

INSPIRE

December 2025



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- New curriculum honors Native American culture
- Proactive strategies to strengthen trust, build relationships



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FUTURE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES™

Superintendent's Message



As we approach the end of the year, I find myself reflecting on the moments — big and small — where our organization has stretched and adapted to forge our path toward our North Star goal.

Last year, at our All-Staff event in December, we gathered feedback to inform our Strategic Plan to achieve our North Star. On July 1, 2025, we launched our plan and have since grown together in our knowledge and understanding of the guiding principles, North Star framework, and Strategic Plan priorities.

Together, we have been exploring what it means to do this work collaboratively — to serve, to lead, and to care for every child and every community in San Diego County.

No matter what changes around us, that shared purpose continues to guide and inspire me.

I want to highlight some of our accomplishments during our journey this calendar year. We just launched the new Leadership Growth Plan, which is SDCOE's tool for supporting and evaluating managers to build belonging and co-create opportunities for their teams. We also have created a suite of tools for building awareness of the Strategic Plan, including a comprehensive webpage, videos featuring student and parent voices, and branded materials such as posters, handouts, and artwork.

In alignment with our guiding principle of fostering a learning organization, our SDCOE Book Club completed *Belonging Without Othring*, and dedicated time to individual and collective reflection to help us better meet our students' needs.

Not only are we living our guiding principles and aligning our work to the Strategic Plan, but what we've built has held us together through some really challenging times this year.

I'm so thankful that we were prepared for this journey. When immigration enforcement activities increased near our schools, when federal funding cuts threatened our programs, as the shutdown impacted our students and families — we were ready to stand as a pillar in the community. Our efforts embodied the spirit of unity and shared humanity expressed in the *In Lak'ech* poem, which begins with, "You are my other me." As a result of our work, we've been able to navigate these hurdles, together.

As we look ahead to the new year, I'm filled with optimism about where we're going. Our Strategic Plan gives us the roadmap, but it's your dedication, creativity, and care that make progress possible. Each day, I see examples of how you bring our North Star to life — ensuring that every student, without exception, is seen, heard, and valued.

Whether you are teaching, maintaining our buildings and grounds, welcoming visitors, managing technology systems, or providing services to districts, your work is directly connected to our Strategic Plan priorities. Your commitment is what makes SDCOE such a special place to work.

As we head into the holiday season, I hope you take time to rest, reflect, and reconnect with the people and traditions that mean the most to you. This time of year can be joyful for many and challenging for others. It's a good reminder of why our work of belonging, seeing one another, and making space for each other matters so deeply.

Thank you for everything you do for students, for families, and for each other. I'm proud to walk beside you in this important work and grateful every day for the heart you bring to it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gloria Ciriza". The signature is fluid and cursive.

County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Gloria E. Ciriza



Susana Ghafur and Jamaal Branch are pictured with their team leader Jill Roth-Tellier.

A Day in the Life : **Information Clerks Serve Smiles at the Welcome Center**

Jamaal Branch and Susana Ghafur are the faces of SDCOE's main campus from their posts in the Welcome Center. There they direct visitors, handle inquiries, listen to parent concerns, and keep an eye out for safety. This is no easy task, and they do it all with smiles on their faces and a great attitude, making visitors feel seen, heard, and valued. We recently sat down with them and asked them about their day, the work they do, and their connection to the Strategic Plan to achieve our North Star goal.

We know how to listen, make visitors feel comfortable, and de-escalate when necessary.

— Jamaal Branch

How do you usually spend the first hour of your work day?

Branch: I start an hour earlier than Susana, so I open the Welcome Center at 7:30 a.m. and begin my day making sure we are set up to receive all the visitors to campus. I review all on-campus events for the day and the attendee lists, have the sign-in sheets ready, double-check the facility reservations to see if any events were added or canceled, and I check email in case anything comes in after hours. This is a big part of my job.

