

THE CONNECTOR

A weekly publication of Harris County Department of Education for the HCDE Board of Trustees

WEEK OF MARCH 29, 2021

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 25

HEALTH AND SAFETY

TOP STORIES

Human Resources to launch new comprehensive employee wellness program

p.2



CSSS trainings prepare educators for active shooter incidents

p.3



Harris County teen writers, artists earn National Scholastic Art & Writing Medals and Scholarships

p.5



Of Note...



I was telling a few ELT members this week that as we age, we need to protect our bodies. We only have one vessel during our lifetime, so at some point we have to let go of certain activities and move toward other actions that support a healthy lifestyle.

That's why I am excited to see HCDE unveil a new employee wellness program, designed to spur employees to be proactive with their health and provide resources to effectively manage diseases and conditions. Human Resources originally planned to unveil this program in Spring 2020, but the pandemic sidelined these efforts and we are just now able to get it jump started again.

The new employee wellness program, in partnership with Houston Methodist, seeks to support all HCDE staff with various services designed to enhance a person's health and well-being. These services include healthy knowledge webinars, nutrition and cooking demonstrations, wellness challenges and free dietician consultations.

The program kicks off this month with wellness screenings for interested employees, tips for healthy aging and live cooking demonstrations. I look forward to seeing the benefits of this internal support program through the increased health and wellness of our staff. Houston Methodist says the program focuses on "partnering for long-term health and wellness" and I look forward to seeing the outcome of these activities over time.

I started the week with my Executive Leadership Team and several standing meetings on Monday and Tuesday. I also met this week with several of you for our quarterly updates. I appreciated and enjoyed the conversation as well as the opportunity for us to better understand varying perspectives. I had forgotten about how meaningful these one-on-one conversations can be for both myself and board members. It is amazing how much COVID restrictions disrupted the subtle best practices I have exercised throughout my career. I look forward to meeting with the rest of the trustees and getting back on schedule with some of my normal leadership habits.

This was a short week with the Spring holiday tomorrow, so my time was primarily consumed with meetings about ongoing projects and initiatives including the legislative session and the budget. I also met with Human Resources to discuss the process for hiring your new board secretary. I look forward to discussing this with the board's hiring committee next week.

The meteorologists agree this weekend should be a beautiful specimen of spring weather so I hope you get a chance to enjoy it with some fun outdoor activities. Have a wonderful three-day weekend and Easter holiday.

PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

Human Resources to launch new comprehensive employee wellness program in April

This month, Human Resources will unveil their new wellness program in partnership with Houston Methodist Wellness Services.

The comprehensive program will offer various in-person and virtual events as well as adult health education programs centered around mental and physical health for employees centered around a monthly topic. Events will include experiences such as free biometric screenings, lunch-and-learn webinars, health challenges, and free consultations with registered dietitians.

“The goal is to create a healthy workforce,” said Executive Director of Human Resources Natasha Truitt. “We want to foster a health-conscious work environment. People do such a great job taking care of others that we don’t make ourselves the priority. Our hope is for [our employees] to prioritize their mental and physical health. You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of others.”

The program begins with the theme “Spring into Wellness.” The first event, a webinar titled “Growing Healthy Habits,” will be held on April 13. During this session, attendees will broaden their definition of gardening by learning about composting, sustainable food systems, and the various ways gardens improve health and wellbeing.

The first free wellness screenings will be offered at the Irvington building in room 100 from 8 a.m. to noon on April 20 and at the North Post Oak building in room 1010 from 8 a.m. to noon on April 22. These confidential screenings will include lipid, glucose, blood pressure testing, and wellness coaching based on each individuals’ results.

For more information and HCDE’s new wellness program, please contact Ashley Barker in Human Resources at along@hcde-texas.org. ■



PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

The Active Shooter Defined

- ▶ An “Active Shooter” is an individual engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area, in most cases, active shooters use firearms.



CSSS trainings prepare educators to prevent and respond to active shooter incidents

This week, two virtual training events – Civilian Response to an Active Shooter Event (CRASE) and Youth Mental Health First Aid – were held by Harris County Department of Education’s Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS).

Both trainings, made possible through the Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grant from the Department of Justice’s School Violence Prevention Program, are designed to improve school security by providing students and teachers with the tools they need to recognize, respond quickly to, and help prevent acts of violence. The grant was

Sandy Hook Elementary

- ▶ Sandy Hook, Connecticut
- ▶ December 14, 2012
- ▶ School shooting, murder-suicide
- ▶ Bushmaster XM15, Glock 20SF and Sig Sauer P226
- ▶ Deaths: 28; 27 at school plus mother
- ▶ Injured: 2
- ▶ Adam Lanza



created under the (STOP) School Violence Act after the Parkland school shooting in Florida in 2018.

