



# THE Write Start

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE LACOE HEAD START AND STATE PRESCHOOL COMMUNITY

## Executive Director's Message: A New Chapter

Now that we're entering our third year of living with COVID, I'd like to ask our whole Head Start and Early Learning family to recommit yourself to starting each day with kindness and empathy. These last two turbulent years have been stressful and exhausting, for you and for all those around you. More than ever, we need to open our minds to see beyond ourselves and recognize that everyone is dealing with challenges in their own way. It's not easy, but we will get through this.



Keesha Woods

I'd also like to take this opportunity to announce that I will be retiring at the end of the 2021-22 program year. It has been the honor of my life to serve the children of LA County with you—an amazing journey that I will forever be grateful for.

I started my journey with LACOE and Head Start in 1999, and was chosen as Executive Director in 2011. During this time, we have gone through many ebbs and flows. We were the first grantee selected by the Office of Head Start to re compete our grant, and the first to successfully defend that competition.

We re-created major service delivery systems to ensure that all of our children are school ready, as demonstrated in our 2017 CLASS scores, where we set a new precedent for Region IX grantees by achieving a 3.43 score in Instructional Support. In 2016, we received an exemplary federal review report—absolutely no findings in facilities and safe environments (across 500 classrooms visited), no findings in fiscal management, and no findings in ERSEA. Amazing.

Our work has continued to exceed all expectations as we navigate the COVID pandemic. We have continually adapted and never stopped serving children and families throughout the heightened stages of the pandemic. I did not do this alone. As Executive Director, I am honored to have supported each of you in the work you do to improve the lives of children and families.

My early learning journey is not over, but it is time to step aside for the next generation of leaders to take up this mantle. Remember, we only have this one chance with each of our babies, and what you do each day makes a difference. You may not see the effect today, you may never see it yourself, but you can know that the child's life is improved forever.

## The Good of Green Spaces

As springtime approaches, our minds are drawn to the activities of the outdoors, flowers blooming, birds singing. In her article "Why Kids Need to Spend Time in Nature" ([childmind.org/article/why-kids-need-to-spend-time-in-nature/](http://childmind.org/article/why-kids-need-to-spend-time-in-nature/)), Danielle Cohen talks about many benefits associated with time spent outdoors.

Here are a few of those rewards:

- Children who spend time outdoors show improvements to their cognitive functioning and overall mood. Unstructured outdoor play can improve children's confidence, imagination, and creativity.
- The sights, sounds, smells, and textures of the outdoors offer children's brains new and different

forms of stimulation. The increased physical activity associated with the outdoors is good for the body and has been known to sharpen the mind.

- In addition, time spent in the outdoors can generate feelings of pleasure, reducing levels of stress and anxiety. Los Angeles County ([parks.lacounty.gov](http://parks.lacounty.gov)) offers opportunities for outdoor adventure in local green spaces and parks as well as beaches, mountains, and deserts, each of which boasts its own unique encounter with nature.

When you can't go in-person, try a virtual visit on for size, like this excerpt from Moving Art production of Forests, a film by Louie Schwartzberg:

[youtu.be/nBH1v7UiWys](https://youtu.be/nBH1v7UiWys).

## The 2021 Golden Apple Awards: Honoring Outstanding Early Educators

Two exceptional early educators are the recipients of LACOE's eighth annual Golden Apple Awards for excellence in teaching and leadership: Natalie Casillas of Mountain View SD and Arleen Lujan of El Monte City SD.

Casillas, an Early Head Start teacher, was the first Early Head Start teacher for Mountain View SD, where she has been teaching for more than eight years. She currently works with infants and toddlers with different learning abilities, dual language learners, and expectant mothers.



Natalie Casillas

Dr. Aileen La Corte, Principal of Preschool Programs at Mountain View SD, stated that during home visits, Casillas "becomes a member of the family by teaching the mother and child as a team." Casillas is also a role model and resource to her families. One parent told the program director, "Due to Ms. Natalie's encouragement, I want to become a teacher one day, and Ms. Natalie has provided me the resources and support to enroll in college."