Ghafur: As soon as I get in, I check everything that is happening during the day. If there are events going on, I check people in. In the afternoon, I print any events lists that have come in and leave everything ready for Jamaal the next morning.

Describe the most common requests you get?

Branch and Ghafur: On an average day, the most common requests are for directing visitors to meetings or trainings, Credentials, and Fingerprinting. Answering the main phone line accounts for 20% to 40% of the day, and calls pick up more in the late afternoon. We route calls to the right department or assist with questions.

What's the most interesting or rewarding part of your job or the part you most enjoy doing?

Ghafur: We feel we contribute a lot because we open the door to SDCOE and handle visitors with care. They feel they can come back and talk to us about their experience.



Branch joined SDCOE as an information clerk in August 2023. Previously, he worked as a special education teacher aide in the Grossmont Union High School District for seven years. He shared that his experience in special education helps him better relate to parents who have a concern.

That means we created a bond at the beginning even though we are strangers. **Branch:** We help people to the best of our ability or lead them in the right way and both of us feel good when people come back or they leave notes or email our supervisor, that means we're doing a good job. When visitors go through the gate to where they need to be, their first interaction with us was already a positive one. We get a lot of cards, flowers, etc., from parents or people holding events thanking us for our help and for being so kind. We are nice to everybody.

How do you feel your work connects to the Strategic Plan?

Ghafur: When I moved from Migrant Ed to this position, I immediately started meeting a lot of people. I've gotten to know so much staff because of what we do. To increase belonging, it's important to understand the diversity that we have here; understand the cultures we come from.



Ghafur has been an information clerk since July 2024. Previously, she worked as a program advocate in the Migrant Education program for 14 years. She said because she's worked in classrooms directly with students, she's better able to help visitors solve problems related to school issues.

Branch: We see who the future teachers in our school districts are when we help people who come in for their credentials; we get to see their attitude and enthusiasm on a first impression basis and we talk about what grade level and subjects they would be teaching.

What is something you do that people might not realize falls under your job title or something you wish people knew?

Branch: We know who everyone is! Everyone should know that being an information clerk means we know the workings of every department on campus and what people do. We have to so we can direct people or forward calls.

Ghafur: It's nice to hear fellow staff say good morning and be courteous when they come in. It makes my day easier.

Branch: People think that we just sit here and let people in, but we also de-escalate situations. You have an intense phone call at the beginning, and then by the time it ends, the problem might not be solved, but it can be de-escalated. I do a lot to make sure that if my colleagues need to talk to somebody that they are at least getting a reasonable customer. Also, I'm a Building Emergency Coordinator (BEC) and try to keep the

campus as secure as possible. I'm out there checking; I'll go out and tell people to be sure to check in, that it's for security reasons.

What's something you've accomplished in this position or have done recently that you're proud of?

Branch: A lot of hiring candidates come in for interviews and we like to be super positive when helping them. Sometimes they come back and tell us, "You made me smile that morning, you cheered me up that day and I got the job," or once they're hired they come back to say hello and tell us they got hired and that's cool.

Ghafur: We notice how young people of color will direct themselves to the clerk who looks like them. There's a familiarity, we make them feel safe. A girl from Puerto Rico who only spoke Spanish came in asking about credentials. Jamaal sent her to me and I was able to help her. She was so happy that she came back and brought us a fruit basket. ■

We make people feel supported. Sometimes they stop by on the way out and tell us how their interactions went.

— Susana Ghafur



SDCOE Helps Lead Development of Inclusive Native American Curriculum

What does belonging mean at school? It could mean seeing your history and culture represented in books and materials.

For Native American students, this hasn't always been the case. There are 109 federally recognized American Indian Tribes in California and until this year, the instructional resources available for use in California public schools did not include accurate historic and contemporary information concerning Native Americans in California. SDCOE has been part of the effort to create the first [Native American Studies Model Curriculum](#) (NASMC).

