable changes; new outfits or sneakers, new haircuts or braids, even braces. Anything to show them that, “I see you. I acknowledge you.” At dismissal, I ensure my kids have all their belongings: backpacks, water bottles, lunchboxes, and Chromebooks. I close the day with, “have a good afternoon, I’ll see you tomorrow, and stay off your phones.” These routine gestures may seem small; it’s my tangible way of showing love and care for students.

I also pride myself on implementing effective student engagement. Inclusive strategies are equitable and encompass all student backgrounds and academic levels of development. My most frequently used student engagement strategies include pair-share, small group collaboration, fist-five, hand signals, and creating opportunities to make connections, relate personal experiences, and be open-minded to new perspectives. Lastly, I emphasize that it’s okay to make mistakes, because learning from your mistakes contributes to having a growth mindset.



Philosophy of Teaching

My teaching philosophy is best demonstrated in multifaceted lessons that incorporate inquiry, critical thinking, and listening and speaking. An example lesson integrates Astra Nova Conundrums and the AVID Inquiry strategy Philosophical Chair. Conundrums are scenarios designed to help students constructively disagree by posing an open-ended question with multiple outcomes. Students must write, decide, and defend the outcome they chose within the format of a Philosophical Chair activity. This AVID strategy develops inquiry, oral language, and argumentation skills through participation in an informed debate on a controversial issue, while considering various points of view. The inclusive nature of the lesson clearly demonstrates my teaching philosophy, because informal dialogue over a controversial prompt stimulates students' ability to reason, think critically, persuade, and discuss different points of view within a safe classroom environment—thus, spotlighting the core of my teaching philosophy: safe learning environment, student voice and free expression, and equitable opportunities for all learners.





Jennifer Sandfort

Folsom Cordova Unified School District
Empire Oaks Elementary School
3rd and 5th Grades

*“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember.
Involve me and I learn.” —Benjamin Franklin*

This quote encapsulates my approach to teaching and working with students. Creating a space for learning as a classroom community begins with communicating to my students that this is “our” classroom, not “my” classroom. I strive to instill that each student is a valued member of our classroom. One of the first activities I do with my class is have them go home and ask their parents about the origins of their name. The rich class discussions that have come from students sharing about their name and describing the identity it has created for them instills a level of belonging and uniqueness they bring to our classroom.

From the beginning of the year, I want my students to know that their voices matter. During the first weeks of school, I create opportunities for my students to reflect and develop what their hopes and dreams for the school year are. Out of this conversation comes what we all need from each other to be successful in the learning environment. During these classroom discussions, we develop what we call our “Big 3” behavioral expectations for which everyone is held accountable. By giving students opportunities to have voice and choice in the classroom, I also believe students need to be taught how to be accepting and open to diverse points of view. I model and practice with my students how we can respond with respect when someone expresses their thoughts and feelings about something with which we might disagree. Establishing trust, positive relationships, and clear expectations and routines then sets the stage for a safe and positive environment for learning.

Teaching is not done in isolation, so I always seek opportunities to collaborate with my colleagues to learn from their expertise and skills. Designing learning experiences takes careful planning and consideration for a diverse group of learners; reaching out to any support staff with ideas for best strategies to help specific students in my class with a unit or lesson I’m going to teach is important to me when I plan instruction.

With numerous content standards to teach, I approach each unit by identifying where I can integrate across subjects. For example, when conducting a novel study on *Esperanza Rising* in language arts, I teach social studies at the same time since the story takes place during the Great Depression. This makes the story more engaging for the students as they are usually fascinated by this historical period, and it also builds their background knowledge to deepen their comprehension skills throughout the book.

I strive to make learning engaging and accessible to all learners. During the *Esperanza Rising* novel study, I provide audio access with my struggling readers in mind, but I also make it available for anyone to use. Sometimes a strategy or approach I think about for one student has the potential to benefit many. To enhance student engagement, I give students options to show their understanding of the standards taught through *Esperanza Rising* by creating opportunities for them to choose how they will show what they learned. For instance, when learning about theme, some students might choose to draw pictures or create a graphic art project on the computer to depict the theme. Other students have opted to write about it in a creative way. I had one student choose to write and draw about the theme in a way that looked like it was out of a page of a graphic novel. I always try to be flexible in the products and processes my students use to show what they learned.

