



## 2021 National Teacher of the Year FINALIST



**Juliana Urtubey**

Nevada

School: Kermit R. Booker Sr.  
Innovative Elementary School

Subject: Elementary Education,  
Special Education

Grades: PK-5



[@urtubj](https://twitter.com/urtubj)

A passionate educator and advocate, **Juliana Urtubey** is the 2020-2021 Nevada State Teacher of the Year. She is the first Latinx Nevada State Teacher of the Year since at least 1992. Ms. Urtubey holds a Bachelor of Arts in Bilingual Elementary Education and a Master's degree in special bilingual education from the University of Arizona. Ms. Urtubey is a National Board-Certified Teacher (Exceptional Needs Specialist, Early Childhood and Young Adults). Currently, she is a hybrid educator at Booker Elementary School in Las Vegas, Nevada where she serves as a co-teacher in pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade special education settings and as an instructional strategist developing school-wide Multi-Tiered System of Supports for academic, social-emotional, and behavioral interventions. Previously, she taught special education in the resource setting at Crestwood Elementary School. She is warmly known as "Ms. Earth" for her work in beautifying the school and advocating for and unifying the school community with gardens and murals. Ms. Urtubey is a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Teacher Fellow, a Nevada Teach Plus Senior Policy Fellow, an Understood Teacher Fellow and mentor, a Nevada Department of Education Superintendent Teacher Advisory Cabinet member, a National Board Network of Accomplished Minoritized Educators founding Board member, and a learning facilitator with the Nevada National Board Professional Learning Institute. She is a recipient of the 2019 Chicanos por La Causa Esperanza Latina Teaching Award, a recipient of the 2019 Hispanic Education Association of Nevada Teacher of the Year, and a 2018 Roger's Foundation Heart of Education Winner.

### **Application Questions**

- 1. Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning? How did that learning influence your students? How are your beliefs about teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit?**

Each year, I explicitly teach my students about how our brains help us learn and manage our emotions and behavior. The concept of growing our brains intersects naturally with our year-long unit of Growth Mindset in the Garden. This learning unit encapsulates my holistic approach of teaching the whole child, inclusive of their family and community. My teaching centers on strengths-based approaches that are culturally responsive, relevant, and responsible.

During the unit, we become neurologists and learn about critical parts of the brain. Together, my students and I dedicate ourselves to understanding how the amygdala triggers the prefrontal cortex when we are upset or scared. We brainstorm and practice how to train our prefrontal cortex to proactively reflect on triggers so we can process information while staying calm. We celebrate when our hippocampus helps us make wise choices because our body has remained or reclaimed calm. We ignite metacognition to reflect on our personal strengths and needs. We support each other; when my students hear others say, "This is too hard," or "I can't do this," they are quick to remind them to add a "yet" to their statement. My students generously offer support and reassurance to their peers because we have all experienced moments of self-doubt or frustration.

I empower my students by helping them understand how they can harness the power of learning by embracing mistakes and challenges. We take time to examine the root causes of behaviors that may impede or slow the development of learning and social relationships. My students and I set goals and chart our growth towards goals of becoming fluent readers,

communicative writers, sound mathematicians, and members of learning communities who are kind. My instruction includes sensitive data collection that is responsive to their specific learning needs so they see what I see—that their learning emerges piece by piece.

As a special education teacher, I know the challenges my students encounter in pursuit of their goals. With this knowledge, I design learning thematically aligned with my students' interests, including learning outdoors in the garden. Since my students and their families have helped build the gardens, they are even more excited and motivated to learn in the garden. Learning in our community-created outdoor classrooms gives us an incredible opportunity to learn with a hands-on approach that is guided by our collective curiosity.

For the multiplication component of the unit, we focus on finding multiple patterns in the garden. I still remember the thrilling moment when Orlin, who struggles with short-term memory loss, made the vital mathematical connection. "Ms. Earth-tubey! The strawberries each have three leaves, that means that two strawberries have six leaves and three strawberries have nine. I get it! I get it!"

Student-guided learning like this is the most powerful as it transcends learning and thinking differences. Even more indicative of the magnitude of his connection came later that week when his general education teacher shared with me that Orlin, who was very shy and reserved, shared his knowledge with his peers during a science lesson in the garden. She overheard him tell his peers, "Sabes [you know], patterns repeat in nature and they help us with math. Look at this plant, it has five leaves so three of these plants have fifteen leaves."

We collectively celebrated his generalization of skills and his self-realization. I knew that this was possible because of the collaboration I facilitated between his mother, his general education teacher, his identities and input. I also knew it was possible because of my students' and my dedication and commitment to develop and improve our growth mindset.

