

# OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP

## **Courageous, persevering, inclusive**

— these are all qualities of an outstanding leader, and all qualities of this year’s three Washington State Principals of the Year.

Each year, AWSP recognizes three principals with Principal of the Year awards, celebrating the elementary, middle and high school levels.

The awards provide significant recognition on the regional and state level.

From diversity issues to culture creation to equity and access, the three principals chosen this year have beaten the odds to get where they are today, and continue to advocate daily for the students they serve. Read on to learn more about Alfonso López (Elementary), Guy Kovacs (Middle Level) and Jason Smith (High School), and the incredible stories they have to tell.

**ALFONSO LÓPEZ**

**2019**

**ELEMENTARY**

**PRINCIPAL OF  
THE YEAR**

**GUY KOVACS**

**2019**

**MIDDLE LEVEL**

**PRINCIPAL OF  
THE YEAR**

**JASON SMITH**

**2019**

**HIGH SCHOOL**

**PRINCIPAL OF  
THE YEAR**



# ALFONSO LÓPEZ

## “HOPE LIVES THERE, TOO”



### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Aligning Curriculum, Improving Instruction, Engaging Families and Communities, Closing the Gap*

**Students at Lewis & Clark Elementary don't have to look far for inspiration: Their principal, Alfonso López, the 2019 Elementary Principal of the Year, is the very definition of it.**

### DESTINED TO TEACH

Born and raised in Mexico, López seemed destined for a life in education. The closest school that offered a profession was in a nearby city. The profession: Teaching. So at the age of 19, López became a teacher — an English language teacher, though he had never been exposed to English.

It was his sister-in-law who first noticed his affinity for the classroom,

pulling English lessons straight out of a textbook, since he had no formal training to teach English.

And she had an idea.

“You have a future if you go to the U.S. with us — learn English — then you can come back and teach English,” López recalls. And he agreed, hopeful that in six months, he could be speaking English.

Then reality set in.



Alfonso López checks in with a student during a classroom visit.

“I learned right away that that was not possible,” he said. “I started going to take ESL classes and that happened at night; during the day I was working. In those classrooms, people encouraged me to go back to school and get my degree here in the US.”

Undeterred, López persisted. And like his sister, his early teaching colleagues were right about him, too.

## DUAL LANGUAGE SCHOOL

Call it luck. Call it fate or fortune. López landed in Wenatchee’s dual language Lewis & Clark Elementary School, starting out as a paraeducator in the same school he now leads as principal.

District office officials in the Wenatchee School District say López has worked to make a difference in the lives of his students regardless of their cultural background.

“Alfonzo López sees diversity issues as opportunities to grow. Instead of avoiding cultural diversity issues, he is proactive and seeks school improvement. He takes the opportunity to discuss difficult situations, listen to multiple perspectives, and develop next action steps,” the district noted in its official announcement of the award. “Described by award nominators as an ‘agent of continuous improvement’, López seeks to promote each student’s academic success and well-being while advancing the dual language school.

López credits former Lewis & Clark Principal Connie Strawn with the vision in making Lewis & Clark a dual language school.

“She was thinking, ‘I need to hire bilingual people.’ I still was a teacher’s aide, but when I became a teacher, the principal used to invite me here to this office to translate for her, and that is the way I learned some of the things principals have to deal with.”

López also credits his amazing staff and a series of mentors, including

“ Instead of avoiding cultural diversity issues, he is proactive and seeks school improvement.”

Strawn and former Wenatchee Superintendent Brian Flones, with his success.

“With these blessings I have received in education — being the recipient of all these awards that I have gotten — I really want to be a role model for people to see that things can be done — that if people with dreams work really hard for them, they can accomplish them,” he said. “It’s not a saying, it is true. I have lived it.”

## LOOKING FOR AN OPPORTUNITY

And so, in a surprise ceremony last spring honoring him as AWSP’s Elementary Principal of the Year, Alfonso’s incredible journey from student to teacher to school principal came into full view.

“It’s unbelievable, the feeling is overwhelming,” López told local media after the event. “When I came to the United States, I was looking for an opportunity for my family, but also I wanted to develop some of the skills that I thought in those days that I had. Thankfully, life took me where I needed to be,” he said.

“I didn’t dream all of this, but I thought something was going to happen in my life, something like this, I didn’t have exactly the idea of what was going to happen, but it happened.”

Thinking back on where he started all those years ago in a classroom in Mexico, López is still a little in awe of — and encouraged by — his own trajectory.

