

NEWS RELEASE

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Awards ceremony honors SCCOE students with special needs, retiring WorkAbility Director

SAN JOSE, CA – Bill Thiemann, a teacher for the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE), believes “Holden Pence is everything that you want in an employee. Holden is motivated, willing to learn, independent, reliable, flexible, never complains, does everything you ask, and is just a model student and model employee.”

Pence was one of 11 students honored as the Class Worker of the Year during the [Workability I Awards Ceremony](#) on Tuesday at the Ridder Park office. Through a grant from the California Department of Education, the SCCOE Special Education Workability I program assists students aged 16 to 22 with the transition from school to work by providing comprehensive vocational training and work experience. The celebration is held annually to honor students in Special Education who participate in WorkAbility.

“This year, 80 students participated in day training,” said Nancy Guerrero, retiring Director of Special Education Projects. “The students are trained by their classroom staff, then job training specialists, and then eventually to other employees in a place of business. We’re very thankful to those employers that give us the opportunity to use their sites for training.”

“Over 200 students participated in work-related activities, such as a job club, career fair, or transition fair,” she added.

Through WorkAbility, Guerrero said this year students received jobs at Safeway, AMC Theatres, Campbell Brewing Company, Walgreens, and Ray’s Built Tuff Gym.

“I think the program provides our students with moderate to severe disabilities the opportunity to have relevant and meaningful experience in work education,” said Aubrey Jimenez, one of four SCCOE teachers from the Campbell Community Center.

Student Kaelyn Silva talked about how the program has helped her develop great foundational job skills after being honored by Sung Park, a teacher at San Jose City College, as the Class Worker of the Year. Through the program, she has learned how to effectively apply for jobs and prepare and participate in interviews.

After the students were acknowledged for their hard work and persistence, Cynthia Valadez, Special Education Program Coordinator, surprised Guerrero with recognition as the Worker of the Year. Valadez reflected on the last 25 years she has spent working with Guerrero, tearing up over her upcoming retirement.

“One of the first things she told me was, ‘Let’s learn together,’” Valadez said. “So I have always learned with her, and I know that all of us are just honored to give her this award today.”

Students from each of the classrooms presented Guerrero with different gifts of appreciation, including cards, original artwork, and plants. But the greatest gift of all, she said, is what it has meant to be a part of WorkAbility.

“It’s been truly my pleasure to work with WorkAbility all these years; see all these students get jobs,” she said. “I started to be a WorkAbility teacher because I was concerned about where our students went after they left our wonderful programs. ... So I worked with the program for all these years to help develop options for students to move on and lead that productive adult life.”

“I’ve enjoyed it, I’ve loved the people I’ve met. It’s been a wonderful experience and thank you so much for letting me be a part of it,” Guerrero said.

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