Throughout a unit, I continually assess and evaluate how my students are responding to instruction. This is critical because it informs my teaching practices. If a student doesn't understand a concept, I believe it is essential to follow up with one-on-one reteaching or small group interventions. For students who master objectives, I look for ways to extend their learning.

The greatest rewards I find in teaching are the relationships and connectedness I form with my students and their families, which extend beyond the year they are in my class. I take my job seriously, as I'm not only teaching my students academic knowledge, but also equipping students with 21st century skills to be successful in life. My hope is that I can foster a sense of self efficacy and the belief that they can achieve anything they set out to do.





Carli Walden

Galt Joint Union High School District
Galt High School
10th–11th Grades • English

A quality education is the best way to understand one's identity, find connections between people of different backgrounds, gain transferable skills to ensure equity of opportunity, develop empathy, and foster a sense of belonging. One of my instructional units that exemplifies this teaching philosophy explores personal values through self-reflection and characterization.

To start the unit, students use "Poll Everywhere" to rank a list of fifteen values (friends, family, health, adventure, money, integrity, power, education, recognition, independence, faith, material objects, entertainment, philanthropy, and creativity) from most important to least important. This allows students to express themselves anonymously, so they feel comfortable being honest without forcing them into a vulnerable position. After everyone completes their rankings, I project the average of the whole class and lead a discussion analyzing the data. We start with what they notice and wonder about the results, and end with how effective the activity is for producing a credible set of data. This anticipatory activity creates relevance and encourages a critical-thinking mindset to prepare for texts they will read in the future.

For the rest of the unit, students read stories about people from diverse backgrounds and annotate them based on what the characters value most and least based on their experiences and actions. To support this learning process, I model what is expected of their annotations with the first story; students annotate on their own and add components of my example after the second story, and they annotate on their own and add components of each other's work after the third. This gradual release of responsibility provides a structure and focus for the critical reading of all the texts in the unit and empowers all my students to effectively annotate the remaining texts independently.

After reading and annotating each text, I facilitate small-group or whole-class discussions during which students



can express their interpretations of the characters' values, how they compare with our class's average values ranking, and how their actions reveal the values they prioritize. To prepare for discussions, students choose a goal from a bank based on the rubric I use to assess the quality of their participation based on their perceived abilities and comfort levels. After the discussions, they reflect on their performance and choose new goals for the next one to promote a growth mindset.

Before the summative writing task, students rank the same fifteen values introduced at the beginning of the unit. I post signs for each value around the room, students stand at the value they ranked lowest, discuss their choices as a class, ask each other questions, and repeat for the value they ranked highest. Since we have already engaged in conversations of values through our readings, it is a much safer environment for students to share their values at this point in the unit.

All this work culminates in an explanatory essay that includes an in-depth character analysis of two characters of their choice and a personal reflection on how they currently spend their time and whether that reflects that they prioritize the values that are most important to them. During the writing process, I have four different levels of differentiated writing supports: a fill-in-the-blank essay frame, sentence starters, a graphic organizer, and a generic outline for essay structure. These allow students to focus more on their thoughts and less on the current state of their writing abilities.

The greatest reward I find in teaching is when students can take what they learn in the classroom and apply it to personal aspects of their lives. I firmly believe that learning is most effective when it is student-driven and that I am strictly a facilitator and supporter of that learning. This unit allows students to explore and reflect on topics that mean a lot to them while practicing the transferable skills of critical reading, collaboration, and evaluating values and priorities.





Sabrina Prociw

Natomas Unified School District
Two Rivers Elementary School
1st Grade

I believe that my patience, my understanding, and my desire to see children succeed helped me create a classroom that is safe and welcoming for all types of learners. Teachers are many things throughout the day, and we wear many hats. We are mom to those who need a hug, nurse to those who need a band aid, mediator during student conflicts with each other, and sometimes miracle workers when we have children overcome their anxiety and replace it with imagination. No matter what hat I wear at any particular moment, they all involve me securing an environment where students feel safe and welcome. This not only includes the classroom, but the entire campus as well. Simple gestures such as calling them by name when saying hello, a smile, or fist bump as they walk in the door can create a community feel. This feeling of belonging can help keep students engaged in lessons that may not be all that exciting.

Supervision during recess time can help alleviate stressors such as bullying and feeling left out and create a sense of safety for the students on the playground by knowing that an adult is there to help them should an issue arise. Having a positive recess time can translate into having a productive experience back in the classroom.

