

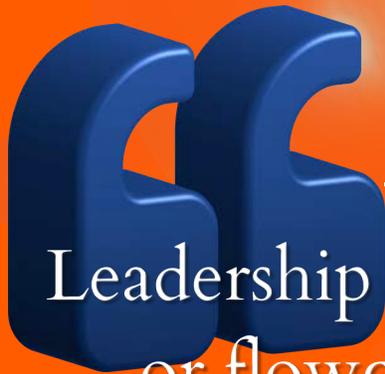


1988  
ARIZONA ASSOCIATION OF LATINO  
ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPERINTENDENTS

# NEWSLETTER

AZALAS • AUGUST 2025

## Leaders *in the* Spotlight



Leadership is not about titles, positions  
or flowcharts. It is about one life  
influencing another.

-John C. Maxwell

# Message *from* the Executive Director



## Honoring the Voices of Our Leaders

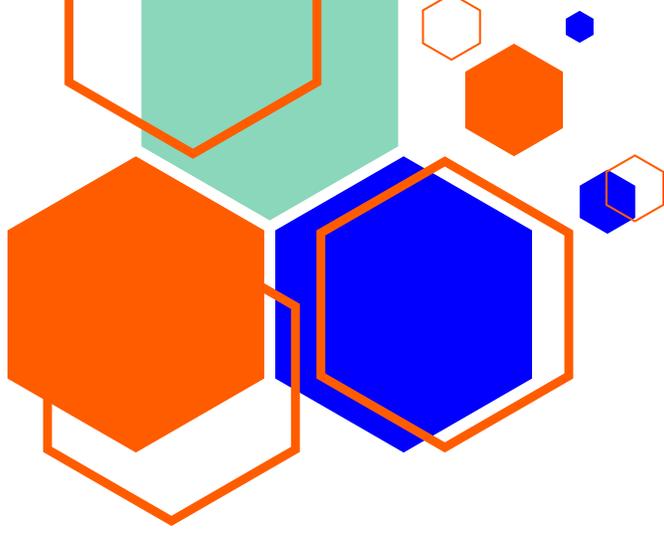
In this newsletter, we are proud to recognize the **AZALAS Board of Directors** and the **Superintendents of our Member Districts** who graciously share their journeys in education. From their earliest days as students, to their time shaping classrooms as teachers, and now as administrators guiding entire districts, their stories reflect the passion and dedication that define true educational leadership. Their experiences remind us that every stage of the journey matters –and that each role, whether student, teacher, or leader, plays a vital part in shaping the future of our schools and communities. We are grateful for their willingness to share their perspectives and inspire the next generation of Latino leaders in education.

*Dr. Marvene Lobato*



*Leadership* is about making  
others *better* as a  
result of your *presence*  
and  
making sure that *impact*  
lasts in your *absence*.

- Sheryl Sandberg



# Christina Boston

**AZALAS Board Secretary  
District Member**

**Director of Multilingual &  
Multicultural Education  
Tolleson Union High School District**

The teacher who left a lasting impression was my fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Joann Dann. She opened a window to a world I had never experienced. She designed a thematic lesson around basketball, teaching us player statistics, game strategy, and the excitement of the sport. She also gave us a challenge: maintain perfect attendance, and you would earn a ticket to see the Phoenix Suns in person.

I met that challenge, and one unforgettable night, Ms. Dann and her husband, Judge Dann, took me to the “Mad House on McDowell” to watch the Suns play. The energy, the crowd, the game (it was magical) made me realize that one day, when I was grown, I wanted to be back in those stands. Today, my husband and I are Phoenix Suns season ticket holders. That dream began with a teacher who believed in creating experiences that took students beyond their zip code and showed them what was possible.

My students have been some of my greatest teachers. They have shown me that no matter the obstacles, determination and hope live inside each of us, waiting for the chance to rise. I have watched them approach challenges with courage, even when the path forward was uncertain, and it has reminded me that learning is as much about perseverance as it is about knowledge. They have also taught me that relationships matter more than anything. A genuine smile in the morning can open the door to trust, and that trust makes all the difference. At the end of each day, I find myself reflecting on what worked and what did not, knowing that every moment with them is a chance to learn, grow, and connect in a way that shapes us both.

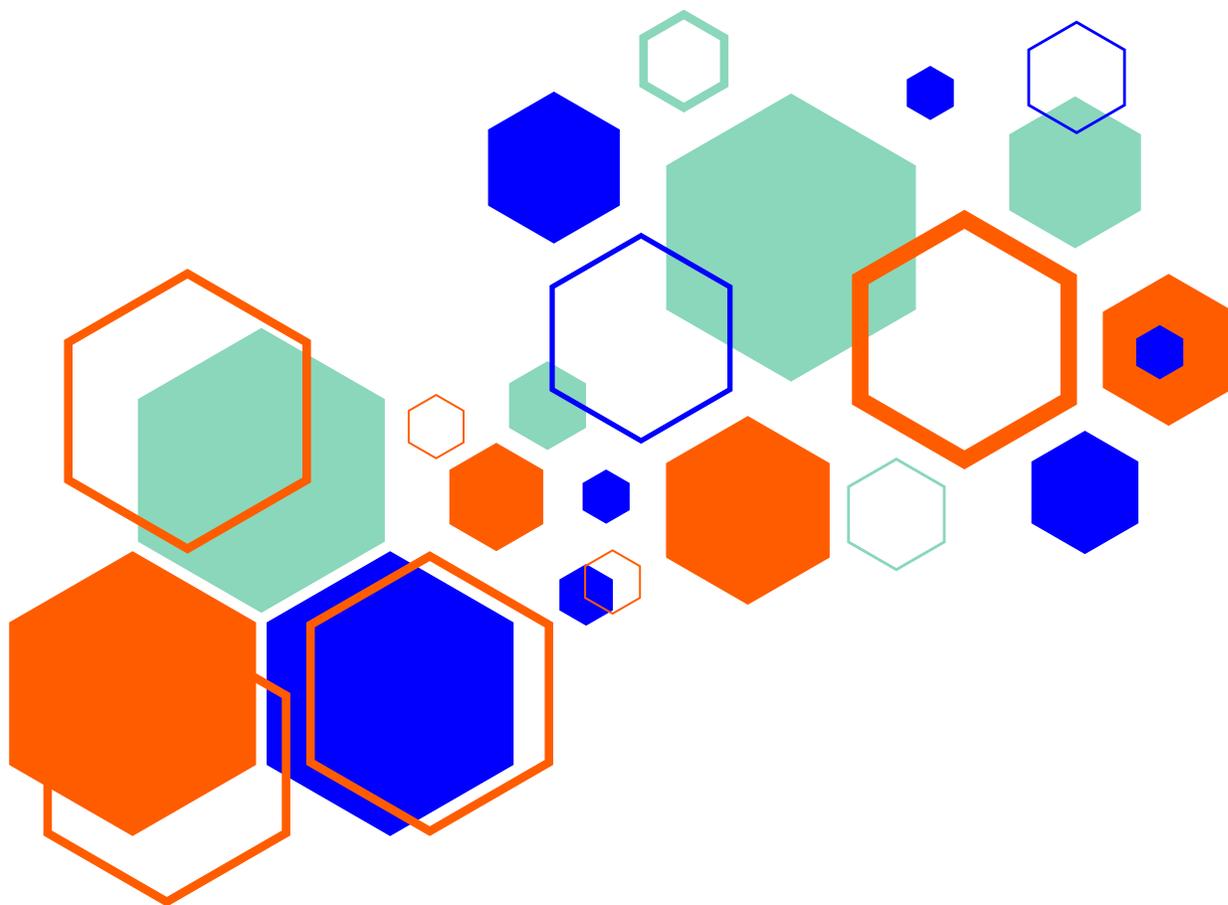
I loved being in the classroom, but I realized that to create the kind of impact I envisioned, I needed to reach beyond my own students. Moving into administration gave me the opportunity to shape programs, allocate resources, and open doors for every student in our district. My work is grounded in the belief that All Children are Capable of Success, No Exceptions! This belief drives every decision I make, from advocating for equitable access to advanced courses to ensuring that multilingual learners have the tools and support they need to thrive. For me, leadership is about creating opportunities that students might not even know are possible yet, and making sure no one is left behind.

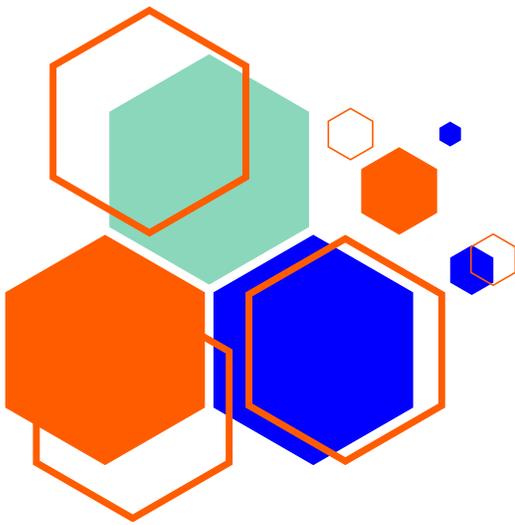
**AZALAS Reflection:**

AZALAS is more than an organization, it is a community that inspires and equips leaders to create meaningful change. As an administrator, I value how AZALAS provides a space to learn, share, and grow alongside others who are deeply committed to equity and access for all students. It connects me with a network of leaders who understand the unique challenges and opportunities in serving diverse communities, and who are willing to collaborate to find innovative solutions.

For my district, AZALAS strengthens our mission to cultivate the future success of all students and staff so they can enrich our community. It directly supports TUHSD's values of Excellence, Respect, Visionary leadership, and Empathy by empowering equity work, providing mentorship opportunities for emerging leaders, offering high school scholarship opportunities for our students, and creating meaningful connections that bridge communities and resources.

Through AZALAS, I have had the opportunity to grow as a leader (participating in the Superintendent Leadership Academy and serving as Co-Chair of the statewide conference). These experiences have expanded my perspective, deepened my network, and reinforced the belief that all children are capable of success, no exceptions.





# Jennifer Cruz, Ed.D.

**AZALAS District Member**

**Superintendent**

**Pendergast Elementary School District**

The teacher who left a lasting impression on me was my 5th grade teacher, Mrs. Tyler. She saw my potential and taught me a great deal about leadership and managing challenges that come your way.

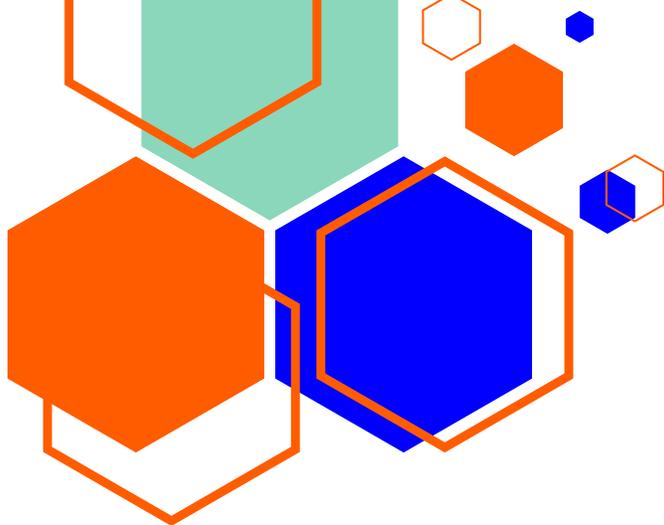
As a teacher, young people taught me about joy, the power of play, and the importance of resilience. I have met so many young people experiencing a variety of challenges, but they still show up each day full of hope and excitement for their future. I'm incredibly grateful to still have the opportunity to spend time with students. The children in our classrooms and schools right now are passionate about a variety of global and national issues. Their desire for a kinder, more inclusive world is incredibly motivating.

I moved into leadership roles to have the opportunity to create systems that work for more people. Every person deserves the opportunity to live their wildest dreams because of the foundation of learning they received. If the system isn't enabling dreams, then the system has to change. That's best done through transformational leadership.

Integrity and inclusion are my key core values. You can test most choices against a few quick questions: Is this the ethical thing to do for kids? If it is, then who is helped and who is hurt when we take this action? Who does this decision need to include? Who might be excluded because of this choice?

