For Immediate Release

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Casa Grande Middle School Named a 2026 Arizona School to Watch®

Casa Grande, Arizona (February 24, 2026) Casa Grande Middle School has been selected as a 2026 Arizona School to Watch, a prestigious designation awarded by the Arizona Association for Middle Level Education in partnership with the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform. The recognition highlights schools that demonstrate excellence in Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social Equity, and strong Organizational Structures aligned to research-based middle grades best practices.

Casa Grande Middle School's application reflected authentic, systemic growth and a clear commitment to continuous improvement. Once a school identified with challenges, CGMS has demonstrated measurable progress through intentional instructional refinement, collaborative leadership, and a renewed focus on the whole child.

A defining feature of CGMS's transformation is its innovative "Waterfall Bell Schedule." This seven-period rotating schedule ensures that no class is consistently scheduled at the beginning or end of the day, promoting equitable access to instruction, maximizing student focus and engagement, and improving student attendance. The schedule has also contributed to reduced discipline incidents by creating balance and variety in students' daily experiences.

By intentionally embedding supplemental Math and ELA blocks within the school day, CGMS ensures students receive targeted support and enrichment without sacrificing electives or co-curricular opportunities.

Beyond structures, Casa Grande Middle School has cultivated a positive, supportive school climate, built over time by a dedicated, stable staff. Strong staff longevity and low teacher turnover have allowed professional learning, PLC collaboration, and instructional systems to

deepen each year. The result is a cohesive learning community where students are known, supported, and held to high expectations.

Under the leadership of Principal Samantha Sarnowski, now in her fifth year, the school has embraced shared leadership structures, consistent communication systems, and a clear instructional vision that aligns culture and academics

Her leadership has strengthened distributed decision-making, empowered teacher leaders, and fostered a collaborative environment focused on sustained growth and adolescent development.

Dr. Robert Caplinger, State Director of Arizona Schools to Watch, praised the school's progress and coherence:

> "Casa Grande Middle School exemplifies what continuous improvement looks like in action. Their leadership has aligned systems, schedule, culture, and instruction in the service of young adolescents. The Waterfall schedule reflects thoughtful design for equity, and the positive climate cultivated by a stable, committed staff is evident throughout the school. CGMS is not simply implementing programs; they are building a sustainable middle school model grounded in relationships, rigor, and reflection."

The Schools to Watch designation is not a one-time award but a recognition of sustained excellence and commitment to growth.

Casa Grande Middle School will be formally recognized at the National Schools to Watch Conference in Washington, D.C., in June, and at the Arizona Middle Grades Summit at Arizona State University in September. Casa Grande Middle School will join a statewide and national network of exemplary middle schools dedicated to sharing best practices and advancing the success of every young adolescent.

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