Why We Teach



Students learn in many ways, and what works for one may not work for another. Having an array of strategies to reach all students is key to everyone's success. Allowing my students to voice their opinions, participate with others, draw out their answers, or be allowed to "phone a friend" when they need help answering questions complements all learning styles and gives them a sense of power over their learning. The greatest feeling as a teacher is when a student has that "aha!" moment, and from that moment on that child has more confidence than before. Those moments this past school year seemed more prevalent when using Costa's Levels of Questioning combined with the AVID strategy Musical Minds. Costa's Levels of Questioning allowed all students, no matter what their ability was, to explore their curiosity, promote higher level thinking, and engaged my students in open ended questioning. Musical Minds allows the students to move around the room, partner up, and discuss the questions asked of them in a safe manner. It also encourages collaboration between partners, which is an essential asset in the school and work community.





Lauren Tyner

River Delta Unified School District
Isleton Elementary School
5th Grade

As a teacher my number one priority in my classroom each day is to ensure that my students feel loved and accepted. I work in a community where students often come to school with not all of their needs met, which makes it even more important for them to know that while they are at school with me, they will be loved, supported, and safe. Every year I have the opportunity to create a family within my four walls, where my students feel safe to push themselves to do hard things, take risks, and grow.

It doesn't take long for my students to realize that I have extremely high expectations of them. There is a very high level of accountability in my classroom in all areas, from attendance to homework completion, to participation in classroom discussions. Every Friday, they receive a "grade report" of their current percentages in each subject, and we publish our classroom Honor Roll. To prepare for this, we talk about how assignments are worth points, and those points create percentages, and those percentages equal grades. My students also know that I will be there to support them in improving their grades in every way I possibly can. I stay to help them with homework assignments in our after school program, and we finish missing assignments together during our classroom study hall time. I scribe for them on assessments that they are not able to complete independently and allow them to make corrections to assessments that they perform poorly on. My students need to know that I am willing to do anything and everything to support them in their attempts to improve and succeed.

For students to be willing to ask for and accept help in this way, they must feel safe and supported both by me and their classmates. My students and I work throughout the year to create a space where the sense of community is strong enough to convince their classmates to take the risks necessary to grow both academically and socially. Through weekly class meetings, and constant reminders that "everyone is working on something," a classroom community is built where everyone is aware of what is expected of them, and everyone understands that they are expected to support their peers. I love watching my students realize that everyone has areas where they need help from their peers to improve, as well as areas where they can give support to

others to help them succeed. Their encouragement of each other as they try to improve in the areas that are challenging for them is truly inspiring.

Throughout the year I teach various units on tolerance and acceptance, and we discuss how these moments in history relate to us in our current time. We talk about Columbus and the Native Americans. We discuss slavery as the nation was formed and how it connects to the Civil Rights Movement. But the one that really brings them together as the year ends is the unit I teach about the Holocaust. By this point in the year, they have learned about discrimination and racism, and we have had many discussions about why we should show respect to others, even if they are different from us. But the atrocities of the Holocaust push their minds to really think about what can happen when intolerance and hatred go unchecked. In their young minds they truly think about what could have been done to change what happened during this time in history. I tell them that it is their job to do better as they inherit the world, and to be models and ambassadors to others for how people should be treated.

Being a teacher is the only thing I have ever done in my life that I feel like I am truly good at. I teach because I love to create a family in my classroom each year that loves and supports one another and that is willing to take risks to improve. I love pushing my students to reach goals that they felt were impossible to reach. I am so lucky to get to spend each day doing something that brings me such joy. I am honored to be recognized as the River Delta Unified School District teacher of the year.





Joshua Weeks

Robla School District
Bell Avenue Elementary School
5th Grade • STEM

My teaching philosophy centers on creating innovative, engaging, and scaffolded lessons for my students. Innovation ensures my students constantly explore new avenues of learning. Engagement fosters a love of learning that goes beyond individual subjects. Most importantly, scaffolding empowers all my students to access and retain the presented content. By combining these elements, I cultivate a classroom brimming with eager learners who find joy in academic exploration.

