FRESNO COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

THE FOUNDATION @ FCOE



# INNOVATION

## Grant Awards Reception

October 28, 2026

Grants Sponsored by FCSS Employees & Friends





# WELCOME



## Dr. Michele Cantwell-Copher

Fresno County Superintendent of Schools

Welcome, 2026 Innovation Grant Awards recipients and congratulations on your successful grant proposals! We are so excited about the projects you have planned in the coming year to impart innovative learning in the classroom. The Foundation @ FCOE believes that education is preparation for life and that excellence, access and innovation can change the life trajectory of Fresno County students. This brochure has the collective list and a brief description of all the awarded grants, illustrating the breadth and depth of innovative teaching and learning occurring in Fresno County classrooms.

The grant recipients span broadly from small rural schools to large urban ones, or from transitional kindergarten to adult transition programs. The funded projects are just as robust and include projects that focus on mental health, agriculture, arts, science, career technical education, and so much more. In each innovative program, students will be challenged to expand their traditional thinking and perceived limitations. The amazing projects funded through the annual Innovation Grants help increase student engagement, develop creativity, encourage collaboration, and foster an understanding of real-world issues through hands-on, innovative learning models. They also foster new techniques, new tools, new methods, and new promising programs, which will serve students well. You should feel very proud of the commitment you have demonstrated to fostering innovation in your classrooms.

We celebrate the educators who applied for the Innovation Grants. They are the type of educators who no doubt inspire students to achieve their dreams, building them up in the process and potentially transforming their future.

This grant program is made possible by the generosity of dedicated employees and friends of the Office of the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools. These folks made a commitment to support innovation in Fresno County schools, mostly through monthly payroll deductions, and have collectively funded these grants. Together, they are to be celebrated for the impact they make on the future of Fresno County students. This investment will equate to better teaching and learning with increased student engagement.

These shared sentiments are expressed on behalf of the FCSS employees, the Fresno County Board of Education, and the Foundation Board of Directors. We believe every student can fulfill their potential and this is at the core of the Foundation's mission.



## MaryEllen Galvan

Executive Director, The Foundation @ FCOE

# INNOVATION GRANT AWARDEES 2026

**Alvina Elementary Charter School District**
Michelle Menefee, Resource Specialist
Igniting Young Minds

This innovative project will introduce students in grades 5–8 to desktop laser cutting technology, connecting computer science, spatial reasoning, and hands-on engineering. Using user-friendly design software and a child-safe desktop laser cutter, students will transform digital designs into physical prototypes, puzzle maps, and scientific models. The project will provide an engaging, inclusive approach to STEAM learning while helping students strengthen skills in geometry, measurement, technical literacy, and three-dimensional design. Through visual and hands-on activities, students will explore how two-dimensional shapes can fold, interlock, and come together to create three-dimensional structures, creating accessible learning experiences for tactile learners, English language learners, and neurodivergent students.

**Big Creek Elementary School District**
Brad Huebert, Principal & Superintendent
Design Center/Makers Area

Big Creek Elementary School will create a maker space where students can apply classroom learning through hands-on, project-based experiences. The space will provide science kits, manipulatives, and activities that connect math, reading, and science to real-world exploration. Students will have opportunities to explore Physical Science concepts through interactive investigations. Materials will be available in classrooms and in the school's library/learning center. Grade-appropriate projects and monthly challenges will encourage curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving.

**Burrel Union Elementary School District**
Daisy Flores, Teacher
Learning Through Play

Burrel Union will implement a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) recognition program to encourage positive student behavior and interactions. Grant funding will provide incentive rewards for students who demonstrate the positive characteristics promoted through the program. The initiative will aim to reduce disciplinary incidents and increase positive student interactions through consistent recognition and reinforcement. Students will be recognized daily, weekly, and monthly for demonstrating targeted character traits. Monthly celebrations will recognize students who exemplify each featured trait, including Respect and Responsibility, with their families invited to celebrate in the recognition.

**Caruthers Unified School District**
Brooke Ford, Teacher
Mastering Multiplication

The Mastering of Multiplication project will encourage third-grade students to master multiplication facts from 1–12 by providing a T-shirt to students who achieve the goal. Building fluency with multiplication facts will help students build a solid foundation for division, fractions, equations, and future grade-level mathematics. The project will support students in meeting third-grade standards and strengthen their confidence and success in math. As a rural Title I school, the incentive will provide additional encouragement and resources for students who may have limited access to learning support outside the classroom.

