



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Feb. 13, 2026 CONTACT: Andrea Garcia PHONE: 909-447-2403

Whittier Union Senior Receives Award of Merit for Resilience, Overcoming Disability

WHITTIER – Whittier High School senior Guadalupe Duenas is poised to be the first member of her family to attend a four-year university, with a plan to major in child development and a goal of becoming an elementary school teacher, milestones she could never have imagined as a young English learner with a speech and language impairment and Specific Learning Disability.

Entering high school, Duenas began with a fully modified curriculum but quickly challenged herself to pursue a college prep track, leading to a seven-period day that includes Whittier High's Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC), math analysis, and advanced art and culinary courses. This schedule allows Duenas to graduate with all her A-G requirements fulfilled, an achievement that has impressed many of her teachers. Duenas has already been accepted to Whittier College, Cal State Fullerton, Cal State Dominguez Hills, and Cal State Los Angeles.

For her resilience in overcoming a disability and tenacity in ensuring her path to higher education, Duenas received an Award of Merit from the Whittier Union Board of Trustees, during its Feb. 10 Board meeting.

"I would like to thank the District and Whittier High School for selecting me for this honor," Duenas said. "Thank you to all my teachers, especially Mr. Chris Dalley, Ms. Christy King, and Ms. Diana Salazar Valles, for helping me through my struggles and instilling high expectations. Most importantly, thank you to my family, especially my mom, for encouraging me to push myself out of my bubble and chase my dreams. She has never let me give up."

Throughout elementary and middle school, Duenas was supported by a small group of friends. Beginning in her junior year, Duenas stepped out of her comfort zone and initiated conversations with classmates, which led to many new friendships, and inspired her to independently complete a dual enrollment program at Río Hondo College.

Enrolling in Whittier High's APEX Learning program, Duenas was able to convert her early modified curriculum and re-apply it as college prep, ensuring she will graduate A-G eligible.

"Lupe is one of a kind," Whittier High math teacher and case manager Chris Dalley said. "She has achievements that one would view as impossible. In my 14 years as an education specialist, I have never witnessed a student go from modified classes as a freshman to all general education classes and on the A-G track as a senior."

Duenas is also a gifted artist who loves to draw and paint. Duenas' dedication to her craft has culminated in her receiving a Visual and Performing Arts medal from Whittier High.

"Lupe is extraordinarily driven. She has completely changed the way I determine A-G eligibility," Whittier High counselor Diana Salazar Valles said. "This year has been an awesome collaboration between the counselor, the case manager, and Lupe. The amazing part of this collaboration is that Lupe has really been doing all the work."

Despite the seven-period school days, Duenas still finds time to help at her family's restaurant and excel in her Work Experience program at May Flowers in Santa Fe Springs, saving every penny to help pay for her higher education.

"Lupe, your thirst for learning and your positive energy are an inspiration to all of us," Whittier High principal Andres Favela said during the meeting. "You have proven that there is no barrier high enough to stop a student who has the heart to work for their dreams. We are incredibly proud of you and look forward to seeing you continue our 'Legacy of Excellence.'"

PHOTO CAPTION

WUHSD_AWARDOFMERIT1: Whittier High School senior Guadalupe Duenas received an Award of Merit from the Whittier Union Board of Trustees on Feb. 10 for her tenacity in ensuring her path to higher education.

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OUR MISSION

The Whittier Union High School District provides all students with an engaging, quality standards-based instructional program delivered by a well-trained staff resulting in improved student achievement. Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students.

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