

The CONNECTOR

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



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Of Note...

“Love Lifts You Up” was the theme of the 34th Annual Early Childhood Winter Conference, held last weekend. While it’s important to equip teachers with improved instructional techniques and new tools, it’s also critical to let them know they are valued and loved.

I heard stories from these teachers about the daily challenges they face. But I also listened to stories of love and hope. We must continue to refuel these teachers as they nurture the souls of the next generation. It’s a big job and that’s what the ECWC is all about.

This week we announced the winners of the 2020 Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. For 16 years HCDE has supported creativity and career development for student artists across the county.

This year art and writing professionals volunteered to judge a record 8,997 entries. Our regional Gold Key awardees will now be judged at the national level where Gold and Silver Medalists will be announced March 16. I look forward to continuing our trend of great representation in New York.

In the meantime, I hope you’ll swing by the Galleria and Texas Art Supply to see exhibitions of their outstanding work on display, February 18–March 16.

Next week I attend the UIL State Executive Committee meeting in Austin. In business closer to home, we begin our budgeting process for 2021 as directors gather and start planning for the year.

Have a wonderful weekend.



PROGRAM

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HCDE Announces 2020 Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awardees, Celebratory Exhibits and Receptions

Talented teen artists and writers in Harris County gain acclaim through the Harris County Department of Education's Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards 2020. From a total of 8,997 entries 1,018 Gold Key awardees advance to be judged nationally in New York City through the artistic nonprofit which inspires teens throughout the country since 1923.

Exhibits and receptions are being hosted throughout the city in recognition of 7-12 graders from public, private and home schools: <https://tinyurl.com/ScholasticHCDE20>. Locations for exhibits include the Galleria and Texas Art Supply. Awards are provided for Gold Key, Silver Key and Honorable Mention recipients.

Awardees find common ground with alumni Scholastic Art & Writing honorees and famous writers and artists such as Truman Capote, Andy Warhol, Joyce Carol Oates, Marc Brown, Sylvia Plath, Dan Fogelberg and Robert Redford. The competition's mission is to bring outstanding visual art and writing created by teens to a national audience by showcasing the work and encouraging creative career development.

Recipients come from public school districts ranging from Aldine to Waller and private schools spanning from Episcopal to The Village School. Home school students gain awards as well.

More individual stories of celebration will be added as the receptions unfold.



For a list of 2020 regional awardees as well as special awardees, go to <https://hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards/>.

PROGRAM

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Early Educators Uplifted by Messages of Support, Teaching Takeaways at Early Childhood Conference

Emboldened early childhood educators attending the Early Childhood Winter Conference spent Saturday, Feb. 1 being energized by local leaders who said their lives were molded by the influence of their teachers.

View photos: <https://tinyurl.com/ECWC20>

Introduced by famed children's author Peter Reynolds, upheld by Harris County School Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and affirmed by conference namesake Raymond T. Garcia, the positive influence of the early childhood teachers was unshakeable.

"I can think of the things preschool teachers instill in you, and those basic, sound principles grow with you," said Garcia, former HCDE Board president and trustee and retired businessman. "That's why I come each year to tell these teachers how important they are. It comes naturally to thank them."

The 34th annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference hosted by Harris County Department of Education is a tradition for generations of early childhood educators. Both longtime and first-time attendees talked about the tools they garnered from the daylong event.

Kamaria Price teaches pre-k at Martin Luther King Early Childhood Center. She is a third-year attendee who says the conference inspires, refocuses and rejuvenates.

"This conference is the best place to go to get pumped and excited," she said. "The best thing I get out of this is collaboration with other teachers, plus the tips I get for my classroom are from some of the best educators around."

HCDE Superintendent Colbert told the educators about a little-known character trait they possess: the ability to see and nurture a child's soul.

"To see in children what their own parents might not see—to believe in them and to come on a Saturday so you can get better at what you do—is amazing," he said. "Our world is troubled in many ways, but education is a powerful thing. The world will get better because we believe in our children."

Following keynote sessions with Reynolds and bilingual keynote musical educator Gilberto Soto, teachers chose from 50 breakout sessions throughout the conference day. Teaching and Learning Center curriculum directors supplied workshops alongside other area education experts. Vendor showcases lined the conference hallways, providing an interactive presence with materials, activities, games and services.

First-year teacher and conference goer Sheila Muzuranic of Sundown Elementary in Katy ISD said she can't wait to put all the new resources she gained into practice in her classroom.

"I can't wait to see how my kids will react to all the engaging activities," she said. "I'm loving it so far."

Conference organizer Andrea Segraves said the conference theme was focused on love this year, a topic promoted by Reynolds through his prose.

"Look at the love in this room," Reynolds said, motioning to the 800 teachers. "I'm a romantic and an optimist. "It's not a pretty world out there, but the kids can be the change. Let's connect the dots."

(The next Early Childhood Winter Conference will be held Jan. 30, 2021. Look for more information at www.hcde-texas.org.)

Scenes from the event continued on the next page.



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Scenes from Early Childhood Winter Conference



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New Four-Legged Friend Provides Social-Emotional Therapy to Fortis Academy Students

Before the Christmas break, Fortis Academy Principal Anthony Moten thought it would be a good idea to have a therapy pet at the school to help with students' social-emotional needs. Fortis is Harris County's first public high school for students recovering with alcohol and drug abuse addiction.

Fortis English Teacher Rachel Finley was out with her husband at a lumber yard one day and came across a small, black, mixed-breed dog. She asked a worker if it was his, and he said no that she just showed up.

