

INSPIRE

March 2026



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san diego county office of
EDUCATION
FUTURE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES™

Superintendent's Message



The March edition of *Inspire* offers a powerful reminder of what happens when students rise — and when we rise together to support them.

Across our organization, we see young people navigating extraordinary challenges, including the fear and uncertainty

many of our families are experiencing at this moment. Students and families carry that weight as they travel to and from school or work, unsure of what they may encounter.

And yet, in spite of that fear, they show up. They persevere.

This month, we highlight Migrant Education Region 9 students preparing for a speech contest, finding and strengthening their voices. We celebrate a new mural that uplifts student identity and expression. And we recognize the cross-functional teams who worked side by side to create an innovative learning space where students can explore future careers.

What makes these moments so powerful is not just the program or the project itself. It is the deep sense of belonging our students describe when they feel seen, heard, and supported. They speak about the educators and staff who stand beside them during their hardest moments, who refuse to give up on them, who help them see their own potential.

This is our North Star goal in action. Through our Strategic Plan priorities — fostering belonging, creating transformational experiences, and embracing a collective responsibility for student outcomes — we are building environments where every student can use their voice and envision their future.

Thank you for being the village that surrounds our students and ensures they thrive.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gloria Ciriza".

County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Gloria E. Ciriza





Students Create ‘We Are Community’ Mural at 37ECB

Building belonging begins with building community and a new mural at 37ECB reminds students they belong each time they climb the steps inside the school’s City Heights campus.

Centering around words that represent community to the students, it was students at the campus who worked with long-time partner A Reason to Survive (ARTS) to create the beautiful painting.

“Art can really connect to anything. No matter what you are focused on, you can use art to express yourself or do a project like this,” said Zuly, one of the student participants.

The central text “We Are Community” is engraved with maps of the different cities that the students are from or have ancestral ties to. This is surrounded by words the students felt represented them, such as “generous,” “courage,” and “success,” and completed the question “We are...?” The dark background with stars and wisps of color is the universe to these powerful words and represents the world’s interconnectedness.

“This project began as a way for students to define themselves, who they are, and their journey using words to describe their past, present, and future,” said ARTS teacher Sheena Dowling. “The intention was to have it be a way to create their own narrative outside of the systems that have labeled them, and to tell their own stories in their own words.”

THE PROCESS

37ECB students Zuly, Louis, Linda, and Perla were selected as interns to participate in the project.

The group began by brainstorming ideas for the overall design. The conceptual elements built into the mural reflect the students’ aesthetic choices and lived experiences.

Each student hand-designed a letter that Dowling then laser-printed on wood. The students painted and decorated their letters in their own unique styles, bringing them together to form the word “community” with a map thoughtfully designed inside each letter.

"It takes a lot of patience and teamwork and I learned that if I just focus on what is in front of me, it all comes together," said Louis, a student intern. "I liked being able to look at how the project progressed and enjoyed the flow in watching it all come together."

Dowling said it was important for her to include the actual handwriting of the students within this piece because handwriting is a personal identifier, and a way to connect to placemaking.

ARTS is a community partner organization with a mission to lift young people in the South County region of San Diego to become confident, compassionate, and courageous community builders through the transformative power of creativity.

Art can really connect to anything. No matter what you are focused on, you can use art to express yourself or do a project like this.

Amanda Wallace, VAPA program analyst for JCCS, said the partnership with ARTS is essential to our North Star goal by creating transformational student experiences.

“For many years, A Reason to Survive has worked alongside SDCOE to ensure students have access to meaningful, creative opportunities that center student voice, identity, and lived experience,” Wallace shared. “Together, we have created murals driven by student design and leadership, developed paid internships specifically for our students, and provided consistent access to professional arts spaces through the A Reason to Survive campus. This partnership continues to grow in depth and impact, offering students not only artistic expression, but pathways to skill building, leadership, and creative careers.” ■





Fueled by Collaboration: **SDCOE Teams Bring New Fire Science Lab to Life**

The debut of the new Fire Science Lab at the Linda Vista Innovation Center (LVIC) last month wasn't just a celebration of a new student experience, it was a moment that showcased the SDCOE teams whose creativity, skill, and cross-departmental coordination made the innovative space possible.

Developed in collaboration with CAL FIRE San Diego, the Fire Science Lab introduces students to careers in fire science, emergency response, and public service through scenario-based, hands-on activities. Students practice teamwork, rapid decision-making, situational awareness, and emergency response

skills in an environment that mirrors real-world expectations.

Students from Sunrise High School and Mountain Empire High School were the first to check out the new lab.