**AZALAS Reflection:**

Our leaders have found AZALAS to be an important network for learning and growth. Affinity groups like AZALAS can be a critical safe space for leaders navigating our increasingly complex world.



# Lizette Esparza

**AZALAS Board Member  
District Member**

**Superintendent  
Gadsden Elementary School District**

The teacher who left a lasting impression on me was my 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Olivia Zepeda. What stood out most was how deeply she cared about each one of us. She gave us personal attention and really understood our backgrounds. Many of us came from families where our parents worked in the fields, and she always found ways to connect what we were learning in class to our real lives. She also used English language learner strategies that helped make lessons clearer and more engaging, especially for students like me who were still developing confidence in English. Because of her, learning was fun, meaningful, and something I looked forward to every day. More than anything, I knew she genuinely cared – and that made all the difference.

My favorite subject was astronomy. Mrs. Zepeda made reading come alive by incorporating astronomy lessons into our lessons, which was brilliant because she knew how fascinated we were with the universe. I remember the day we went outside to observe an eclipse. We used plates, cups, and glasses to safely watch. It was a moment I'll never forget. It wasn't just about the science; she made sure we understood the connection between what we read and the world around us. That experience sparked a love for learning that I still carry with me today.

As a teacher, one of my most memorable moments was working with a student who transferred into my class from another state. When she arrived, she had a tough exterior and tried to act much older than her age. She often resisted following classroom procedures and seemed emotionally distant. I can still remember her walking into my classroom—chewing gum, deliberately making sure her classmates saw that she wasn't following the rules. Instead of disciplining her, I focused on building a relationship. I made her a classroom helper, gave her responsibilities, and consistently showed her that I cared—not just about her behavior, but about her as a person.

Over time, her attitude changed completely. She softened, began following expectations, and eventually became a model student. That transformation reminded me of the power of connection, trust, and giving students a sense of purpose.

My students have taught me that behind every behavior is a story. They've shown me that what kids often need most is not discipline it's to connect with the teacher. They've reminded me to be patient, to look beyond the surface, and to never underestimate the impact of small, consistent acts of kindness.

What motivated me to move into administration was the desire to make a broader impact. As a teacher, I loved working directly with students and shaping the classroom environment. As a principal, I loved working with teachers and the school community. I then realized that I wanted to influence on a larger scale, I wanted to support not just one classroom or school, I wanted to support an entire district community. I saw how leadership decisions directly affected students, teachers, and families, and I wanted to be an advocate for equity, strong instruction, and a positive district culture. Becoming a superintendent gave me the opportunity to support teachers, families, build systems that help students succeed, and ensure that every child has access to a high-quality education.

My leadership is grounded in integrity, empathy, equity, and collaboration. I believe in doing what's right even when it's difficult, leading with compassion, and always keeping students' best interests at the center of decision-making. I value every voice, from students and teachers to parents and support staff. I strive to create a culture where everyone feels heard, respected, and empowered. I also believe in continuous growth for myself and for those I lead because great schools are built by reflective, committed people who never stop learning.

**AZALAS Reflection:**

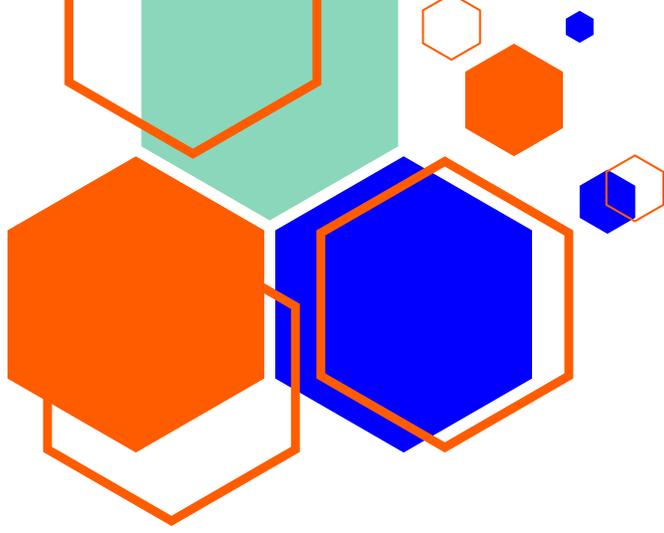
AZALAS has tremendous value for me as an administrator because it provides a strong network of support, mentorship, and professional development tailored to the unique experiences and challenges faced by our district. Through AZALAS, I've been able to connect with like-minded educators who are committed to equity, cultural responsiveness, and leadership excellence. It's not just a professional organization—it's a community that uplifts and inspires.

For my district and school community, AZALAS serves as a powerful partner in cultivating inclusive leadership. It empowers educators to advocate for underrepresented students, celebrate diversity, and ensure that all voices are heard—especially those from marginalized backgrounds. The leadership development opportunities offered through AZALAS help ensure that we are growing leaders who reflect the communities we serve and who are equipped to create lasting, equitable change in our schools.

AZALAS holds deep value for me as an administrator because it not only offers a strong professional network, one of the most impactful aspects is the Aspiring Leaders program, which supports future school leaders through mentorship, training, and guidance. This program helps prepare the next generation of administrators to lead with cultural awareness, equity, and confidence—qualities that are essential in today's schools.

For my district, students, and staff, AZALAS plays a vital role in fostering leadership that reflects the diverse communities we serve.





## Dr. JoEtta Gonzalez

**AZALAS Board Member**

**Clinical Professor  
Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching  
and Learning Innovation  
Arizona State University**

Gracie Jimenez Calderon, my first-grade teacher, left a lasting imprint on my heart and my path in education. She was one of only two Latina/o teachers I had growing up, and her presence in my small town classroom was both joyful and powerful. Gracie had a fun and creative spirit, and her fashionable beehive hairdo made her unforgettable. But it was her deep knowledge, passion for teaching, and the way she partnered with families that truly made an impact. My mom, who also taught first grade, worked closely with Gracie, and together they modeled what it meant to collaborate and care for young learners. Years later, I had the privilege of being a distant colleague to Gracie when I served as principal of Nevitt Elementary; she taught at Frank Elementary in Tempe. We reconnected most recently at my mother's memorial, where she and her husband offered heartfelt support. Gracie's unwavering commitment to the teaching profession continues to inspire me as a learner, educator, and leader. I hope she knows what a difference-maker she has been.

Reading was my favorite subject - until it wasn't. In primary school, I devoured books with big, bold words and colorful picture support. I loved stories and read hundreds of books. But as the font shrank and the pictures disappeared, the letters on the page began to dance. Reading became a struggle. I later learned I was experiencing dyslexia, and by 10th grade, my school counselor told me I was reading at a fifth-grade level according to the ITBS. It was a shock. I still loved the content of books, but had to work incredibly hard just to track the words. It wasn't until college that I taught myself how to compensate. With time, technology, and a lot of determination, I found my way back to reading, and today, I'm an avid reader. Whether it's a blog, article, audiobook, or traditional book with assistive tools, I can't get enough. Reading is how I learn, think, and stay inspired.

As a teacher, some of my most memorable moments came during my time teaching cross-categorical special education. I was on an interdisciplinary team, serving grades 6-8, called the I-Team. The "I" officially stood for integrated, but to me, it also meant inclusive. We were a team that co-planned and co-taught, blending discreet skill-building in the mornings with integrated, project-based learning in the afternoons. Each quarter, we explored a new theme, spending nine weeks guiding students through collaborative problem-solving and creative thinking processes. What made it truly special was watching general education students and students with IEPs work side by side to design and present their final projects. Their voices, ideas, and strengths were woven into the work in ways that hadn't happened before. It was authentic, meaningful, and deeply impactful for everyone involved. Honestly, we were doing PBL before PBL had a name, and it changed the way I saw teaching and learning.

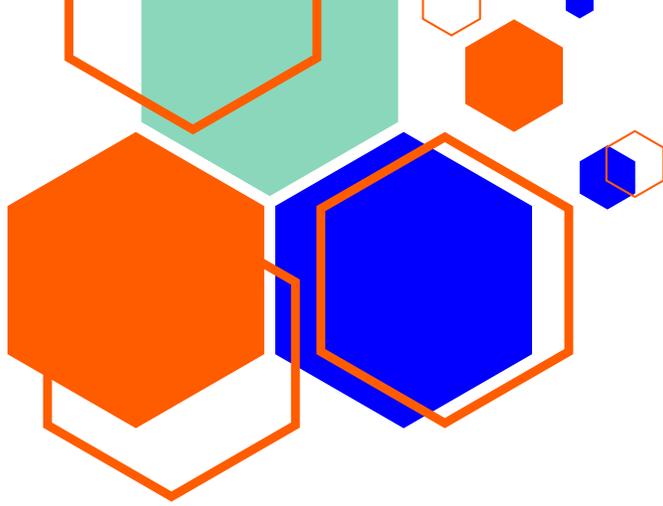
My students taught me the lasting impact of inclusive, collaborative, and creative learning. One general education student from our I-Team days stands out in particular. He was patient, flexible, and deeply respectful of the students with disabilities in our classroom. Years later, as an adult, he became one of the architects for a new school I was helping design as a superintendent (he worked for SPS+, one of our sponsors). Because of his early experience with project-based learning and inclusive education, he brought a unique perspective, ensuring our plans included collaborative spaces and environments where students with disabilities were fully integrated and supported. He taught me that inclusive education isn't just the right thing to do - it shapes lives and communities. Tragically, he passed away a few years ago, and I often think about the students who won't get to learn in the spaces he might have built. He reminded me that PBL can change the trajectory of a life, that inclusion must always be championed, and that we must treat each day as a gift.

As a special education teacher, I discovered how much I loved working alongside other teachers, helping them modify and adapt lessons so that all students could access rich, meaningful learning. I found joy in that collaboration and, truthfully, a bit of fun in the challenge of working with those who were hesitant to change. It became clear to me that I could make a bigger impact by stepping into a leadership role; one where I could influence schoolwide practices and cultivate a culture that values inclusion, creativity, and student-centered learning.

My leadership is rooted in the belief that schools thrive when leaders prioritize people - when they listen with humility, act with integrity, and create the conditions for everyone to belong and grow. I value inclusive excellence, community partnership, and principled innovation. These values push me to make decisions that are not only effective, but also ethical and responsive to those most impacted. As a professor, now preparing the next generation of leaders, I carry those same values forward encouraging aspiring principals and system leaders to think systemically, lead with heart, and use their influence to create more just, human-centered schools.

### **AZALAS Reflection:**

AZALAS has always been more than a professional organization to me. It's a familia. As an administrator, and now as a professor, I see the value of AZALAS in the way it nurtures leadership development, creates pathways for educators serving diverse communities, and empowers equity work in tangible, grounded ways. It connects us across roles and regions, reminding us that we are not alone in this work. For my students and colleagues, AZALAS offers visibility, voice, and validation. It uplifts leaders who are rooted in community and driven by purpose. I'm proud to be part of an organization that leads with corazón and keeps students at the center of every conversation.



# Nora Gutierrez

**AZALAS Board Member**

**Retired Superintendent**

Teaching for me was extremely rewarding in so many ways. I very much appreciated my students, the parents and community during the most positive days as well as the most difficult times. There was no greater reward than to experience students as they mastered the curriculum, and to see them celebrate their learning with pride. I was fortunate to have strong passionate administrators who believed in and supported the staff as well as the students and the community. I learned quickly that success does not occur in isolation, but that it is a team effort and together goals will be achieved. Through the years, I also experienced ineffective leadership and witnessed the negative impact this can have on staff, students and the community.

I decided to go into administration after 16 years of experience so that I could have a greater positive impact on teaching and learning which is the foundation of the education profession. As an assistant principal for curriculum and instruction, I worked with teachers on their professional development. I believe professional development is essential to ensure teachers are at the forefront of the content and teaching strategies. I provided guidance, support, and feedback through the evaluation process. I made myself available on a daily basis, and visited classrooms on a daily basis. I wanted to witness excellent teaching not just “hear” about it. Sadly, I also witnessed ineffective teaching. This was extremely difficult because I knew the negative effect this can have on students for years to come. I had the opportunity to move to district office. I believed again, I could have a greater impact as I would be responsible for hiring teachers and administrators. I believed then and I believe today, that if you surround yourself with the most competent, dedicated, hard working people that actually CARE about students and student outcomes, success will be achieved. This is not a simple task, as a matter of fact, it is quite difficult. You have to find the most competent staff, and build a supportive team that works collaboratively, for the greater good. This has to be addressed every day, year after year.