My hope is that my lessons' impact goes beyond immediate engagement. I want to ignite a passion for learning that extends far beyond the classroom walls. I want my students to discover the joy of connecting their interests to academic content and to become self-motivated learners. I want them to begin seeing themselves as capable researchers and creators, fostering a growth mindset that propels them throughout their academic journey. And, I want to empower them to tackle future challenges with confidence and a willingness to explore new ideas. These are the goals I have in mind when creating my lessons.

One such example is a lesson designed for my 6th graders. Recognizing their passion for the Pokémon trading card game, I harnessed this interest to fuel their understanding of the 12 Olympian gods and goddesses we were studying. I designed a template that allowed students to create their own "Mythological Pokémon Cards," each focusing on a specific deity. Each card required specific criteria, including the god's name, a special ability reflecting their background, a symbolic image, and a brief description.

To ensure accessibility for all learners (whose reading levels ranged from second to tenth grade), I scaffolded their research component. Utilizing an AI program, I tailored informational passages (such as their gods' myths and backgrounds) to slightly exceed each student's reading level. This empowered them to conduct independent research while simultaneously strengthening their reading comprehension. I even translated all the passages for my students who were non-native speakers to their primary language.

Philosophy of Teaching

The results were captivating. Witnessing their creativity come alive on these “official” cards (printed on cardstock) brought me immense joy. This lesson exemplifies the immense satisfaction I find in teaching. By actively seeking to understand my students’ interests, backgrounds, and hobbies, I can seamlessly integrate academic content. This approach fosters a genuine connection with students and keeps me up to date on their evolving needs, ensuring my lessons constantly adapt and improve. Each year brings new opportunities, and I embrace every teaching experience with an unwavering positive attitude.





Erinn Leone

Sacramento City Unified School District
Luther Burbank High School
9th and 11th Grades • Social Sciences

My philosophy of teaching is rooted in the conviction that education is a transformative force that empowers individuals to achieve their fullest potential. I believe that every student has the capacity to learn and grow, and it is my role as an educator to create an environment that fosters this development through deliberate instructional decisions, trauma-informed practices, and liberation pedagogy.

A crucial aspect of my teaching philosophy is creating a trauma-informed learning space. Recognizing that many of my students face various forms of trauma, I prioritize emotional and psychological safety in the classroom. This involves establishing clear routines, setting predictable procedures, providing clear and explicit expectations, and being attuned to students' emotional needs. I incorporate daily mindfulness practices and provide opportunities for students to express themselves creatively, which can be both therapeutic and empowering.

One of my primary instructional strategies is differentiated instruction, which allows me to meet the diverse needs of my students. By assessing students' prior knowledge, learning styles, and readiness levels, I can tailor my lessons to provide multiple pathways for learning. For example, in an Ethnic Studies unit, *El Movimiento de Chicanx*, students have the flexibility to choose how they demonstrate their understanding. Some may opt to write analytical essays exploring key events and figures, while others might create multimedia presentations that visually capture the era's essence. Additionally, students can engage in debates, enact historical simulations, or design creative projects such as artwork or poetry that reflect their insights. This flexibility accommodates different learning preferences and fosters a sense of agency and ownership over their learning.

Engaging students of all backgrounds and abilities is paramount to my teaching approach. I employ culturally responsive teaching practices to ensure that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. This involves incorporating diverse perspectives and texts that resonate with students' experiences and backgrounds. For instance, when teaching about immigration in the U.S., I select primary sources from various immigrant groups present in our community, encouraging students to explore the

rich tapestry of American society and its development. This helps students connect with the material and promotes empathy and understanding among peers.

A lesson that defines me as a teacher is a unit that I developed titled “My Local Geography.” This unit exemplifies my commitment to creating a dynamic learning environment. Through primary source analysis, multimedia resources, and interactive activities, students travel back in time to explore the historical context and significance of the factors that have shaped our community, demographics, and health outcomes, including health disparities. This unit helps students understand why things are the way they are, how they got to be there, and what the implications are for themselves, their families, and their community. The unit empowers students to effect positive change. By deepening their understanding of the content and developing critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills, this unit connects students to the curriculum in meaningful ways.

This unit also defines me as a teacher because it encapsulates my dedication to helping students grasp the interconnectedness of historical and contemporary issues. It is about fostering a sense of agency within my students, enabling them to recognize and challenge systemic inequalities. By examining local geography, students gain insight into the social, political, and economic forces that impact their lives, encouraging them to think critically about their environment and their role within it. This approach reflects my belief in the importance of education as a tool for empowerment and social change.