"It's a really cool experience, especially for anyone interested in fire science or becoming a firefighter, but also for everyone else too," said Abril Gastelum, a student at Mountain Empire High who experienced the grand opening event with her class.

"It's pretty cool, I love it over here doing these hands-on activities," said fellow student Daniel Pragosa.

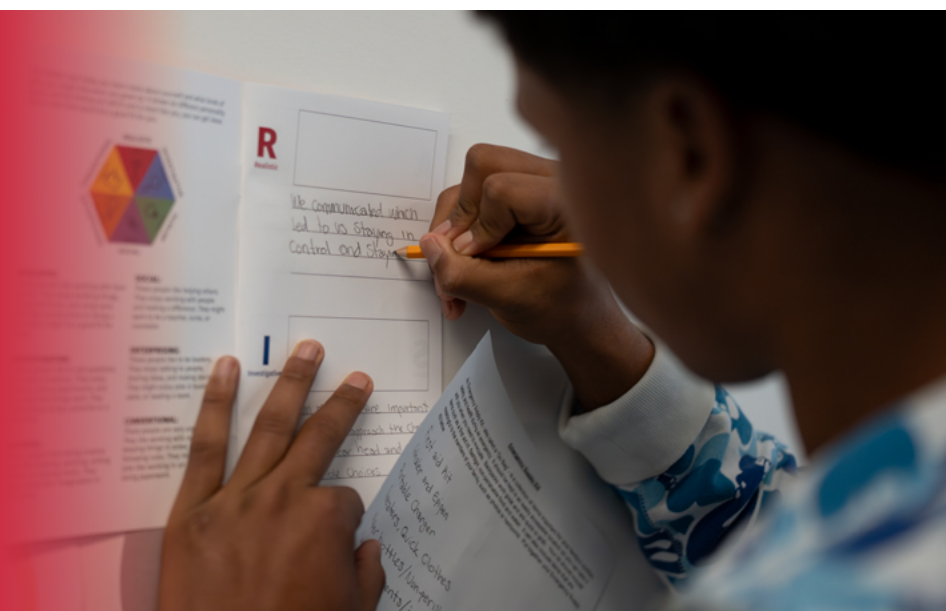


**I told Amir he
looked like a
hero, and he
smiled and said,
'I feel like a hero.'**

— Rodrigo Magdaluyo

I loved seeing
our work in
students'
hands, helping
them explore
their options
and envision a
future they're
excited about.

— Haley MacKenzie



But behind the scenes, this immersive experience came together through the dedication of the SDCOE teams who designed, prepared, produced, and delivered every detail.

The development of the Fire Science Lab was led by **Dahnika Romero**, LVIC teacher, who envisioned and built the experience with key support from **Christina DeSanto**, principal of the LVIC, as well as **Dr. Pamela Rabin**, coordinator for the Ed Tech

team, and **Jonathan Witt**, project specialist with the Outdoor Education team. Cuyamaca Outdoor School village leader **Mick Odell** was instrumental in connecting Romero and DeSanto with his brother, CAL FIRE San Diego Battalion Chief Patrick Odell, to kickstart the collaborative partnership. Romero and DeSanto worked closely with Battalion Chief Odell and his CAL FIRE team to ensure

the lab's activities were grounded in real scenarios and authentically represented the skills needed in fire service and emergency response careers.

Before students ever stepped into the room, employees from across the Innovation division — the LVIC, Data and Impact Center for Excellence, College and Career Readiness, Outdoor Education, and Education Technology — became the first group to pilot the experience. Their willingness to step into the role of learners helped ensure the lab activities were safe, coherent, and engaging before being opened to students.

To help make the student experience uniquely immersive, team members from Maintenance and Operations, as well as the Communications and Creative Services department stepped in to help create a cohesive and intentional space.

Todd Owens, executive director for Maintenance and Operations, said he was excited to help bring the space to life with an authentic fire hydrant that was securely installed in the lab. His team also installed some of the popular hands-on activities, including the fire hose in the hallway, pulley system, and reaction time devices.

In the Communications and Creative Services department, graphic



designer **Haley MacKenzie** led the design of interactive student materials, including career cards that highlight fire science pathways, student journals, and the door and wall decals that helped make the space feel cohesive and purposefully branded. The Print Shop team then brought those designs into reality, turning around materials quickly, with **Lazarus Ayala** and **Emelia Archuleta** installing the decals for a polished space just days before the grand opening.

"I loved seeing our work in students' hands, helping them explore their options and envision a future they're excited about," said MacKenzie.

Alessandra Angelone, communications strategist, coordinated local media presence at the event, ensuring broader coverage of how SDCOE is connecting student learning with economic opportunity through truly unique transformational experiences with stories airing on [NBC San Diego](#) and [Fox 5](#).