As assistant superintendent, it was my responsibility to hire teaching staff and administrators. Easier said than done! During my first year, I had three hundred teaching positions to fill. I learned very quickly there were many exceptional teachers for hire, and that I was competing with every other district in and out of state. It was extremely difficult to say the least. After the hiring, I worked with the administration to retain the best teachers, and hold all staff accountable. Again, easier said than done! I was fortunate to work with outstanding administrators and teacher leaders; together, we were successful. I also had the opportunity to work with support staff administrators, bus drivers, grounds keepers, electricians, painters, carpenters, lumbers, statisticians, and technology experts. This was also extremely rewarding, and without these staff members school districts cannot run effectively or efficiently. The final administrative position I held was that of superintendent. After 32 years of experience from classroom teacher to school administrator to district administrator holding four different titles, and responsibilities at the district level, I knew I was ready to lead a district.

Again, I knew in order to be successful, it would be a team effort. I knew that the team would have to be the most competent, team players, work collaboratively and just flat out CARE about the students, staff and community. I had never worked directly for and with a governing board. This was a new dynamic for me, but I did not deviate from the core values I held firm to throughout my career. I shared my sentiments with my governing board, and I was fortunate to have their support. When I began teaching, I brought with me my core values, my morale compass, integrity, my work ethic and my heart. When I moved into administration, I did not deviate from these core values and when I became superintendent, I did not deviate from my core values. I have always placed students as our most important client. Students' academic achievement as priority and preparing students for college, career and life was expected from every employee, whether classified, certified or administrative. My journey has not been perfect, but it has been addressed with all my sincerity. I believe if you treat people with dignity and respect, they will reciprocate. I believe regardless of your title, you should do your work with pride and everyone will benefit. I believe the district office must support the schools and meet the schools' needs. I believe everyone must be held accountable, regardless of your title. I believe you can be the most knowledgeable, but students will not learn from you if they know you really do not CARE. I believe parents must be involved and supportive of student learning. I believe administrators must support teachers, and also hold them accountable for teaching and learning.

I believe there are so many factors that make up a successful school district. It is imperative that the team, the governing board, superintendent, administrators, classified staff, certified, staff and parents work together. If there are entities or individuals that work to divide and conquer, they must be addressed if you want to reach your goals and be effective, efficient, and SUCCESSFUL.

Moving from teaching to administration was difficult because I loved teaching. I learned that administration is also rewarding, but you are responsible for the whole, and decisions must be made in the best interest of the whole. You must ensure your team is working as a team, collaboratively, and in unison with a shared mission and vision. The work necessary to be a successful district is everchanging, but the core values, beliefs, work ethic, morale compass, integrity and to actually CARE must be present. It sounds simple, but it is amazingly difficult to achieve.

My journey in the education profession has been rewarding at every level. I continued to grow and learn over the 40 years of my career. I will always appreciate all the students, teachers, classified employees, administrators, parents and community members I had the opportunity to meet. Everyone brought a different schema along with their vision. We are all different yet we are all alike in so many aspects. I will always admire, respect, and appreciate effective teachers and administrators. Their job is tremendous, and too many times taken for granted. I love learning, teaching and leading. I am retired after forty years. My teaching and administrative certificates are still valid and I intend to renew them and keep them valid. I respect the education profession and I am proud to be an educator!

#### **AZALAS Reflection:**

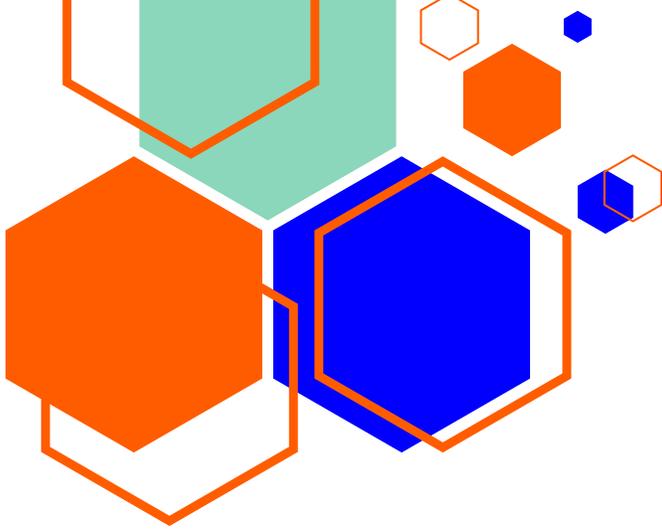
AZALAS has been transformational for the leadership path in education. Today our leaders have access to professional development for teachers, and administrators targeted to meet the needs of their population. There is a focus on English language acquisition, standards driven curriculum, and advanced placement curriculum for all students. AZALAS offers training in the best interest of all students, and staff with emphasis on high standards. It is expected our leaders are role models for their staff and students because we know the power of great role models.

Because of AZALAS, many of our leaders have been awarded scholarships to continue their education towards a masters or doctorate degree. This is also true for many of our students. Students have the opportunity to apply for scholarships for their education beyond high school, and it is always exciting to see the joy students share when receiving support from AZALAS. For students, this support goes beyond scholarship, the AZALAS Board of Directors will lend a helping hand if additional assistance is needed such as a meal plan etc... AZALAS assistance is not mechanical, but truly sincere and authentic. Many of our leaders experienced these hardships, and have made it a priority to pay it forward.

One of the most beneficial benefits for our leaders is the ability to have mentors to guide and support them. The mentorship programs along with Cadre participation are powerful, and celebrated by members often. This type of support did not exist in the past and leaders have benefited greatly from these opportunities. The camaraderie and networking opportunities are truly phenomenal.

Recognition of an individual's work is a celebration everyone appreciates. Not only do you celebrate the individual, you are also celebrating everyone who benefitted. AZALAS does a wonderful job celebrating excellence. Administrators, governing board members, leaders from the past and students are recognized yearly at the AZALAS Annual Conference. It is breathtaking to witness excellence and the positive impact on so many students, staff and community.

AZALAS is an outstanding organization that has positively impacted students, community and most importantly our school administrators. I am fortunate and proud to be an AZALAS Board Member.



# Gisselle Herrera

**AZALAS Board Member  
District Member**

**Superintendent  
Tolleson Elementary School District**

As a young immigrant child, I came to school ready to learn. I was not afraid. I was curious, determined, and eager to find my place. Ms. Laubmeir noticed that right away. She did not speak to me slowly or avoid calling on me. Instead, she made space for me to participate, even when my English was still developing. She asked me thoughtful questions, encouraged me to share my thinking, and treated me as someone who belonged.

One day during reading group, I shared an observation about the main character in a story. My words were not perfect, but I remember her pausing and saying, "That is an important insight. I am glad you shared it." She wrote it on the board and invited others to respond to my idea. It was the first time I felt that my thinking mattered to the whole class. What stayed with me was not only her encouragement, but her steady belief in what I could do. She never lowered expectations. She helped me rise to meet them. She saw me for who I was and who I could become. To this day, I carry the memory of Ms. Laubmeir with me. She helped me find my voice in a new language and a new place. She reminded me of the power of being seen and supported. She is the reason I believe that one teacher can make a lifelong difference.

When I first became a teacher, I believed my role was to guide, to teach, to help children grow. What I did not expect was how deeply I would come to love them. Horacio was in my class the year he lost his mother. His father was doing his best, working long hours, trying to hold everything together. Horacio rarely spoke, but his eyes were always filled with emotion. He showed up every day and did his best.

One afternoon, he stayed behind after school and quietly said, "Thank you for being nice to me." This stayed with me. In that moment, I realized how much simply being there, listening, and showing kindness can create safety. Horacio taught me that teaching is more than providing content knowledge. It is about creating a space where children feel seen, valued, and safe. I think of him often.

I was a classroom teacher for twelve years and I loved every single one of those days. Each day was an opportunity to connect with students, to challenge them, to celebrate their growth, and to learn alongside them. I have always believed deeply in the potential of every child and in the responsibility we carry to help them discover it. If I could succeed with all the “labels” that some would see as deficits such as female, poor, immigrant, and language learner, then with the right support, our treasures can succeed as well. Those so-called labels are actually strengths that shape who we are and what we bring to the world. What has always grounded me is the power of collaboration, listening closely, and supporting people so they can bring their best to the work. I hold high expectations for myself and for others not for the sake of perfection but because our children deserve our best every day.

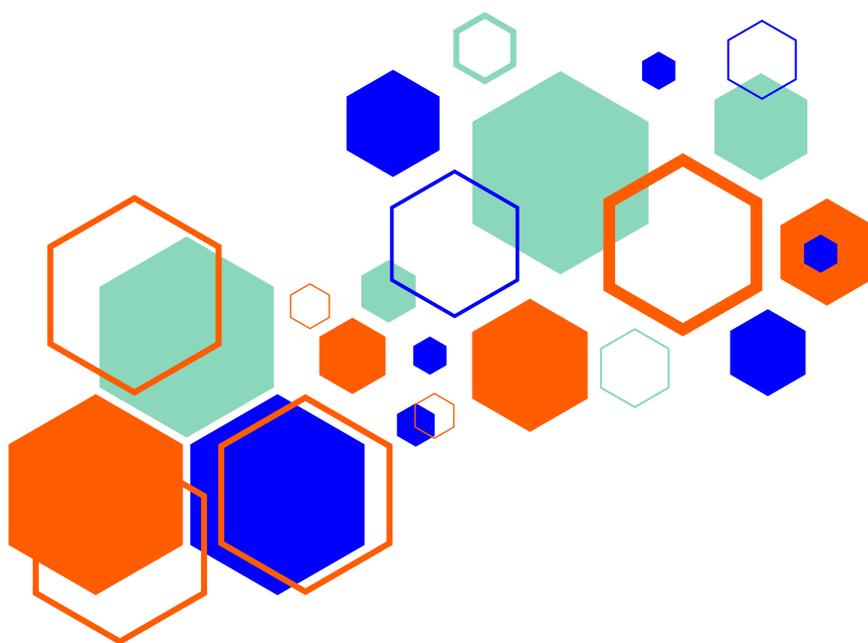
What ultimately motivated me to move into administration was the desire to make an impact beyond my classroom and my school. I wanted to support teachers, staff, and leaders across a broader system. I wanted to help create the conditions where all children, not just those in my room, could thrive. Stepping into leadership was not about leaving the classroom behind. It was about carrying everything I learned there forward and using it to serve at a larger scale with the same heart and purpose. I am deeply honored to be in the role of superintendent and to serve this community with dedication and commitment to our treasures’ success.

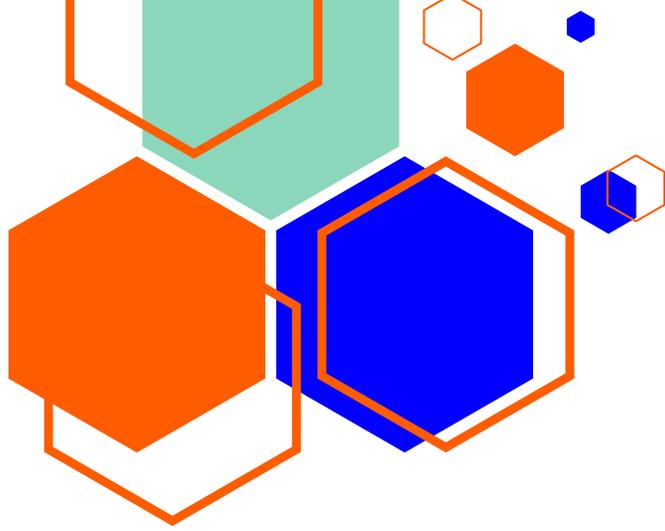
**AZALAS Reflection:**

AZALAS provides invaluable support to me, my district, and our community by cultivating strong and effective leadership dedicated to improving outcomes for all students. Through AZALAS, I have gained access to comprehensive leadership development opportunities that have empowered me to grow my skills and lead with both purpose and confidence.

