

# THE CONNECTOR

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

WEEK OF June 21, 2021

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 37

## BUILDING LEADERS

### TOP STORIES

**Courtney Waters  
Named Principal of  
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**TLC Kicks Off Leadership  
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**CASE Debates Team  
Takes Top Prize**  
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## Of Note...



One of the cornerstones to the success of HCDE is the partnerships we foster with organizations across the county. A prime example of this is CASE Debates, launched in 2017, in collaboration with the Houston Urban Debate League. HUDL initially worked only with Houston ISD but our partnership has allowed them to expand debate to nine additional districts and three charters. The program not only helps students develop critical thinking and communication skills, it also boosts self-confidence and encourages teamwork. The real-world value of our partnership was proven out this week when students from Elsie High School, in Alief ISD, topped 219 teams to win the World Schools Debate Championship, a competition open to debate teams from around the globe. I am so proud of the work our divisions do to enhance student achievement in Harris County.

Last week we had an informative budget workshop. Dr. Amezcua took great care to illustrate, scoop by scoop, the many layers of funding that allows us to provide a high level of support for education in Harris County. I sincerely appreciate your time and attention to better understand the complexities of the HCDE budget.

I started the week with internal meetings. Tuesday, I interviewed finalists for principal of Fortis Academy. We have an excellent pool of candidates and I plan to announce the new principal next week. I am extremely excited for the continuing success and future of the program.

Currently I am in Virginia visiting family but will be back to the business of HCDE on Monday.

Enjoy the weekend.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Collier".



# EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

## Courtney Waters Named Principal of Highpoint School East

Harris County Department of Education proudly announced Courtney Waters as the new principal of Highpoint School East during the June regular monthly board meeting.

Waters, who served the last three years as the assistant principal at HCDE's Highpoint School, brings over 25 years of experience in education. A proud Prairie View A&M University graduate, she holds a Bachelor of Science in interdisciplinary studies and a Master of Education in curriculum and instruction.

Prior to working for HCDE, she worked for multiple district administrations, including San Diego City Schools, Spring ISD, and Cy-Fair ISD in roles ranging from district behavior support specialist to assistant principal. She also spent multiple years as a life skills teacher and behavior adjustment class (BAC) program teacher for Houston ISD and a resource teacher and positive approach to student success (PASS) teacher for Galena Park ISD.

When asked what drew her to her original position at Highpoint, Waters shared the school and its mission hit close to home. The school is centrally located in her community. Not only is she familiar with many of the students and families it serves, but she approaches them with the empathy gained through personal experience.

"I have always desired to work with students with behavioral challenges because they remind me of myself," she said. "I feel connected to my students on many levels. My personal experience serves as the catalyst for the work that I do."

Genuinely invested in the growth and success of both students and staff, Waters aims to create a climate and culture that supports both. She said she hopes to develop a fully comprehensive service delivery model that addresses the needs of the whole child.



"Highpoint will be known for restoring and reforming our young scholars by way of preparing them for a more productive future in a safe and loving environment," she said.

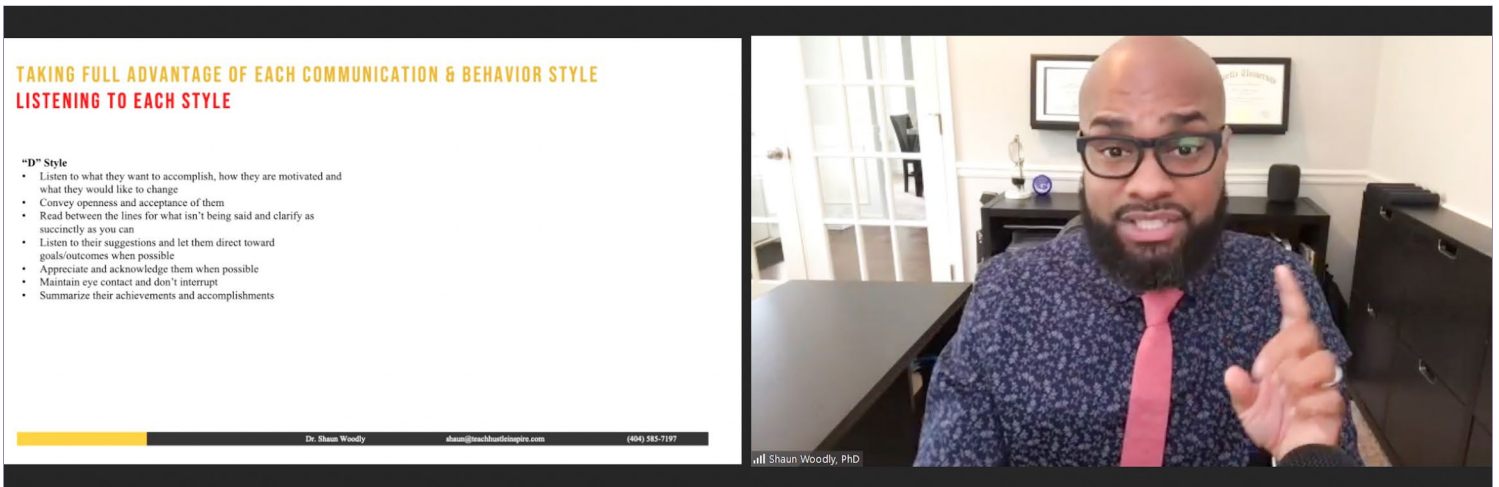
What most excites Waters about this role, however, is the opportunity to change lives and be in the prime position to lead those efforts.