A twice-exceptional student, Joaquin, made tremendous growth in his emotional and behavioral regulation. When I started working with Joaquin, he was transitioning from a self-contained setting to an inclusion with resource setting. I collaborated with his autism program teacher and his new general education teacher to plan for a healthy transition. I partnered closely with his family. Using his exceptional strength of illustration and love for superheroes, I taught him growth mindset through the creation of his own comic book. After each lesson, Joaquin drew a scene for the comic book that defined a trigger, self-regulatory strategies, a solution, and the application of the solution. When Joaquin was ready to transition to inclusion services only, his comic book served as his guide to help him. As an educator, to see my students assume responsibility for their learning and behavior is one of the greatest rewards experienced.

**2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in which contributed to the improvement of overall school culture. What was your role, how did you collaborate with others, and what is the status of this project today? Please include evidence of student impact.**

My teacher leadership journey grew when I recognized the need for more effective family engagement because of cultural and linguistic gaps between the school and community. To build a school culture where all feel welcomed and valued, I created a garden program in 2014, which included four outdoor classrooms and fifteen colorful, inviting, and culturally responsive murals that transformed 13,000 square feet of unused grass areas.

The program has grown tremendously thanks to a collaboration between students, families, teachers, and community partners. As the leader of the Garden Team, I have witnessed a profound impact on our student population. The Garden Gnomies (gnome caretakers and “homies” of nature) met every Friday for an hour before school to help maintain the garden, plant seeds, compost, and share our harvest with our community.

The garden program increased students' pride and stewardship for our school. A prime example is that during the fall of 2019, over seventy students signed up for the Garden Gnomie Club, one of the few extra-curricular clubs at our elementary school. Students who are now in high school still introduce themselves as Garden Gnomies, as being a Gnomie is a badge of honor in our community neighborhood. Each month, we hosted a Farmer's Market at the school to share the fresh and healthy produce with our community. The Gnomies made it their policy to share the food on a sliding scale, so all neighbors could enjoy the food if cost was a barrier.

Family members and parents are integral to our garden's thriving success. This past year, our Family Gnomie Club included over twenty family members. The families set up a mobile kitchen for cooking lessons - full of math connections and delicious snacks to share with our school community. For many families, the garden has served as an 'equalizer', as speaking a common language is not necessary to grasp the power of transforming our school grounds and culture.

With the help of many teachers, families, and community organizations, I secured over \$80,000 in grants to design and build the Crestwood Garden. This budget permitted the build of four gardens (one of which is a federally registered Monarch Weigh Station), two outdoor classrooms (with seating, tables, and whiteboards), fifteen commissioned murals, and two Garden Summer Camps.

During my time at Crestwood Elementary, I led the Garden Team with immense pride. Assuming that I might transition from the school community, I led with a distributive leadership model founded on community involvement and on my colleagues' strengths. This way, others would be ready to assume leadership of the garden when the time arose for a new leader. I secured generous funding to provide the school with three years' budget to continue the program. Today, I am leading in another school, and my colleagues and community members continue to care for the garden. I still live down the street from our community garden and support the team. I, Ms. Earth-ubey, will forever be a Gnomie.

**3. How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community. Please include evidence of student impact.**

As an educator, I build bridges between my students and their possibilities. Understanding that education has the power to transcend the classroom, I design learning environments based on my students' strengths, diverse identities, families, and communities so that a holistic connection with the community occurs. My leadership centers on co-creating educational spaces that extend beyond school so students have the confidence, abilities, and sincerity to be healthy members of their community.

I deliberately connect my students with the community by building bridges that allow their excellence to shine. To construct the school garden, I organized "Community Build Days" with the help of our Gnomies. Each build day attracted over two hundred community members - our students' enthusiasm was contagious! More importantly, the Gnomie Garden Club became a safe space for my special needs students and their general education peers to foster healthy community connections and help my students to generalize their skills. Working collaboratively in the garden helped my students realize their responsibility to contribute to their community. I partnered with parents, family members, neighbors, nonprofits, businesses, teachers, and local leaders to create community spaces that improve the health and learning outcomes for our children. In the last seven years, our school garden has become an iconic part of our community - featured in the news and inspiring school garden programs throughout the district.

Annually, we participate in the Green Our Planet's Farmers' Markets, which includes fieldtrips to both familiar and new communities. The Gnomies lead by organizing the logistics of sales, from the produce to student-made craft items. When selling their products to the Las Vegas community my students beam with pride; they are poised, articulate, enthusiastic, and determined. It is worthwhile to note that the students in the Garden Club attend a Title 1 school, most are emerging bilinguals, and receive free/reduced lunch. I quickly realized that these barriers were no match to my students' outcomes; they were learning beyond the school setting and were transcending expectations. It is through this learning design that I witness future teachers, entrepreneurs, scientists, nurses, nutritionists, chefs, and public servants leading and serving in their community.