In addition to professional growth, AZALAS serves as a powerful advocate for educational leaders and the diverse needs of students throughout the state. By representing our collective interests and championing equitable practices, AZALAS drives meaningful, positive change on a broader scale. A key strength of AZALAS is the vibrant network of committed leaders it brings together. This community fosters collaboration, allowing us to share insights, learn from one another, and work collectively to address the challenges we encounter.

AZALAS strengthens leadership capacity by supporting student success and staff development, while fostering a culture rooted in high expectations, continuous improvement, and equity. AZALAS is an essential partner that empowers leaders to make a lasting, meaningful impact on education and the lives of the children we serve.



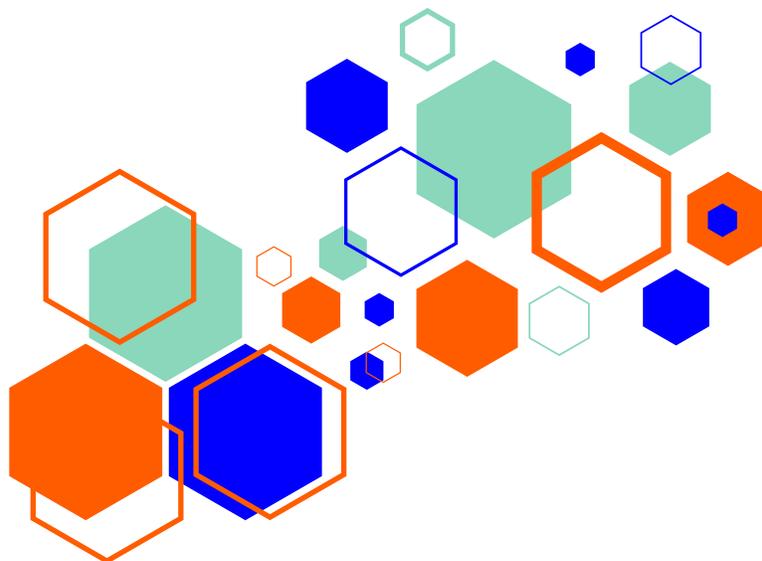


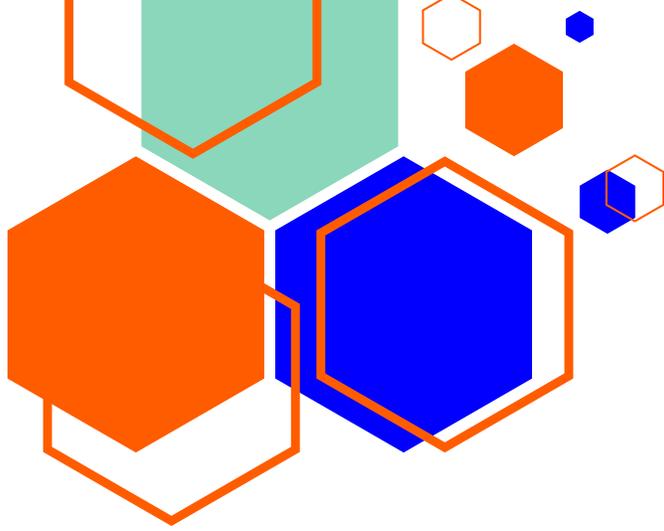
## **Dr. Louis Laffitte, Jr.** **AZALAS District Member**

**Superintendent**  
**Littleton Elementary School District #65**

One of my most memorable moments in teaching came while working with a student who had an emotional disorder and difficulty trusting adults. Over time, through consistent support and a safe, structured environment, the student began to engage more openly and even led classroom discussions. That breakthrough reminded me of the importance of patience, empathy, and creating spaces where every student feels seen and valued.

My students, especially those with emotional and behavioral challenges, taught me the importance of understanding individual needs and meeting students where they are. They showed me that differentiation is not just about instructional strategies, but also about building relationships, recognizing emotional cues, and creating opportunities for every learner to succeed. Their resilience and honesty deepened my commitment to inclusive and compassionate learning environments.





# Juvenal Lopez

**AZALAS Board Member  
District Member**

**Interim Chief Operations Officer  
Tucson Unified School District**

My family moved from Guanajuato, Mexico in April of 1964 to the small town of Bagdad, Arizona. In Guanajuato, I was not introduced to formal education during my first six years of life. In Mexico, I was a professional campesino, and I was good at it. My grandfather was my first true teacher, passing down generations of core skills, like understanding the cultivation of crops, taking care of livestock and, my favorite, gathering leña so my mom and abuelita could cook the delicious meals of our small ranchito Pamaceo. My dad was in El Norte, working as a Bracero.

My first weeks of education in Bagdad were scary to say the least; a true culture shock that evoked loneliness, fear, and home sickness. I would catch myself daydreaming of the beautiful ranch.

After attending school for two weeks, I made the decision not to go to school. My sister and I would walk to school and during lunch, we would go home and go back to finish the school day. On one occasion, I decided to skip school and go play in the creek until lunch, then I would go home with my sister to get lunch and go back to school. I chose the creek and then went home for the day when school was out.

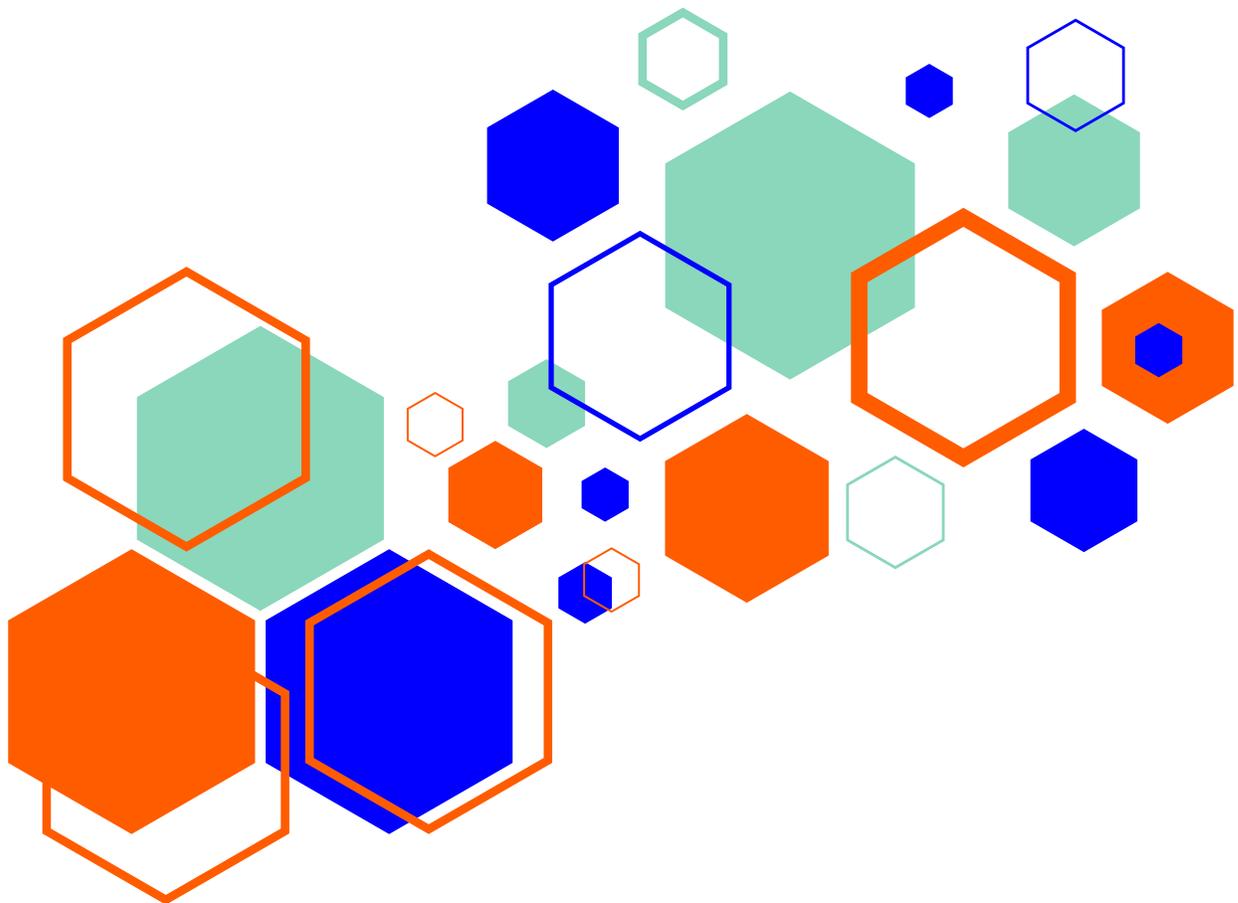
My first-grade teacher, Ms. Josephine Turner, made a home visit and wanted to know why I was not attending school. Ms. Turner could speak Spanish, and she informed my mom that only my sister was showing up for school. My mom explained how I was going to school with my sister in the morning, returning for lunch and then back to school to finish the school day. The next morning, my dad followed us after we walked to school. He noticed that I went to the creek and my sister would walk to school. On that day, I learned a hard and painful lesson. I never skipped school again.

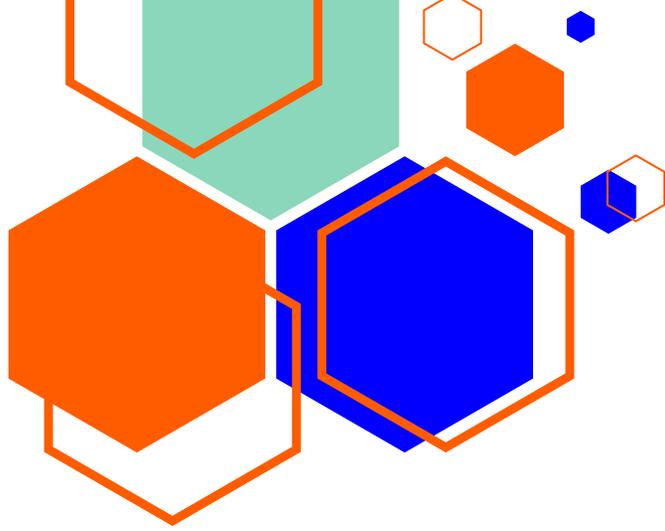
Ms. Turner's caring and supportive services to me and my family changed how I felt about education. I felt more connected to school and my peers. I shared my story with a colleague of mine, Ms. JoEtta Gonzales, when I was working in the Kyrene School District. To my utter surprise, JoEtta shared that Ms. Turner was her mom. I had a chance to visit with Ms. Turner for about an hour and felt so lucky to reunite with my first-grade teacher from Bagdad, Arizona.

Sadly, Ms. Turner passed away December 26, 2024. I attended her funeral in Kearny, AZ. I felt a duty to pay my respect to the teacher that made such a difference in my life. A full circle moment that only God can create.

**AZALAS Reflection:**

AZALAS creates opportunities for future and current school leaders to gather, break bread and learn from each other. Through the networking opportunities, powerful professional and personal relationships are forged, creating lifelong mentors and coaches. AZALAS is truly committed to providing equity in education for all students. Developing leaders that are representative of the communities they serve is powerful. AZALAS leaders serve as advocates and sponsors for new leaders that are ready for their first opportunity to lead. I am grateful for the leaders that came before me and took an interest in mentoring, coaching and advocating for me in meetings where decisions are made. As veteran leaders, we now have that honor and responsibility to serve in that role.





## Jay Mann

**AZALAS District Member**

**Superintendent  
Creighton School District**

The teacher who left a lasting impression on me was my high school physics teacher, Mrs. Lois Blondeau. I had struggled with math concepts in trigonometry and analytic geometry, but she was able to easily help me master them from the context of physics. This taught me the value of cross-content learning. She was also amazingly supportive and kind.

My favorite subjects in school were science and literature. I've always had a fascination with science and wanted to know how and why things work the way they do. That interest persists to this day and is shared with my family. Our favorite YouTube content relates to science ranging from physics to botany. My love of literature drove me to teach literature, humanities, and creative writing, and has also persisted throughout my life.

One of my most memorable moments in the classroom was a day when I reversed roles with the students and had them prepare to teach the components of my lesson, then deliver their part to their peers.