"Everything that I have done the last 25 years has prepared me for this moment," she said. "I consider myself to be a change agent who is passionate about saving lives. All of our children matter, and I want to make sure that every student who enters our building leaves with a better vision, attitude, and path for their future."

Waters is a mother to two children, Taylor and Xavier, and contributes much of her success to her family for supporting her every step of the way. ■

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS



### TLC kicks off Leadership Matters development program for first-year principals

This week, Harris County Department of Education’s Teaching and Learning Center wrapped up its inaugural Leadership Matters event, a summer boot camp to kick off a yearlong leadership development program for first-year principals.

During the two-week virtual boot camp, principals spent time identifying difficulties on their campus, learning about school-wide instructional best practices, and equipping themselves with emotional intelligence tools to manage change on their campuses. As they move forward in the program, they will use the knowledge gained to strategically implement change on their campus to address those issues. Each month, principals will share updates and findings with the cohort and at the end of the year principals will present a portfolio showing the growth and impact on their campus.

Fifteen Harris County principals from Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District and Alief, Aldine, Dayton independent school districts were selected to be a part of the founding cohort after going through rigorous application process.

“I wanted to participate in the Leadership Matters program because of the opportunity to enhance my leadership capabilities, network with other leaders, learn from mentors, and identify personal and professional skills needed to transform lives in the field of education,” said Nimitz High School Principal Charles Land (Aldine ISD).

The program addresses a need to provide an induction period for early-career principals. According to a study by the Learning Policy Institute, principal turnover is highest in the first three years on the job. Leadership Matters is designed to equip and empower first-year principals with tools and resources to become highly effective leaders of schools with measurable gains and low staff turnover. ■



# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### **In a first, CASE Debates team takes top prize at 2021 National Speech & Debate Championships**

For Rodrigo Trujillo, it was the perfect culmination of his high school debate career—taking top team honors at one of the largest and most prestigious debate championships in the United States.

Not only that, it was the first time ever that a CASE Debates team took top honors in the World Schools Debate event at the 2021 National Speech and Debate Championship.

“Debate taught me that if you do not prepare or do your research, you’re probably wrong,” said Trujillo. “When we finally won first place, it felt relieving, like all of our hard work, determination, and passion was finally being recognized by the world.”

Trujillo and his teammates from Alief ISD’s Elsie High School’s speech and debate team—Diego Castillo, Ebenezer Appiah and Anthony Hoang—wowed the judges with their rebuttal, or “opposition” as it’s known in debate leagues, to the belief that the benefits of expanding the U.S. Supreme Court outweigh the harms.

Elsie’s Space City Violet beat out 219 teams from the United States, China, and Canada in the World Schools Debate event.

The event’s format combines prepared topics with impromptu topics, encouraging debaters to focus on specific issues rather than debate theory or procedural arguments.

Harris County Department of Education funds debate for inner-city youth through CASE Debates, an afterschool collaboration between HCDE’s Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids) and the Houston Urban Debate League (HUDL).

Tournaments scheduled throughout the year give teens the access and opportunity to compete locally



and nationally. Teams who win HUDL competitions at the local level receive funds to pay for entry fees, meals, and transportation to national competitions.

Through CASE Debates, a free program for students, debaters receive training and access to coaches. More importantly, CASE Debates offers them the opportunity to build self-esteem, expand their horizons, meet other like-minded students locally and nationally, and creates scholarship opportunities.

“Without a single doubt, debate has played a crucial role in preparing me for a future in government and education through strengthening my research skills, broadening my academic horizons, and deepening my interests in sociology and government,” affirms Trujillo. “Debate did an amazing job at growing my confidence, but more importantly, it humbled me.” ■

# SYSTEMIC

## ACHIEVEMENT...*WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT*

This week the following Board expectations were met:

### **Superintendent Objective C: Personnel Management**

- Ensures that the system for recruiting and selection results in personnel recommendations based on defined needs, goals, priorities and candidate credentials/qualifications.

During our regular monthly board meeting last week, I formally introduced to you the new principal of Highpoint School, Courtney Waters. Waters is a seasoned educator with over 25 years of experience under her belt. In addition, she is intimately familiar with the Highpoint community as she has served as the assistant principal there for the past three years. I have full confidence in her, and I know she is the right person to lead our Highpoint students and educators in the right direction.



The Teaching and Learning Center has been hard at work over the past two weeks with the inaugural Leadership Matters event, a summer boot camp to kick off a yearlong leadership development program for first-year principals. The fifteen principals selected to join the cohort concluded the boot camp this week with a plan to address issues on their respective campuses, which they will audit throughout the year. At the conclusion of the program, they will present their successes, failures, and findings to their cohort. As we continue to offer and improve our top-tier professional development programs for educators, we are eager to see the impact this program will have on first-year principals and the students they serve.

Finally, I am thrilled to share some exciting news. For the first time ever, one of our CASE Debate teams took top honors in the World Schools Debate event at the 2021 National Speech and Debate Championship! This is a huge accomplishment for the four Elsie High School students and their coaches. Debate is notoriously known for being a cost-prohibitive, elite activity for students. This goes to show that if students are given equitable access and opportunity, they can rise to the highest levels of academic success—and beyond.

By establishing a culture among our staff to strive for excellence, I am meeting the expectation to recruit and select qualified and dedicated key personnel to serve our students.

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### **UPCOMING EVENTS**

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#### **June 14 - July 15**

Ecobot Challenge

Robotic Competition

#### **July 21**

Board Meeting