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# We Are New Haven

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2026



**NEW HAVEN**  
UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

# Eric Endow

ADAPTED PHYSICAL  
EDUCATION TEACHER



# Meeting Students Where They Are: A Life of Care, Movement, and Meaning



With Dina Padilla, Paraprofessional who has worked alongside Eric for many years.



For nearly four decades, one New Haven educator has quietly shaped lives through patience, creativity, and an unwavering belief in every student’s potential.

For 37 years, Adapted Physical Education teacher Eric Endow has been a steady, compassionate presence across the New Haven Unified School District. Serving elementary and middle schools throughout Union City, his work often happens behind the scenes, yet its impact is deeply felt by students, families, and colleagues alike.

This year, that impact earned national recognition. Endow has been nominated for the 2025–26 National LifeChanger of the Year Award, which honors outstanding K–12 educators across the country for

excellence, leadership, and positive influence. The nomination celebrates what New Haven families have known for years: he changes lives through care, consistency, and an unshakable belief that every student belongs.

**“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care,”** Endow says.

It’s a simple motto, but one that has guided an entire career devoted to meeting students exactly where they are and helping them move forward—sometimes literally, sometimes emotionally, and always with dignity.

Originally from Smithtown, New York, Endow grew up surrounded by education. After earning degrees in Physical Education and Special Education/Adapted Physical Education, he found his calling supporting students of all abilities. A formative experience volunteering with students with cerebral palsy as a teenager helped shape his philosophy early on: learning should be joyful, inclusive, and full of possibility.

In New Haven, he has become synonymous with Adapted PE. As an itinerant teacher covering multiple sites, he calls the district his “second home” and credits its collaborative culture for keeping him here. Working alongside supportive colleagues and dedicated families, he focuses on creating opportunities for every student to experience success through movement.

Some of his most meaningful moments come when progress feels uncertain. He recalls one student recovering from surgery who refused to participate in PE for months. Traditional approaches weren’t working. Then Endow noticed the student’s curiosity about a hopscotch grid painted on the blacktop. They started there—counting squares, stepping slowly, turning the game into an obstacle course. Bit by bit, confidence returned. Today, that student designs his own courses.

**“That’s what it’s about,” Endow says. “Find what connects and build from there.”**

That mindset extends beyond individual students. Endow collaborates closely with general education PE teachers to model inclusive practices and create environments where all students feel valued and capable. Colleagues describe him as a mentor, problem-solver, and calming presence whose positivity lifts entire campuses—qualities that inspired his LifeChanger nomination.

His commitment also shines through the Special Olympics Young Athletes Program, one of his proudest efforts. For years, these events have brought together staff, families, volunteers, and community partners to celebrate Pre-K and TK students of all abilities. Campuses transform into cheering sections as young athletes run, throw, jump, and smile their way through activities designed just for them.

**“In most cases, the whole school comes together,” he says. “It’s pure joy.”**

A collection of TK/K Special Olympics photos taken by Eric himself





Outside of school, Endow’s hobbies reflect the same curiosity and heart he brings to his work. He enjoys traveling with his wife, collecting baseball history and memorabilia, dabbling in photography, and coaching Challenger Little League. He often photographs Special Olympics events, capturing moments of pride that families treasure.

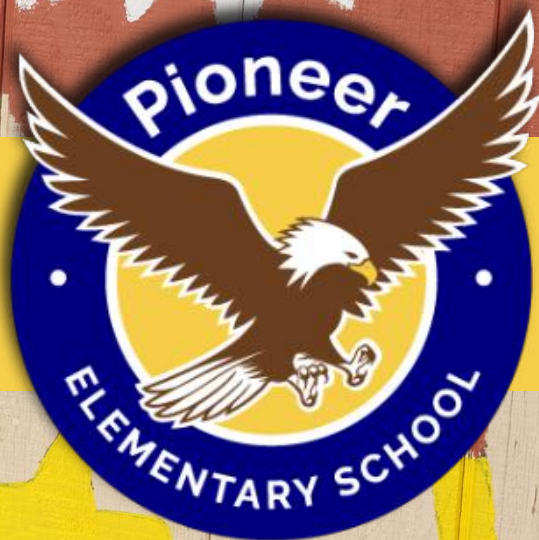
Ask him what makes New Haven special, and he answers without hesitation: the people. **“Our staff shows up for each other and for kids,”** he says. **“Whether it’s a celebration or a challenge, everyone comes together.”**

After nearly four decades, his hopes for students remain simple and profound: that their dreams aren’t limited and that they’re given every opportunity to succeed. If he could change one thing, he’d create even more inclusive spaces where students of all abilities learn and play side by side.

How does he hope students remember him?

**“Positive and energetic,”** he says with a smile. **“Someone who made class fun.”**

For the thousands of students he has encouraged, supported, and believed in, that legacy is already secure. The LifeChanger nomination simply puts a national spotlight on what New Haven has long known: Eric Endow’s work isn’t just about physical education. It’s about confidence, belonging, and helping every child move forward—at their own pace and on their own terms.



**Fides**

**Galang**

*Paraeducator*

# Ms. Fides Galang: The Heart of Pioneer Elementary

At Pioneer Elementary, there are people who quietly shape the heart of our community. These are individuals whose dedication, compassion, and steady presence leave a lasting impact on students and staff alike. Ms. Fides is one of those extraordinary people. For more than a decade, she has represented the heart of Pioneer through her unwavering commitment to students, her colleagues, and the broader school community.

Ms. Fides has been part of the Pioneer family for over 10 years, serving as a para educator in Special Education. In this role, she works closely with teachers to support students, especially those with the greatest needs. Whether she is encouraging students to participate or celebrating small but meaningful successes, Ms. Fides approaches every interaction with patience, warmth, and high expectations. Her pride shines brightest when students overcome challenges, follow directions, and grow in self-confidence, moments she considers the true rewards of her work.

