

Charter School Award Winners Announced

Largest Arizona Charter Support Organization Recognizes Top Charter Teachers, Leaders and Schools

Phoenix (October 6, 2015) – Arizona has emerged as a national leader in the charter movement, with numerous teachers, administrators, and schools who drive the success of our charter schools. The Arizona Charter Schools Association is pleased to honor these exemplary educators with our 2015 Charter Awards, which annually recognizes the top charter teacher, leader, business manager and school in Arizona. The award winners highlight some of the best of what Arizona’s charter movement has to offer.

This year, the Association is also honoring Greg and Pam Miller, founders of Challenge Charter School in Glendale and pioneers of Arizona’s charter movement, with a Lifetime Achievement Award. The Millers were an integral part of the political discussions leading up to the original successful Arizona charter school legislation.

Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Charter Education –



Greg and Pam Miller, founders, Challenge Charter School. Greg and Pam Miller lead Challenge Charter School in Glendale, but their contribution to Arizona’s charter movement, and the state’s overall education landscape, extends far beyond the boundaries of their campus. The Millers were involved in the first conversations that led to the passage of Arizona’s charter school law in 1995. Later, they collaborated with State Rep. John Allen to ask voters to allow a charter school operator to serve on the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools and State Board of Education. Individually, Pam Miller, who has a banking background, previously served as President of the United Parent Council and was elected to the Paradise Valley Unified School Board. Greg Miller, a retired executive of the civil engineering & land planning industry, currently serves as President of the Arizona State Board of Education, as well as the Board’s charter school representative. Celebrating its 20th anniversary, Challenge Charter School is an A-rated school and has previously been named a National Blue Ribbon School and National Charter School of the Year by the Center for Education Reform. The Miller’s contributions are fueled by their passion for children and their own strong partnership, as evidenced by the celebration of their 44-year wedding anniversary.

2015 Charter School of the Year –



Mission Montessori Academy, a K-8 charter school serving 300 students in Scottsdale. Mission Montessori Academy, which opened as a charter in 2000, emphasizes a global education, teaching students to not only view themselves as citizens of their local communities, but of the world. Students don’t just learn this lesson in the classroom; they practice it in real life. Mission Montessori students have traveled to China, Switzerland and Rome to gain a deeper understanding of global issues and ways to help solve the world’s challenges. The students will also head to Chile this school year. These trips have allowed the students to hone their skills as peacemakers and compassionate stewards of the planet. Mission Montessori’s global education focus, along with the Montessori education philosophy, extensive professional development for teachers and strong parent engagement, supports high academic outcomes for students. As an A-rated school for three straight years, Mission Montessori has consistently ranked as one of Arizona’s highest achieving schools.

2015 Charter Transformational Leader of the Year –



Arlahee Ruiz, school leader at NFL YET College Prep Academy, a 7-12 school serving 300 students in south Phoenix. Arlahee has a connection to the school that’s rare for an administrator. Not only does she serve as NFL YET’s principal, but she also graduated from the school in 2003 after immigrating to Arizona from Ciudad Obregon, Sonora Mexico with limited English skills. Arlahee overcame those obstacles and eventually taught leadership

classes at the school before rising as an administrator. She has played a role in the school's evolution as a student and teacher, but NFL Yet's biggest transformation has occurred under her leadership. In 2006, NFL YET was labeled as an underperforming school by the state, and the school's operations and culture needed a makeover. Arlahee implemented data-driven measures to improve student achievement, including professional development on Galileo testing and quarterly staff data presentations to measure student growth, with a focus on meeting individual student needs. By 2013, the school attained an "A" grade and has maintained its status as a top performing school. Arlahee has been lauded for her collaborative approach to decision making, always including staff and families in the process. Regarding her students, she says "I want to make sure I can get to the heart, so I can get to the mind."

2015 Charter Business Leader of the Year —



Melissa Holdaway is Chief Executive Officer at Arizona Charter Academy, an A rated K-12 school serving about 800 students in Surprise. Melissa has served as the school's business leader for more than 14 years, but her influence has spread throughout the Surprise community, Phoenix metropolitan area and even the state. She is one of the most respected leaders in Arizona's charter movement, with a reputation for implementing successful business practices at her school, forming strong partnerships with government and community leaders, and showing passion and support for charter schools in general. Arizona Charter Academy consistently maintains a positive cash flow and Melissa's contract negotiating skills has allowed her to free up money to support academic needs. Earlier this year, Melissa's collaborative approach resulted in the

procurement of \$72,000 federal grant for Arizona Charter Academy and two other Surprise charter schools. The grant has allowed Melissa and other school leaders to work with Surprise city officials to study safer routes to school for their students. Melissa's leadership is one of the primary reasons Arizona Charter Academy continues to establish new partnerships and thrive while serving a high poverty demographic.

2015 Charter Teacher of the Year —



Katelyn Toci, an elementary teacher at Imagine Camelback, a K-8 charter school serving nearly 650 students. Katelyn is one of Imagine Camelback's most innovative teachers. She is known for integrating technology into her classroom, but her usage has risen above the standard internet-based textbooks and one-to-one laptop programs as seen in many schools. The forms of technology in her classroom range from online geography lessons that allow students to interact with other classes across the country, to apps that warn the class when they're making too much noise. Apple TV, apps, iPads and laptops are some of her staples. Katelyn uses technology to spark her students' natural curiosity for learning. As a result, her students are known for being some of the most prepared pupils when they enter the next grade. Katelyn's influence hasn't been limited to her students. She is known for sharing her knowledge with fellow teachers,

modeling various lessons for colleagues while helping them implement technology into their lessons. This isn't the first time she has been recognized for her teaching accomplishments. Earlier this year, Katelyn was named runner-up for Imagine Teacher of the Year, which recognizes the best teachers in the charter school's national network.

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For interview requests or if you would like to attend the Charter Awards Ceremony on Wednesday, Oct. 28, please contact Megan Gilbertson.

About the Arizona Charter Schools Association

The Arizona Charter Schools Association is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to support student achievement through high-quality charter schools, advocate for student equity and charter school autonomy, and lead Arizona charter schools as a sustainable, strong, credible organization. Arizona is home to 552 charter schools serving over 170,700 students. For more information, visit www.azcharters.org or call 602.944.0644.