The greatest rewards I find in teaching come from witnessing the growth and achievements of my students. There is no greater satisfaction than seeing a student who initially struggled with a concept finally grasp it and succeed. Moments like these reaffirm my belief in the power of education and the importance of perseverance and resilience. Additionally, the relationships I build with my students are incredibly rewarding. Knowing that I have positively impacted their lives and contributed to their personal and academic development is deeply fulfilling.





Kelly Martinez

Sacramento City Unified School District
Rosemont High School
9th–12th Grades • Japanese

Central to my teaching philosophy is instilling the importance of community. Cultivating connections through community is an important part of life, one that students learn as they are ushered into adulthood. Access to unlimited information through the Internet is a boon to students' knowledge, but meaningful community ties are most effectively achieved through human connection. My teaching practices provide my students with opportunities to create meaningful connections through real-world experiences. Beyond the language itself, my classroom serves as a safe environment where students come together to share their experiences, struggles, and triumphs.

Through daily check-ins and group activities, they build camaraderie in their shared journey of language acquisition, supporting and encouraging one another along the way. By fostering a sense of community and collaboration, I aim to create an inclusive learning environment where every student feels valued and empowered to participate.

Mental health and wellness play key roles in this teaching philosophy. When I or my students need a mental health break, we engage in a community circle. Students are given a safe space to answer prompts ranging from frivolous questions (What survival skills do you have if we're stranded on a deserted island?) to more serious (What has a teacher said or done that made a lasting impact on you?) and everything in between. This fosters self-awareness, creates community ties, and establishes meaningful rapport with peers—and is essential to students' learning and growth. Students are more engaged and enjoy being in class when they know they are respected and have a voice. Students make concrete connections with peers, and into aspects of their lives outside of school. My teaching philosophy includes fostering a safe and inclusive environment for all.

Community is developed in my classroom by students uniting through achievements and shared challenges. I implement immersion techniques to teach exclusively in the target language. Students are expected to communicate in Japanese for the entirety of the class. They find comfort, humor, and humility in their common struggles while celebrating shared and collective achievements. It is challenging for students to understand

everything I say as well as express themselves in Japanese, but immersion in the target language is the most effective way of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language. Being a non-native Japanese speaker myself, I am proud of my commitment to providing instruction only in the target language, and my dedication to improving my communication skills through independent study, professional development seminars, and in-person training programs in Japan.

Students have the opportunity to experience Japanese culture in meaningful, real-world ways outside of my classroom as well. The Urasenke Foundation in San Francisco, an organization that “exists to promote a better understanding and appreciation among the American people of the rich cultural heritage of Japan as expressed in the art of chanoyu” (traditional Japanese tea ceremonies), accepted my application earlier this year to have my students join them for tea. Students participated in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony where they learned about the history of tea ceremonies, as well as essential phrases and body language unique to this thousand-year-old celebration of tea and community. Students ate wagashi, a traditional Japanese sweet, and drank matcha, many of them for the first time. This was an amazing opportunity for students to participate in a cultural practice hands-on, and a way to deepen their appreciation for the uniqueness of Japan. It is incredibly rewarding to provide students with experiences they might never have the opportunity to experience otherwise.

The greatest reward I find in teaching is seeing students excited to use the language in real life. Communication in the target language outside of the classroom is a gratifying element of this endeavor. One of the most enriching thematic units for my level 3 students is the “Travel Unit.” Through this unit, students acquire a comprehensive set of skills essential for navigating Japan with confidence. By its conclusion, students gain the ability to vividly describe Japan’s diverse regions and their distinctive attractions, meticulously plan and articulate their travel itineraries, adeptly navigate various modes of public transportation, and confidently solicit directions—a crucial aspect of exploring a foreign country. Students undergo practical assessments, such as making reservations, demonstrating proficiency by leaving detailed voicemails on my Google Voice Number, including reservation particulars, pertinent inquiries, and their contact details. I emphasize the importance of mastering these skills for anyone contemplating travel to Japan, urging all my students to seize the opportunity to do so.





Heather Morehouse Jack

Sacramento County Office of Education
Infant Development Program
Special Education (Deaf and Hard of Hearing)

Early childhood deafness has been called a “developmental emergency”—we are racing against the clock to provide full access to language before the child begins to demonstrate delays. Decreased hearing levels don’t inhibit language acquisition; inaccessible language does.