**Central Unified School District**
Jonathan Marks, Teacher
The Sensory Reset Lab

The Sensory Reset Lab will provide fifteen autistic students with a dedicated classroom space and sensory tools to help them manage sensory overload and remain engaged in learning. Grant funding will provide items such as weighted lap pads, active seating, noise-canceling headphones, and calming visual supports. Students will learn to recognize sensory needs, choose appropriate tools, and take brief sensory breaks before returning to instruction. The project will promote self-regulation, reduce disruptions and lose instructional time, and strengthen students' independence and self-advocacy skills.

# INNOVATION GRANT AWARDEES 2026

**Clay Joint Elementary School District**
Zachary Lopes, Teacher
A Journey Through History: Lessons of the Past

Junior high students will visit the newly renovated Holocaust Museum for an immersive learning experience focused on American heritage and Holocaust history. During the three-hour visit, students will engage with docents and firsthand artifacts, bringing historical learning beyond the textbook. Students will examine historical evidence and personal stories while exploring the consequences of prejudice and discrimination and the importance of tolerance and human rights. Student learning will be assessed through before-and-after activities and a written reflection on the experience.

**Clovis Unified School District**
Rebecca Siemens, Intermediate Intervention Teacher
Write Your Story: The Good Newsroom

The Good Newsroom will engage seventh- and eighth-grade students in a student-led digital media project focused on resilience, kindness, achievement, and positive change. Students will research stories, conduct supervised interviews, write and revise scripts, and create video, audio, and written features while rotating through authentic production roles. The project will strengthen writing, communication, research, collaboration, media literacy, and technology skills while building student confidence and empathy. By sharing stories of perseverance and overcoming challenges, students will see how setbacks can become opportunities for growth and a positive change.

**Coalinga Huron Unified School District**
Vahid Motazedian & Jonathan Spreng, Teachers
Wings of Knowledge Farm Rover

Coalinga High School students will advance a student-designed agricultural rover that combines agriculture, engineering, computer science, and environmental monitoring. Eleven students will work as an engineering team to redesign, program, and field-test the rover, adding GPS, obstacle detection, and a camera to collect field information. Working with agricultural partners, students will identify real-world needs, build and test solutions, and use field data to guide improvements. The project will provide hands-on experience with emerging precision agriculture concepts while strengthening technical skills, collaboration, problem-solving, and career awareness.

**Firebaugh Las Deltas Unified School District**
Ashley Gutierrez, Learning Director
Eagle Excellence

Firebaugh High School will provide student incentives to recognize positive behavior, improved attendance, and academic achievement and growth. Throughout the year, students will be celebrated through attendance challenges, academic recognition, prize drawings, school spirit items, special treats, and other schoolwide activities. The project will encourage students to set goals, make positive choices, and take pride in their accomplishments while creating additional opportunities to recognize personal growth and improvement. Through consistent recognition, the initiative will strengthen student engagement, school connectedness, and a culture that celebrates success.

**Fowler Unified School District**
Aleece Kilduff, Math Intervention Teacher
Culinary Enrichment

Students at John Sutter Middle School will explore culinary arts through a hands-on enrichment class focused on cooking, nutrition, food safety, and viticulture. Students can earn a Food Handler's Certification at no cost and apply their skills through cooking activities in the classroom and school cafeteria. Grant funding will help expand cooking equipment and provide opportunities for students to participate in farm-to-table learning through a school vegetable and herb garden. Students will also explore culinary careers through field trips to local restaurants and food production facilities, expanding their learning beyond the classroom.

# INNOVATION GRANT AWARDEES 2026

**Fresno County Superintendent of Schools**
Brendaly Rodriguez, ESN, Special Day Class Teacher
Shoebox Tasks

Shoebox Tasks will provide students with hands-on activities designed to strengthen fine motor skills and build greater independence in daily living activities. Students will practice tasks that develop hand, wrist, and finger strength while also reinforcing early academic skills such as color, shape identification, and counting. The activities will be incorporated throughout the school day during learning stations, individual practice, transitions, and choice time. Staff will use evidence-based strategies to help students build confidence, coordination, and independence.