"Native histories and cultures have long been marginalized, misrepresented, or excluded from K–12 education," said **Dr. Staci Block**, executive leadership coach. "The Native American Studies Model Curriculum corrects these omissions by uplifting past and present Native voices and fostering classrooms that are more inclusive, accurate, and reflective of California's First Peoples. We want every student to see their story recognized as part of California's past, present, and future."

The California Department of Education selected SDCOE along with Humboldt County Office of Education to co-lead development of the NASMC and build statewide capacity to author and disseminate curricular resources. The effort has been a partnership with many voices, including: California Native American Tribes, multiple county offices of education, Native American educational and cultural experts, K-12 educators, higher education American Indian/Native American Studies departments, and Native-

led nonprofit organizations. This collaborative approach ensured the development of a curriculum that reflects the authentic voices, perspectives, and sovereignty of California Native peoples.

"The Native American Studies Model Curriculum is integrating authentic Native perspectives across history, science, and the arts to foster culturally sustaining learning environments," said Nicole Kim, executive director of California Indian Museum and Cultural Center. "The curriculum engages indigenous expertise and place-based learning practices, providing students a more profound and respectful understanding of Native contributions, histories, cultures, and tribal sovereignty. By centering the voices of California Native Americans, this curriculum does more

We want every student to see their story recognized as part of California's past, present, and future.

— Dr. Staci Block

than change what we teach — it changes how we teach. It emphasizes consultation, collaboration, humility, and the importance of learning directly from and with California Native educators and communities."

The K-12 NASMC are culturally responsive units, lessons, and instructional resources, including “a-g”-approved Native American Studies courses within California’s curriculum that will prepare all pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures, will aim to close the opportunity gap, reduce pupil truancy, increase pupil enrollment, reduce dropout rates, and increase graduation rates.

California aims to create a model that is accurate, inclusive, and rooted in the voices and priorities of Native communities in California. By centering Indigenous knowledge, voices, and leadership, the state seeks to transform curriculum and set an example for other states pursuing Tribally-authored educational reform.

The NASMC initiative provides an opportunity to prepare future generations of leaders, educators, and students who understand the sovereign status of Native nations, appreciate their vital contributions, and are equipped to address pressing social and environmental challenges in ways that honor justice, equity, and shared responsibility.

“The Native American Studies Model Curriculum marks a turning point in reversing centuries of colonized education,” said Gregory Hinchliff, a teacher at Bonsall High School in Bonsall Unified School District, 2026 California Teacher of the Year finalist, and NASMC co-writer. He was recently honored as a state Teacher of the Year finalist in part because of this work.

“In my classroom, Native students are not only improving academically but are also reclaiming a sense of belonging and pride in school through culturally grounded, place-based learning,” he shared.

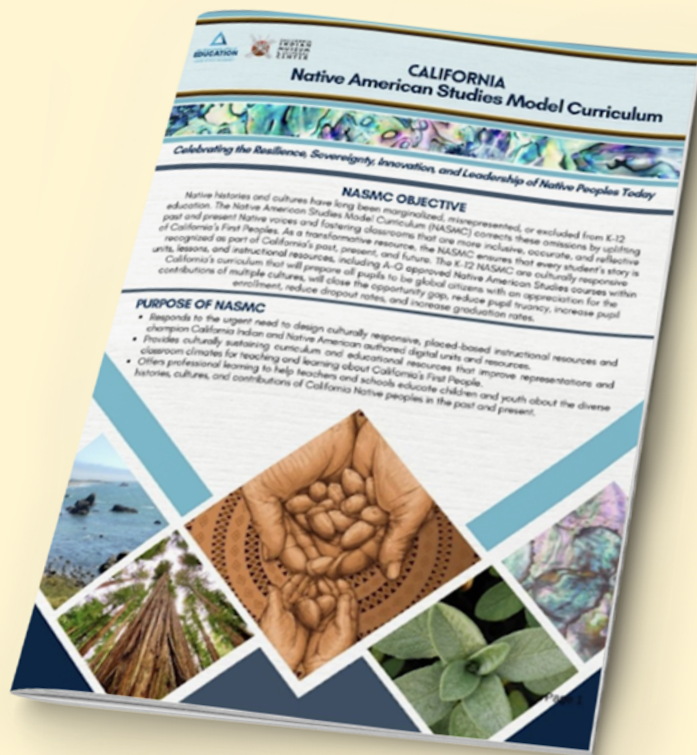
In September the NASMC was formally presented to the California State Board of Education, marking a significant milestone in advancing equity and representation within California’s educational system.