As part of the IFSP team, I address skills, strategies, and supports across disciplines to support holistic development. As the family is the first and primary teacher and the most important influence on a child’s development, we utilize a family coaching approach. Research shows that this positively impacts caregiver capacity and leads to more learning opportunities for children.

We work to build relationships with families to establish a safe learning environment. Following each family’s lead, I seek to meet them where they are at in their journey of raising a child who is deaf. I ask open-ended questions to guide self-reflection, explore why something might be happening, or to better understand their perspective and feelings about experiences. This way, I can validate concerns and offer insights, without rushing to resolve an issue.

Growth is not necessarily visible or linear, so being present with families while they express concerns and frustrations as they process new information can be invaluable for them in deciding what their next steps are in supporting their child’s development. At the beginning of each home visit, I check in to see if there is anything new, review any highlights or concerns, and see if they have any questions, thoughts, or insights. Each session is tailored to focus on each family’s unique strengths and skills to build their knowledge and share relevant supports and resources. Together, we identify opportunities for supporting their child’s development within their daily routines, such as during meals, diaper changes, bathtime, book sharing, and bedtime. At the end of the visit, I review strategies, ideas, and next steps.

Over 90% of deaf children are born to hearing families. It is important that families understand their child’s unique needs, so that they can effectively advocate for their child. This starts

with helping caregivers understand their child's hearing levels and the potential impact on language and social/emotional development.

While following the family's lead, I share information and explore strategies and supports, including access to spoken and signed languages, language and literacy development, and amplification retention. Other information includes family-to-family and Deaf community supports, local and online community agencies, events and resources.

I support them as they apply new knowledge and continue to build their understanding over time. Along the way, we discuss ways to optimize their child's access to language, both spoken and signed, within their routines. When appropriate, I share my own experiences growing up deaf to provide firsthand examples. Additionally, I offer instruction in American Sign Language (ASL) using a routines-based family curriculum.

While it is a thrill to be present for a child's first steps or first words/signs, most new skills emerge outside of our home visits, so it is a privilege when families share their child's new skills, new signs or words, or responses to new experiences.

When caregivers feel successful in trying a new strategy, attending new community or online events, advocating for their child, or when they express the confidence to learn and apply new information or skills across contexts, I know our work together makes a difference for their child.

Note: The term "deaf" is inclusive, regardless of hearing status and regardless of language modality (signed or spoken).





Melissa Oates

San Juan Unified School District
Dyer-Kelly Elementary School
3rd Grade

When designing curriculum for my third graders, I create inquiry-based units, where students are actively learning through hands-on activities. This also creates opportunities where students are using reading to learn. One content unit that exemplifies my belief in the power of hands-on learning, critical thinking, and collaboration to foster a deep understanding and meaningful connections is a unit focused on the exploration of ecosystems. I encourage my students to investigate different ecosystems and examine living organisms and their environment to better understand their roles and responsibilities in the natural world. This year, I partnered with a community-based program called the Sacramento Tree Foundation. By learning about the native oak tree, my students were able to experience nature first-hand while learning lessons about trees, life cycle, science, and how to be good participants of the earth. My students grew oak trees that went to a restation site to help provide wildlife habitats, health benefits, and recreational space for generations to come. My goal for my students is to have them collaborate with their classmates, explore, and inquire through both hands-on activities and coursework and make real-world connections. I can give formative assessments through group projects, class/group discussions, and student reflections. Summative assessments can include presentations or projects that showcase students' understanding of the unit. This unit allows my students an opportunity to collaborate with their peers and promotes critical thinking and a sense of responsibility towards the environment.

Creating a safe and welcoming learning environment for all my students is a critical part of my teaching philosophy. Cultivating a classroom culture built on trust, respect, and empathy are the foundation of my beliefs. With these key ideals, I introduced ecosystems through discussions, anchor charts, and multiple videos and books. Student-led groups brainstormed different components of an ecosystem and then collaboratively created an ecosystem chart. Our focus was on plants and soil to coincide with the oak tree project. I continuously encourage my students to be lifelong learners who are also compassionate and care about people and the earth around them. These principles are rooted in this unit and create a student-centered learning environment.

