

## Arizona Teacher Recognized with Rising Star Award

Arlington, Va., February XX, 2026 – Nerwin Balilu, Special Educator and ESS Department Chairperson and English Language Arts Resource Teacher with Desert Wind Middle School, received the 2026 Rising Star Special Educator of the Year Award from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). This award recognizes a CEC member teacher in the first five years of their special education career who has shown exceptional potential for leadership in teaching, service, and scholarship.

Starting at Desert Wind Middle School in 2021, Nerwin has cemented himself as mentor to his colleagues and an unwavering partner to the families he serves. He has played a key role in helping his fellow educators refine their instruction, assisting with writing IEPs, leading meaning, offering tips, and strategies, and facilitating professional development. He prioritizes open and collaborative partnerships with families to prioritize his student's success, leading to marked improvements in state assessment scores.

Nerwin was awarded the 2025 Teacher of the Year for Desert Wind Middle School and has been honored as a Desert Wind Spotlight Teacher in 2021, a MUSD Legendary Teacher in 2022, 2023, and 2024, Second Step's National Educator of the Year in 2023, and the 2025 Save Our Schools Arizona Teacher of the Year. These accolades reflect the tireless dedication and hard work Nerwin has put in to supporting his fellow educators, as well as the success of all students.

"In my many years working in education, I have never seen a more dedicated teacher. Mr. Balilu's commitment to providing individualized and differentiated instruction has had a profound impact on the academic and social-emotional growth of his students. We truly need more teachers like Mr. Balilu," shares Randy Whalen, a paraprofessional at Desert Wind Middle School.

"At every IEP meeting, he champions inclusivity, ensuring families feel heard, valued, and empowered as active participants in their child's education. His impact goes beyond keeping families informed, he equips and supports the most vital advocates for their child's growth and well-being," says Marinelle Santos, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Desert Wind Middle School

Balilu will be recognized this March, along with other CEC Professional Award recipients at the CEC Convention & Expo in Salt Lake City, Utah.

---

---

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest international professional organization dedicated to high-quality education that is inclusive and equitable for individuals with disabilities. Learn more about CEC at <https://exceptionalchildren.org/>.