Lujan, a Head Start preschool teacher, was recognized for being a role model and mentor to her fellow teachers as well as ensuring all children and families, including children with different learning abilities and dual language learners, receive high-quality services.

Guillermina Diaz-Huerta, Child Development Supervisor for El Monte City School District, noted that Lujan has "served her community and taught children to learn with enthusiasm, take every opportunity as a moment to thrive, and be the best they can be." Diaz-Huerta explained that Lujan also promotes acceptance and kindness in her classroom by implementing strategies like the "peace table" where children are encouraged to talk about their differences, empathize with each other, compromise, and/or dispute their differences with the ultimate goal of problem solving.

A committee of child development and education experts selected this year's recipients based on

excellence in showing dedication to children, creating positive environments, and adapting to challenges to serve children and families.



Arleen Lujan

County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Debra Duardo thanked both recipients for their work to "close the opportunity gap to give all children a chance to succeed in school and in life." County Board of Education President Betty Forrester commended their "perseverance, creativity, and dedication throughout this challenging time."

"The pandemic has been a constant reminder not only of how challenging the teaching profession can be, but also just how vital great

educators are to all of our children, our parents, and our community, starting with our very youngest," noted Keesha Woods, LACOE Head Start and Early Learning Executive Director, during the awards ceremony. "Early learning has never paused during the pandemic. Whatever happens, our teachers have adapted to keep providing the best services possible to children and families."

The awards were presented during the January 11 meeting of the Los Angeles County Board of Education. LACOE awarded each recipient with \$500 in classroom supplies from Lakeshore Learning, which also donated \$300 worth of materials to each awardee.

The two Golden Apple winners were selected from a remarkable group of dedicated teachers, including:

- **Elena Aldana (Garvey SD)**
- **Maria Castillo (Foundation for Early Childhood Education, Inc.)**
- **Mabel Figueroa (Bassett USD)**
- **Carolina Garcia (Garvey SD)**
- **Diane Gonzalez (Bassett USD)**
- **Claudia Guzman (Para Los Niños)**
- **Jazmin Leal (Para Los Niños)**
- **Maria Nava (Foundation for Early Childhood Education, Inc.)**
- **Noemi Ochoa (Mountain View SD)**

## Sonia Gonzalez-Urbe: From the Classroom to the Page!

Our teachers have the important job of inspiring and collaborating with parents to provide the best educational experience for the children in their care. Many use their experiences to motivate outside the classroom as well.

Sonia Gonzalez-Urbe is a teacher at PACE's Aloha Learning Center. Here is her story.

### What is your teaching history?

I began working with children in 1998, as an AmeriCorps member with the Los Angeles Conservation Corps Clean and Green program. I worked with middle school children and received a scholarship from then Vice President Al Gore for my community projects around the City of LA. I was a teacher's assistant/home visitor/parent advocate for ABC Child Development. I became a chef in 2004, and I worked at the Ritz-Carlton until I had a knee injury. I got back to teaching in 2007 and then started with PACE. I received my BA in 2012 and became a teacher.



### We heard you wrote a book. What is the title and where can it be purchased?

"I Think My Teacher Is Crazy" is currently available on Amazon.

### What was your motivation for writing the book?

My son Vicente was my motivation, because when he was very little he would always ask me about my work. A few years ago, I got really sick and I decided to write a book about my experience teaching preschoolers.

### What challenges did you face writing the book?

It was difficult picking the right situations or stories that happened in the classroom, to make the book funny and exciting. I wanted the book to bring out what really happens sometimes in a preschool classroom.

### How did you overcome those challenges?

Since this book project was a family project, I made a list of situations that had happened in my classes, and had my own kids pick the situations that I would put in the book.

### What advice would you give to others that want to author/publish a book?

Be patient and get organized, this way you do not get overwhelmed with the process.

## HSEL Resource Center Update

LACOE Head Start and Early Learning Division (HSEL) is focused on creating a safe and welcoming space for everyone! For your health and the health of others, we ask that you please familiarize yourself with our new safety measures. LACOE HSEL Resource Center will require delegate agency employees/parents to show proof of full COVID-19 vaccination OR proof of negative COVID-19 test result (viral tests must be no more than 3 days before your planned visit to the library).

