

## NEWS RELEASE

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# School Connect Announces Arizona's 2025 Champions of Education Award Winners

*Arizona's Education and Community Champions Celebrated at School Connect  
Champions of Education Awards Breakfast*

SCOTTSDALE, AZ - May 2, 2025 - On May 1, 2025, School Connect brought together educators, students, and community leaders at the Orange Tree Golf Resort in Scottsdale for its 5th Annual Champions of Education Awards. The sold-out breakfast event honored 15 individuals and organizations for their outstanding contributions to education and community service throughout Arizona.

Eight Education Award winners were selected from [25 statewide finalists](#), representing individuals from elementary students to superintendents. These honorees lead with heart, inspire those around them, and show what's possible when people come together to support education.

## Education Award Winners:

- **Student Champion of the Year (K-6):** Krish Tyagi, Scottsdale Unified School District
- **Student Champion of the Year (7-12):** Sonny Renee Montano III, Tolleson Elementary School District
- **Hero Maker Award (Teacher):** Melissa France, Fowler Elementary School District
- **Catalyst for Education Award (Principal):** Crystal Bustamante, Washington Elementary School District
- **Changemaker Award (Superintendent):** Dr. Robert Pappalardo, Apache Junction Unified School District
- **Collaborative Leadership Award (School Board):** Martin Quezada, Pendergast Elementary School District
- **School Champion of the Year:** Denise Hawk, Avondale Elementary School District
- **Because It Takes A Village Award (School):** Ira A. Murphy Elementary School, Peoria Unified School District

## Community Award Recipients:

Seven Community Awards highlighted the vital role of businesses, nonprofits, faith leaders, and government in supporting Arizona's youth.

- **Community Impact Award (Local Business):** Lisa Folsom, Sunland Asphalt, for connecting resources to schools in need.
- **Bridge Builders Award (National Business):** STEM GameDay Planning Committee, American Council of Engineering Companies of Arizona, for hands-on STEM experiences for 1,200 middle schoolers.
- **Community Spotlight Award (Local Nonprofit):** Dawn Gerundo, Valley of the Sun United Way, for tackling literacy, digital access, and absenteeism.
- **National Spotlight Award (National Nonprofit):** Washington Coven, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona, for wellness programs reaching over 35,000 students and educators.
- **Hope Builders Award (Faith Community):** Tere Tucker, Palm Valley Church, for mobilizing volunteers and resources through school-focused programs.
- **Civic Impact Award (Government):** Thomas Claiborn IV, First Things First, for strategic community transformation.
- **Founder's Heart Award:** Margaret Judson, School Connect San Antonio, for expanding the School Connect model and building powerful collaborations in Texas.

## A Morning of Inspiration

Hosted by Emmy-Award Winning News Host, Danielle Learner, the breakfast event featured student performances, inspiring stories, a keynote by award-winning teacher, Jason Catanesea earning an enthusiastic standing ovation, and a heartfelt message from Fatimah Amer, the 2024 Student Champion of the Year (Grades 7-12), who expressed deep gratitude to leaders whose service continues to shape Arizona's future.

"These award recipients represent the very best of what can happen when communities come together to support education," said School Connect Founder & CEO Tracey Beal. "Each honoree has demonstrated that when passion meets purpose, we can create educational environments where every child has the opportunity to thrive."

The annual awards breakfast celebrates the collaborative spirit that defines School Connect's mission—to strengthen partnerships between schools and communities throughout Arizona.

For more information visit [schoolconnectaz.org/school-connect-awards/winners](https://schoolconnectaz.org/school-connect-awards/winners).

### 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.*