The CRASE course, designed and built on the “Avoid, Deny, Defend” strategy developed by the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) at Texas State University in 2004, provides strategies, guidance, and

a proven plan for surviving an active shooter/active aggressor event or other critical incidents. Sgt. Jeffery McGowan from the Harris County Sheriff’s Office led a group of over 30 educators in the 2-hour training.

“We hope that this training will help people think about active shooter events and be aware that it can happen in any work or school

Continued on pg. 4

PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

environment,” said Dennis Calloway with the CSSS. “The challenge is that when we’re sitting at our desk when it’s nice and quiet when you can think calmly, you think you might know what to do, but when you hear something [like gunfire], you have to be a little bit more aware of where you are, and you have to take action quickly.”

However, responding to acts of violence is just as important as preventing acts of violence. For this reason, the STOP School Violence grant also calls for school officials to intervene when mentally ill individuals threaten school safety.

“We all go through times of emotional distress,” said Cierra Nickerson, Climate and Culture Specialist with the CSSS. “We want to make sure that our teachers are equipped, especially now Covid-19. Our students are being asked to be very flexible. Their learning environments have changed, their home environments may have changed, and they may be going through some challenging situations. When we equip our teachers to recognize and be able to respond appropriately, we’re helping to mitigate harm and promote safety within our schools.”

Offered in partnership with the Texas Institute for Excellence in Mental Health for the first time this school year, Youth Mental Health First Aid training teaches caring professionals and caregivers who regularly interact with young people how to identify, support, and respond to a young person in crisis and non-crisis mental health situations.

“Think of what physical first aid looks like,” said Nickerson. “When you cut yourself or fall and hurt yourself on campus, there are people who can patch you up and put a Band-Aid on you, but you may still need to have the school nurse look at you for further evaluation. That’s what this training is. Individuals who obtain a Youth Mental Health First Aid certification are the Band-Aids who can intervene before you get professional help. They don’t get certified as counselors, but they’re able to assist and respond before the counselor is available.”

Due to the pandemic, this course was carefully adapted so that caregivers could identify mental health warning signs when interacting with youth in virtual spaces. This in-demand training is offered several times during the year.

Adult Mental Health First Aid training will be offered on April 28. The Youth Mental Health First Aid training will be offered again on May 19. To enroll, visit <https://b2j.short.gy/hcdeworkshops>. ■



Youth Mental Health First Aid Training Event

Youth Mental Health First Aid
(YMHA) is a skills-based course that teaches caring professionals and caregivers, who regularly interact with young people, how to identify, support, and respond to a young person in crisis and non-crisis mental health situations.

Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of adolescent development, common signs and symptoms of mental health needs and a five-step action plan to address/support a young person in need.

Now more than ever our young people need caring adults to notice them, ask important questions, and provide appropriate levels of care.

Trainers

 Nadia Maynard, MSW, SHRM-SCP
Certified YMHA Trainer
Trauma-Informed/Healing-Centered Practices Specialist at the Texas Institute for Excellence in Mental Health

 Holly Beseda, M.Ed., NCC, LPC-S
Certified YMHA Trainer
Child Training & Technical Assistance Coordinator at the Texas Institute for Excellence in Mental Health

Registration is now open! You may need to make an account to access the registration. Please contact Dennis Calloway by emailing dcaloway@hcdetexas.org if you have registration questions. This blended learning course is limited to 20 participants and will consist of a two-hour self-paced online class.

*Dates for future training opportunities to follow!



IN THE NEWS



Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

Harris County teen writers, artists earn 80 National Scholastic Art & Writing Medals, Scholarships

Again at the harbor, I scrunched my nose at the odor of fish. I held tightly onto Cô Thao's hand that night and I watched my mother as she slowly walked away without turning back once...

excerpt from **"Mother"**



Natalie Dinh
11th grade,
Kerr High School

The creative works of 70 teen writers and artists from 13 Harris County school districts and 10 private schools were recognized this month during the 98th annual National Scholastic Art & Writing Awards 2021, judged in New York City. Seventy-five national medals and five scholarships were awarded to the area youth who earned regional Gold Key Awards earlier this year during a competition sponsored by Harris County Department of Education.

The national medalists come from the following Harris County districts: Alief, Clear Creek, Cy-Fair, Deer Park, Pasadena, Pearland, Houston, Humble, Katy, Klein, Spring, Spring Branch and Tomball. Private schools include Emery Weiner, Episcopal High, Kinkaid School, River Oaks Baptist, St. Agnes Academy, St. John's School, Veritas Christian Academy and the Village School.

View list of area teen recipients at www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards.