From a student's perspective, Ms. Fides makes school feel safe and welcoming. One student shared, **“Ms. Fides always helps me. She talks to me kindly and helps me calm down. She makes me feel like I can do it.”** For many students, Ms. Fides is the trusted adult who notices when they need extra support and believes in them even when learning feels hard.

Originally educated in the Philippines, Ms. Fides brings a rich and inspiring journey to her role at Pioneer. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and worked in a pharmacy before discovering her calling in education. Influenced by a family deeply rooted in teaching, including her father and four siblings, she eventually pursued her passion for serving children. She studied teaching methods at East Central Colleges and continued working toward a master's degree in teaching and supervision at Don Honorio Ventura Colleges of Arts and Trade, now Don Honorio State University, in the Philippines. Her commitment to lifelong learning mirrors the values we strive to instill in our students every day.



Ms. Fides' path to Pioneer reflects resilience and dedication. What kept her here, she says, is the people. **“Pioneer is my family,”** she shares. **“Everyone is valued, and we work together as a team. The support here is what makes this school special.”**

Outside of work, Ms. Fides continues to give generously to those she loves. She treasures time caring for her grandchildren, cooking meals, and sharing food with family and friends. She enjoys listening to music, karaoke, dancing with her family, drawing, making handmade cards, and relaxing with Korean dramas. These activities, she says, keep her healthy in both body and spirit, and that joy carries into her work with students each day.

When asked how she hopes students will remember her, Ms. Fides speaks with heartfelt humility. She hopes they remember her name, her personality, and the care she gave them. She remains in touch with former students and beams with pride when she sees them grow into doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, and community leaders. Their success, she says, is inspiring and affirming.

Perhaps it is no surprise that her family calls her **“Wonder Woman.”** Ms. Fides embraces the title with a smile, crediting her strength to overcoming life's challenges, the love of her family, and the joy she finds in her students. Her late husband, whom she describes as brave and devoted, remains one of her personal heroes.



When reflecting on her impact, Ms. Fides offers words that capture the essence of who she is.

**“I believe everyone can grow when they feel supported. My goal is to help others believe in themselves, work hard, and know that they matter.”**

At Pioneer Elementary, Ms. Fides is more than a staff member. She is a steady presence, a caring guide, and a reminder that kindness and dedication can change lives. Her story reminds us that the true strength of a school lies in the people who serve with love, humility, and purpose every single day.



# Alumni Focus



Megan Northcote



Rachel Sowell



Melanie Ruiz



## All in the Family

*Three sisters. Three campuses. One lifelong commitment to New Haven students.*

On any given day in the New Haven Unified School District, you might see Rachel Sowell leading a game of capture the flag, Megan Northcote teaching volleyball fundamentals to a class of third graders, or Melanie Ruiz coaching Logan softball after school. What you might not realize is that these three dedicated educators are sisters.

*Megan. 11 yrs Old*



*Rachel. 11 yrs Old*



Their story is one of roots, relationships, and coming home.

All three grew up in Union City, attended New Haven schools, and built their lives around sports, teamwork, and mentoring younger kids. Today, they bring that same energy and heart back to the district that shaped them.

“It feels full circle,” Rachel said. “New Haven’s a really special place. A lot of people stay here because they care about the community. We’re giving back in the same ways we were taught.”

Athletics has always been part of their language as a family.



*Megan #20 and Rachel #21*

*Junior Year*



*Melanie. Senior Year*



Melanie

Melanie, the oldest, played four years of softball at Logan High School, earned a full scholarship to the University of Notre Dame, and was later inducted into the Logan Athletic Hall of Fame. Twins Rachel and Megan earned 11 varsity letters each across volleyball, softball, soccer, and basketball before continuing their softball careers together at Azusa Pacific.

“We told coaches, ‘You take us both or you don’t have either of us,’” Rachel laughed.

But their favorite memories are not about trophies. They are about people.

“Coach Rod [Coach Al Rodrigues] really created a great community,” Megan said. “He made it feel like family. That stuck with me.”

That sense of belonging now guides how they teach.

Long before they had teaching credentials, the sisters were already leaders. As teens and college students, they worked for Union City’s day camps and sports programs, organizing activities and mentoring younger kids.

“It was just a natural progression,” Melanie said. “We grew up playing sports and running camps. Coaching and teaching felt like where we belonged.”

Rachel remembers discovering the unique impact of physical education early in her career.

“At Pioneer, I had almost a thousand students,” she said. “Instead of just 20 kids in a classroom, I got the whole school. I could call all of them mine. That’s awesome.”

Megan agrees. After starting in the classroom, she transitioned to PE because she missed being active.

“I was jealous Rachel got to be outside,” she joked. “I love teaching kids games and skills. Every day is different, and you get to connect with everyone.”

What makes their story especially meaningful is where it is happening.



Megan



Rachel

All three returned to the same district that educated them. In many cases, they now work alongside their former teachers.

“When I first started teaching, my third- and fourth-grade teachers were still there,” Rachel said. “I still called them Mrs. Schoon and Coach Blair. You just feel like you’re home. Everyone supports you.”

Those early mentors left lasting impressions.

Rachel still remembers Mrs. Schoon’s gentle approach. “She never raised her voice. Not one day. But if she said she was disappointed, every kid wanted to do better. She was magical.”

Megan recalls her algebra and basketball coach encouraging her to consider teaching. “He told me, ‘You should be a teacher. You’re really good at it.’ That belief stuck with me.”

And Melanie credits a quirky high school math teacher who made learning fun and inspired her own teaching style. “He made math exciting. That’s not easy to do.”

Today, the sisters are focused on creating that same sense of connection for their own students.

Rachel recently helped launch Logan’s girls flag football program. Even after the season ended, players kept gathering for holiday parties and summer plans.

“We wanted it to feel like family,” she said. “More than just something you do after school.”

That philosophy runs through everything they do.

Whether it is a kindergartner learning to throw for the first time or a high school athlete chasing a championship, they see the whole child. They teach confidence, teamwork, and belonging alongside skills.

They are also living proof of what New Haven does best. The district nurtures students, invests in staff, and builds a community strong enough that people want to return.