Alejandro Tamayo, lead multi-media producer, and **Rodrigo Magdaluyo**, videographer/editor, captured students' voices and joy in photos and videos throughout the day for use across SDCOE platforms.

The Fire Science Lab advances SDCOE's commitment to preparing students for college, career, and beyond through equitable, career-connected learning experiences. Internally, it stands as a model of what we achieve when teams across divisions work together and build on their strengths and collective wisdom to champion a shared responsibility to improve student outcomes through transformational experiences. The result is a high-quality, real-world learning experience that not only connects students to career paths, but reassures them that they are seen, valued, and capable of shaping their future. ■



**It's pretty cool, I love it over here
doing these hands-on activities.**

— Daniel Pragosa, Student, Mountain Empire High

Migrant Education Students Shine at Region 9 Speech Tournament

Each year, the SDCOE Migrant Education Region 9 program hosts a regional speech tournament for students, where they compete for the chance to represent at the annual statewide competition.

The speech tournament is an opportunity for the students to shine as they speak with poise, knowledge, and conviction, while dressed in professional business attire. Judges are often SDCOE employees who volunteer their time, and community partners donate gift cards or small awards.

The Migrant Education program is a federally funded program designed to provide supplementary educational and support services to identified migratory children and youth, who move periodically with their family as they do seasonal agricultural work.

The Region 9 tournament was held last week and, prior to the big day, we spoke to two students who shared their experience preparing for the public speaking competition.



BERENICE YAÑEZ

12th Grade
Fallbrook High School



KIMBERLY MORALES

8th Grade
Guajome Park Academy

Why are you participating in the speech contest?

BERENICE: This is my third year competing. I first competed when I was in 8th grade, and then again last year as a junior. It's been a fun experience to gain that confidence in front of others. Last year I competed with more experience and was more sure of myself.

KIMBERLY: I have competed in the Region 9 Speech Tournament since 6th grade. This is my third year competing. I got involved in speech and debate because I was invited to participate but was unsure if that's what I wanted to do. I was nervous about speaking in public and interacting with people. I challenged myself to give it a chance and now I feel that maybe it was a lifechanger. It allowed me to shake off the nerves about public speaking. I feel I have grown in my confidence, I talk to more people and am able to explain myself through speech.

What's the most fun or valuable part about the contest?

BERENICE: It's not really a competition, we are trying to uplift each other so we can all feel the confidence that develops from participating in this event. I support the new students even though we might be competing. I want to make them feel good about themselves. If they win, I'm not going to feel bad about it. I want them to have that experience as well; I know how much it helps.

KIMBERLY: The most exciting part is meeting new people and having the courage to socialize with them. Something I would tell others who may join is to enjoy the moment, have faith in yourself, and trust the process when you're out there.

How has preparing for the contest helped you at school or home, connected you to friends, or given you confidence?

BERENICE: It helps because it's a stepping stone for being able to do presentations in front of class, and in the future it will help when talking to people when I get a job — with my colleagues and my boss. It shows you how to communicate with confidence. You're always going to need that skill.

Also, when I'm in a new environment, I feel prepared to talk. I recently went to Peru as part of a leadership program and this prepared me to not be shy and be more outgoing. I was open to talking to the students there; I felt more connected to them and confident in my conversations in Spanish.

KIMBERLY: Participating has helped me a lot. This year I'm taking AVID and I have improved a lot in my public speaking since AVID has a lot of group projects and presentations and also involves interacting with older people. My competition experience makes me feel like I've done this lots of times. When the teacher says we are doing a presentation, it's not a big deal anymore.

When I'm presenting and I start feeling nervous or want to rush through it, I just look at the top of people's heads because that way it seems like you're looking right at them.

What would moving on to compete in the state Migrant Education State Speech and Debate Tournament in Monterey mean to you?

BERENICE: It would mean a lot to me; it would show me that working hard and being persistent really does pay off. I advanced to the state tournament last year. My parents would be even prouder to see me advance again, and I would be proud of myself. I'm a first generation student. My parents never got to experience these things and it's eye-opening for them.

Competing at the state-level is fun because you get to know all the kids that go with you and you meet new people. Last year in Monterey, I realized how many migrant students there are. Seeing all the students who share a similar background as me but who come from areas like Fresno and Coachella — those students had more stories to share about the migrant experience.

KIMBERLY: I made it to the state tournament for the past two years. It was a mix of emotions, but an honor to be there. It's my personal goal to advance again this year and to make it to first place in the State Speech and Debate Tournament. ■



SDCOE Leads New Statewide Initiative to Reimburse Costs for School-Based Behavioral Health Services

How can we get children and teens access to behavioral health supports when and where they need it?

