

THE CONNECTOR

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

WEEK OF May 17, 2021

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 32

RECOGNIZING EXCELLENCE

TOP STORIES

**Gupta, Anderson Named
HCDE's Educators of the Year**
p.2



**Young Women Encouraged to
be Leaders**
p.3



**HCDE Student Art Displayed
at Irvington Building**
p.4



Of Note...



At HCDE, the month of May is synonymous with money. As we have discussed in the past, our business model is complex and dynamic. The tax rate, grants, fees-for-service and profits from the choice purchasing cooperative make up the basis of our revenue and work in tandem with a fiscally conservative spending plan that turns one dollar of property taxes into five dollars of services.

This week we wrapped up more than 30 hours of budget meetings, with ELT listening as division directors outlined the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing their programs in the coming year. These conversations highlight what divisions need to not only succeed, but thrive. They also give us insight into what is needed to support those efforts. They also show how HCDE's business model is a unique puzzle that relies on each piece to do its part so we can support our community while being good stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Dr. Amezcua and I have already met several times to hammer out details about anticipated revenues, requests for new expenditures and how we can keep growing the reach and scope of HCDE programs while continuing to provide competitive salaries and affordable benefits. This all leads up to our workshop with you next month to discuss our proposed expenditure plan and get your feedback and input. I look forward to this conversation and discussion about how we can ensure HCDE provides top notch compensation for employees while maintaining the high quality of existing programs and funding new ideas and projects.

I started the week with ELT in the last of our budget meetings. As I reported at the board meeting this week, based on Governor Abbot's announcement Tuesday, we are scaling back our COVID restrictions in a tiered approach. Employees are excited for several actions, not the least of which appears to be the return of the ice machines. It's always the small things that make the biggest difference!

Our employees have done an excellent job of maintaining discipline with our safety protocols and I anticipate the transition back to our pre-COVID operations will go smoothly. I ended the week with several internal meetings and spent Friday at my NPO office discussing ongoing and potential projects.

Have a relaxing weekend as we weather some spring showers to bring May flowers.

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

Gupta, Anderson named HCDE's 2021 Teacher of the Year and Educational Aide of the Year

Two veteran staff members, Ta'Keia Anderson and Lopamudra Gupta, were named Harris County Department of Education's 2020-2021 educators of the year this week.

On Monday, Dr. Charles Ned, Senior Director of Schools, made visits to each of the winners' campuses, stopping first at Academic and Behavior School East to surprise Educational Aide of the Year, Ta'Keia Anderson.

"I feel honored," said Anderson. "You know, hard work pays off. It doesn't matter what I have going on, I come through those doors, and I prepare myself for [my students]. They are the most important."

As part of her recognition, Anderson, who has served students at ABS East for the past 12 years, was presented with an \$800 check by Dr. Ned. Insights to Behavior sponsored the prize.

"She doesn't realize what an impact she has on our students and staff," said ABS East Principal Donna Treviño-Jones. "Without Ms. Anderson, I can definitely say [our campus] would be different."

Dr. Ned's second stop on Monday was at Fortis Academy, where he surprised Teacher of the Year Lopamudra Gupta.

"I know firsthand about what you bring to Fortis Academy every day," Dr. Ned said to Gupta. "Your dedication, your commitment to students, your willingness to never give up on any student that's in your classroom. That makes you stand out among all of our employees."

Gupta, who has been an HCDE employee for nearly 18 years, was presented with a \$1,000 check underwritten by Edgenuity.

"It feels overwhelming. I didn't expect this much," said Gupta. "I want to thank everyone that's helped me to become successful, everyone that lets me do what I do. The thing is, I love what I do. That's the best thing – to be acknowledged for what you love. That's the greatest feeling."

Gupta was also HCDE's February employee of the month. To read her profile, click [here](#).

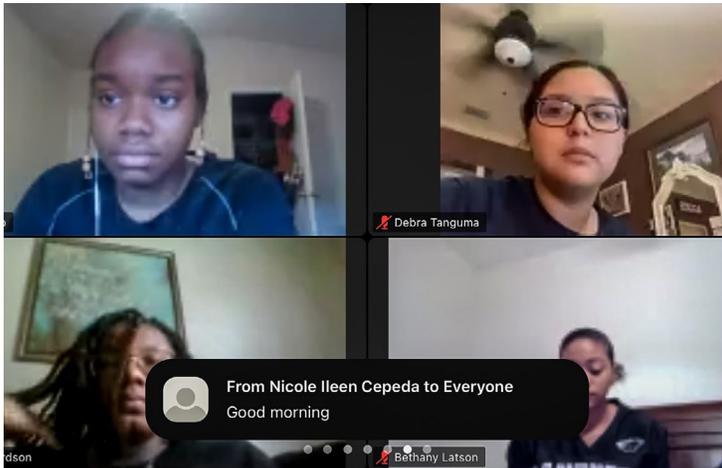
Both educators were invited to attend the Department's regular monthly board meeting on Wednesday, where the board and superintendent recognized them with awards. ■

To view profiles on our Educators of the Year, click the images below.



PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

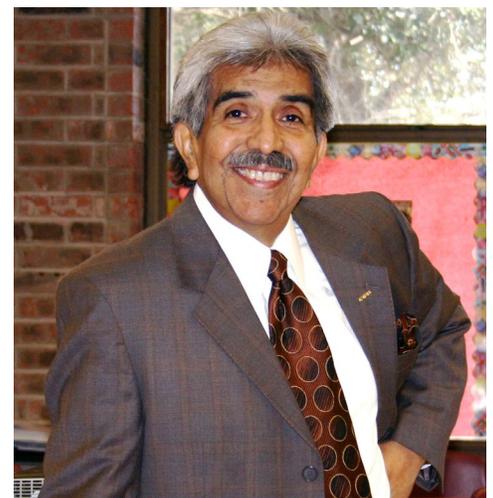


Over 180 students attend 19th annual Manuel H. Gallegos Young Women’s Leadership Conference

Over 180 young women from Harris County and South Texas participated in the 19th annual Manuel H. Gallegos Young Women’s Leadership Conference, held virtually on Friday, May 14.

The free conference, hosted for the first time by Harris County Department of Education and organized by Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Dr. Jesús Amezcua and CASE for Kids, empowers young girls to seek leadership positions in professional environments.

“We did not have a conference last year due to Covid, but we were determined to continue this conference,” said Amezcua. “I think it’s important to provide an opportunity for students to participate in leadership activities, network, and see examples of successful community members that can be someone they can look up to and follow their path.”



Manuel H. Gallegos

Named after its creator, South Texas youth advocate Manuel “Manny” Gallegos, the conference had historically taken place at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas. After his passing, Amezcua, a former colleague, took on the responsibility of continuing the conference.

As a virtual event, young women in grades 9 through 12 from Harris County and across the state were able to participate, regardless of their location. Students who participated in the conference are from public, charter, and parochial schools from HCDE, Stafford MSD and Alief, Laredo, Spring Branch, United, and Houston ISDs.

Presenters included HCDE leaders Venetia Peacock, Senior Director of Head Start; Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Director of CASE for Kids; Danielle Bartz, Chief of Staff; and Celina Cereceres Miller from accounting firm Whitley Penn.

HCDE will host the Graciela Ramirez Young Men’s Leadership Conference in December. ■

PROGRAM

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HCDE student art displayed at Irvington building as part of contest

Student art projects from Harris County Department of Education's four campuses were displayed in the Irvington building Wednesday as part of a contest held by the Schools division.

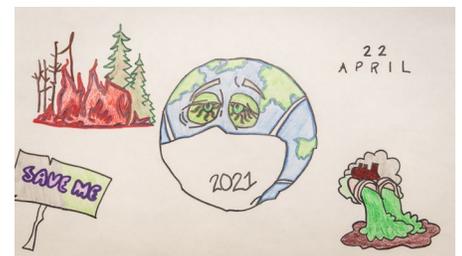
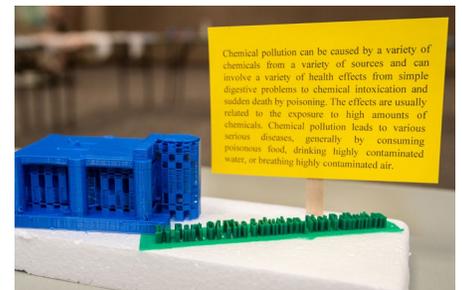
In March and April, students from the Academic and Behavior Schools were tasked with decorating a t-shirt to depict their interpretation of Earth Day (April 22) or their concerns about Earth. Students from Fortis Academy were encouraged to create 3-D printed objects, and students from Highpoint School created drawings.

Students submitted their works at the end of April, and the art was put on display in May to coincide with the May monthly board meeting.

"The students did a great job," said contest organizer and HCDE Parent Engagement Liaison Gabriela Hernandez. "They weren't given strict guidelines, and they showed off how they wanted to represent the idea of earth."

The objective of the art contest was to offer students an opportunity to show off their skills outside of the classroom and earn a reward. Hands-on activities and external learning environments support students' learning.

Two classrooms from ABS East, two classrooms from ABS West, a student from Highpoint, and a student from Fortis were named winners. Winners from the AB schools will be taken on field trips to the Houston Aquarium next week. Students from Highpoint and Fortis will be rewarded with a pizza party. ■



PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

Educators attend workshop to support learning in the era of misinformation

On Tuesday, Kelly Tummy from Harris County Department of Education's Teaching and Learning Center led educators in a workshop focusing on the media and misinformation.

The timely workshop, hosted in partnership with CASE for Kids and The News Literacy Project, titled "A Future Founded on Facts," was designed to help educators develop strategies to help students recognize misinformation online and on social media and provide reliable resources for fact-based decision making.

"Teachers don't always have time to curate new materials," said Tummy, who is a News Literacy Project Ambassador and HCDE's curriculum director for English language arts and social studies. "As a county curriculum director, I feel like it's my job to put vetted resources in front of teachers and say, 'Use this resource, and this is how you use it.' By putting on this workshop, I feel like I have said, 'this is why this resource is valuable.'"