Learning that the Gnomies at Crestwood had never experienced summer camp, I polled all the intermediate students and found that less than one percent had ever been to a summer camp so I planned, fundraised, and facilitated two Garden Summer Camps. As many students at my school face food insecurity in the summer months, I engaged experienced STEAM educators to organize a program that included cooking, project-based learning, and student-led community service projects. I challenged students to brainstorm, plan, and execute a project that embodied community care. Projects included building solar fruit dehydrators to prevent food waste, painting murals, engineering water-saving methods, and creating media to share with the community. At the conclusion of camp, I organized a celebration with students, families, and community stakeholders to present the students' projects. The impressive quality of their leadership service, projects, and presentations empowered all members of our community.

**4. What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue both inside and outside the classroom walls.**

A major public education issue is the vast and complicated systemic and systematic inequities in access, opportunity, and outcomes for underserved students and students with disabilities. A viable solution lies within a combination of culturally responsive school and family partnerships, teacher leadership, and courageous efforts to address the root causes of inequities.

I am a learner, leader, and innovator in addressing this critical need at school, state, and national levels.

At the school level, I assumed a leadership role to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. I designed a co-taught resource classroom to provide students with additional academic and SEL support that I presented as a co-teaching model to my administrator. Once implemented, many of our students made more than 1.5 to 2.5 years of growth in one year. We were able to prevent several students with intensive behavioral needs from requiring a self-contained classroom assignment as a result of our responsive behavioral support.

At the district and state level, as a professional learning facilitator, I support colleagues pursuing National Board certification. Additionally, I serve on our State Superintendent's Advisory Cabinet as an advocate for students with special needs, emerging bilinguals, and families that face access barriers. And as a Teach Plus Nevada Fellow, I collaborate with colleagues to propose a teacher leadership model that leverages teacher expertise and encourages retention in schools with a diverse student population.

On a national level, I engage in impactful fellowships that deepen my expertise in equity, teacher leadership, and family partnerships. As an Understood Fellow and mentor, I create national resources with Understood to improve the educational and social-emotional outcomes for students who learn and think differently. In this role, I have published in the ASCD Educational Leadership magazine, focusing on special considerations for first-generation Latinx families in the initial special education evaluation process.

I held the distinct honor of serving as a National Board for Professional Teaching (NBPTS) Standards Fellow where my projects have included collaborating with Teaching Tolerance to align the Social Justice Standards with the National Board's Architecture of Accomplished Teacher for equitable school and classroom design. I also supported the national Teachers 2020 Campaign by engaging presidential candidates, including Secretary Castro and Senators Warren and Sanders, in conversations about elevating the teaching profession and supporting teachers' rights. I serve as a founding board member for the NBPTS Network of Accomplished Minority Educators (NAME). We focus on creating affinity spaces to connect, uplift, and empower teachers of color and their students.

I have passionately committed myself to these distinguished opportunities as a dedicated, lifelong learner, leader, and innovator. The direct connection between this work and addressing inequities for students of color and students with disabilities compels and challenges me in my leadership service. As we build inclusive schools that are closely tied with families and communities, develop a collective leadership voice in policy and advocacy, and support and

empower educators to boldly address systemic inequities, we can improve access, outcomes, and opportunities for all students.

**5. As the 2021 National Teacher of the Year, you serve as a spokesperson and representative for all teachers and students. What is your message? What will you communicate to your profession and to the public?**

Our students deserve a just and equitable education where their identities, families, and communities are authentically centered and celebrated. Embracing this belief, I contend that school spaces be designed for equity by welcoming the strengths and assets of all students, families, and community members. I believe in the transformational power of school and community environments that put the whole child at the center.

My beliefs are rooted in my lived experiences as an immigrant student. I was born in Bogotá, Colombia to a human rights lawyer and a musician. My family moved to the United States when I was five. My father was born in the U.S., so my sisters and I have the privilege of dual citizenship. My story is unusual because of my access to economic mobility and education, which are not often common in the Latinx narrative. My lived experiences have helped me understand the inherent strengths of their families and their cultures and the persisting challenges and struggles my students face.

My family left Colombia in part so my sisters and I could live in safety. My mother was active in human rights work during the height of our country's civil war, making Bogotá a dangerous place to live. I vividly remember bombings and the frequency of my mother's friends losing their lives to violence. These memories most recently triggered by the racial and social injustices persisting in our national community- and reflected in global protests. When we arrived in Chicago, the language and cultural differences between my family and the school staff concerned my parents - we realized that keeping our cultural identity would be challenging. Maintaining language and cultural connections so far from home is a challenge for first-generation families who feel a push to assimilate. Being able to add identities to our family's identity was crucial to build positive self-esteem.

