

Obama picks alumnus for teaching excellence award

By [Cayla Gales](#)

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Shortly after failing third grade, Sacramento State alumnus Mark Fairbank found out he had dyslexia, but that did not stop him from eventually becoming an award-winning teacher.

President Barack Obama recently announced Fairbank is one of the 103 top science and math teachers in the country to receive the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching.

The award is a \$10,000 grant Fairbank can use at his discretion and a six-day, all-expense-paid trip to Washington D.C. to meet the president and to attend the award ceremony, which will take place in two weeks.

Even as a third-grader Fairbank knew he wanted to teach chemistry one day. So from then all the way through college, he spent extra hours studying before and after school.

"I struggled through my entire career at school. So I went to community college for three years," Fairbank said. "Then at Sac State I used to study from 6 a.m. in the morning to 10 p.m. every single day, including Saturdays and Sundays, so I could make it through."

He said he had a lot of help from his family, from his mother who read textbooks to him, to his wife and best friend who helped him type his papers.

"My parents were tremendously supportive. I would not have gotten to the place that I got if my parents had not supported me all the way through," Fairbank said. "I had a lot of people help me all the way along."

A semester after receiving his teaching credential from Sac State, Fairbank got a job teaching at Sacramento High School, then at Elk Grove High School where he worked while he was getting his master's degree from Sac State.

From there he moved to Paso Robles High School where he has been teaching physics and chemistry for the past 27 years.

"Mark is far more than just an amazing teacher. He is a terrific friend, and a leader on our campus. His integrity, honesty, work ethic, skill and knowledge are, without exaggerating, legendary in our community," said Paso Robles High School science/biology teacher Mark DiMaggio, who has known and worked with Fairbank for almost 25 years.

Fairbank demonstrates a strong dedication to his profession. He spends the first half hour of every school day with some of his students, providing them with extra help.

"He arrives at school at 5:30 a.m., and by 6 a.m. there are eight or 10 students in his classroom ready to put in extra time to prepare for an exam, finish a lab report or get help on a homework assignment. How many teachers do you know who have students voluntarily come at 6 a.m.?" DiMaggio said.

Fairbank said his experiences at Sac State inspired him to have this level of dedication to his students.

"The best professor I ever had took interest in us learning, and had a passion for the content. I'd go into his class and we would be hands on, involved, active, participating in education," Fairbank said. "He would say 'Hi' to us when we were in the hallways."

For Fairbank, teaching is not just about the curriculum, textbooks and lectures; it is more about developing strong relationships with his students and helping them grow into well-rounded human beings.

"I think what it all boils down to is relationships and how we treat other people. If you treat them with respect and honor and dignity no matter who they are, you've made a connection," Fairbank said. "If I teach them every day that the most important part of being a person is their ability to relate to others and how they react to others and that's more important than the content knowledge."

Cayla Gales can be reached at cgales@statehomet.com.

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Courtesy Photo

Sacramento State alumnus and school teacher Mark Fairbank is a recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching.

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