During the workshop, participants were given an overview of Checkology, a news and media literacy learning platform created by the News Literacy



Project, a nonpartisan national education nonprofit that provides programs and resources for educators and the public to teach, learn and share the ability to determine the credibility of news and other content.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational landscape has changed, and districts must now consider if and how to expand virtual learning while teachers contend with misinformation spread online.

"[The News Literacy Project] reaches a new digital component that classrooms need. Four

area school districts will have a virtual school next year (New Caney, Cy-Fair, Houston, and Conroe ISD), and so this is a new digital option for teachers to put into a virtual school."

Participants also heard from Houston Chronicle Education Reporter Jacob Carpenter, who spoke about journalistic objectivity and how he discerns what is reliable news.

Attendees included librarians, teachers, and volunteers for the CASE Debates program, which sparks and nurtures critical thinking in students. ■

HEALTH AND SAFETY

**MASKS
REQUIRED**



Harris County
Department of
Education

**EMPLOYEE
HEALTH
SCREENING
CHECK-IN**



Harris County
Department of
Education

**WASH HANDS
FREQUENTLY**



**PLEASE
PRACTICE
SOCIAL
DISTANCING**



Harris County
Department of
Education

COVID UPDATE

On Tuesday, May 18, Governor Abbott issued an executive order prohibiting any governmental entity, including school districts, from requiring any staff member or visitor wear a mask while on their property after June 4, 2021.

As I said at the board meeting this week, HCDE will be lifting its COVID-related restrictions and protocols in a tiered approach as follows:

Beginning Thursday, May 20:

- Coffee will return to normal in all break rooms
- Ice machines will be turned on
- Water fountains will be accessible
- Social distancing stickers will be removed from flooring

Beginning Tuesday, May 25:

- The daily employee wellness assessment will not be required (texts and emails will stop)
 - Head Start will fill out paper forms through June 4
 - Staff should continue to self-assess their health each day and if they experience COVID symptoms contact their supervisor immediately
- Temperature checks will no longer be taken upon arrival to our buildings

Beginning Tuesday, June 1:

- Elevators and restrooms will return to normal capacity
- Restore full access to employee breakrooms

Beginning Monday, June 7:

- Masks will not be required for any staff member, student or visitor to HCDE
- Social distancing will no longer be required for staff gatherings and meetings
- Return to pre-COVID cleaning routines

Sanitation stations will remain positioned around our buildings for staff and visitor convenience and desk shields will also remain in place.

While we are not distinguishing between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals with regard to our safety protocols, I encourage employees to familiarize themselves with the new CDC Guidelines and act appropriately.

It has certainly been a wild ride in the last 18 months dealing with the pandemic and associated impacts to schools, staff and our students. While I knew this action would eventually come, I was not expecting it to come so quickly. I am confident HCDE will transition to this new level of normal in the post-COVID world as smoothly as we pivoted to handle the pandemic when it became an emergency in March 2020. ■

SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week the following Board expectations were met:

Superintendent Objective B: Organization Morale

- Seeks systematically to improve the climate by obtaining and utilizing feedback from employees of the Department.
- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.



Last week we launched our annual Culture and Climate Survey. We have conducted this survey for the past two years and the feedback we receive has been integral to guiding the culture of HCDE. The survey, administered by the independent research company Energage, is anonymous, empowering individuals to be completely candid in their assessment of HCDE. Last year more than 80 percent of staff took the time to share their thoughts on the Department. I enjoy reading every comment, positive and negative, as it gives me a true temperature of the climate across HCDE.

Our Teaching and Learning Center conducted a workshop this week tackling one of the most pernicious forces in today's world, misinformation. "A Future Founded on Facts" brought together thought leaders and media representatives to help educators develop strategies to help students recognize misinformation spread through social media and provide reliable resources for fact-based decision making.

Finally, this week we celebrated teaching excellence with the announcement of our Teacher of the Year and Instructional Aide of the Year. Lopamudra Gupta has been teaching science at HCDE for 18 years and is currently changing the lives of our students at Fortis Academy. Her passion and dedication to giving students an opportunity at success, regardless of their circumstance, is something we should all aspire to share. As an instructional aide, Ta'Keia Anderson works hand-in-hand with her classroom teacher at ABS East to ensure students have the best opportunity to learn and grow. I am proud of the work all of our educators do to help students succeed but I am especially grateful for the work of these two exceptional women.

By creating an open environment for sharing and exchanging ideas to improve organizational climate and promoting the recognition of excellence across the Department, I am meeting the expectation to treat every person with respect and to accomplish the mission, goals and objectives of the Department.

HCDE BOARD

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Richard Cantu

2nd Vice President

Andrea Duhon

Board Members

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Erica Davis

Eric Dick

Amy Hinojosa

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 25

Board Walk

9 a.m.

May 27

Board Walk

9 a.m.

May 28

Schools Chess

Tournament

ABS West

9 a.m. - Noon

June 16

Board Meeting

1 p.m.