I want my students to feel valued and supported and make sure that I create a safe space where every voice can be heard. I want to make sure that I create a classroom community where students feel safe expressing their ideas and perspectives with me along with their peers. Student groups submitted projects and activities that supported the ecosystem unit. Specific components of the lessons included students collaboratively creating pictures and charts naming parts of the oak tree, animals that use the oak trees as their habitat, food chains and webs, and classifying and identifying different oak tree leaves. During this unit, I established and maintained routines and schedules to provide my students with a sense of stability and consistency. I wanted to make sure that I was providing clear expectations and positive reinforcements to encourage good behavior and enthusiasm for learning. I also made sure to integrate social and emotional learning into the curriculum. By integrating SEL into the ecosystem unit, I created a more holistic learning experience that deepens my students' knowledge of the ecosystems and helped develop critical thinking and reflection on the environment and how we interact within it. This project was over a four-month period where my students had to nurture and work together to grow and sustain the oak trees. Checking weather conditions, watering, and journaling growth and development of the trees was a daily activity. This created a community in our room that centered around collaboration, core curriculum and community building.

Teaching brings me great joy and gratification as I watch the growth and progress of my students. No matter my students' backgrounds, abilities, or academic levels, I thrive on watching the spark of curiosity and eagerness ignite regardless of their starting point. Engaging all students requires a multifaceted approach that embraces inclusivity and differentiation. I use multiple instructional strategies, where lessons are tailored to meeting varying skill levels, and incorporate culturally responsive teaching to try and ensure my materials reflect the diverse background of my students. Creating strong relationships with my students, and understanding their strengths and interests, fosters my classroom community where all students feel valued and empowered. I want my students to participate and take an active role in their learning journey. For them to feel cared for, supported, seen, and encouraged is the ultimate reward of teaching for me.





Marc Vankeuren

Twin Rivers Unified School District
Grant Union High School
10th–12th Grades • AP Environmental Science,
AP Physics, and Physics of the Universe

My passion for science and teaching has its roots in the tomes of nature, zoology, and the universe lining the walls of my 3rd-grade teacher's classroom. Every day, she encouraged me to browse the literature and indulged my questions, and at the end of the year, she awarded me a "Most Curious Student" award. Since then, my fascination with science and education has been unflinching. I went on to major in Geology at Brown University, completed a Ph.D. in Earth and Environmental Sciences at Columbia University, and finally pursued a job in science education. It is firmly imprinted on me that the course of one's life can be changed with a great instructor. I aim to be that instructor for my students at Grant Union High School in Sacramento.

I have centered my teaching on hands-on learning, inquiry-based labs, and engineering projects. These happen daily in my classroom: observation before lesson, inquiry, and phenomena followed by data gathering, graphing, and then whole-class discussion and analysis. At the end of each unit, there is an engineering project where students plan and design an applied physics problem to a real-world phenomenon. I find that many of my students find my passion for STEM contagious and are excited to be involved in the process of science. Fostering learning through student-designed investigations is how we make our students the true scientists and engineers in our classrooms. Thus, students need the opportunity to practice what scientists actually do.

I have completed eight years of teaching high school science (Earth Science, Physics, Physics of the Universe, AP Physics, and AP Environmental Science) at Grant Union High School in northern Sacramento, a Title 1 school with a student body of 2,000 that is greater than 90% low-income and greater than 70% underrepresented minorities with a high concentration of English language learners and a schoolwide math proficiency of less than 11%. My teaching is rooted in argument-driven inquiry designed to foster student learning through student-designed investigations and solutions. Some of my most rewarding experiences have been seeing students reach "a-ha" moments while absorbed in activities like modeling geologic faults in clay, simulating phases of the moon with light bulbs and foam orbs, and

understanding elasticity and plasticity by playing with various cheeses. My goal as an instructor is not to help students remember facts, concepts, and terms, but for them to be proficient in science by defining problems, using models, analyzing and interpreting data, constructing explanations, engaging in argument from evidence, and evaluating and communicating information. This emphasis on “figuring things out” instead of “memorize these things” is consistent with how science is done—not mere hands-on activities, but application leading to the development of explanations and solutions to problems. Whether this is finding strain amounts in deformation clay models, building tensegrity structures to identify tension and compression forces, or optimizing solar cars, students use these experiences to carry out investigations, interpret data, and argue from evidence.

