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Southworth Elementary's Teresa Schultz Wins AWSP's 2026 Elementary Assistant Principal of the Year Award

Yelm administrator rebuilds trust and culture through hope, connection, and data-driven leadership



OLYMPIA — Teresa "Traci" Schultz, assistant principal at Southworth Elementary School in Yelm Community Schools, has been named the 2026 Washington State Elementary Assistant Principal of the Year. Schultz will also represent Washington state in the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) National Outstanding Assistant Principal program.

Schultz leads with empathy and clarity—anchoring every decision in her belief that every interaction can change a life.

"Traci consistently brings a positive outlook to every situation. She is grounded and realistic, yet always finds a way to focus on the positives. Her steady and optimistic approach makes her a reliable and uplifting presence in our school," writes Principal's Office Professional Dorine Hunt.

Known for her steady leadership and ability to restore hope in times of challenge, Schultz has helped rebuild trust and community at Southworth following district-wide levy losses and staff turnover. Schultz implemented an open-door policy, ensuring every staff member felt heard and valued.

"By engaging in honest, individualized conversations and prioritizing transparency in decision making, I affirmed each person's dignity. This approach, grounded in the principles of openness, empathy, and fairness was crucial in repairing harm and rebuilding a foundation of trust within our school community," says Schultz.

Through a series of intentional initiatives—including empathy interviews with staff, the implementation of instructional rounds for teacher collaboration, and district-wide Advanced Academic coordination—Schultz has elevated both culture and student achievement. Her work reconnected educators across grade levels and strengthened the school's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), resulting in more responsive interventions and higher academic growth.

Beyond Southworth, Schultz serves as district coordinator for Advanced Academics. Her work bridges academic excellence with social-emotional growth for students from diverse backgrounds



Strong leaders, strong schools, strong students.

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—including those from military families and tribal communities through Southworth’s Native language and heritage partnerships.

Schultz writes, “We maintain a strong connection with our neighbors, the Nisqually Indian Tribe, with our weekly native language classes serving as a cornerstone of this relationship. Taught by community members, these classes preserve linguistic heritage and empower students by deepening their cultural identity. Additionally, we organize student field trips to the local tribal youth center and host professional development sessions where Native community members share their traditions and stories with our educators.”

Through her work at Southworth Elementary, Traci Schultz has shown what hope-centered leadership looks like in action: listening deeply, leading steadily, and reminding every student and staff member that they belong.

National Outstanding Assistant Principal Program

Each year, NAESP recognizes a new class of National Outstanding Assistant Principals. Public school elementary and middle-level assistant principals are nominated by their peers, and state winners are selected by committees of educators from each NAESP affiliate state. Honorees are celebrated in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 2026.