

NEWS RELEASE

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School Connect Announces Top 25 Arizona Finalists for 2025 Champions of Education Awards

Ceremony to Honor Educational Leaders Creating Pathways for Student Success Across Arizona

PHOENIX, AZ – April 17, 2025 - School Connect is proud to announce the top 25 finalists for the 2025 Champions of Education Awards, recognizing outstanding individuals and organizations making a significant impact on Arizona's youth. These finalists exemplify courageous leadership and commitment to collaborative community support of education, creating pathways for student success across the state.

"For me, it's really just the joy of being a catalyst for other people to encourage their passion to make a difference in the lives of others in their community and in their world," says Denise Hawk, a 2025 School Champion of the Year Finalist and social worker at Desert Star School in the Avondale Elementary School District.

Finalists will be celebrated at the 5th Annual School Connect Champions of Education Awards ceremony on Thursday, May 1, 2025 from 7:30 am to 10:30 am at the Orange Tree Golf Resort, Mariposa Ballroom, 10601 N. 56th Street, Scottsdale, AZ 85254.

2025 Finalists:

Student Champion of the Year K-6

Nico Bishop, Student, Queen Creek Unified School District

Faumelevai Danielson, Student, J.O. Combs Unified School District

Krish Tyagi, Student, Scottsdale Unified School District

Student Champion of the Year 7-12

Jacob Greene, Student, Pendergast Elementary School District

Sonny Renee Montano III, Student, Tolleson Elementary School District

Minerva Monterroso Escobar, Student, Alhambra Elementary School District

Catalyst for Education Award (Principal)

Samantha Armstrong, Principal, Littleton Elementary School District

Crystal Bustamante, Principal, Washington Elementary School District

Kelli Frazier, Principal, Queen Creek Unified School District

Hero Maker Award (Teacher)

Sara Daffe, Teacher, Madison Elementary School District
Emily Emhardt, Teacher, Avondale Elementary School District
Melissa France, Teacher, Fowler Elementary School District
Amy Wicks, Teacher, Peoria Unified School District

Changemaker Award (Superintendent)

Dr. Cecilia Maes, Superintendent, Alhambra Elementary School District
Jay Mann, Superintendent, Creighton School District
Dr. Robert Pappalardo, Superintendent, Apache Junction Unified School District

Collaborative Leadership Award (School Board Member)

Sophia Carrillo, Governing Board, Creighton School District
Samantha Davis, Governing Board, Queen Creek Unified School District
Martin Quezada, Governing Board, Pendergast Elementary School District

School Champion of the Year Award (School Champion)

Denise Hawk, School Champion, Avondale Elementary School District
Gil Nisleit, School Champion, Central Christian Church
Laura Roman, School Champion, Roman Realty Group

Because It Takes A Village Award (School)

Black Mountain Elementary School, Principal Matt Owsley, Cave Creek Unified School District
Ira A. Murphy Elementary School, Principal Reginna Lewis, Peoria Unified School District
Sheely Farms Elementary School, Principal Rebecca Ford, Tolleson Elementary School District

The ceremony will be hosted by Danielle Lerner, AZ Living Host of Cox Yurview, and will honor 8 award winners along with 7 community awardees for their trailblazing leadership. The 2024 Student Champion of the Year (Grades 7-12) Fatimah Amer will address this year's class of 2025 to thank them for their leadership and honor their role in Arizona's future.

Tickets are available now at schoolconnectaz.org/school-connect-awards.

For media inquiries please contact Shea Duryea at shea@schoolconnectaz.org.

About School Connect

School Connect is an Arizona nonprofit dedicated to closing equity gaps for Arizona youth through community-driven educational support. Founded on the principle that community collaboration is essential to student success, the organization serves as a catalyst for positive change by connecting community leaders directly with local schools. Since 2014, School Connect has been at the forefront of community-driven educational transformation. In recent years School Connect has impacted 743 schools and over 371,500 Arizona youth with initiatives.