“The teachers poured into us,” Megan said. “Now we hope to do the same for the future of New Haven kids.”

In New Haven, some of the best educators are homegrown.

Sometimes, they even share the same last name.



**“New Haven’s a really special place. A lot of people stay here because they care about the community. We’re giving back in the same ways we were taught.”**



# Evonne Baker

Paraprofessional

## At the Heart of Community: Evonne Baker's Story of Connection, Care, and Commitment

*How one Kitayama staff member models belonging, honesty, and teamwork across New Haven Unified*

Walk onto the campus of Kitayama Elementary and you'll quickly sense it: a feeling of warmth, connection, and care that goes beyond job titles or classrooms. Much of that spirit is embodied by Evonne Baker, a dedicated staff member whose journey in education and in life has been shaped by community, compassion, and a deep belief in the power of relationships.

"I've always been really involved in community," Evonne shared. Growing up in Newark and attending Newark schools herself, education was a family affair. One of her uncles even served as her high school principal. School events, local sports teams, and neighborhood connections weren't just activities, they were a way of life. That sense of rootedness extended beyond school; Evonne married her high school sweetheart, further grounding her life in long-standing relationships and shared history. "When you run into people at the grocery store and say hello, that matters," she said. "That sense of belonging stays with you."

That belief in belonging is a thread woven throughout Evonne's career. She began working in education in 2001 at Cisco Family Connections, supporting children from infancy through elementary school. Over time, she earned her way into leadership roles—teacher, coordinator, program director—overseeing multiple programs and wearing "many hats," as she put it. Each role added tools to her belt, but also reinforced a core truth: relationships matter as much as instruction.



Evonne and her husband who was her high school sweetheart.



First day of school AUGUST 2025

In 2021, Evonne brought that experience to New Haven Unified School District, joining as a paraprofessional at Kitayama Elementary. The transition from private programs to a public school district felt like a leap, but one she embraced wholeheartedly. “I’ve been on all sides of the fence,” she said. “That helps me appreciate the whole structure, and how important it is that we support one another.”

Colleagues often describe Evonne as both kind and direct, a combination she sees as essential. One story she shared highlights her approach to teamwork. When communication challenges arose within a staff team, she didn’t avoid the discomfort. Instead, she asked for a conversation. “We didn’t agree on everything,” she said, “but we understood each other better. And we agreed to be respectful and professional.” The result was a healthy, productive working relationship, and a powerful model for students watching how adults navigate differences.

Culinary Experience: Pizza Making



That modeling extends to families as well. Evonne recalled working with a family who struggled to trust what they were hearing about their child’s progress at school. Rather than growing frustrated, she leaned into communication by sharing positives, inviting questions, and offering to show exactly how strategies were used on campus. “We just needed to get the door open a crack,” she said. Four years later, that door is wide open, and the relationship remains strong. “Families appreciate honesty even when conversations are hard.”

Evonne’s passion for special education and student advocacy is deeply personal. As a child, she often served as the “translator” for her younger brother, who had a speech impediment. Later, she became a caregiver for her brother-in-law with Down syndrome and her mother-in-law with dementia. Those experiences shaped her empathy and reinforced her commitment to students who need extra support. “I saw how feeling ‘less than’ affected people,” she reflected. “I wanted to protect that (feeling of worthiness), and help.”

Outside of school, Evonne brings the same energy to her personal life. She’s an avid softball coach currently coaching her granddaughters, an outdoors enthusiast, and, to the surprise of many, an avid sewer. “Anything outside,” she laughed. “The winter’s a little rough.”

What keeps her grounded, though, is purpose. “We’re role models,” Evonne said. “For kids, for families, for each other. It’s okay not to agree on everything. What matters is how we treat one another.”

Evonne Baker’s story reflects the best of New Haven Unified School District: dedicated staff, strong relationships, and a shared commitment to students and families. At Kitayama and across the district her presence reminds us that community isn’t just something we talk about. It’s something we live, every day.



# Carmen

## Castellanos

*Paraprofessional*



## Rooted in Community, Growing Futures

*How Carmen Castellanos turns care, culture, and connection into everyday impact at César Chávez Middle School*

For Carmen Castellanos, working at César Chávez Middle School isn't just a job; it's a continuation of a lifelong journey rooted in family, community, and service. A paraprofessional with New Haven Unified School District for nearly ten years, Carmen is a proud product of the very schools she now serves. From Hillview Crest Elementary to Barnard-White Middle to Logan High School, her story is deeply woven into the fabric of this community, and her work reflects that sense of belonging every day.



**“I grew up here. I attended kindergarten through high school,”** Carmen says. **“And now I get to give back to the same community that raised me.”** That full-circle moment is one she carries with pride, along with a deep appreciation for the district’s supportive staff, strong programs, and family-centered culture. At Chávez, she says, **“It feels like home.”**

Carmen’s commitment to education began early, inspired by her mother, a longtime paraprofessional herself. **“The classroom was always comfortable to me,”** she recalls. **“I knew at a very young age that I wanted to work in education.”** That early exposure grew into a calling, one fueled by mentors who believed in her potential. She credits former math teacher John Jacobs for helping her see her own strengths. **“He always told me, ‘You’re better than you think you are.’ Looking back, I realize how much that encouragement shaped me.”**

Another influence, Life Skills teacher Stacey Diaz, left a lasting impression through warmth, creativity, and care. **“Her classroom made you feel like your dreams were limitless.”**



**FROM START AT DECOTO  
TO FINISH AT LOGAN HS**

# CHÁVEZ GARDEN CLUB



Today, Carmen brings that same spirit to her students, especially through programs that foster connection beyond academics. She is deeply involved in Chávez's Garden Club, a small but mighty group that meets weekly. What began as a gardening activity has grown into a space of pride, teamwork, and belonging. "The kids know the routine; watering plants, checking what's grown," she says. "They take ownership." During the holidays, students harvested herbs to take home to their families and even shared extras with staff. "It became a way to give back," Carmen explains. "That's what community looks like."