The curriculum now includes more than 400 open-source lessons and instructional resources that center Indigenous voices and affirm Tribal sovereignty. These resources provide a culturally sustaining framework for classrooms of belonging, inclusivity, and respect. In addition, the NASMC includes professional learning

opportunities to equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively teach the histories, cultures, and contributions of Native peoples.

SDCOE will continue to offer free, professional learning opportunities for K-12 educators, administrators, and Tribal members. Rooted in the theme of “Seeds of Native Knowledge,” each institute plants ideas and practices that will take root, spread, and grow while nurturing curriculum that supports both Native and non-Native students across California.

Ultimately, the NASMC represents more than the development of curriculum materials. In alignment with our Strategic Priority 2, it is a transformative educational resource that fosters equity, justice, and inclusion, while preparing future generations to engage responsibly in shaping a more just and inclusive society. ■





Building Trust and Community

with Restorative Practices

Over the next five years, one of our two priorities as an organization is to “transform structures to foster belonging by strengthening trust, collaboration, inclusivity, transparency, equity, and relationships.”

This priority was developed through listening to feedback from employees and our educational partners, so we know relationships are important. Building community is critical. Belonging is key. But how do we begin?

The Restorative Justice Practices team in Student Services and Programs has been working through this question with SDCOE teams and district and school staff as part of its work. They see how the practices and skills they teach can be useful in our efforts to build belonging at SDCOE.

Program Specialist **Dr. Lan Nguyen** and Project Specialist **Jennifer Vermillion** recently sat down with us to share more about their work, how it applies to the Strategic Plan to achieve SDCOE’s North Star goal, and practices you can use in your work or in your personal life.

In her early career as a high school science teacher, Nguyen began using restorative practices to build relationships and connections with and among her students.

“Restorative practices is one answer to the question of how to create spaces that prioritize and center community,” she explained. “I noticed that as relationships strengthened in my classroom students became more engaged in the learning and were more willing to take the intellectual risks necessary for developing scientific thinking skills.”

Before coming to SDCOE in 2020, Vermillion worked for a nonprofit organization that helped students and educators in San Diego Unified to build community and resolve conflicts among their peers.

“Most of the work that our team does at SDCOE is to support teachers and school staff with strategies for building strong, positive relationships both before, during, and after conflicts that are developmentally and age appropriate for students,” Vermillion shared. “With restorative practices, you can replace ‘students’ or ‘families’ with any group or community you find yourself in.”

At its heart, restorative practices are proactive — meaning they are the actions and skills used to create communities of belonging before there’s conflict. Conflict is often the result of ongoing interpersonal dynamics, where someone feels dehumanized, unseen, undervalued, or ignored. And that’s often when we think to “fix” or restore the relationship.

Nguyen says when done well, restorative practices is proactive and intentional — before there are issues.

“It’s the equivalent of drinking water and eating your vegetables as a preventative health action, but in this case, it’s for the relational health of a group,” Nguyen said.

Cultivating relationships, the team shared, leads to less conflict, as people are less likely to fill in the blanks with their own story or suspicions.

It’s a building block of increasing belonging and strengthening relationships, which is where SDCOE is focused and aligned through our Strategic Plan.

Restorative Practices *in Action*

While restorative practices is technically a field of study that examines how to strengthen relationships between individuals and improve social connections within communities, you can use these practices for conflict resolution, creating dialogue, bridging gaps across divided groups, and building cultures where all members have a voice, work more effectively together, and become more innovative.