When my parents began looking for a school for us, they struggled because most of the public schools in our areas looked and felt unsafe. Deterred by the metal detectors and windowless schools, my parents searched for a school that was safe, supportive, and embracing. Luckily, they found a bilingual magnet school where they attained zone variances in exchange for my parents volunteering to lead music and Spanish instruction.

My mother's advocacy to make sure my sisters and I would not only be safe but also connected to our identities inspired me to become the kind of teacher that always focuses on families and the strengths of their cultural identities. My parents' concerns and advocacy continue to influence and shape my beliefs and philosophy years later now that I am a teacher in Las Vegas, where over seventy-five percent of students are children of color.

I am driven by my motivation to be a mirror to my students and their families. Like many of my students, I am first-generation, Latinx, and bilingual. Being proud of my identities helps my students be proud of theirs; it helps the families at my school acknowledge their strengths and

contributions. It helps my colleagues embody an asset mindset when considering our students who are often seen through a deficit mindset.

I know firsthand the tremendous value of being bilingual, staying connected to our family identity and roots, and overcoming barriers. I holistically embed my students and their families' identities into each thread of our learning. I have a deep commitment to ensuring that students of color who have limited access to equitable education and financial stability, have increased access to opportunities. I take immense pride in being a role model for my students and community because I know when students are proud of their diverse identities and schools embrace, nurture, and celebrate those identities – students thrive.

Although I never had teachers of color in my public schooling, I had my family and community that taught me the importance of interdependence, solidarity, and proudly maintaining my cultural identity. The importance of teachers of color like me and teachers who holistically embrace diverse communities has the power to change and transform lives. To achieve a just and equitable education for all students, we must continue to courageously center students, families, and communities with love and action. With great humility and in the face of unprecedented crisis, I boldly challenge my colleagues, our profession, and our local, state, and national education administration to lead and advocate for students, families, and teachers with a focus on equity, access, and SEL that honors the diverse identities reflected within each of us.

## **Resume**

### **Education**

School	University of Arizona
Degree	Master of Arts
Major	Special Education and Bilingual Special Education
Years Attended	2009-2011

School	University of Arizona
Degree	Bachelor of Science
Major	General Elementary and Bilingual Special Education
Years Attended	2005-2009

School	Universidad de Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras
Degree	Bachelor of Art
Major	Spanish Literature with a Minor in Language, Reading and Culture
Years Attended	2009

School	Universidad de Alicante, Spain
Degree	Bachelor of Art
Major	Spanish Literature with a Minor in Language, Reading and Culture
Years Attended	2006

### Certifications

Certification	National Board of Certification: Exceptional Needs Specialist, Early Childhood Through Young Adult
Year Obtained	2018

Certification	Elementary Education and Special Education
Year Obtained	2013

Certification	Arizona Educator Proficiency Certification: Special Education Cross Categorical
Year Obtained	2011

Certification	Professional Elementary and Elementary Content Area
Year Obtained	2009

Certification	Arizona Educator Proficiency Certification: Bilingual Spanish
Year Obtained	2008

### Experience

Title	Hybrid Role Co-Teacher for Special Education and Instructional Strategist
Organization	Kermit K Booker Sr. Innovative Elementary School
Years in Position	1

Title	Resource/Inclusion Special Education Teacher
Organization	Crestwood Elementary School
Years in Position	7

Title	Resource/Inclusion Special Education Teacher
Organization	Frank Borman K-8 School
Years in Position	2

Title	Special Education Teacher
Organization	Cavett Elementary School
Years in Position	1

### Leadership

Position	Advisory Member
Organization	Association for the Supervision and Curriculum Development
Years in Position	1

Position	Teacher Fellow
Organization	National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
Years in Position	1

### Leadership Continued

Position	Member, Superintendent's Teacher Advisory Cabinet
Organization	Nevada Department of Education
Years in Position	2

Position	Teacher Fellow and Fellow Mentor
Organization	Understood.org
Years in Position	3

Position	Founding Member, Chair, Advocacy and Policy Committee
Organization	Network of Accomplished Minority Educators
Years in Position	2

### Awards and Other Recognitions

Award/Recognition	Latino Teacher of the Year, Hispanic Education Association of Nevada
Year Received	2019

Award/Recognition	Esperanza Teaching Award, Chicanos Por La Causa
Year Received	2019

Award/Recognition	Roger's Foundation Heart of Education Award
Year Received	2019

Award/Recognition	Mayor's Urban Design Award for School Gardens
Year Received	2015

Award/Recognition	Excellence in Autism Award, Clark County School District
Year Received	2014