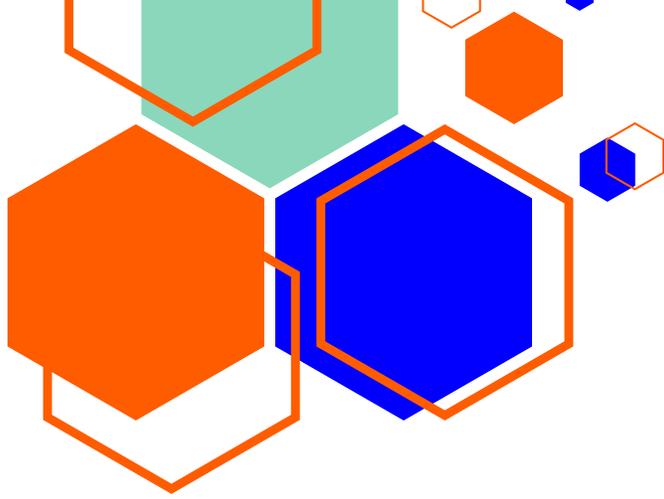
My students taught me two things, you learn the most by teaching, and none of us is as smart as all of us.

I was motivated to move from teaching into administration to be able to support others to do more for students.

The core values that guide my leadership as an administrator are trust, transparency, and the "vir bonus dicendi peritus" tradition from classical rhetoric that advocates for effective persuasion by being a good person expressing expertly. The "vir bonus" value constantly reminds me to focus on kindness and communication through conversational leadership.

### **AZALAS Reflection:**

AZALAS provides great value to Creighton through leadership development and opportunities to network with peers, mentors, and partners. AZALAS also helps ensure that we maintain a lens focused on the latinx community that we support.



# Larry Martinez

**Founder, A2Z Teach**  
**Instruction. Leadership. Coaching.**

The teacher who impacted me the most in my education was Coach Humberto Federico in the 7th grade. At this point in my life, I had been to 8 schools in 2 countries. Our family moved from the Oakland area to Tucson and Coach Federico was my first Latino teacher! He treated me with respect and was from the same challenged neighborhood as me. We moved again for 8th grade, to the Tucson area, and lo and behold Coach Federico transferred to the same school. He mentored, pushed and taught me that I could go to college and be a teacher.

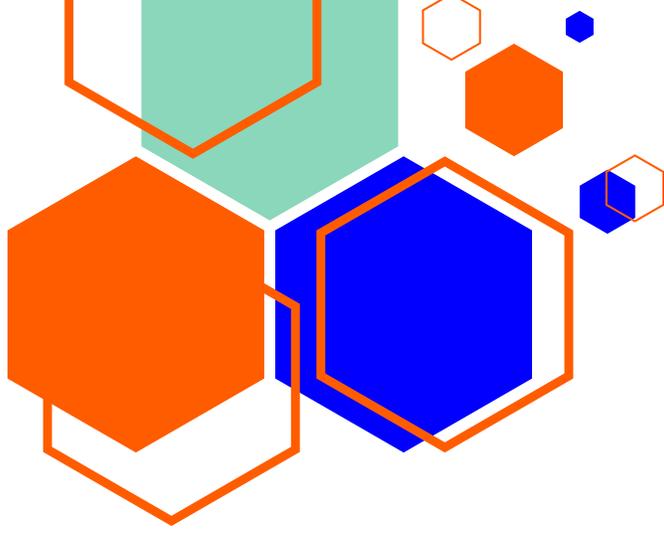
I was very fortunate to teach in the Sunnyside school district in Tucson, where I went to school and graduated. The students taught me that building relationships and holding ourselves accountable were the key to being successful. The students, who many came from disadvantaged neighborhoods, were longing for student-teacher relationships to give them ownership in the school system. Holding the students accountable for their actions and them of me, taught us that teaching is a two-way street. We need each other for us to accomplish our goals.

The core values that continue to guide me are integrity, empathy and accountability. These values have led me from a student to an educational leader.

- Leaders need to show the community that integrity is a key component to building trust and holding yourself to high standards.
- We all need to show empathy to our students and staff when it is needed. Showing empathy continues the relationship building while developing trust.
- If we do not hold ourselves accountable how can we expect reliability from our team members? These values have assisted me in my roles in education.

## **AZALAS Reflection:**

I have been very fortunate to support AZALAS as a conference committee member, a mentor to the 4 Corners Latinx Leadership Academy, the Aspiring Administrators, be a presenter at the AZALAS and national ALAS conferences and as an AZALAS groupie. The experiences I have gained have supported the AZALAS mission of providing leadership to Latinx Leaders. I am most proud that I have the ability to learn from and lead these administrators in their quest to support all children to reach their goals. AZALAS continues to pave the way for leaders of color who will be the mainstay of education when our schools reach a majority minority in 2042.



# Monica Mesa

**AZALAS Board President  
District Member**

**Assistant Superintendent East Area  
Elementary Mesa Unified School District**

The teacher that made the biggest impression on me was Mrs. Placencio. She was my first grade teacher, and as soon as I started school in her class, I wanted to be just like her. She was kind, saw the strengths in us and wanted to really make sure that learning was fun for us. So I grew up wanting to be a teacher just like Mrs. Placencio.

In school, my strength was writing and language. I would say that my favorite subject was always related to that. I remember in Mrs. Placencio's class, I was really strong at spelling, and back in the day we had spelling tests every week. I was always successful at that and rewarded for my work in that area. So, I'd say looking back at that time, my favorite subjects were probably spelling, English and/or writing.

When I started teaching in 1992, I had a class mixed with kindergartners and 1st graders. My incoming kindergartners were still learning how to grasp pencils and identify their names and tie their shoes. One of the most memorable times I've had as a teacher was in my early career when one of my students found success making the E in her name. After several, several attempts and thinking that she couldn't do it...the joy on her face and the celebration that we had in our class in celebration of her, was an experience I'll never forget.

My students taught me that I could find joy every day going to work in a job that I truly, truly loved and was a match for. There was not one day that I got to school with my students, that I did not enjoy the time with them, that I did not want to see them succeed or that we were not able to work out our problems and our situations as a family through conversation and discussion. My role was teaching them how to not only work together, but like each other. The seven years that I spent in the classroom were the best in my career.

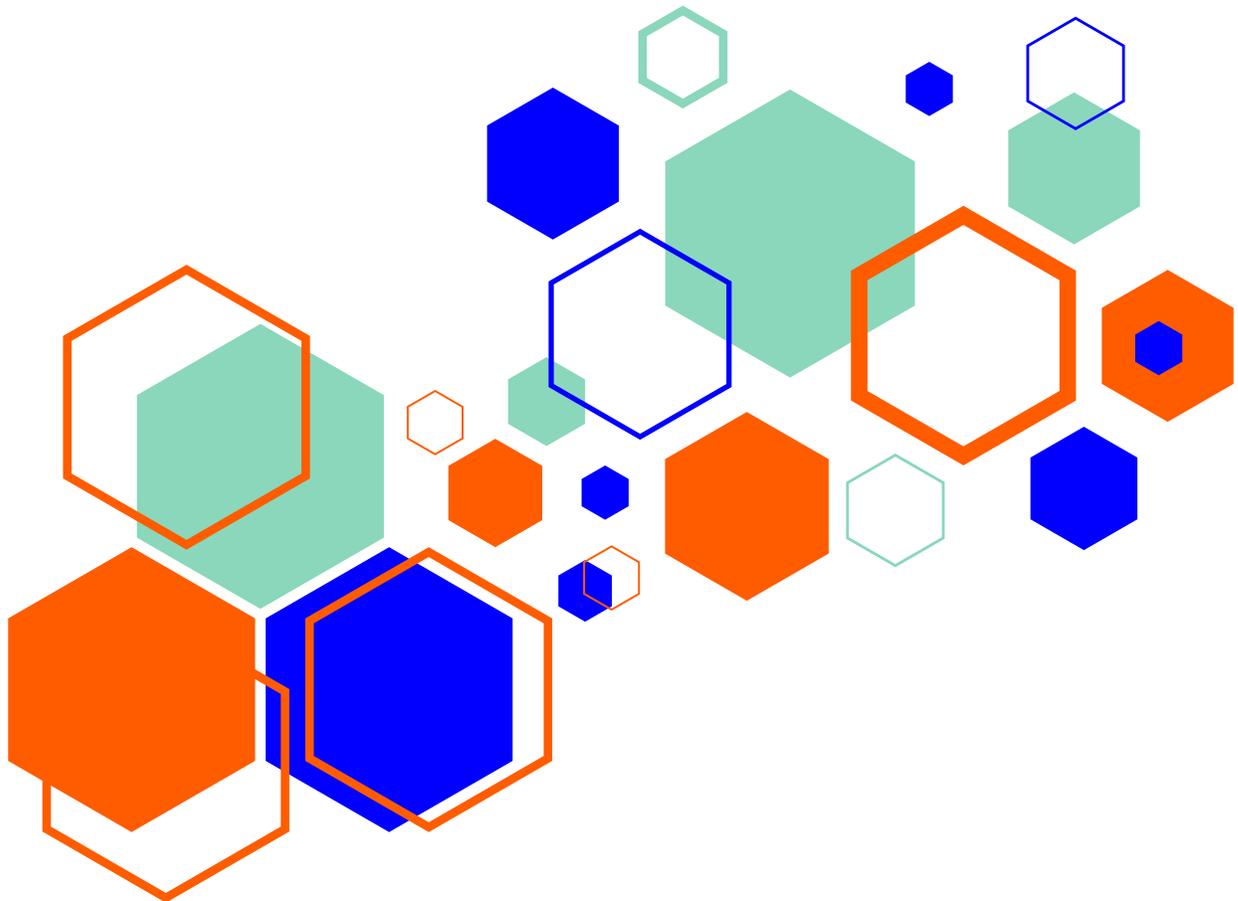
I was motivated to move into administration by my principal, Mary Rosales. She saw something in me; skills that I probably never would have seen in myself. As an early member of AHSAA (Arizona Hispanic School Administrators Association) now known as AZALAS, she introduced me to the network of people and leaders that would continue to support my leadership development for the next 30 years.

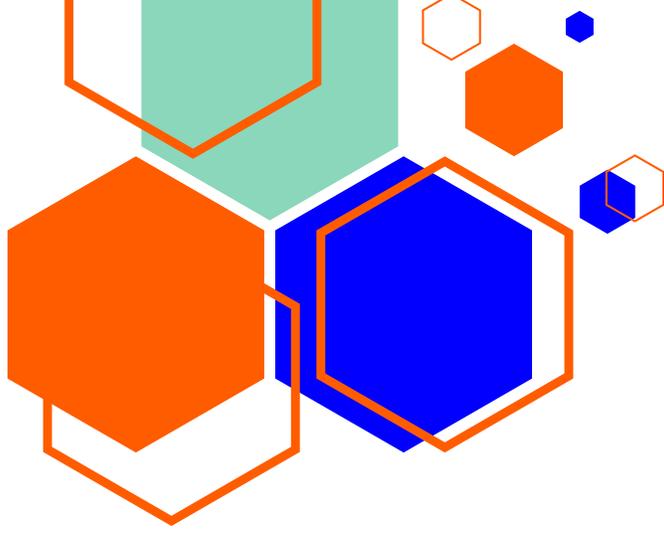
The core values that guide my leadership as an administrator are trust, integrity and collaboration. My core values are grounded in the fact that I hold the core belief that all students deserve high quality learning experiences all the time. Everything that I do as a leader is about constructing the systems and the environments for school leaders that support teachers to be able to provide those learning experiences to all students, all the time.

**AZALAS Reflection:**

The AZALAS organization has provided tremendous value to me as an administrator over the last 30 years. Personally, it's provided the leadership development that has helped me grow as a leader. Through AZALAS I have gained the benefit of professional growth from networking, coaching, and mentoring from leaders who hold the same values and vision for leadership, ultimately designed to benefit all students.

[For example, how AZALAS supports leadership development, builds a network of Latinx leaders, empowers equity work, etc.]