**Fresno Unified School District**
Kristy Page, Teacher
Raíces y Sueños: A Dual Immersion Mural Honoring Hispanic Culture

Raíces y Sueños: A Dual Immersion Mural will bring students in grades K–6 together to celebrate Hispanic culture, bilingualism, family, identity, and their dreams through collaborative art. Students will explore Hispanic art and traditions before creating individual designs that will inspire a permanent school mural. A local Hispanic artist will work with students and staff to bring their ideas together, incorporating Spanish and English words or phrases that reflect the school's dual immersion community. The project will strengthen creativity, collaboration, communication, and cultural pride while creating a lasting celebration of students' voices and heritage on their school campus.

**Golden Plains Unified School District**
Faith Yee, TOSA: Reading Intervention
Chess Club

The Chess Club at Tranquility Elementary will provide students with an engaging opportunity to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, patience, and perseverance through the game of chess. Students will learn at their own pace through hands-on chessboards and digital practice on Chromebooks. As they build their skills, students will practice strategic decision-making, solve chess puzzles, and participate in team challenges and partner activities. The club will help students build confidence and strengthen skills that can support success both in and out of the classroom.

**Kerman Unified School District**
Melissa Squeo-Rodriguez, Teacher
Sewing Club

Students at Harvest Elementary will learn sewing techniques while creating a variety of practical and creative projects, including bags, pillowcases, stuffed animals, heating pads, and tote bags. Advanced students will have opportunities to expand their skills through hand stitching and projects such as placemats, blankets, puppets, and clothing. Grant funding will provide additional sewing machines and materials, allowing more students to participate and maximize hands-on learning time. The project will build creativity, patience, fine motor skills, and confidence through hands-on instruction.

**Kings Canyon Unified School District**
Martha Lopez, Teacher
Published Authors

Fourth grade students at Great Western Elementary School will become published authors through a hands-on writing project focused on how animals use defense mechanisms to survive. Working in research groups, students will learn about their assigned animals and use their findings to write and illustrate narrative stories for a class book. Each student will contribute two pages and celebrate their work at a Meet the Author and book signing event. The project will give students an authentic purpose for writing while strengthening research, narrative writing, revising, editing, and language skills.

# INNOVATION GRANT AWARDEES 2026

## Kingsburg Elementary Charter School District

Abigail East, Library Media Tech
Fun Fiction Makeover

The Fun Fiction Makeover will refresh the school library's fiction collection with developmentally appropriate books for Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten students. Grant funding will provide at least 200 new hardcover fiction books, including 50 Spanish-language titles, while replacing outdated materials with engaging books that reflect students' interests and support early literacy. The project will also refresh the Spanish-language collection to better serve the school's growing Spanish-speaking student population. Updated books will promote academic, social-emotional, and cognitive development while helping foster a lifelong love of reading.

## Kingsburg Joint Union High School District

Leigh-Ann Olsen, Teacher
Eco Column

AP Environmental Science students will build and monitor Eco-Columns, analyzing changes in their ecosystems through several weeks of real-time data collection. Students will measure factors such as soil and water pH and temperature, nutrients, nitrates, and dissolved oxygen while applying scientific practices and environmental concepts. Grant funding will provide additional data collection tools, allowing more student groups to work efficiently and focus on analyzing their findings. The equipment will be reusable for future Eco-Column projects and other hands-on science activities, extending its value beyond a single class.

## Laton Unified School District

Claudia Ibarra, Library Aide
Family Library Hour: Growing Readers Together

Family Library Hour: Growing Readers Together will create a welcoming after-school library experience where students and families can read, explore, and enjoy books together. Once a week, families will participate in activities such as read-aloud, storytelling, literacy games, crafts, and partner reading while discovering books based on students' interests and reading levels. Grant funding will provide high-interest books and materials for family literacy activities and encourage continued reading at home. The project will strengthen the connection between the school library and families while helping students develop positive reading habits and view reading as an enjoyable, shared experience.

## Mendota Unified School District

Vanessa Covarrubias, Counselor
Aztecs Creating Connections through Mental Health Awareness Events

The NAMI Club at Mendota High School promotes mental health awareness and creates opportunities for students to connect, learn, and support one another. The student-led club offers activities throughout the school year focused on topics such as suicide prevention, self-harm awareness, autism awareness, healthy relationships, and stress management. Grant funding will expand these activities through educational experiences, guest speakers, student wellness resources, and schoolwide outreach. The project will help students develop healthy coping strategies, increase awareness of mental health resources, and strengthen a school culture where students feel comfortable seeking support.

