



CUSD Insider



Don Juan Avila Middle School (DJAMS) was recently recognized as one of the 2023 California Schools to Watch by the California League of Educators, a professional development organization. Photo provided by Amy Varricchio

Don Juan Avila Middle School becomes a School to Watch

By CUSD Insider

[Don Juan Avila Middle School \(DJAMS\)](#) was recently recognized as one of the [2023 California Schools to Watch by the California League of Educators](#), a professional development organization.

The Aliso Viejo campus was the only middle school in [Capistrano Unified](#) to receive the recognition, which was presented to DJAMS Principal Amy Varricchio during a conference in Monterey on March 9.

“It was a true honor to receive this recognition on behalf of the DJAMS staff. I am very proud of the work the teachers and staff do on a daily basis to educate our students,” Varricchio stated. “This award allowed us to be recognized for the work done to support our students in and out of the classroom and to be recognized for our high academic achievements on local and state assessments. What was even more special was having interim Superintendent Clark Hampton, Trustee Krista Castellanos, staff members Katie Nicol and Michelle Escutia in Monterey with me to receive the award at the recognition ceremony in March.”

To be named among the Schools to Watch, DJAMS had to prove in its application that it supports the whole child through academic excellence, social equity, developmental responsiveness and systems that foster innovation, according to a news release. It also included a site visit from Schools to Watch committee members.

Varricchio added, “We have such supportive and dedicated teachers and staff members who show up each day for our students and do as our mission states: to engage, educate and empower all our students in meaningful educational opportunities.”



Don Juan Avila Middle School (DJAMS) was recently recognized as one of the 2023 California Schools to Watch by the California League of Educators, a professional development organization.

Photo provided by Amy Varricchio

The [California League of Educators](#) says its awards are unique in that all staff at the candidate school who have a credential must complete an extensive rubric, whether as a first-time applicant or reapplicant. According to the league, “This step helps school teams identify what is great at their site as well as what needs to be improved. It also develops a shared language for school improvement, buy-in for the improvement process, and ownership of the school culture among the staff.”

In a statement, Scott Steele, director of the Schools to Watch program, added: “Schools to Watch lends itself to [social emotional learning] issues. The positive culture that is present on Schools to Watch campuses carries more weight with us than checking a box with a test score.”

Seventy-seven middle-school campuses received the Schools to Watch award, of which 36, including DJAMS, were first-time winners.

Capistrano Unified’s interim superintendent, Clark Hampton, credited the staff at DJAMS for being so well-connected with their students’ social, emotional and academic needs.

“I would chalk up the award to the high-quality teachers,” he said. “I’m very proud of Don Juan Avila Middle and all our schools with the education that we provide.”

Hampton noted that it’s admirable for the California League of Educators, which is based in Irvine, to specifically recognize middle school campuses. He said he wants to present the process of how the district’s other middle schools can apply for Schools to Watch.

“Middle school is such an important time for students in their education,” Hampton said. “It’s nice to know that there’s an organization that values middle schools because they are so critical for our students’ lives.”