This was the idea behind the California Department of Health Care Services investment of billions of dollars to expand behavioral health supports for children and youth in 2024. As part of the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), the state introduced the CYBHI Fee Schedule — a first-of-its-kind program designed to make it easier for students and families to access behavioral health services tailored to their needs.

SDCOE is leading the local implementation of this new school-based behavioral health funding model, supporting districts and schools across the region in building sustainable systems to get reimbursed for the behavioral health services schools already provide to students.

Under recent legislation, Medi-Cal and commercial/private health plans must reimburse schools for eligible behavioral health services delivered to students. This shift allows schools to expand access to care while securing stable, ongoing funding for services they have long provided.



“With recent reductions and uncertainties within education funding, the Fee Schedule provides districts and schools with the opportunity to sustain and build out their behavioral health school-based services. It’s the new way of doing business in schools that can generate critical revenue,” said **Heather Nemour**, a coordinator at SDCOE who is part of the team leading this work.

According to the Department of Health Care Services, the program establishes a sustainable reimburse-

ment pathway for local educational agencies (LEAs) to receive funding for services provided at a school or school-linked site. The program sets the reimbursement rate for a certain set of school-linked services rendered to children and youth who are under the age of 26, enrolled in TK-12 or higher education, and covered by certain managed care plans.

Importantly, students and families do not pay any out-of-pocket costs, nor does participation affect their existing insurance coverage or deductibles.



To participate, families provide their insurance information and consent to receive services, allowing LEAs to bill for and be reimbursed for the mental or behavioral health services.

“Mountain Empire Unified School District saw the CYBHI program as a pathway to continue to provide invaluable counseling, guidance, and resources to our students,” said Gary Brannon, director of Student Services and Alternative Education at Mountain Empire. “In a small, rural school district the student mental and behavioral health support pieces have historically been the first areas to be affected by budget fluctuation, and we hope this will solidify these important services.”

To help LEAs develop the infrastructure needed for successful implementation, the state also launched the CYBHI School-Linked Partnership and Capacity Grant. This one-time funding supports LEAs in building their operational readiness to participate in the Fee Schedule.

In San Diego County, SDCOE’s Student Wellness and School Culture team serves as the grant administrator and provides hands-on



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— Gary Brannon,
Mountain Empire Unified School District

technical assistance, implementation guidance, and ongoing support.

“It has been an opportunity for the SDCOE team to meet with our small LEAs who have little to no behavioral health staff to explore other staffing opportunities,” Nemour said. “We have the opportunity to get creative and find new avenues to get reimbursed for services we’re providing to our kids. LEAs can also build or enhance partnerships with community-based organizations to bring services to students and bill on behalf of the student’s LEA.”

Since the launch of the Capacity Grant in 2024, LEA participation in the Fee Schedule has grown into a countywide movement. The

SDCOE team has worked diligently to meet LEAs where they are — providing individualized support, reducing the operational burden on them, and serving as thought-partners throughout each stage of implementation.

“SDCOE has been a valuable partner to our district throughout this process,” said Yuka Sakamoto, program manager at San Diego Unified School District. “The Fee Schedule has required new approaches and systems within LEAs and the opportunity to brainstorm, process, and dialogue with a trusted thought partner has been incredibly beneficial and helpful to move from conceptualization to implementation.” ■

GALLERY



A rainy day doesn't stop progress! The Maintenance and Operations team gathered on a wet main campus for an on-site update about current renovations.



Human Resource Services team members **Calipso Barrera-Gomez** (left) and **Vanessa Gutierrez** (right) represented SDCOE services and job opportunities at the Goodwill San Diego Employer Panel and Resource Fair at One Safe Place in San Marcos.



- ▲ Students attending Cuyamaca Outdoor School in February learned where their delicious carrots were grown through the school's farm-to-school partners.
- Camp students also experienced snow, and some for the first time ever! Principal **Kris Pamintuan** said watching them catch snowflakes on their tongues was "magical!"



GALLERY



For National Love Your Pet Day, SDCOE colleagues shared their furry friends on Viva Engage. Pictured posing with his cat is **Jose Avila**, Learning and Leadership Services, and on a road trip with his two dogs is **Jerry Ibarra**, Integrated Technology Services. See more photos on [Viva Engage](#).



Innovation team members **Dionicio Riego de Dios** (left) and **Alexander Becker** (right) led a student panel at the Classroom of the Future Foundation College and Career Pathways Summit. See more photos on [Viva Engage](#).



Sarah Espiritu, Risk Management, displayed her sewing skills with goldwork embroidery panels at a weekend event with her boyfriend.