## Orange Center Elementary School District

Rogelio Trevino, Athletic Director
Growing Leaders

The Orange Center Athletics Program will provide students in grades 4–8 with opportunities to participate in a variety of sports while developing leadership, teamwork, communication, responsibility, resilience, and sportsmanship. Through athletics, students will learn to set goals, work collaboratively, manage challenges, and take responsibility for their actions and contributions to the team. Two athletic award banquets will celebrate student-athletes who demonstrate leadership, sportsmanship, teamwork, perseverance, and achievement. The program will strengthen student engagement and school connectedness while encouraging students to become positive teammates, leaders, and citizens.

# INNOVATION GRANT AWARDEES 2026

**Pacific Union Elementary District**
Lisa Machado, Teacher
Play-Based Learning

Transitional Kindergarten students will have more opportunities to learn through hands-on play with new centers, including a dollhouse, wooden train set, community-themed play carpet, and animal adventure carpet. These activities will encourage students to use their imaginations, create stories, communicate, solve problems, and work cooperatively with classmates. Through play, students will strengthen language, vocabulary, creativity, and social-emotional skills while building friendships. The interactive centers will also help English language learners develop new vocabulary through engaging, hands-on experiences.

**Parlier Unified School District**
Fabiola Rodriguez, Reading Lab Teacher
Dressed for the Future: Building a College-Going Culture

Mathew J. Brletic Elementary will foster an early college- and career-going culture by providing every K–6 student with a college or university T-shirt representing a two- or four-year institution. Weekly "College Thursdays" and grade-level activities will use the shirts as a starting point for conversations about college, careers, goal-setting, and future possibilities. Students will participate in college and career research while connecting their learning to personal "I Will Be Able To…" goals. The project will build college awareness, confidence, and aspirations from an early age.

**Pine Ridge Elementary School District**
Baylee Malcolm, Teacher
Where in the World Wednesdays

Where in the World Wednesdays will give preschool students the opportunity to explore different countries and cultures through children's literature. Each week, students will read books featuring people, traditions, animals, celebrations, and places from around the world, followed by a small snack inspired by the country. A classroom travel map and reading passport will allow students to track their literary journeys and discover unfamiliar places and cultures. The project will combine early literacy, geography, cultural awareness, and hands-on learning while encouraging curiosity and a lifelong enjoyment of reading.

**Raisin City Elementary**
Brandy Rivera, Library Clerk
Voices That Bring Books to Life

The Audio Reading Station will become a permanent part of the school library, providing students in preschool through eighth grade with ongoing access to audiobooks and reading technology. Equipment such as headphones, audio technology, and books will be reusable for many years and available to students across grade levels. The station will expand access to engaging reading experiences while providing an additional resource to help students build confidence and strengthen literacy skills.

**Riverdale Joint Unified School District**
Dina Fukuda, College & Career Counselor
Financial Futures Initiative

The Financial Futures Initiative will help high school students prepare for independent adulthood through financial literacy and real-world learning. FAFSA/CADAA application nights will provide students and families with hands-on assistance, while an "Adulting 101" speaker series will introduce essential topics such as budgeting, credit, taxes, careers, and workplace expectations. The program will culminate in a "Bite of Reality" financial simulation, where students will practice making real-world financial decisions related to housing, transportation, food, and unexpected expenses.

# INNOVATION GRANT AWARDEES 2026

**Sanger Unified School District**
Jessica Winkler, Teacher
Creative Foods: Building Independence Through Cooking

The project will provide students with hands-on opportunities to develop cooking, nutrition, food safety, independent living, and employment-readiness skills. Students will learn to read recipes, measure ingredients, safely use kitchen tools, prepare and serve food, and practice sanitation and cleanup while applying functional reading and math skills. Through repeated practice and gradually increasing responsibility, students will build confidence, independence, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills that can transfer to home, community, and future workplace settings.