Her love of gardening also connects generations. Gardening at her parents' home is a family tradition, one that brings Carmen, her father, and even her nephew together. **"We harvest, then we cook together,"** she says. **"It's bonding."** That same joy shows up at school, where learning extends naturally into life skills.



Carmen is also a proud member of the Beyond the Bell after-school program, which she sees as one of the most impactful offerings in the district. **“I always wanted to change the world,”** she says with a smile. **“And then I realized, you start small.”** For many students, Beyond the Bell provides safety, structure, and care during critical hours. **“Some of our kids face real hardships,”** Carmen shares. **“Being able to give them a safe place means everything.”**

Her philosophy on life and learning is guided by a Spanish saying she lives by: **“Hay más tiempo que vida” (there is more time than life).** **“Time keeps going, but we don’t always,”** she explains. **“Everyone is on their own journey, at their own pace.”** That belief has shaped her recent decision to return to college, a step she calls one of her proudest achievements. **“I stepped out of my comfort zone. I’m not done growing, and I never want to be.”**

Carmen’s dreams for the future of education mirror her values: expanded after-school programs, gardens at every campus, strong libraries, passionate teachers, and continued access to free meals for students. **“Our district already does so much,”** she says. **“I just hope we keep building on it.”**

When asked who her hero is, Carmen doesn’t hesitate: her mother. **“She’s always had our backs, front, sides, everything,”** she laughs through tears. Watching her mom return to college and graduate later in life only strengthened Carmen’s belief that growth has no expiration date.

Above all, Carmen hopes her story reminds others, students, families, and staff that it’s okay not to have everything figured out. **“The sky’s the limit,”** she says. **“Dreams are endless. As long as you keep working, keep growing, and stay true to yourself, you’re exactly where you need to be.”**



**CARMEN WITH HER HERO, HER MOM BEATRIZ.  
BOTH CURRENTLY WORK TOGETHER AT  
CÉSAR CHÁVEZ MIDDLE SCHOOL.**

# Measure N



**NEW HAVEN**  
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New Middle School Track and Fields

New Logan HS Score Board



PROPOSED NEW POOL 50Meters  
Dan Oden Swim Coplex Project at Logan HS



## Building for the Future: How Measure N Is Shaping the Next Chapter of New Haven Schools

*Thoughtful planning, responsible stewardship, and a long-term vision for students*

### INTERACTIVE LEARNING CENTER



Exterior Painting at Itlliong-Vera Cruz Middle School

When voters approved Measure N, a \$272 million general obligation facilities bond, they invested not just in buildings, but in the future of the New Haven Unified School District. At the center of that work is Eric Chiu, NHUSD's Director of Facilities and Construction, whose steady leadership is helping turn a community promise into carefully planned action.

For Eric, facilities work is about more than bricks and mortar. "Our goal is to create environments that support learning, safety, and belonging," he shared. "Every project we plan is rooted in how students and staff actually use their campuses every day."

Measure N represents a significant investment of taxpayer dollars, and the district has been intentional about how those funds are planned and monitored. Projects were first identified through the district's Facilities Master Plan, a long-range roadmap developed with professional assessments of building conditions and student needs. From there, Eric met individually with site principals to determine whether new or urgent facility needs had emerged since the plan was created. That collaboration continues today, ensuring the district remains responsive as campuses evolve.

Oversight is also built into the process. An independent **Citizens' Bond Oversight Committee (CBOC)** reviews Measure N expenditures to confirm funds are used as promised and in alignment with voter intent. "Transparency and accountability are essential," Eric noted. "We take seriously the trust our community has placed in us."

**Eric Chiu,**  
Director, Facilities and Construction



**MEET  
THE  
TEAM!**



**Natasha Niusulu,**  
Facilities Technician



The largest investment under Measure N, approximately \$170 million, will support the revitalization of James Logan High School. About one-third of the campus is expected to be renewed or modernized, including administrative spaces, the library, and multiple classroom buildings. While construction is anticipated to begin around 2027, the project will unfold in phases over several years.

“This is a long-term transformation,” Eric explained. “Students will benefit along the way as phases are completed, and future Colts will experience the full vision as it comes together.”

The phased approach allows the district to maintain a functioning campus during construction while delivering meaningful improvements incrementally. It also reflects a broader philosophy: plan carefully, move deliberately, and prioritize student experience at every step.



**Background:** Current aerial view of James Logan High School  
**Foreground:** Preliminary rendering and blueprints used as samples by architects for presentation purposes only. Final design not yet determined.

## Audio Enhancement Systems



While Logan is the largest single project, Measure N supports improvements across the district that will benefit students at every grade level.

One major initiative is the installation of Audio Enhancement systems, public address systems, at school sites. These systems provide voice amplification for teachers, emergency communication between classrooms and offices, campus-wide announcements, and real-time translation of classroom instruction, supporting both safety and equitable access to learning.

Measure N also funds the replacement of aging playground structures at elementary schools. These upgrades are guided by professional safety assessments, ensuring that play spaces are modern, inclusive, and secure.

Another milestone is the completion of the district's HVAC modernization effort. This work improves indoor comfort, air quality, and energy efficiency, supporting healthier learning environments while reducing long-term operational costs.

Finally, the bond includes funding for a new James Logan High School swimming pool. Currently in the design phase, the pool is expected to be completed during the 2026–27 timeframe, assuming the project moves through design, approval, and construction as planned. The new facility will support student athletics and physical education while serving as a valuable community asset.

For Eric, the work of Measure N reflects New Haven's broader values. "Facilities should support great teaching and learning," he said. "When we plan well, we create spaces where students feel safe, supported, and inspired."

As Measure N moves from planning into construction, the district remains committed to clear communication, fiscal responsibility, and collaboration. The work ahead is significant, but so is the opportunity.

With careful stewardship and a shared vision, New Haven Unified School District is building spaces that will serve students not just for the next few years, but for generations to come.