“When I went to school in Mexico, we didn’t have books, we didn’t have a white board, we didn’t have markers, those kind of things the teachers need to provide,” he said.

“But I learned in those mountains where I went to teach that hope lives there, too.” ■



López hopes to be a role model for his students and others in Wenatchee.

# GUY KOVACS

## “A KID-CENTERED LEADER”



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**It's not always clear what turns a student's path in school. It might be the high five in the hall. Or a smile on an otherwise dreary day. Maybe it's just a matter of saying "hello."**

### IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

For Guy Kovacs, Kalles Junior High Principal and 2019 Middle Level Principal of the Year, building relationships with students and staff is as much a leadership priority as anything else.

“It was a fifth-grade teacher. It was an eighth-grade teacher. It was a high school coach. It was a college coach that really kept me on the right path that gave me the passion and the

desire for something better. And to be the best version of myself that I can be,” said Kovacs. “I take that to each building I go to and remind staff of how important relationships are and how important we are as role models because we might be the highlight in somebody's day,” he added.

“We don't know every kid's story, and coming from a place where adults made a difference in my life, I'd like to think that we can do that on a daily basis.”

Students appreciate Kovacs' affable nature: “I feel like I'd be able to talk to him and be comfortable talking to him about a lot of things.”



## A KID-CENTERED LEADER

A 29-year education veteran, Kovacs has spent 19 of those years as a principal in the Puyallup School District. In fact, six of his years as a classroom teacher were spent teaching social studies at Kalles.

Now, as the school principal, Kovacs has turned his attention to three key components: achievement, respect, and involvement. These three core areas are supported by a school culture that is centered on students. Kovacs has created a positive environment where students have multiple options to become more engaged, have fun, and get involved outside of the classroom.

Jamie Lee, assistant principal at Kalles, sees this every day in Kovacs' daily interactions with students, staff — anyone in the school community.

"He embodies what you call a kid-centered leader. He's in the lunchroom every day, he's in the classroom, he's at the events just because when you show up, that's how you show the community and our staff and our students that you care and that this is his family," she said.

In addition to his remarkable outreach to students, Lee said Kovacs' leadership and service at Kalles has paid significant dividends for school staff, as well. In recent years, staff members have been recognized for Teacher of the Year, CTE Teacher of the Year, Paraeducator of the Year, Volunteer of the Year (district and state), and the Golden Acorn Award.

"He is constantly motivating and encouraging our staff through emails, face-to-face conversations, celebrations at each of our staff meetings, and honoring their time and professionalism," Lee said.

## NOT 'JUST A PRINCIPAL'

Kovacs' engagement is something ingrained in him by many mentors, including his own mother, who

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provided unconditional love and a passion for learning. His other mentor, former Firgrove principal Connie Miller, taught Kovacs to tenaciously support every student, especially those who are at-risk.

As it turns out, students at Kalles recognize and appreciate Kovacs' genuine approach.

"He always has a smile on his face and he's welcoming. Every time I walk past him in the hallway he always gives me a high five and asks how my day is going," said Annabella Ramos, a student at Kalles.

"Instead of just being a principal, he's kinda more of someone I can lean on and talk to about anything," adds fellow student Talon Keizer. "I feel like I'd be able to talk to him and be comfortable talking to him about a lot of things."

## A HUMBLE HEART

"Receiving this award has been a lot of fun, but it's been very humbling," said Kovacs. "On one side, I wonder how someone could be more worthy of this than someone else. We have a lot of hard working people around the state. I don't think educators get into the business for recognition," he added.

"I think we're here to serve and we try to do it with a humble heart, and serving and recognition just tend not to go hand in hand."

His students, though, think he deserves his time in the spotlight.

"He makes me look forward to coming to school now. Just from the first day on and he's just a great principal," said Nathan Shouse, a student at Kalles. "I'm just so happy he got all this recognition that he completely deserves." ■



A "kid-centered leader": Kovacs frequently interacts with students during the school day.

# JASON SMITH

**“WE’RE GONNA LOVE KIDS AND TEACH”**



## PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

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**At Gov. Rogers High School in Puyallup, not everyone pays a visit to the principal’s office — and that’s perfectly OK.**

**Principal Jason Smith still knows who you are, and takes pride in that fact.**

## A RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN BUSINESS

“A lot of times, people think the only time you interact with the principal is when you’re bad or if you’re in trouble. Or parents will say, ‘Well, I bet you don’t know my kid because my kid’s never been in trouble.’ And I take offense to that, because that’s not what my role is,” said Smith. “My role is to work with young people.”