Special awards earned include the American Voices and American Visions Awards, two medalists chosen from five student nominees in each region in art and writing categories. Honorees each earn \$1,000 scholarships as "best of show" in their local programs. Awardees include:

- Natalie Dinh, Kerr High School, Alief ISD
American Voices and Gold Key Medalist
short story "Mother" submitted through teacher Kathleen Harrison
- Landen Tran-Nguyen, League City Intermediate, Clear Creek ISD
American Visions and Gold Key Medalist
illustration and drawing "Power," submitted through teacher Sherry White

Continued on pg. 6

IN THE NEWS



Landen Tran-Nguyen
8th grade,
League City Intermediate School

The \$1,000 New York Life Award sponsored by the New York Life Foundation is given to six students across the country who explore personal grief and loss through their works.

- La'Zavia Joseph, Hastings High School, Alief ISD, New York Life Award poem "Am I Next?" submitted through teacher Mashayla Nash

Two "Best in Grade" awards of \$500 go to 24 Gold Medalists competing throughout the nation in each grade level in art and writing categories:

- Jerry Tong, Pearland Junior High West, Pearland ISD (writing) personal essay and memoir "Our Anthem," submitted through teacher Olivia Cole
- Mikayla Villafuerte, Veritas Christian Academy, (writing) science fiction and fantasy "Stars in the Dark," submitted through teacher Laura Arrazolo

Clear Creek ISD artist Tran-Nguyen, 14, admits that art helps him with his identity. He was particularly inspired to complete his drawing/illustration called "Power," which earned him the American Visions Medal.

"I had realized it was a piece I had liked especially because I had insane amounts of motivation to finish it," he said.

In questioning his sense of purpose and identity of who and what he is, he often turns to art.

"I can never answer the question, but in some ways, art answers it for me," the eighth-grader said.

American Voices Medalist Natalie Dinh, 17, turns to writing as a form of expression and enjoyment.

"I take inspiration from real experiences around me and from my observations of universal issues," Dinh said.

Her short story "Mother" deals with family dynamics. She gives due credit

to her teacher for online support and encouragement during the pandemic.

This year, challenges resulting from the pandemic required the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards to be 100 percent virtual – from submissions to judging to celebrations.

"We understand that young people may not have had access to the same resources they had in previous years due to COVID-19," HCDE Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Coordinator Andrea Segraves said. "Our jurors were in awe of the resilience and talent that shone through each piece in light of these challenges."

Segraves said she was impressed by the quality of the entries submitted by teen artists and writers which was encouraged and orchestrated through area teachers.

"This year, we received a high volume of competitive entries, and judges had to make difficult decisions based on three criteria which included originality, technical skill and the emergency of personal voice or vision.

Medalists traditionally invited to New York City's Carnegie Hall will be recognized through an awards ceremony via YouTube. More details about national recipients and the link to the celebration may be found at www.artandwriting.org.

HCDE has sponsored the awards in Harris County since 1983. For more information about entering, judging, or supporting HCDE's Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, access www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards or email Andrea Segraves at asegraves@hcde-texas.org. ■

SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week, the following Board expectations were met:

Superintendent Objective A: Management of Administrative, Fiscal, and Facilities Function

- Recruit and maintain high-quality, professional staff at all levels.

Superintendent Objective D: Community Relations

- Works with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way.



The challenges we have faced over the past year have truly emphasized the importance of personal well-being. As HCDE and our employees weathered the pandemic and associated new normal, taking care of ourselves and our health became critical. This month our Human Resources department is launching a staff wellness program in partnership with Houston Methodist Wellness Services.

“Spring into Wellness” kicks off the program with a virtual session dedicated to healthy habits on April 13, followed by free health screenings at the Irvington and NPO offices later in the month. This new program will afford employees opportunities to effectively manage their health and change behaviors to support wellness goals.

Through this wellness program, I am providing HCDE another talking point for recruiting high quality staff. In today’s employment market, staff weigh benefits

packages and employee programs along with salary. We are constantly seeking to attract experts in the educational services field and this program is a perk for our employees and another reason why someone would choose to work for HCDE. These programs also demonstrate that HCDE cares about our employees not only professionally, but personally as well.

By partnering with Houston Methodist for this wellness program, we are also bolstering HCDE’s efforts to engage with local organizations for the betterment of our students and staff. This partnership affords HCDE the opportunity to serve as a role model to other school districts and governmental entities and show how local partnerships can not only benefit the organization, but its employees as well. I am excited to see how this program grows and evolves and provides yet another avenue for HCDE to be a leader in our community.

HCDE BOARD

Board President

Eric Dick

Vice President

Danny Norris

Board Members

David W. Brown

Richard Cantu

Erica Davis

Andrea Duhon

Amy Hinojosa

UPCOMING EVENTS

April 2

Good Friday

All HCDE offices closed

April 7

Chat with the Chiefs

CSSS Virtual

10 - 11 a.m.

April 10

A Day of Educational Innovation

Featuring Ron Clark

Virtual

9 a.m. - 3 p.m.

April 21

Board Meeting

1 p.m.