# NEW HAVEN

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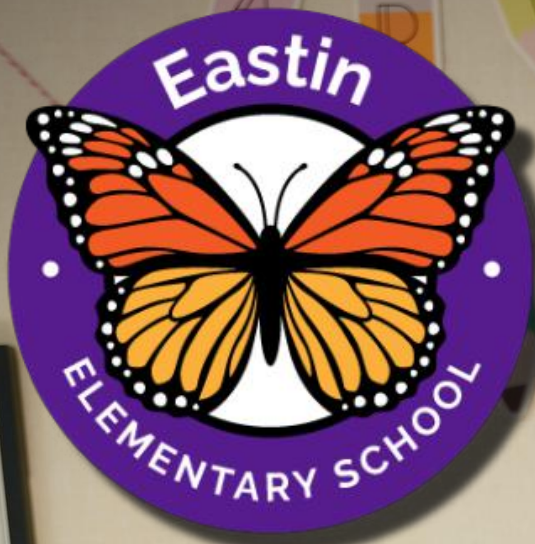
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# Zachary Long

TK Teacher

# From Bay Area Roots to TK Joy: A New Haven Educator Who Keeps School Fun

After 25 years in New Haven Unified, one teacher's story shows how consistency, community, and a good sense of humor can shape generations of students.

If you ask Zachary Long to describe himself, he will probably shrug and say he is "the most boring person in the world." He wakes up, goes to work, spends time with his family, and goes to bed. But spend even a few minutes hearing his story, and it becomes clear that this quiet steadiness is exactly what has made Mr. Long such a meaningful presence in the New Haven Unified School District for the past 25 years.

A Bay Area native who grew up mostly in Union City, Mr. Long attended Decoto Elementary, Alvarado Middle School, now IVC, and James Logan High School. These schools helped shape his path long before he ever stepped into a classroom as an educator. "We moved a lot," he recalls, "but New Haven was always home." Today, that sense of belonging has come full circle. He is now part of the homegrown talent that makes the district so special.

Mr. Long's career in education began as a paraprofessional in the inclusion program, a role he held for 14 years. For the past 11 years, he has served as a teacher, primarily in Transitional Kindergarten and kindergarten. "I've always liked the younger grades," he says with a smile. "They come to school excited, and it starts the day off right." For Mr. Long, joy is not just a byproduct of teaching. It is the point.

That joy traces back to his own childhood classroom. He still remembers the late Marilyn Juarez, his kindergarten teacher, and how fun she made school feel. "I just remembered how fun that experience was," he says, "and I was thinking, okay, I would like to do that the rest of my life." Along with mentors like former New Haven teacher Pauline Bettancourt, who encouraged him to earn his credential, those early influences helped solidify a lifelong calling.

Zachary Long officially landed at his current school site during student teaching. While working with Sarita Chawla, he heard murmurs about a new TK

position opening up. He took the leap and has been teaching TK or kindergarten ever since. What keeps him there is not just the students, but the people.

**"As a staff, we've been together for a long time," he says. "I'm basically around friends all day."**





That sense of community is something Mr. Long believes truly sets New Haven Unified apart. From teachers and yard duty staff to lunch personnel and specialists, people tend to stay. Students benefit from daily access to music, physical education, media, and science. These are opportunities he describes as “really rad” and not always available in other districts. “That’s a special experience for them,” he says.

As a member of the Instructional Leadership Team, Mr. Long values the opportunity to see the bigger picture of how a school runs. “It’s good to know the behind-the-scenes stuff,” he shares, especially understanding what teachers in other grade levels are facing. That broader perspective helps him support colleagues beyond his own TK classroom.

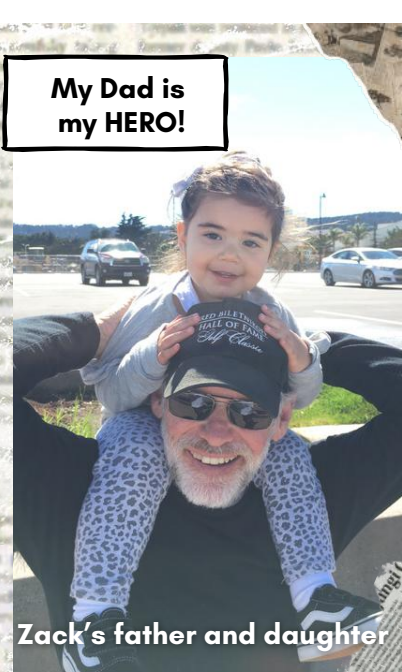
When asked what makes the work meaningful, Zachary Long does not point to awards or milestones. Instead, he talks about growth. “Seeing the kids grow from the first day of school, being terrified to around field day, where they’re just ready to move on, that’s pretty cool.” His hope is simple. He wants students to remember their first experience with school as a fun one.

Teaching, he says, has shaped him just as much as he has shaped his students. “It honestly helped me be prepared for parenthood,” he reflects, crediting the power of relationships, positive reinforcement, and connection. Family is central to who he is. His dad, whom he calls his hero, modeled a calm presence, a sense of humor, and the ability to not take life too seriously. His wife, Karina, also a teacher, has been by his side for 22 years, supporting both his career and their shared life.



If there is a single quote that captures Zachary Long's philosophy, it might be this: "There's only so much you can control in life. Just ride it out." Paired with a love for reading, painting, travel, and a healthy appreciation for humor, including a fondness for The Far Side, it is a mindset that keeps things grounded.

In many ways, his story mirrors New Haven Unified itself. It is deeply rooted, community-driven, and quietly impactful. He may insist he is boring, but for the students whose first day of school feels safe and joyful because of him, Zachary Long is anything but.



# The Far Side of Eastin





MLK Forensics Tournament photos courtesy of Marvin Huber



# Finding Their Voice

Logan alumnus **Justin Kurup** leads a nationally recognized forensics program that empowers students to speak up, stand out, and change the world

When Justin Kurup graduated from James Logan High School in 2007, he never imagined he would one day return to lead one of the most celebrated student programs in the country. But today, as the head of Logan’s nationally renowned Forensics (Speech and Debate) program, Kurup is doing exactly what his own teachers once did for him: helping students discover their voices and realize their potential.

