

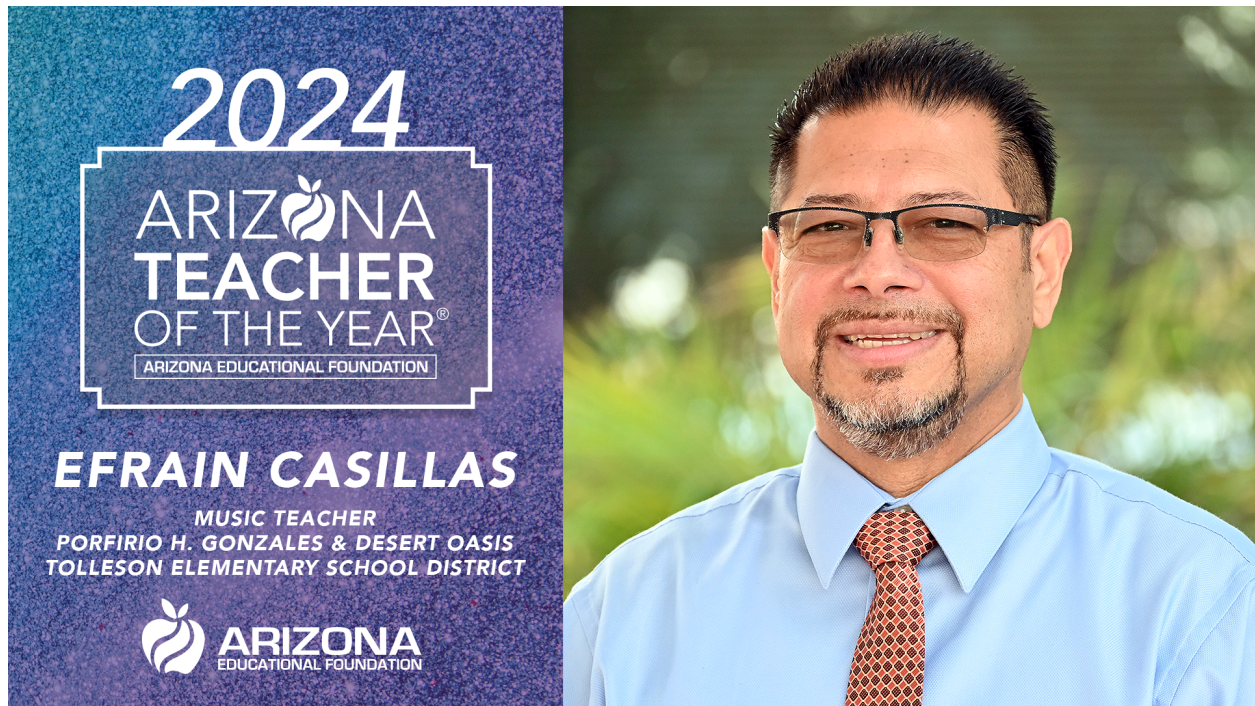


**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**Arizona Educational Foundation Announces the 2024 Arizona Teacher of the Year®**

PHOENIX, Ariz., October 14, 2023 — Today, [Arizona Educational Foundation \(AEF®\)](#) announced **Efrain Casillas**, Music teacher at Porfirio H. Gonzales Elementary and Desert Oasis Elementary, in the Tolleson Elementary School District, as the [2024 Arizona Teacher of the Year®](#). Initially, there were 15 candidates for the award, which was then narrowed down to five finalists (known as Ambassadors of Excellence). All five finalists were present during a ceremony held today at the Madison Center for the Arts in Phoenix where Casillas was announced the winner of the award. Desert Financial Executive Vice President, Cathy Graham, presented the award along with AEF's Chief Executive Officer, Kim Graham. Desert Financial has served as the presenting sponsor of the Arizona Teacher of the Year Awards for the past four years. Casillas now goes on to compete as Arizona's candidate for National Teacher of the Year.



“All of our Teacher of the Year nominees exemplify the best that Arizona has to offer in terms of educational excellence, being a role model, and inspiring students in their

community,” said Kim Graham, AEF’s Chief Executive Officer. “We are so proud of each and every one of them. AEF congratulates Efrain on being named Arizona Teacher of the Year and looks forward to him representing us in Washington, DC, as Arizona’s 2024 National Teacher of the Year candidate.”