A foundational element that all of us can practice is something known as deep listening, Nguyen explained. It can also be a helpful tool in your holiday toolbox as you connect with family and friends.

“Deep listening is opening yourself up to the possibility of being changed by someone else,” she said. “It’s being able to hold perspectives and experiences, your own and others, without being threatened by what you’re hearing.”

Finding shared understanding is often complex and nuanced. Deep listening can be a bridging opportunity — as the listener you’re looking for opportunities for curiosity, interest, or connection, Vermillion said. It’s about expanding your inner capacity to hold two truths at the same time: your own feelings and beliefs as well as the perspective of the person you’re speaking with.

“It can mean being comfortable with not agreeing, but finding common ground,” Vermillion shared.

An exercise the team often does in their workshops goes a little like this: Pairs of people sit across from each other with a topic. Each has a few minutes to think about what they want to share. Then one person talks for two minutes, and the other person listens in silence. The goal is to fill up the time, tolerate the silence, and be present. ■

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To learn more about restorative practices, the team created [a playlist of short videos](#) for families, and the tools and tips are easily adapted to work.



GALLERY



SDCOE recently hosted a workshop for high school representatives from across San Diego County as part of the SD9UP network. Pictured is **Brian Butler** from LLS presenting; also presenting were LLS colleagues **Stephanie Brown**, **Ross Godfrey**, **Greg Magno**, and **Richard Carreon**.



Members of the We Are SDCOE Book Club wrapped up another year of learning and reflection with an in-person gathering to celebrate growth and connection. Through books like *Design for Belonging* and *Belonging without Othering*, participants explored how to create spaces of unity, empathy, and shared humanity across our SDCOE community. Shown from left are **Carola Solano-Humerez**, Migrant Education, and **Kristen Amicone** and **Sam Womack** from Communications and Creative Services.



Representatives from SDCOE, San Diego Unified, Cajon Valley, Grossmont, Valley Center-Pauma, Sweetwater, and Santee school districts attend the California Association of Administrators of State and Federal Education Programs (CAASFEP) in Monterey.



Sweet surprise! Thanks to Nothing Bundt Cakes in Santee, Monarch School staff enjoyed a delicious treat after **Valinda Bricker**, Monarch's Health Services Technician, won an office party drawing — bringing smiles and sweetness to the hardworking Royals who give their all every day for students.

GALLERY



Local business, community, and education leaders gathered at the University of San Diego for the Classroom of the Future Foundation's fifth Supe Tank event. Seven superintendents from school districts around the county pitched green initiatives to local business and community leaders for funding and partnership opportunities. SDCOE's leadership and staff were in attendance supporting districts' innovative ideas, including **Christina DeSanto** (middle) and **Dr. Matt Tessier** (right).



The video team has been working with students and staff in South Bay Union School District on a video to help students and families learn more about the reclassification process for students who are English learners. Told by students for students, this video focuses on multilingualism as a superpower. Shown with the student is **Rodrigo Magdaluyo**, and holding the audio boom pole is **Chris Iandolo**, both from Communications and Creative Services.



At a Friday all-staff meeting, all Innovation departments shared how their work brings SDCOE's Strategic Plan to life through a creative and collaborative World Café activity. Participating here are **Joel Tapia**, **Marco Gonzalez**, and **Stephen Williams**.



Once a year, Rady Children's Hospital San Diego invites all the audiologists and Deaf and hard of hearing teachers to get together to discuss what is new in audiology and its impact on our students. Shown here from East County SELPA are, from left, **Dr. Angela Gray**, **Dr. Jessica Moreno**, **Marissa Simoni**, and **Kelsey Cobb**.

GALLERY



Early Education team members (from left) **Luz Garcia**, **Cindy Rivera**, **Hope Michel**, **Katerina Brennan**, and **Erika Munoz** learned about infant mental health and equity at the Rooted in Hope conference in Sacramento sponsored by the California Association for Infant Mental Health.



