



## **PRESS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Contact: Angel Mead

Phone: (760) 668-5037

### **Air Force Father Returns from Deployment to Surprise Son in Emotional Reunion at Central Elementary School**

BANNING, CA — A third-grade classroom at Central Elementary School turned into a scene of joyful tears and heartfelt emotion today as U.S. Air Force Civil Engineer Michael LuGrain surprised his only son, Thomas LuGrain, after nearly a year of being deployed overseas.

The reunion, which took place just before the school’s lunch break, was a complete surprise to Thomas, his classmates, and even much of the school staff. Michael, who serves as a water and fuel systems maintenance specialist, has been deployed four times. Although he and Thomas have done their best to stay in touch one to two times a week during his absence, the time apart was deeply felt.

“Thomas is my world,” Michael shared. “We talk as much as we can, but it’s not the same as being there. I missed him more than words can say.”

Michael entered the classroom quietly and stood next to Thomas’s desk. It took a moment before Thomas realized who was beside him—then, in an instant, he leapt into his father's arms, speechless and overwhelmed with emotion. The two shared a powerful embrace, and Thomas quickly began showing his dad what he had been working on in class.

The surprise didn’t stop there. Thomas’s mother and grandmother were also part of the moment, stepping into the classroom shortly after Michael, adding to the wave of joy. Students were equally moved—some cried, and many told Thomas how happy they were that his dad was finally home.

“This is what community and connection are all about,” said Principal Marcia Cole-Fijabi. “To witness such a powerful and personal moment reminded all of us of the strength and sacrifice our military families endure. We’re honored that this reunion happened in our school.”

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**Contact Information:**

Angel Mead, District & Community Relations Coordinator  
O: 951.922.0200 ext: 104012 | E: [amead@banning.k12.ca.us](mailto:amead@banning.k12.ca.us)

PR: 2425-021



The reunion took place in Mrs. Ruano’s third-grade class, whose students were deeply impacted by the experience. “Our classroom was instantly filled with love and emotion,” shared Mrs. Ruano. “The students were in complete awe. Many cried tears of joy. It reminded us how powerful it is to see love in action.”

Michael shared that Thomas’s favorite thing to do with him is play video games, and the two already have a match planned for tonight.

Several major media outlets—including ABC7, KTLA, NBC, and regional print publications—were on campus to capture this unforgettable moment.

This special day highlighted the deep bonds between family, the resilience of military life, and the powerful support within the Banning Unified School District community.

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**About Banning Unified School District:**

Banning Unified School District serves nearly 4,300 students across its schools and is one of the largest employers in the city of Banning, with over 500 dedicated staff members. The district’s mission is to collaborate as a diverse community to develop responsible, respectful, and prepared students who achieve their full potential. Guided by its vision to prepare, inspire, and educate, Banning USD is committed to fostering a supportive environment where students can thrive academically and personally.

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(Photos have been attached)

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PHOTO CAPTION: Michael LuGrain surprises son Thomas in Mrs. Ruan's classroom.

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PHOTO CAPTION: Michael LuGrain hugging Thomas as he was just surprised with his arrival.

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PHOTO CAPTION: Michael LuGrain and Thomas LuGrain pose for their first picture of dad being back from deployment.

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