Efrain Casillas, Coordinator of Music Programs for Tolleson Elementary School District in Tolleson, has had a tremendous impact on his students. A public-school music teacher for 22 years, he is currently teaching both general and instrumental music at two schools in the Tolleson district. He graduated with a BA in Music Performance and Education degree from Western Connecticut State University in 1999. While wearing both a classroom teacher and Department Coordinator hat at TESD, he created the district’s first Mariachi, Jazz, Marching, Concert and Latin Jazz bands. The Tolleson Elementary School Mariachi band has competed at the Tucson Mariachi International Conference and won 1st and 2nd place for the Choice Awards for 3 years in a row. They’ve also performed at Disneyland and in the Disneyland Parade. His Latin Jazz Band opened for Pete Escobedo and played alongside him. They have also participated in the Fiesta Bowl Parade for three consecutive years.

Casillas is an active member of the Arizona Music Education Association and a candidate for National Board Certification (NBCT). He has also been a presenter for the National Symposium of Multicultural Music at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville in 2004. In 2015, Casillas was selected for TESD’s Teacher of the Year and nominated for the Life Changer Award in 2017. He was selected to receive the Esperanza Award from Chicanos Por La Causa in 2018, and the Music Teachers of Excellence from the Country Music Foundation. His dedication as a music teacher also had him featured at the Kelly Clarkson Show in 2020.

The prize package for the Arizona Teacher of the Year includes \$15,000 from the Arizona Educational Foundation and travel to National Teacher of the Year events, including a trip to the White House to meet the President and a weeklong trip to International Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama. Casillas will also be considered for an honorary doctorate from Northern Arizona University.

The 2024 Arizona Teacher of the Year and four Ambassadors for Excellence also receive professional speech and media training to aid them in delivering hundreds of presentations during their year of recognition. AEF also has generous partners who contribute toward a [prize package](#) for the top ten teachers including a free membership to Treasures4Teachers, scholarships from the Arizona K12 Center to pursue National Board Certification, the opportunity to ride on the APS fire engine during the Fiesta Bowl Parade, and a “Fiesta Bowl Experience” package including tickets and on-field recognition provided

by Fiesta Bowl Charities. In addition to serving as presenting sponsor of the ceremony, Desert Financial Credit Union provides each teacher with an iPad and keyboard case.

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### **About Arizona Educational Foundation, AEF®**

The mission of AEF is to celebrate excellence and cultivate equity in Pre-K-12th grade Arizona public education. This is accomplished through a variety of programs for teachers, administrators, and students. Some programs shine a spotlight on excellence; others provide a stepping stone to help support schools and educators on the road to awesomeness. In addition to the [Arizona Teacher of the Year®](#) program, AEF also coordinates the [Arizona State Spelling Bee](#), the [A+ School of Excellence® Award](#), the [Principals Leadership Academy of Arizona](#), [teachSTEM](#), [Our World](#), and [Take Your Legislator to School](#). AEF was founded in 1983, by then State Superintendent of Public Education, [Carolyn Warner](#), who felt a nonprofit needed to be established to champion public education and recognize the great work of public school educators. AEF annually reaches over 500,000 students, teachers and administrators throughout Arizona. **For more information visit [www.azedfoundation.org](http://www.azedfoundation.org), or contact [info@azedfoundation.org](mailto:info@azedfoundation.org).**

### **About Desert Financial Credit Union**

Celebrating more than 84 years in Arizona, Desert Financial is the state's most trusted local credit union with over \$8 billion in assets, 400,000+ members and 45 branches. Membership eligibility is open across Arizona with contactless solutions making it easy to click, call or come in. As a not-for-profit cooperative, Desert Financial takes pride in sharing success. In 2023, members received \$16 million in dividends via the Member Giveback Bonus, and the credit union became the official retail banking partner of Arizona State University. Federally insured by NCUA. Learn more at [www.desertfinancial.com](http://www.desertfinancial.com).