“It really comes full circle,” he says.

Kurup grew up in Union City and attended Cabello Elementary, Alvarado Middle School (now IVC), and Logan. Like many students, he remembers teachers who shaped his path early on. His fifth-grade teacher, Miss Liu, stands out for sparking his creativity through project-based assignments that helped him see learning differently. “That was the year I really found my creative side,” he recalls.

But it wasn’t until high school that he found the program that would change his life.

Despite coming from a sports-oriented family, Kurup decided soccer wasn’t his path. Searching for something competitive yet meaningful, he stumbled across an elective called Forensics. He joined as a sophomore and quickly realized he had found his place.

“I needed somewhere I could compete and challenge myself,” he says. “But I also wanted something that felt rewarding and purposeful.”

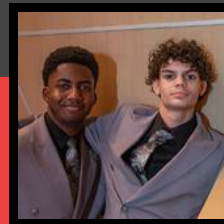
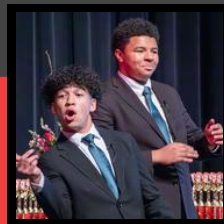




Photo courtesy of Jeremy Allen

*"I was that kid who didn't know what my path was. This program helped me find my voice. Now I get to help other students find theirs."*

Justin Kurup, Director of Forensics

Under the mentorship of longtime Logan educator Dr. Tommie Lindsey Jr., Kurup discovered much more than public speaking. He found a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and the power of education beyond the classroom.

"In his class, learning never stopped," Kurup explains. "When we traveled to competitions, we were visiting museums, learning history, talking about race and identity and the world around us. It opened my eyes in ways I hadn't experienced before."

Those lessons stuck. After college and working in education-focused nonprofit roles, Kurup returned to Logan to student teach under Lindsey. When Lindsey retired, he asked Kurup to come back and help carry the program forward. "It felt like coming home," he says.

For those unfamiliar with forensics, the name can be misleading. There are no lab coats or crime scenes here. Instead, students develop skills that last a lifetime: critical thinking, research, empathy, and confident communication.

"Speech and debate helps students articulate who they are and what they believe," Kurup explains. "Public speaking is one of the biggest fears people have. We teach students how to move through that fear and use their voice effectively."

The program's debate events require students to research and argue both sides of complex issues. Students don't choose their side, they're assigned one, pushing them to think critically and understand multiple perspectives. "It makes them more informed citizens," Kurup says. "They develop empathy."

Forensics also includes competitive acting and interpretation events, where students perform powerful pieces that highlight underrepresented voices and social issues.

"There's always a purpose behind what we do," he adds. "Our students aren't just competing for trophies. They're telling stories that matter."

That purpose and excellence have built one of the most successful programs in the nation.





Logan's team now includes nearly 200 students and has earned accolades few schools can match:

- 27 consecutive years earning the School of Outstanding Distinction at nationals
- Dozens of state championships
- More than 50 national champions
- Hundreds of alumni awards

Each January, Logan hosts the Martin Luther King Jr. Invitational Speech & Debate Tournament, a tradition now in its 34th year. This year alone, more than 2,000 students and 900 judges, from 130 schools and 15 states traveled to Union City to compete.

"It's our way of honoring Dr. King's legacy," Kurup says. "What better way to celebrate one of the greatest speakers of all time than through speech?"

For a Title I public school to host, and consistently lead, such a prestigious event is a point of pride not just for Logan, but for the entire district.

"It shows what our students are capable of," he says. "The talent and heart in this community are incredible." While the trophies are impressive, Kurup says the real success stories are personal.

Nearly 95% of forensics students go on to four-year universities. Alumni include Emmy-winning journalists, surgeons, professors, and community leaders. Many return to volunteer, coach, and mentor the next generation. "They always tell me the same thing," Kurup says. "They use these skills every single day in their careers." Just as important is the sense of belonging the program creates.

"Logan is a big school. It can feel overwhelming," he explains. "Forensics becomes a family. You travel together, compete together, grow together. Those friendships last a lifetime."

And the program isn't just for naturally outgoing students.

"There's something for everyone," Kurup says. "Most of our students come in terrified of public speaking." He shares the story of one student who could barely present in front of a small group as a freshman. By senior year, she was a state champion performing in front of thousands at nationals.

"It completely changed her life," he says.

*Forensics becomes a family. You travel together, compete together, grow together. Those friendships last a lifetime."*

# MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. SPEECH & DEBATE INVITATIONAL

# JAMES LOGAN FORENSICS SPEECH & DEBATE



Kurup is especially proud that finances are never a barrier to participation.

“If a student wants to be on the team, we make it happen,” he says. “I believe cost should never be a burden to participation.”

For Kurup, leading the program isn’t just a job; it’s a way to give back.

“I was that kid who didn’t know what my path was,” he says. “This program helped me find my voice. Now I get to help other students find theirs.”

And in classrooms, auditoriums, and competitions across the country, Logan students continue doing exactly that, speaking up, standing tall, and showing the world what New Haven Unified is all about.



THE *Future* OF THE *World* IS  
IN THIS ROOM TODAY



*Meet*

**Brandy** Sagun

# A Career Built on Connection: One Educator's 28-Year Journey at New Haven Unified

For nearly three decades, one New Haven Unified educator has dedicated her career to helping children grow, not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. Brandy Sagun has 28 years in the district; her work has spanned traditional elementary classrooms, alternative education programs, and now a blended virtual and in-person model at New Haven Academy (NHA).

What began as a practical career choice soon became something much deeper.

“I was originally drawn to teaching because of the vacation schedule,” Mrs. Sagun admits with a smile. “But along the way, it became so much more. Building relationships with students and families and watching children grow, that’s what has kept me here.”

Her journey started at Hillview Crest Elementary, followed by many years teaching fourth and fifth grade at Searles Elementary. Over the last six years, she has worked in alternative education with students in kindergarten through fifth grade, an experience that has sharpened her ability to meet children where they are and tailor instruction to individual needs.



