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Bonita Unified's Gladstone Elementary School Joins Elite Group of California Distinguished Schools

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – Gladstone Elementary has earned its first-ever California Distinguished School recognition from the California Department of Education (CDE), marking the 21st time in Bonita Unified history a District school has received the prestigious honor for closing the achievement gap and demonstrating exceptional student performance.

This year, 336 elementary schools received the California Distinguished School award, putting the Griffins in the top 6% of elementary schools in the state. The CDE uses multiple metrics to select California Distinguished Schools each year, such as chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, and scores in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics, as measured on the California School Dashboard.

"Our success belongs to every member of our school community—students, teachers, staff, and families," Gladstone Elementary principal Phil Heng said. When Heng asked his second-grade team how they felt about receiving the award, they responded, "We have always felt we have been a California Distinguished School by modeling the traits and expectations, but now the general public and surrounding communities will know as well."

With a growth of 14 points compared to last year, Gladstone Elementary reached 33.1 points above standard in ELA, according to the California School Dashboard. Math scores also climbed by 18.9 points, reaching 23 points above the standard.

Gladstone's gains in state testing reflect instruction through small-group learning, particularly in early literacy and foundational math skills, Heng said. Teachers consistently differentiate lessons to match student needs, using ongoing assessment data and observations to adapt instruction in real time.

This approach is especially apparent in reading instruction, where students are given time and space to master essential skills at their own pace. The school also integrates programs like the Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS) to further support early literacy development.

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“At our school, identifying and supporting struggling students is a team effort. We use data and observations to flag concerns early—looking at assessment results, attendance, behavior, and class engagement. We bring those observations to data team meetings, where we focus on the whole child, addressing both academic and social-emotional needs,” said Tracy Pang, a fifth-grade teacher at Gladstone. “A student who feels safe and supported is more likely to take academic risks. Monitoring progress, keeping families involved, and staying flexible has been key to closing achievement gaps.”

Hands-on learning also plays a critical role in Gladstone’s math instruction. Educators incorporate daily math talks, manipulatives, and real-world scenarios to build deeper conceptual understanding and confidence among students. Staff credit these practices—combined with a strong culture of collaboration and mentoring between veteran and new teachers—as essential drivers of student success.

Beyond academics, Gladstone’s leadership focuses on fostering a positive school culture through campus events and community-building activities. From transitional kindergarten to fifth grade, the school hosts student-led assemblies, field trips, and special visits from guest speakers. These events promote student engagement and belonging and support social-emotional development, helping to create a welcoming and supportive learning environment.

PHOTOS:

BUSD_GLADSTONE_DISTINGUISHED1: A Gladstone Elementary teacher’s aide checks in with her students during a lesson. Gladstone Elementary earned its first-ever California Distinguished School award this year, an effort that is credited to hands-on and small-group learning, as well as the school’s collaborative teaching staff.

BUSD_GLADSTONE_DISTINGUISHED2: Gladstone Elementary teacher Suzanne Goddard guides a student through a virtual activity. Through interactive classroom lessons, Gladstone Elementary fosters academic growth and student confidence and further development in literacy.

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