**Selma Unified School District**
Regina Jimenez, Band Director
The Mallet Makers Lab: Engineering Acoustic Innovation

The Mallet Maker's Lab will bring design thinking and STEAM learning into the high school percussion curriculum. Students will design, prototype, test, and create custom marimba mallets while exploring how materials and construction affect sound and performance. The project will connect acoustic physics, engineering, mathematics, and music while building problem-solving, innovation, and hands-on manufacturing skills. Students will also develop sustainable practices by learning to repair and repurpose worn equipment.

**Sierra Charter School**
Armando Montero, Principal
Senior Community Services Project: Discovery Center Outdoor Rabbit Exhibit

Sierra Charter School seniors will partner with The Discovery Center to help develop a new outdoor rabbit exhibit that will enhance animal care and create additional learning opportunities for visitors. Students will contribute through hands-on service activities such as exhibit preparation, habitat improvements, signage, and educational displays while applying teamwork, problem-solving, agricultural, and career-readiness skills. The project will give students real-world experience in animal care, habitat design, public education, and community service while contributing to a local community organization. The completed exhibit will provide a lasting educational resource for Discovery Center visitors.

**Sierra Unified School District**
Jamie Swisegood, Principal
Positivity Project & Belongingness

The Positivity Project (P2) will help students at Foothill Elementary School build character, strengthen belonging, and create a positive school culture. Through character-building and social-emotional learning lessons, students will develop skills that support positive relationships, responsible decision-making, and a stronger sense of connection to their school. The project will build on Foothill's ongoing PBIS efforts to increase student belonging and continue reducing suspension rates.

**Washington Colony Elementary**
Daniela Ramirez, Teacher
From Digital Designs to Real-World Creations

Students in Technology and Robotics will use a 3D printer to bring their digital designs to life and experience the complete engineering design process. Using Tinkercad, students will create measure, test, and revise projects such as personalized items, classroom tools, prototypes, and robotics components. By evaluating and improving their printed designs, students will strengthen measurement, spatial reasoning, creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. The project will also provide hands-on experience with technology and processes connected to STEM careers, including computer-aided design, prototyping, and manufacturing.

# INNOVATION GRANT AWARDEES 2026

**Washington Unified School District**
Cassandra Mendez, Librarian
Hear Every Voice, Reach Every Family

Hear Every Voice, Reach Every Family will provide translation devices to help educators and families communicate directly in their preferred languages. The devices will be used during conferences, student support meetings, registration, school events, and everyday interactions, helping remove language barriers and strengthen family engagement. By improving communication between families and educators, the project will help ensure parents can actively participate in their children's education and support student success.

**West Park Elementary**
Tamita Boyd, Superintendent
Building a Culture of Reading

Student book clubs will give students opportunities to explore high-interest books while strengthening literacy, comprehension, and communication skills. In small groups, students will select age-appropriate books across a variety of genres, cultures, perspectives, and reading levels, then participate in guided discussions, vocabulary activities, written reflections, and student-led conversations. The project will encourage students to make connections, analyze characters and themes, and support their ideas with evidence from the text. By providing choice and access to engaging books, the book clubs will help students build confidence, increase reading engagement, and develop critical-thinking skills.

**Westside Elementary**
Andrew Gent, Teacher
Ceramics & Science

Students at Westside Elementary will explore ceramics, engineering, environmental science, and plant biology through hands-on, project-based learning. Students will design and create ceramic vessels, test how unique designs affect plant growth, collect scientific data, and modify their work based on their findings. The project will help students understand how materials change through drying and heating while applying science concepts through experimentation, observation, and problem-solving. By connecting ceramics with agriculture and plant science, students will see themselves as scientists, engineers, designers, and innovators who can contribute to the future of agriculture in their community.

# THANK YOU

The 2026 Innovation Grants are made possible by the generous contributions from monthly payroll deductions of FCSS Employees.

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## About The Foundation @ FCOE

The Foundation @ FCOE is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and the fundraising arm of the Office of the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools (FCSS). The Foundation exists to call attention to the educational needs in Fresno County and to solicit tax-free gifts from private sources. All gifts are used to fund programs, activities and improvements beyond the scope of the school tax dollars to improve the quality of education for more than 205,000 students in Fresno County.

## Mission

The mission of The Foundation @ FCOE is to ensure students reach their full potential by supporting exemplary educational programs and services through a shared community responsibility.

## Belief

Guided by the belief that education is preparation for life, The Foundation @ FCOE pledges to promote excellence, access and innovation in education for all students.

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