**New Haven Academy**  
Pathways for Customized Learning

## *A Love for Elementary Learners*

From the start, Mrs. Sagun felt most at home working with younger students.

“They’re curious and open to learning,” she explains. “You get to see their personalities develop and watch their confidence grow. That’s incredibly rewarding.”

Beyond the classroom, she has embraced leadership opportunities throughout her career. Brandy Sagun has served as an advisory teacher for new educators, a curriculum leader, and a department head, and has contributed to textbook adoption committees and district initiatives. These roles, she says, helped her expand her perspective and collaborate closely with colleagues across the district.

Brandy Sagun joined New Haven Academy because it offered a different way to teach—but what keeps her there are the students and families.

Even in a program that is largely virtual, she emphasizes that relationships remain at the center of everything she does.

“I’ve built strong connections with families and students,” she says. “Being part of their progress—seeing them grow year after year—is what makes this work meaningful.”

At NHA, she works with students across all elementary grade levels, meeting virtually Tuesday through Friday and in person on Mondays. Her days include providing direct instruction, front-loading key concepts before students work independently, and offering daily one-on-one support to learners who need additional help managing coursework.

*After 28 years, her motivation remains clear:  
the students.*



“Their determination and willingness to keep trying inspire me every day,” she says. “I’m grateful to be part of a community where educators, families, and staff all work together to support children.”

Mrs. Sagun's personal motto captures her approach to teaching:

“Teaching is like a river—you have to go with the flow. Some parts are rougher than others, and success comes from being flexible and adapting along the way.”

When asked how she hopes students will remember her, her answer is simple and heartfelt.

“I want them to remember that I cared about them—that I celebrated their successes and made learning fun,” she says. “I want school to be a place where they feel safe, encouraged, and happy to be themselves.”

For New Haven families, her story reflects what defines the district: experienced educators who build strong relationships, innovative programs like New Haven Academy, and a shared commitment to helping every student succeed.

Whether in a classroom or through a screen, her impact continues: one child, one family, and one moment of growth at a time.



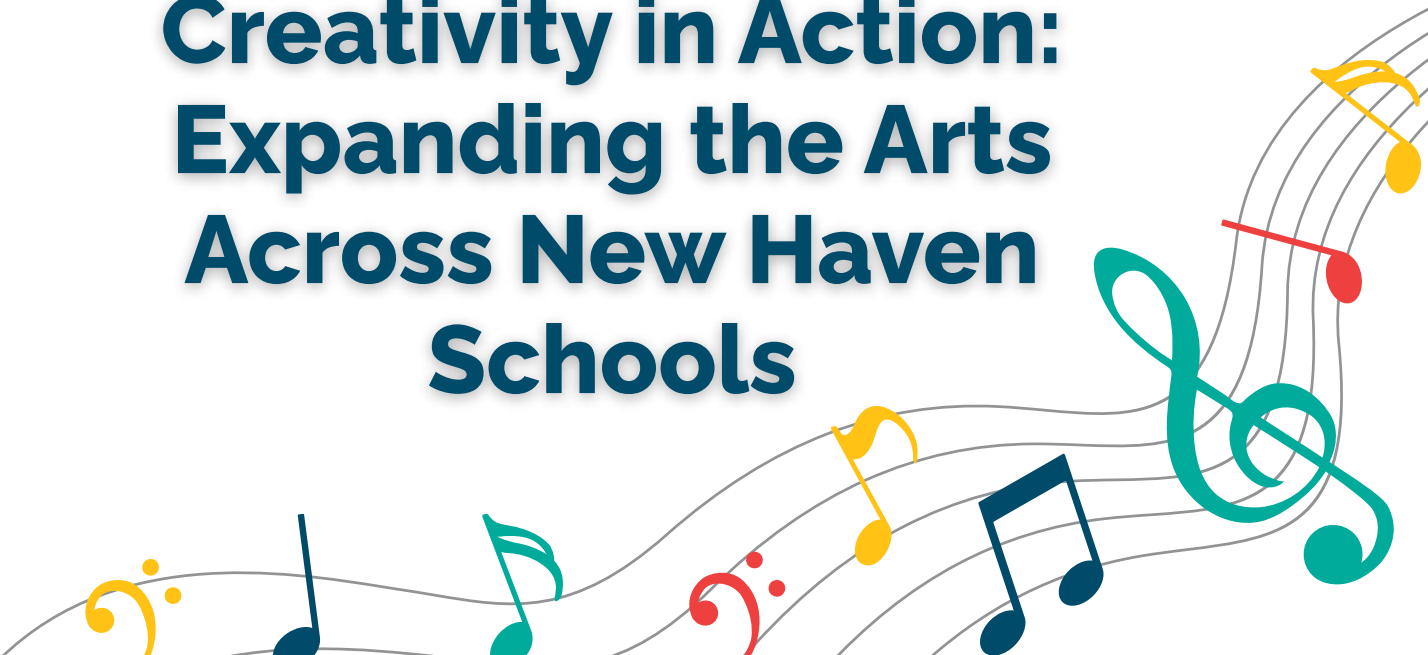
*“Teaching is like a river; you have to go with the flow.”*





# Proposition 28 Art and Music

**Creativity in Action:  
Expanding the Arts  
Across New Haven  
Schools**



On any given afternoon across New Haven Unified School District, creativity is alive and thriving. At one school, students rehearse harmonies in choir. At another, they design and program robots. In classrooms across the district, students are writing poetry, learning cultural dances, composing music, and creating films. These opportunities are made possible in part through Proposition 28.

Approved by California voters in 2022, Proposition 28 provides ongoing, dedicated funding to expand arts and music education in public schools. The goal is simple but powerful. It ensures that all students have access to meaningful arts experiences that foster creativity, confidence, and connection to school. These programs support a wide range of artistic disciplines, including visual arts, music, dance, theater, media arts, and emerging creative technologies.

Across New Haven schools, students are embracing these opportunities in ways that reflect both their creativity and their identities.

