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AESA Honors Dr. Paul Gothold and Dr. Debra Duardo with Justus A. Prentice Award for their Efforts to Provide Educational Services for Migrant Children

Dr. Paul Gothold, Superintendent of the San Diego County Office of Education and Dr. Debra Duardo, Superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, have been named winners of this year's Justus A. Prentice Award presented by the Association of Educational Service Agencies (AESAs). The award was presented by John Bass, AESA COO, at the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association fall membership meeting in San Francisco, California.

The Justus A. Prentice Award is presented annually in recognition of contributions through executive leadership in the advancement of regional educational service agency programs at the regional, state, and national levels. Gothold and Duardo were selected because of their efforts in setting up educational services for migrant children being held in emergency intake centers as immigration levels surged to record numbers.

The first such center was established at the San Diego Convention Center in San Diego, California. Since March, 2021, about 1,450 unaccompanied children between the ages of 5 and 17 who have traveled to the United States from countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, have been receiving a quality education via the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE). SDCOE was uniquely positioned to do this work, having operated the regional migrant education program, and having experience working with unaccompanied immigrant youth through various programs that they offer. The education was guaranteed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1982 Plyler vs. Doe ruling, which forbids states from denying students a free public education because of their immigration status.

Under Gothold's direction the SDCOE set up Futuro Brillante, or Bright Future, a program staffed by their own employees and contractors. In a matter of days, the program was up and running with staff developing curricula in English and Spanish, printing and delivering instructional materials to the center and providing other types of support.

Duardo led a similar program that was set up in Los Angeles a week after officials were notified that migrant students would be coming. The first site was at the Long Beach Convention Center, and would temporarily house up to 1,000 children, providing housing, food, recreation and education. An additional site serving another 2,000 unaccompanied migrant children was set up in the Pomona Fairplex. In addition to having to provide thousands of children with educational services within a very short time frame, the team at Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) joined calls with the White House to better understand how to serve these children as they transitioned from overcrowded Border Patrol facilities.

In addition, LACOE staff reached out to local school districts to let them know that they were ready and willing to support any efforts to provide educational services to migrant children. The team at LACOE continues to work with all 80 Los Angeles County school districts to ensure that they are prepared to support and provide welcoming environments for any children integrating into their communities and enrolling in their schools.

Gothold and Duardo were nominated for the award by Karen Stapf Walters, Executive Director of the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association with supporting nominations provided by Nathan Fletcher, Chair of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, and Hilda Solis, Chair of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

In her nomination letter, Walters noted that “nothing of this caliber and in this large numbers had ever been asked of our county offices of education” yet Gothold and Duardo responded quickly and without hesitation. The fact that they addressed this challenge while also facing the educational challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic made the achievement even more remarkable, Walters said.

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