

Sunnyside educator wins \$100,000 prize for excellence in teaching

[By Danyelle Khmara Arizona Daily Star](#)

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Cesar Gutierrez was in awe as he entered the Desert View High School gym on Thursday morning, greeted by bleachers full of students, his family and news crews.

The precision manufacturing teacher in Sunnyside Unified School District was a first-place recipient of a \$100,000 cash award in the 2019 Harbor Freight Tools for Schools Prize for Teaching Excellence, one of three educators nationwide to receive the honor.

“This is yours,” he said to his students after receiving the award. “It’s because of your hard work.”

An educator since 2007, Gutierrez has been teaching at Desert View since 2012. Desert View students are 80% Latino, and 90% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, according to a news release.

Sunnyside School District’s graduation rate is 77%. But Gutierrez’s students have a 100% graduation rate, and 82% of them graduate with postsecondary credit, the news release said. All of his students have taken part in work-based learning.

“I can help students understand that hard work can create opportunity, breaking a cycle of poverty,” Gutierrez says. “There is no greater joy for me than seeing my students begin to experience a sense of economic security and professional achievement.”

Gutierrez uses his connections with local employers to find students internships and pathways to jobs. His students assist with building parts for local aerospace companies, creating metal signs for businesses, and they built solar-powered golf carts, the news release said. Through a partnership with Pima Community College,

students earn up to 25 college credits, which equates to almost a full year toward an associate degree in industrial technology.

Gutierrez said his students receive the practical knowledge on what an engineer can do, and in college they'll receive the theory.

Desert View senior Ramon Cazares joined Gutierrez's class as a freshman with no idea of what he was getting into. Now, like most of the class, he plans on going into engineering. He's definitely going to college, he says, and because of the internships he got in Gutierrez's class, he'll have a job while in school.

"I don't like to think of him as a teacher," Cazares says of Gutierrez. "I like to think of him as a boss."

Cazares and the rest of the class gathered around their teacher as he accepted the award. They spend many weekends and holidays together in the shop, passionate to keep working on their projects. In class, Gutierrez is just known as G. He's like a bossy uncle who pushes them in the best way, says senior Monica Gutierrez.

Harbor Freight Tools for Schools awards more than \$1 million nationally to public high school skilled-trades teachers and programs with this yearly award that began in 2017, the news release said.

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The 2019 prize drew nearly 750 applications from 49 states. Along with Gutierrez, there were two other first-prize recipients who received \$100,000, 15 second-place winners who received \$50,000 and 32 semi-finalists who shared \$32,000 in prizes.

Desert View receives \$70,000, and Gutierrez gets \$30,000. How the school's portion will be spent isn't ironed out yet, but Gutierrez said they'll be looking at what machines they need to keep the program moving forward.

As for his portion of the money, he has no idea what he'll use it for — he's still in shock at the award. Besides the money, the nonprofit also gave Gutierrez a 30-inch, five-drawer mobile mechanic's cart full of tools.

Gutierrez says he just tries to put the same passion into his work as an educator that his students put into their work.

"Everything is for them," he said. "And in return, they make it about themselves and their futures."