The success of this student-led approach is clear: students in my AP Physics 1 class pass the exam at a higher rate than the national average. I have been selected as the lead teacher to develop and implement the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) for Physics in The Universe (earth science + physics) and Environmental Science that will be used in all Twin Rivers Unified District high schools. I am regularly observed and filmed by students in teaching credential programs as an example of best practice methods for teaching science, and my reviews by administration and students consistently rank “excellent.” The students I am teaching now have made substantial changes at the government level through classroom advocacy (NOAA and US Ice Drilling Program).

My accomplishments in my current position as a Physics teacher include fundamentally reworking how Physics is taught and emphasizing student-designed investigations within the parameters of the Physics curriculum. I cultivated this learning environment by creating engineering projects around the Physics free-response questions—long-form answers in which students must design a hypothetical experiment, such as solving the coefficient of friction between two surfaces. Students engineer moving items, analyze motions, choose relevant equations, and give poster presentations defending their findings from their science notebooks. This emphasis on student-oriented and student-led education has proven effective for students pursuing both academic and trade careers. Past students returning to visit my class have stated that the skills they learned in my class have been invaluable, whether they are now at university or a construction site.





Edie Xiong

Twin Rivers Unified School District
Foothill Oaks Elementary School
5th Grade

There are so many facets that go into a teaching philosophy: the environment you are creating, your personal style, and often your personal experiences with teachers. To sum it all up is a difficult task.

It is my deepest belief that before learning can occur, students must feel a connection to their space, leaders, and peers. Therefore, my primary job is to create and cultivate an environment for students to thrive in, both academically and emotionally. I do this by starting our day with a recitation of our classroom charter. This is a set of expectations that the class creates and agrees upon throughout the year. An example of a charter statement is, "Mrs. Xiong's Victorious Voyagers make sure our actions do not affect our peers." I also have a dedicated space for students to use when they are feeling overwhelmed, angry, sad, or just not ready to learn.

The way I build environment in my classroom is directly connected to the type of teacher I strive to be. This is an amalgamation of my experiences with past teachers, my Southern culture, and the lessons I take from each year. My personal style of teaching is rooted in a place of high expectations, inclusive practices, and consistent routines. I like bringing humor into the classroom and a sense of ownership to students. This is often shown in giving them choices throughout the day and time to voice their opinions. It also includes empowering students to hold me to high expectations as the facilitator of their educational experience.

One of the most rewarding moments I get in the classroom is watching the growth my students make throughout the year. When I see a student who had given up on learning turn a new leaf and take charge of their education through goals, it truly makes all my restless nights worth it. This is especially true for my students with IEPs and 504 plans. I am filled with pride when I see a student who has not only made academic or behavioral goals but has also learned to advocate for their needs in a respectful manner.

A personal goal that I have set for myself in my career is to make sure that all children feel acknowledged in my room. This is demonstrated in several ways. First, I ensure that the

pronunciation of my students' names is not only a priority for myself but also for school staff and peers. With a room of diverse learners, it is imperative that they feel proud of the culture and backgrounds they bring to our class. Next, every student checks in with me daily through a Google form. This allows students to be honest with me in a non-confrontational way about how they are feeling about school for the day.

Through that I am able to assess their needs and provide the supports necessary for them to have a successful day. That ranges from getting a snack, supplies, and even some grace around participation. Finally, I make sure that perspective taking is a key component to almost all lessons. I believe that this is a skill that not only enhances comprehension of text and media but also empathy and social emotional learning.

A unit that I teach that encapsulates many of these attributes is during the first week of school when we read *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*. This book is what I use as a fifth-grade introduction to theme and diving deeply into a text. I do this because a picture book allows children at all levels to access the text. The complexity of the imagery allows me to get my students engaged in a rigorous discussion around so many topics. I also use this book because it is a great way to get students to think about the author's choices. Finally, this lesson allows me to convey my love of reading and learning to my students. My students feeling like they know me on a deeper level than just a teacher is a key component to building our classroom community and encouraging reluctant students to seek help when they need it.

In summation, my teaching philosophy really comes down to making students feel as though they are part of something bigger while simultaneously providing them with the individual supports they need to feel successful.



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District Teachers of the Year

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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:

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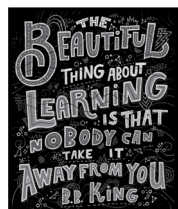
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