It’s that mindset — along with a passion for teaching, helping kids and a seemingly boundless amount of positivity — that helped Smith earn AWSP’s 2019 High School Principal of the Year honor by a panel of principals representing the Washington Association of Secondary School Principals (WASSP), a component of AWSP.

Smith was also nationally recognized as the Jostens Renaissance Educator of the Year for his leadership, as an individual who has “positively impacted the climate and culture of their school.” Smith was just one of two educators selected for the honor from more than 6,000 schools across the country.

“My role is to work with young people.”

Naturally, Smith shares credit for the honors with his team at Rogers.

“It is very flattering, but again, it really is the compilation of a lot of work from a lot of people. You have to have the ability to communicate, and then I think it’s understanding that everything we do is predicated on relationships,” he said.

“It is a relationship-driven business, 100 percent with our teachers, with our students.”

## AP FOR ALL

Smith has served as principal at Rogers for five years; he was previously at Puyallup High for seven. In his time at Rogers, Smith has implemented an “AP for All” philosophy with the belief that all students should experience the rigor of taking an Advanced Placement class.

It’s a bet that has paid off well for his students and his school: The number of students taking AP exams has increased by more than 30 percent.

While Smith has increased rigor, he has also raised the level of expectations — among students and staff alike — and this has also paid multiple dividends.

“I have had the absolute privilege of being his assistant for the past five years, and you can feel the positive culture that he’s built at Rogers,” said Anne Hoban. “He is able to identify strengths in his staff and in his students and he really has a gift of bringing out those strengths.”

Rogers is home to not only the most ethnically diverse population in the Puyallup School District, but also offers many targeted programs for special needs students, such as the self-contained KITE (Behavior Program), Support Center (which includes a range of special needs students from intellectually disabled to medically fragile students), and the district’s WRAP Program (which educates all students on the Autism Spectrum in the school district).

Smith is intricately involved in each of these programs, Hoban says, working one-on-one with families when behaviors create a barrier to access.

Like Hoban, Rogers teacher Colleen Pancake credits Smith for the culture he has built at the school.

“Walking into this building every day is a gift,” said Pancake. “He

“ It is a relationship-driven business, 100 percent with our teachers, with our students.”

has created such an inclusive environment, and it’s just got that trickle-down effect. You see it among our student body, you see it among staff. He does that through, obviously, love and care, but also gives people a little kick when they need it and sets very high standards and people rise to those standards for him.”

Rick Morton, a spokesperson for the Johnston Renaissance program, said Smith has clearly created an environment where every student is connected in a meaningful way.

“To come into a school as a new principal leader just five years ago and create a change in the environment this quickly, it takes passion and a belief and grit that is so rare today, so he does stand out amongst thousands of individual leaders,” Morton told the News Tribune.

## FEELING INDIVIDUALLY SPECIAL

In a high school the size of Rogers — close to 2,000 students — it takes a concerted effort to know each person by name. It takes an even deeper undertaking to connect with each student, enough to make them feel personally connected to the school.

Kevonte Boose and Brynley Shakespeare, both students at Rogers, praise Smith for creating an environment that fosters that sense of belonging.

“I feel like he establishes a really good environment here at Rogers, and that he just has a really good overall relationship with all the students. And then he’s always interacting with us. And it’s making us feel individually special,” said Boose.

“He really makes an effort to get to know each student individually, so he knew the things that I was struggling with and the things that I was really good at and he used that to help me,” added Shakespeare.

For Jalé Williams, a senior last spring, Smith was a positive force when things got tough — as they often do for students in their final year of high school.

“In times like this, or in our lives as seniors, it gets hard and it’s a struggle for us, and he is that positive way for us. And I am grateful for that,” she said.

## ‘THAT’S WHAT DRIVES US’

In May, Smith was speechless as his staff and representatives surprised him with what he thought was a staff meeting, but was, in fact, an awards ceremony.

Once the reality of things set in, and he had a chance to reflect on the award, Smith did not mince words about his role as a school leader and his mission with his team at Rogers.

“We’re gonna love kids and teach,” said Smith. “That’s what drives us. That’s our mission statement. It’s very simple: We love kids and teach.” ■

Smith credits his team for his success at Rogers, and they credit Smith with bringing out the best in them.