At Alvarado Elementary, students participate in programs such as Show Choir, Filipino dance, Bollywood dance, and spoken word poetry. Others are learning percussion and robotics coding, blending artistic creativity with technical skills. At Hillview Crest Elementary, students express themselves through hip-hop dance, guitar, choir, and embroidery, discovering new ways to focus their energy and creativity.



Music fills classrooms at Eastin Elementary and Kitayama Elementary, where students learn to play instruments such as ukulele and recorder while building confidence through choir and dance. At Guy Emanuele Elementary, students combine music and technology through choir, cultural dance, and robotics programs, strengthening both creative and problem-solving skills.

For students at Pioneer Elementary, visual arts and makerspace activities offer opportunities to design, build, and experiment. Soon, students will also explore animatronics, bringing their creative ideas to life through engineering and design. At Searles Elementary, students are creating original short films through the Youth Cinema Project. They work alongside industry professionals and see their ideas come to life on screen.

These creative pathways continue as students move into middle school. At Cesar Chavez Middle School, students participate in mariachi, jazz ensemble, choir, and percussion, while also exploring animatronics and digital media. At Itliong-Vera Cruz Middle School, students are learning storytelling and filmmaking skills through the Youth Cinema Project and developing their musical abilities through band and choir.





At the high school level, students expand their artistic talents even further. At James Logan High School, dance and choir students work directly with professional choreographers. Art students participate in the Heroes of Color program, creating and showcasing their artwork while learning entrepreneurial skills. At Conley-Caraballo High School, students celebrate culture and creativity through the Aztec Drum and Dance Club. They also contribute to campus beautification by designing and painting murals.

These experiences do more than teach artistic skills. They help students find their voices, build confidence, and connect more deeply with their school community. Through music, art, dance, and media, students learn discipline, collaboration, and creative problem-solving. These skills support their success both inside and outside the classroom.

Proposition 28 reflects a statewide commitment to ensuring that arts education is an essential part of learning for all students. In the New Haven Unified School District, that commitment is already visible in classrooms, performances, and creative projects across every school.

As students sing, build, perform, and create, they are discovering new ways to express themselves and new possibilities for their future.





Logan  
Athletics



Winter  
25-26



As winter athletics move into the postseason, James Logan High School's student-athletes continue to demonstrate what it means to compete with pride, resilience, and heart. From championship mats to packed gymnasiums and hard-fought league matches, Logan's winter teams are building on a strong tradition of excellence while shaping a promising future.

## Wrestling: A Championship Standard

The Logan wrestling program continues to set the bar high. Both the boys' and girls' teams have enjoyed an outstanding season marked by consistent podium finishes and strong team performances across Boys Varsity, Boys JV, and Girls competitions.

That success carried into the postseason, where both squads earned third-place finishes at the NCS Dual Team Championships. For the boys, the finish marked their first NCS Dual Meet pennant since 2022. For the girls, it was a milestone achievement, earning a pennant in their first-ever appearance at the NCS Dual Meet Championships.

Adding to the excitement, Logan will host the first-ever combined NCS Championships for both boys and girls on February 20–21 in the Pavilion, making history while continuing their championship run.



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# Girls Soccer: Competing with Heart



The Logan girls' soccer program has battled through a demanding league schedule with resilience and unity. With a roster blending experienced seniors and emerging underclassmen, the Colts have embraced a team-first mentality and represented Logan with pride at every match.

Both Varsity and JV remain in contention for league titles, and Varsity has positioned itself for a potential NCS playoff berth. The team also earned recognition in the weekly Top 10 rankings by 49ers Cal-Hi Sports, a testament to their consistency and performance against tough competition

Beyond the field, players have balanced rigorous practice schedules, travel, and academic responsibilities, exemplifying what it truly means to be student-athletes. Senior Night on February 12 will celebrate the graduating players and their years of commitment to Logan and the New Haven community.



# Boys Soccer: Building the Next Chapter

Following a Mission Valley Athletic League championship run last season, Logan Boys Soccer entered the new year with momentum and renewed purpose. Although the graduation of 13 seniors marked a significant transition, returning players have stepped into leadership roles while mentoring a talented group of underclassmen.

With eight returning varsity players joined by 14 newcomers, including 12 underclassmen, the team is blending experience and youth as it builds toward sustained success. The focus remains on daily growth, honoring last year's championship legacy, and continuing to compete at a high level in the Mission Valley Athletic League.



# Girls Basketball: Competing Among the Best

The Logan Varsity Girls Basketball team challenged itself this season with one of the toughest non-league schedules in NCS, competing in prestigious tournaments such as the Peyo Classic, Justin-Siena Christmas Classic, and West Coast Jamboree.

Senior captain Iwalani Lealao and junior captains Mauriah McHenry and Momoka Johnson have led the team with energy and determination. Iwalani currently averages 15 points per game, along with contributions across assists, steals, and rebounds

At the Junior Varsity level, the team captured the championship at the Zoe Inciong Memorial JV Tournament. Freshman Alainna Lacandazon earned Tournament MVP honors, while several teammates were named to the All-Tournament Team.

Despite injuries and adversity, the Varsity squad looks ahead with confidence as it prepares for postseason competition.



# Boys Basketball: A Program on the Rise



Logan Boys Basketball has defined its season through grit, growth, and belief. With just four returning players, a young and determined group has embraced the challenge of competing in tight contests, with many preseason games decided by three possessions or fewer.

That experience has paid dividends in league play. The team has already surpassed last season's win total and is pushing toward another NCS playoff appearance. Close games are no longer moments of uncertainty but opportunities for this squad to thrive.

With only two seniors graduating, the future looks bright. Confidence is building, experience is accumulating, and the foundation for continued success is firmly in place.



From championship wrestling mats to soccer pitches and packed gymnasiums, Logan's winter athletes continue to represent the New Haven community with excellence, resilience, and pride. As postseason competition intensifies, one thing remains clear: the Colts compete not only to win, but to uphold a tradition of commitment, character, and community.



Logan Athletics • James Logan HIGH SCHOOL • Winter 25-26