# Joe Quintana

**AZALAS Training Facilitator  
Retired Superintendent**

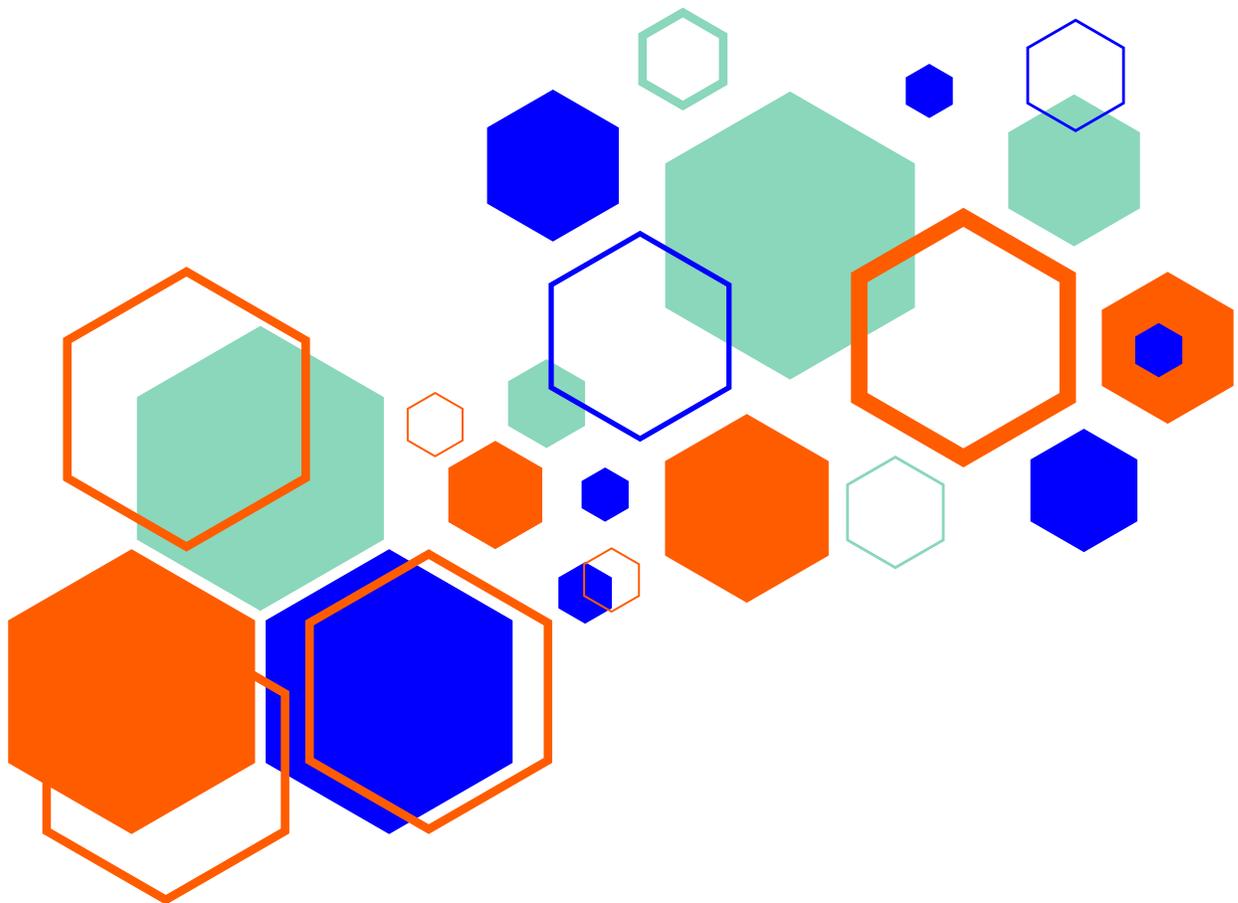
Mr. Elmo Padilla, my 6th grade teacher, left a lasting impression. Mr. Padilla was one of the youngest teachers I had. He made the content relevant and interesting, was firm but fair, and cared about his students beyond the classroom and school. He had the ability to make every student feel special.

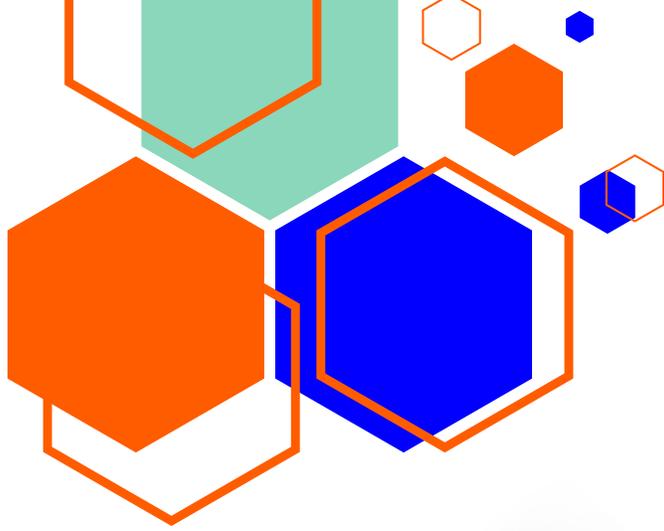
Although I was a student in Mr. Padilla's class in 1975, Mr. Padilla continued to demonstrate the same traits and characteristics that made him a great teacher throughout his life. Approximately 16 years ago, I was serving as the assistant superintendent for human resources in the Cartwright School District and was recruiting teachers at New Mexico State University. A teacher candidate came to my table to sign up for an interview and told me Mr. Padilla encouraged her to seek me out. She explained she worked as a waitress at a local restaurant that Mr. Padilla frequented and they were recently discussing her upcoming graduation and search for a teaching position. She explained when she told him she would be attending the job fair, Mr. Padilla told her I was an assistant superintendent for a school district in the Phoenix area, and I would be at the job fair. He told this young lady that although we had not spoken in at least 20 years, he kept up with my career, was proud of me, and again encouraged her to seek me out. That experience reinforced all the great qualities Mr. Padilla consistently demonstrated as a teacher that made a lasting impression on me and so many other students who were fortunate to be one of his students. I have tried to emulate those qualities throughout my career as a teacher and administrator, including caring about students, staff members, and community members beyond the doors of the school.

As a teacher, my students taught me that as educators we have the incredible power to make or break a student's day. The work can be exhausting, the work can be frustrating, and the work can test our patience. In spite of this, this power should be treated with reverence and utilized with care. The same applies as it relates to our interactions with staff members and the parents and guardians of our students.

After my second or third year of teaching, my principal, Joe Casillas, encouraged me to consider pursuing an administrative position and invited me to attend the inaugural Project Lead event in Yuma. This was about 1987 or 1988. It is my understanding that was the birth of what we now currently know as The Arizona Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents. Like many others, I did not have the interest or desire to pursue an administrative position but was tapped on the should by someone who saw potential in me. I became a teacher because I wanted to be a high school baseball coach. With the support, encouragement, and mentorship of so many, I went on to serve as an assistant principal, principal director of human resources, assistant superintendent, and superintendent for the remaining 26 years of a 33-year career.

As the training facilitator for the AZALAS Aspiring Leaders Program, it allows me to support the growth and development of aspiring school leaders as they prepare for their first or next administrative job. It is inspiring to see individuals who have gone through the training program move into their first or next administrative position with the skills and support needed to provide for the academic success and well-being of the students in their care.





## **Roxana Rico-Beaucage**

**AZALAS Board Member  
District Member**

**Superintendent  
Continental Elementary School District**

I was lucky and blessed to have great experiences with all of my teachers growing up. However, my 5th grade teacher, Mr. Bill Maynard, holds a very special place in my heart for his loving and caring nature and for recognizing worth and potential in all of the students he served. He took the time to get to know each and every one of us and truly cared about me personally and professionally. He had high expectations for me and allowed me to learn at my own pace. He pushed me to enhance my vocabulary and fostered my love for reading and writing. He was a mentor and inspiration to me as a young adult and I was fortunate to continue to rely on his support and advice as I started my career as a teacher in Sunnyside.

Reading and writing were always my favorite subjects. I loved being involved in school activities, and I was student body president from 7th grade through my junior year of high school. I attribute my leadership and planning skills to the many years of student council and planning of school events, which were extremely useful and aligned with my roles as a teacher, principal and superintendent.

One of my most memorable moments in the classroom took place when I looped with my 2nd graders to 3rd grade; the students could literally run the class without me. As I watched them become leaders in the classroom, I realized how impressionable we are as teachers and how students repeat and imitate things that we do and say. This served as a reminder for me to always be impeccable in my words and tone especially with children.

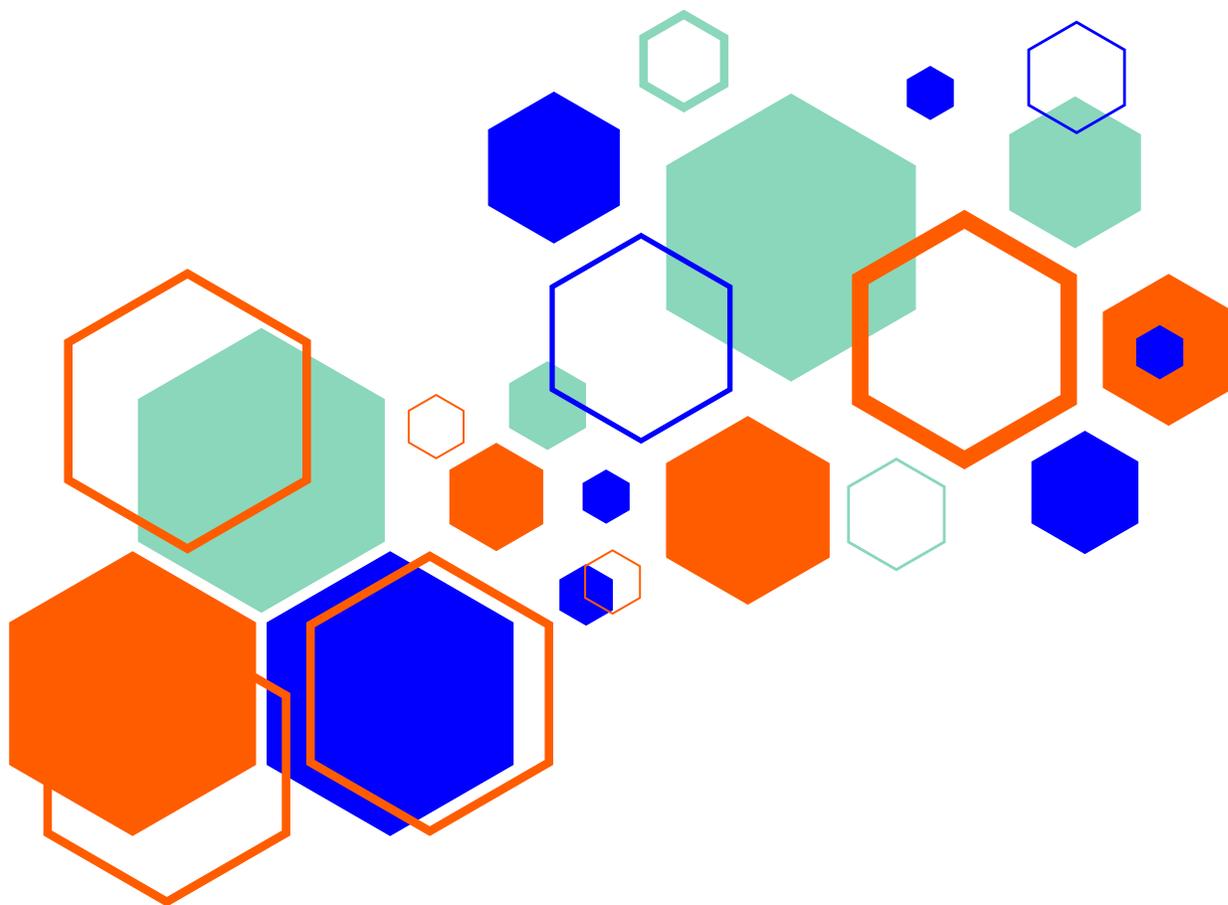
My students validated for me that “kids don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care” - a Theodore Roosevelt quote that I truly believe and have used often in my educational career.