We are also excited to announce that the LACOE HSEL Resource Center repairs have been completed. Please visit our Resource Center page at <https://hselresourcecenter.library.site> to prepare your visit to the library and for updates on operating hours. For any questions, please contact us at (562) 401-5332, mail to: [HS\\_Resourcecenter@lacoedu](mailto:HS_Resourcecenter@lacoedu)



## LACOE Immigration Resources

LACOE regularly updates resources on immigration issues that affect our school communities.

Please visit: [www.lacoedu/Home/Immigrant-Relations](http://www.lacoedu/Home/Immigrant-Relations)

For social media, visit: [@lacoemrel](https://www.facebook.com/lacoemrel) on Facebook and Twitter.

**Important Dates to Remember  
April – May 2022**

April	National Child Abuse Prevention Month
April	World Autism Month
Apr 2	World Autism Awareness Day
Apr 7	Delegate Agency Directors and Managers Meeting
Apr 12	Policy Council Meeting
Apr 21	Delegate Agency Directors and Managers Meeting
Apr 23–24	Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, Los Angeles, CA
May	Healthy Vision Month
May	Mental Health Awareness Month
May 2–5	NHSA National Head Start Conference, Baltimore, MD
May 2–6	Teacher Appreciation Week
May 3	Teacher Appreciation Day
May 5	Delegate Agency Directors and Managers Meeting
May 9–11	Head Start California Managers & Directors Institute, Sacramento, CA
May 10	Policy Council Meeting
May 19	Delegate Agency Directors and Managers Meeting
May 30	Memorial Day—LACOE Offices Closed

**Write Start Submissions**

The Write Start welcomes your articles pertaining to Head Start and Early Learning Division activities and events. Please submit them to [thewritestart@lacoedu.edu](mailto:thewritestart@lacoedu.edu). The deadline for the next edition is **Friday, April 15, 2022.**

**Los Angeles County Office of Education  
Head Start and Early Learning Division  
is now on...**



Events, parenting tips, developmental milestones, and more... LACOE Head Start and Early Learning Division is your reliable source for early childhood education and early care information.

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<https://www.facebook.com/lacoehheadstart/>

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**April Is National Stress Awareness Month**

Here are three stress-reducing habits that are the cornerstone to a happy, healthy life.

- 1. Eating a diet full of fresh, whole foods** helps the body combat stress naturally. Avoid stimulants like caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine that can amplify stress, interfere with sleep, and worsen the effects stress has on the body.
- 2. Getting the recommended amount of exercise** lowers blood pressure and provides a healthy outlet to relieve stress. Try 30 minutes of moderate activity, five days a week, such as walking, jogging, and swimming.
- 3. Establishing a healthy sleeping routine** makes it easier to deal with stressful situations and reduces anxiety and depression. Turn off all electronics at least 30 minutes prior to going to bed and try to establish a calming nighttime ritual to signal your mind to relax, such as reading or meditating.

Adapted from "April Is National Stress Awareness Month: 7 Tips for Preventing and Managing Stress," [www.bioiq.com/7-tips-for-preventing-and-managing-stress/](http://www.bioiq.com/7-tips-for-preventing-and-managing-stress/)

An official newsletter of the Los Angeles County Office of Education's Head Start and Early Learning Division, 10100 Pioneer Blvd., Ste. 325, Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670 (562/940-1770). **prekkid.org.** **Superintendent:** Debra Duardo. **Board of Education:** Betty Forrester, President; James Cross, Vice President; Judy Abdo; Yvonne Chan; R. Michael Dutton; Stanley L. Johnson, Jr.; and Monte E. Perez. **Executive Director:** Keesha Woods. Produced by the LACOE Communications Department in partnership with the Head Start and Early Learning Division Write Start Team. **Contributing writers for this issue:** Danee Jones-Mitchell, Colin Legerton, Dawn Meggerson, Stephaney Roy, Gabriela Trejo, and Keesha Woods. **Copy editor:** Colin Legerton. **Graphics/layout:** John Paster.