The San Diego Homeless Education Summit gathered nearly 100 educators and partners for a day of learning, connection, and resources to better support students experiencing homelessness. Juvenile Court and Community School (JCCS) students also showcased products from their Career and Technical Education Entrepreneurship Program. Pictured are Homeless Education Services team members **Susanne Terry**, **Christina Luna**, and **Leah Mendez**.



HOPE Infant staff members and families practice massage — a gentle practice where caregivers use slow, soothing strokes to support a baby's comfort, bonding, and development.



GALLERY



These are two examples of the many beautiful altars created by our JCCS students and staff in celebration of Día de los Muertos.



Halloween brought a look-alike dress-up, with **Ramon Estrada** on the left, and his double, **Chris Turner**, both from Maintenance and Operations.



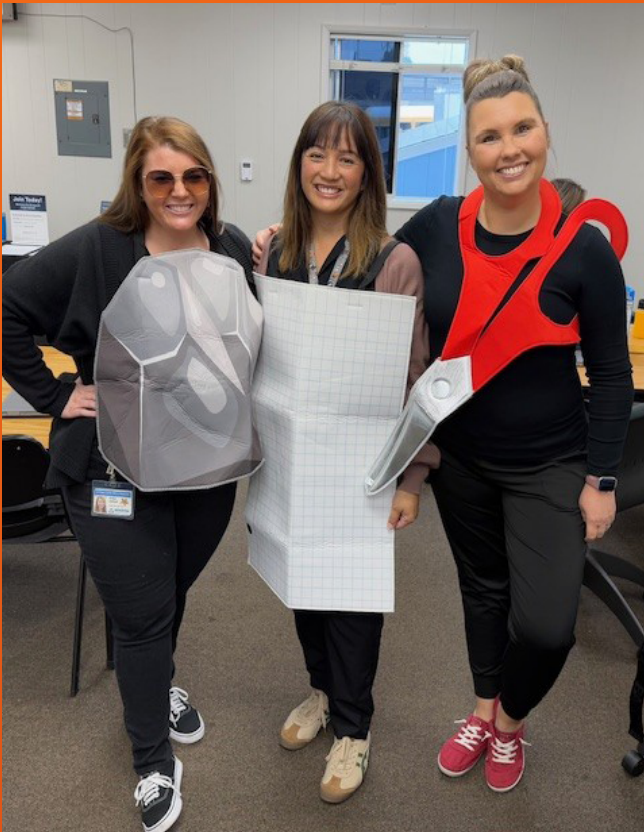
More than 80 Migrant Education families enjoyed a day of learning and discovery at the Safari Park, explored wildlife up close, and experienced new opportunities sparked by our ongoing partnership with the park. This memorable day was made possible thanks to the dedication and teamwork of our incredible staff, whose hard work continues to open doors for the students and families we serve.



The Migrant Ed team visited Fallbrook High School for a Halloween trunk-or-treat. They decorated the van and handed out treats. Pictured left to right are **Carola Solano-Humerez**, **Blanca Lopez**, **Jessica Garcia**, and **Maricela Garcia**.

GALLERY

Human Resource Services held its annual Halloween costume contest at their all-staff meeting, and additionally, celebrated Boss's Day with baskets and treats.



GALLERY



This group photo was taken at a Thanksgiving celebration for the San Pasqual Academy community last month. It was sponsored by the Friends of San Pasqual Academy and Rite of Passage. **Top right: Joseph Clevenger**, assistant superintendent of Student Services and Programs, poses with San Diego County Board of Education Member **Guadalupe González**. **Bottom right: JCCS Executive Director Roberto Carrillo**, **Dr. Gloria E. Ciriza**, and San Diego County Board of Education Vice President **Rick Shea**.



The JCCS Student and Family Engagement team helped distribute 50 turkeys, food, and gift cards to students and families thanks to a donation from educational partner Interfaith Community Services. Pictured above is **Anna Schen** (far right), JCCS social work services program specialist, with partner volunteers.