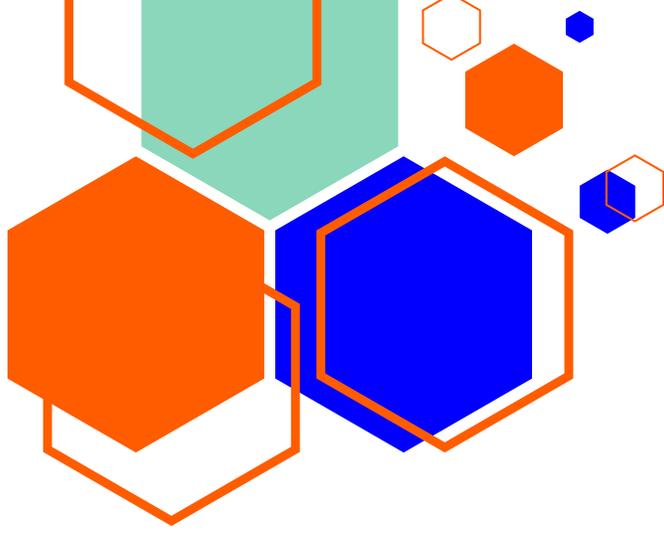
I was motivated to move from teaching into administration because I wanted the ability to lead and have a positive impact on more students, staff and families. I am a servant leader and enjoy working with staff, students and families and being a part of watching them all learn and grow. Maximizing potential for ALL.

My five core values that drive my work and life are relationships, integrity, learning, collaboration and strategy. When the things that you do, and the way that you behave, match your values, life is GOOD!

**AZALAS Reflection:**

My AZALAS family has been instrumental in supporting my leadership development for many years. Building a network of like minded leaders has enhanced my ability to lead and effectively navigate through challenging times in my educational journey. Having amazing life lines that will answer the phone and provide good sound advice is priceless and so appreciated!





# Marco Ruiz

**AZALAS Board Member  
District Member**

**Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services  
Cartwright School District**

The teacher who left the most lasting impression on me was Dr. Richard Lopez. Dr. Lopez was my science teaching methods professor while I was enrolled in my undergraduate bilingual education teaching program at the University of Arizona. Dr. Lopez helped us to think critically about the daily decisions and actions that we take as teachers to set up systems that either result in student success or failure. Dr. Lopez would model highly engaging science lessons, and we took on the role of learners. Following every lesson, Dr. Lopez would pose questions about lesson delivery, materials, and classroom management procedures that he put into place that supported learning outcomes for all learners. While we gained a great deal of learning from his lessons, it was the post-lesson dialogues that were the most enlightening. I learned that as the teacher, I am the most decisive factor in whether students were successful. Dr. Lopez helped to shape how I planned for instruction and the management systems that I put in place to develop a positive, supportive and engaging learning environment. He also developed a sense of familia amongst the cohort, building relationships and connections that last a lifetime.

Sadly, Dr. Lopez passed away in 2015. I know that he lives on in the many hearts that he touched while he served the College of Education community.

My students taught me that every child is unique and requires different levels of support to learn. Each student walked into my classroom with a different story, different strengths, and different needs. They taught me that true teaching is about seeing the individual, understanding their unique experience and story, and adapting my approach to build a bridge from where they are to where they can be. They taught me to be flexible, compassionate, and creative. I am blessed to have taught for nine years in fourth through sixth grades, and more so to have been in this field for twenty seven years.

I was motivated to move from teaching into administration because I wanted to impact the lives of students on a larger scale. As a teacher, I could create a thriving environment for the thirty students in my classroom. When I noticed inconsistencies in the quality of education that was obtained from other students on the same campus, I felt drawn to address those systemic issues. I wanted to move from building one supportive classroom to helping build a whole school of great classrooms. I was also provided an opportunity to work with teachers during my first few years in the classroom. While working with adult learners, I was able to see how new knowledge and understanding translated into changing teacher action, which ultimately impacted learning outcomes for students. I found that the biggest reward to being an administrator is to help remove barriers and challenges that get in the way of teachers being successful in their classrooms.

In addition, I am immensely grateful to serve on the Board of Directors for AZALAS. It has been one of the most impactful experiences of my professional career, providing profound benefits not only for my own leadership development but also for our school district as a whole.

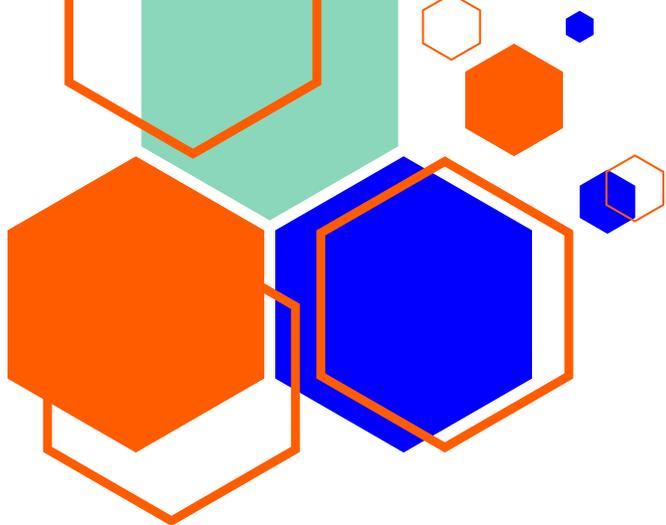
### **AZALAS Reflection:**

For me personally, the association provides an invaluable network of peers and mentors who understand the unique opportunities and challenges that come with being a Latino leader in education today. The synergy of sharing best practices, troubleshooting complex issues, and receiving mentorship from seasoned administrators across the state has shaped my strategic thinking and problem-solving skills in ways that traditional professional development simply does not. It has equipped me with a broader perspective on statewide educational trends, particularly those impacting our diverse student populations.

My involvement provides our district with a direct connection to a network of highly-qualified and culturally competent educators and administrators. When we have openings, I can share them with a targeted group of professionals who are dedicated to serving students like ours, significantly enhancing our recruitment efforts for hard-to-fill positions.

At a time when there is a great deal of familial stress for our undocumented families, my role on this board is vital and relays a message to our families that we understand their needs, and we are committed to ensuring that their children succeed. The representation builds bridges of trust and helps to ensure that the voices of our community are reflected in district-level decision-making. My service is far more than an extracurricular commitment and is a vital part of my role as a leader in this district and in our greater Arizona community. Lastly, it helps us better fulfill our mission of promoting effective leadership that produces the best outcomes for **all** students.





# Ana C. Samaniego

## AZALAS Board President-Elect

**Superintendent  
Douglas Unified School District #27**

Over the years as a student, I had several teachers throughout various grade levels leave a positive impression on me. I attended Sarah Marley Elementary School in Douglas. The teacher that made the most impact on me was my first grade teacher, Ms. Yarbrough. I started school in Kinder as a non-English speaker, but Ms. Yarbrough was extremely kind and believed in my ability to learn English. It was through her teachings and gifting of books that I learned how to speak and read English. She made sure we always tried to speak the language even though we made mistakes. She also knew little Spanish and would do her best to communicate with my Mom. She made us feel like we mattered.

Then in second grade I met Ms. Quijada, one of my favorite teachers. There was something so special about her, that I remember wanting to be like her. She was patient, hardworking, and so much fun as a teacher. She made learning fun and exciting by taking us on imaginary adventures in her class. In middle school, I had the absolute best math teachers each year. They were dedicated, loved to teach, and made sure we were learning. To this day, I am in contact with two of them: Mr. Obregon and Mr. Manjarres. They challenged me to be a better student by holding me accountable for my own learning. My ultimate favorite teacher was Mr. Thorp, my high school physics teacher. Mr. Thorp went above and beyond for all of his students. He tutored during his lunch, afterschool, and even on Saturdays if we needed him to. He was brilliant and he made learning meaningful and fun. He built relationships with his students and always made sure he knew if you were in a sport, club, or something about his students so that he could attend our events. He definitely was one of a kind and I don't believe I have encountered an educator like him since. He made a huge impact on many high school students.

My favorite subjects in school were math and reading. I was always a lover of learning, so school was a joy for me. I looked forward to school each day and made it a priority to be a good student.

The most memorable moments in the classroom are too many to count. All I can say is the 14 years I spent teaching middle school children were the most rewarding for me. I loved teaching and the role I played in students' lives. I loved that each day was different, and that although middle school children were tough, I found ways to connect with them. I also sponsored student council for many years and through that I provided opportunities for our student leaders to travel to Disneyland and various camps for several years. That brought me much joy as many of our Douglas kids had never traveled out of the state or our city.

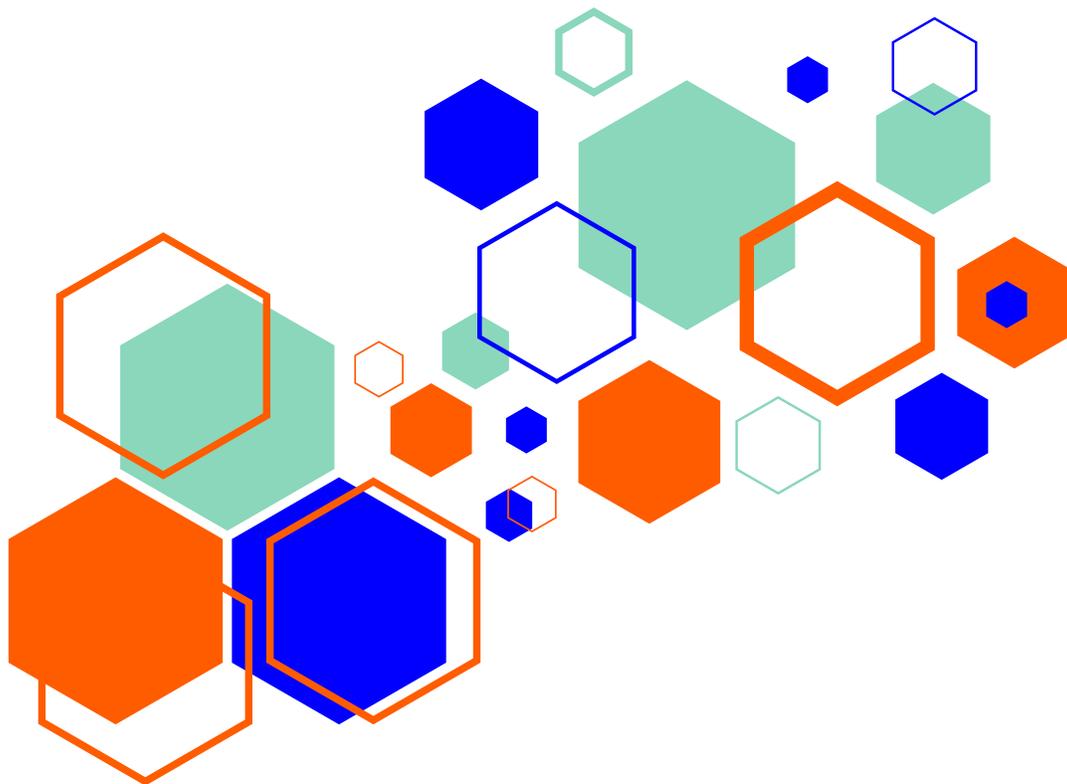
My students taught me to be kind; to believe in them; to care; and that each child deserves a chance.

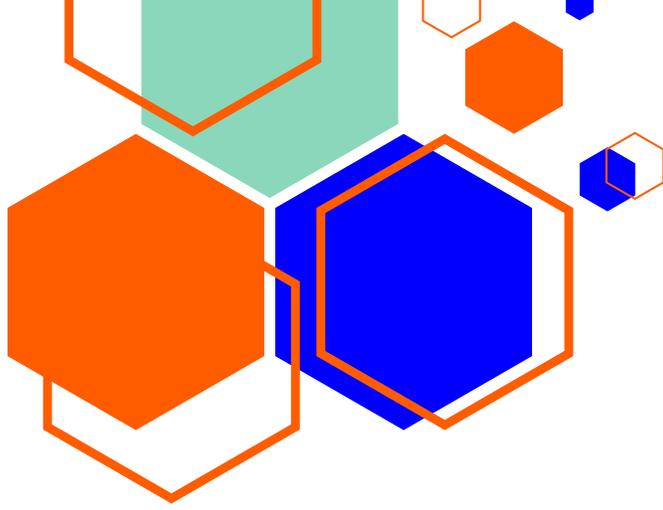
What motivated me to move into leadership was having principals or other leaders who saw the potential in me. As a teacher, I always volunteered for leadership roles, as I felt it was also my duty to help our school. Eventually, I realized that I too could be part of the bigger picture where decisions were being made in the best interest of students; therefore, I went into administration.

As an administrator I am guided by core values that are always ethical, equitable, and student-focused. I lead with integrity and respect, fostering trust and valuing the dignity of every individual. My commitment ensures all students have fair access to opportunities and resources. I like to collaborate with staff, families, and the community, model continuous learning, and have the courage to make difficult decisions in the best interest of students. Most of all, I am firmly grounded in empathy and compassion. I believe I have to maintain a clear vision and purpose, to inspire others to work together toward shared goals. I believe in every child and their success.

**AZALAS Reflection:**

AZALAS has allowed me to have a close network of professional leaders who are fighting the good fight. It has provided professional growth opportunities for me, my staff, and my colleagues, while fostering the importance of our Latino culture, values, and heritage for all students. It is an organization that strives for true and authentic leadership development opportunities for Latino leaders. Ultimately, AZALAS unites us across the state as an institution of Latino leaders who are supporting all students with attainment of higher education, with a "Si, se pudo!" mentality.





# Cindy Segotta-Jones

**AZALAS District Member**

**Superintendent  
Glendale Elementary School District**

A teacher who left a lasting impression on me was Mr. Bill Bryant, a 6th grade science teacher. He taught me to lead rather than follow, to give back, and to serve others. Through his guidance, I learned that true leadership comes from service, that I should step outside my comfort zone, compete without limits, and always believe in myself. He also instilled in me a deep understanding of equity and social justice—that no matter who you are or where you come from, you matter and deserve the same opportunities as anyone else.

My favorite subjects in school were science and foreign language. I was fascinated by science because it helped me make sense of things that at first seemed unexplainable—from natural phenomena to how the human body works. It challenged me to think critically and always stay curious. I also loved studying foreign languages because of their power to build bridges between people. Growing up in a diverse neighborhood, language was a way to connect across cultures, understand different perspectives, and bring people together. Science sparked my curiosity, and language gave me the ability to communicate and connect—both shaping how I see and interact with the world.

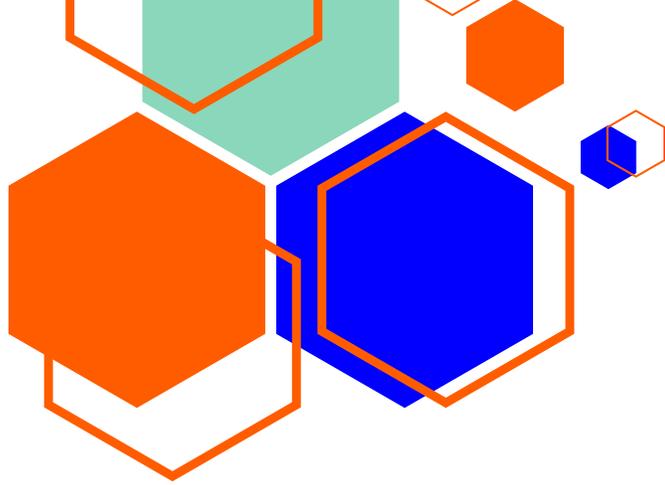
One of my most memorable moments in the classroom was when a first-grade student brought me a pitch pipe so we could sing together in the right key. What started as a simple gesture turned into a powerful moment — I discovered that this six-year-old was an incredible singer. I had taught him all year without knowing this talent existed. That experience taught me something important: my students have gifts and abilities I may never see unless I create space for them to shine. It reminded me that as educators, we often only scratch the surface of who our students truly are — and that we must listen, observe, and stay curious about every child in the room.

I was moved into administration without initially seeking the role. My motivation has never been about chasing a position—it's always been about serving students. I saw administration as a new way to support students more broadly by engaging families, building relationships, and creating environments where all students can thrive.

My leadership is guided by integrity, humility, and grace. I believe in leading with honesty, understanding others' perspectives, staying grounded, and showing compassion—even in the most challenging moments. I always strive to lead with grace.

### **AZALAS Reflection:**

The value of AZALAS falls within understanding advocacy and equity. Working together to address systemic barriers and promote equity and representation for all individuals.



# Dr. Matt Strom

**AZALAS District Member**

**Superintendent  
Mesa Public Schools**

My father, Larry Strom, was my high school honors pre-calculus teacher, and he left the most lasting impression on me. He taught with energy, enthusiasm, and intellectual rigor. He understood that deep learning in a content-rich field like mathematics required curiosity, discipline, and constant self-quizzing to strengthen metacognition. From him, I learned that true creativity only functions well when built upon a strong foundation of knowledge. As I began to explore mathematical concepts through multiple modeling techniques, he unlocked in me the desire to dive deeper into number theory, cryptography, linear algebra, probability, and combinatorics.

Probability and combinatorics fascinated me because they taught me how to think beyond rigid rules and appreciate the complexity of outcomes in the real world. These subjects gave me a language to describe uncertainty, nuance, and interdependence. One of the most important things I learned is that very little in life is truly binary. Binary choices are often the result of a system—or a person—not yet ready or equipped to think probabilistically. Learning to reason in terms of likelihoods, patterns, and possibilities has shaped the way I approach decision-making in both life and leadership.

One of my most memorable moments as a teacher was with a student named Amber Tucker, who is now an anesthesiologist. She transferred in as a junior from another school and was exceptionally gifted in mathematical thinking. One day, I told her, “You really get this stuff, and you’re thinking about these concepts in a unique and powerful way.” The next day, she came back and said, “You’re the first teacher who has ever told me something like that.” I remember pausing and replying, “To be honest, if my wife weren’t African American, I’m not sure I would have had the awareness to say it.” That moment has stayed with me through all 13 years I spent in the classroom—it reminded me how important it is to affirm brilliance in every student, especially those who may not have had their talent recognized before, and particularly those who may learn in a much more introverted manner.

Modern school environments often unintentionally reward extroverted learners—those who speak up quickly, participate publicly, or process ideas aloud. But as Susan Cain notes in *Quiet*, “There’s zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas.” That moment with Amber reminded me that quiet brilliance is everywhere—we just have to slow down and look for it.

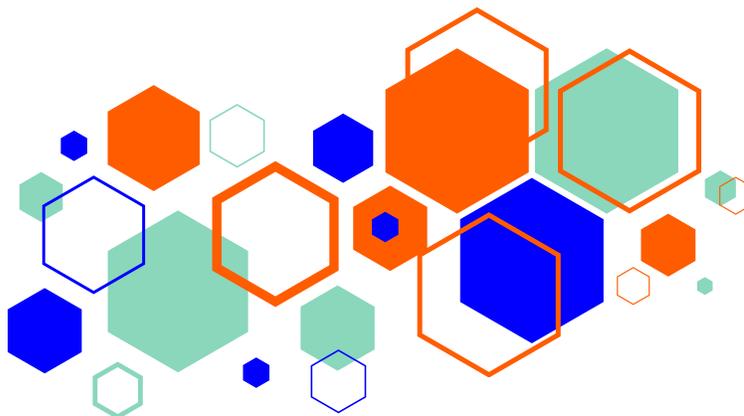
My students taught me something that runs counter to a popular belief in education: the number one factor in learning is not the teacher. We say that all the time in schools—and while well-intentioned, it unintentionally minimizes the role of the student and misguides parents and communities about how learning actually happens. The truth is, the most powerful driver of learning is the student—their motivation, their engagement, and their curiosity. The second most influential factor is the family, and the third is the student’s peer group.

Understanding this changed how I taught. I saw that my role wasn’t to be the center of the learning experience, but to build the conditions where students could access and amplify their own innate power to learn. That’s where trust, connection, listening, adapting, and leading with empathy became essential. My students helped me learn that effective teaching is really about helping students uncover what they’re already capable of.

To be quite frank, I didn’t want to get into administration. One summer, while I was attending an AP Statistics conference in Bellevue, Washington, I received a call from the superintendent of my district encouraging me to apply for an assistant principal position at a junior high. I told her I had just recruited five full sections of AP statistics students for the following year and I wasn’t going to walk away from my students in the summer. When I got back to school, people said, “Oh my gosh—you told the superintendent no! You’ll never get another opportunity!” And I thought, “Oh well—teaching is a blast. I’ll just keep helping students learn.” The following May, that same superintendent called again, this time asking if I’d meet with the district’s research analyst, who was about to leave. She had heard I’d passed some actuarial science exams and wanted to see if I could help with the district’s data work. Not long after that meeting, I became the director of research and accountability—and from there, leadership just... happened.

Even as I moved through various roles, I continued teaching—calculus and differential equations at a local college—because at my core, I will always be an educator; not a superintendent, not a chief financial officer, not an assistant superintendent—an educator. And I believe all educators are leaders.

I lead with learning, empathy, and accountability. The best type of accountability is holding ourselves accountable to the standards we expect of others. Learning keeps us growing. Empathy grounds us in understanding. I believe great leadership happens when we balance all three, always with a focus on improving student outcomes.





AZALAS hosted the **19th Annual Alejandro Perez Memorial Scholarship Golf Tournament** on August 23, 2025. The tournament generates funds to award the \$10,000.00 Alejandro Perez/McCarthy Scholarship at our annual conference.

We kicked off the morning with breakfast burritos sponsored by Jessica Clanton Jungblunt and Sun Valley Builders. Thank you Jerry Cipriano and Valley School Management Group for sponsoring a great lunch. Our Signature, Encore, Emerald, and Diamond Sponsors contributed to the tournament. Other sponsors also participated.

Special thanks to the following for donating raffle items that helped generate additional monies for student scholarships:

IGPA  
Antigua (Joh Martinez)  
AZ Diamondbacks  
AZALAS Board Members  
BlueCross BlueShield of Arizona  
Carrizoza Consulting Company  
CHASSE Building Team  
Concord General Contracting  
Cory & Christina Boston  
Curriculum Associates  
Custom Golf Center ( James Leonard)  
DLR Group  
Edmentum  
ESS (Nikki Thomas)  
Progressive Roofing  
Proximity

Special thanks to all the volunteers that helped this year's golf tournament be one of the best:

Sonia Alarcon  
Frances Arreguin  
Christina Boston  
Liz Gonzalez  
Brisa Lagunas  
Diana Walsh

We thank the entire staff at Coldwater Golf Club in Avondale, AZ. They were awesome working with AZALAS.

All golfers had a great time and are already talking about next year's tournament.

Arturo F. Carrizoza worked tirelessly on this tournament that honors his friend and mentor, Dr. Alejandro Perez. He started this tournament 19 years ago to help raise funds to award a scholarship. The first scholarship was for \$1,000.00, now AZALAS awards a \$10,000 scholarship to an AZALAS member pursuing a Doctoral Degree in Education Leadership.

Thank you to everyone that supported this year's tournament! Because of your contributions, the event was a huge success!



1988  
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ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPERINTENDENTS

# *the star*

POLISHER

*"My job is to take the stars in, shine them, buff them, and then send them out into the sky." I have a great job in the universe of occupations. What do I do? I'm a star polisher.*

*It's a very important job. If you want to know how important, just go out at night and look at the stars twinkling and sparkling. You see, I am a teacher. The stars are the children in my class. My job is to take them in - in whatever shape they come - and shine them and buff them, and then send them out to take their places as bright little twinkling beacons in the sky.*

*They come into my room in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes they're bent, tarnished, dirty, crinkly and broken. Some stars are cuddly, soft, and sweet. Some stars are prickly and thorny. As I buff, polish, train, and teach my little stars, I tell them that the world cannot do without them. I tell them they can do anything they set their minds to do. I tell them they can be the brightest, shiniest stars in the sky, and that the world will be a better place because of them.*

*Each night as I look at the sky, I'm reminded of my very important job and awesome responsibility. I go and get my soft buffing cloth and my little bottle of polish in preparation for tomorrow and for my class of little stars.*

Make it a great day!

*Tracy Harris*