"He told me I could take her home, so we did," Finley said. "She was really good with my kids at home, and thought she would be the same with our Fortis students."

She messaged Moten about the one-and-a-half-year-old chihuahua-yorkie mix and decided to see how she would interact with the students. When school started back in January, Finley took the newly named Allie to school and was pleased about how she did with everyone.

"She did great, and it was like she was born to be here at Fortis," Finley said. "We definitely found our Fortis pet."

In the morning she gets excited when the students start arriving and jumps on them as they enter the school. Allie goes from class to class greeting the students and teachers throughout the day while wearing one of her many Fortis Academy shirts.

"She's really cute and good with all of us," said senior Karen Espinoza.

"Allie's a loveable dog," sophomore Yadhira Martinez said.

The main goal for Allie while on campus is to help students with emotional therapy. Staff and students have noticed the school environment has been happy since Allie has been on campus. Finley doesn't take Allie to school when it's raining, and they see the effects of her not being there.

"That first day I didn't bring her we were all just having a bad day, and students kept telling me that I should have brought Allie," she said.

"I was one of those students that asked for Allie that day," said sophomore Julian Guerrero. "She definitely changes our mood."



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Meet HCDE's New Benefits Coordinator Regina Johnson

As the new benefits coordinator for HCDE Human Resources, Regina Johnson has an open-door policy for employees who have questions about HCDE benefits. She joined the Human Resources team in November after longtime employee Mary Yocham retired.

Common questions she fields are on matters like retirement, benefit changes, payroll deductions, leave of absence and provider information. She is an authority on subjects ranging from benefits administration, new employee orientation and leave administration.

A Houston native, Johnson graduated from Texas Southern University. She volunteers as a grief facilitator with Bo's Place, a nonprofit bereavement center which offers free grief support services for children. She is also a Big Brothers Big Sisters Mentor.

Before coming to HCDE, she was as senior benefits analyst with Parker Drilling. She also worked as senior human resources generalist at the City of Houston.

In her leisure time, Johnson enjoys snow-skiing, college football and travel. She is partial to spicy cuisine like Cajun and Tex Mex. Her current favorite candy is Starburst Jellybeans.

As benefits coordinator, Johnson has several immediate and long-term goals in mind. She has some ideas about streamlining some processes electronically such as FMLA. She looks forward to sharing frequent information and updates about HCDE benefits, including the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

"One of the most underutilized benefits offered by HCDE to benefits-eligible employees is the Employee Assistance Program," she said. "Eligible employees and their eligible family members may receive up to 10 free counseling sessions per family member, per issue. EAP can assist with stress, family concerns, financial issues, legal issues and more.

Counseling services are completely confidential.

Johnson's office is in the HR suite on the first floor at 6300 Irvington. She may be reached by phone, extension 8284.



"THE (FREE) EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM CAN ASSIST WITH STRESS, FAMILY CONCERNS, FINANCIAL ISSUES, LEGAL ISSUES AND MORE." -REGINA JOHNSON

HCDE Head Start Hosting Job Fair Feb. 21

Harris County Department of Education is hosting a job interview fair to recruit teachers, teaching assistants, family service providers, cooks and a mental health professional to join any of its 15 locations throughout northeast Harris County. The recruitment event will be held Friday, Feb. 21, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 6300 Irvington Blvd.

“We are looking for highly energetic, passionate individuals who enjoy working with young children to join our team,” said HCDE Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock. “Our employees help transform lives of children and their families, along with making a difference each day.”

Qualifications for Head Start teaching assistant, Early Head Start teacher and Head Start teacher include experience working with young children and an interest in early childhood education. Those who hold child development associate (CDA) degrees are strongly encouraged to apply. The mental health professional must have a master’s degree in social work, counseling, psychology or education with at least five years’ experience working with underserved populations. Interested candidates can apply online at www.hcde-texas.org or call 713-696-8287 for information.



HCDE Head Start provides services to facilities in Barrett Station, Baytown, Channelview, Compton, Coolwood, Dogan, Fifth Ward, Fonwood, Humble, J.D. Walker, La Porte, Pugh, San Jacinto, Sheffield and Tidwell. Head Start ensures future success for students both academically and socially and provides comprehensive health, education, nutrition and financial services to families.

Find more information on positions available and qualifications, visit: <https://bit.ly/36ULgsF>. Visit www.hcde-texas.org/head-start for general information about HCDE Head Start and locations.

Middle School Math Teachers Gain New Activities for Classroom

Several middle school math teachers from around Harris County joined Harris County Department of Education Teaching and Learning Center Curriculum Director Nicole Shanahan on Feb. 4 to create new interactive activities for their students.

Alief ISD Olle Middle School Math Specialist Natasha Burton came to her first make and take for eighth grade math at HCDE in many years. Each attendee made 10 activities to take back to their classrooms for student learning.



“I enjoy attending make and takes and will share these new activities with a fellow teacher because he is always willing to help his students in any way he can,” said Burton.

One activity was the Real Numbers Garden- sets and subsets of real numbers which consisted of a cookie sheet, magnets with numbers and foam pieces.

For more information about the upcoming Algebra 1 make and take on Feb. 11, visit <https://bit.ly/20txpmL>.

Professional Growth and Development, Personnel Management, Community Relations:

In accordance with the Board's goals of me to:

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

Administer a compensation and benefits plan for employees based on clearly defined goals and priorities and ensure consistency in all personnel practices;

Ensure that appropriate staff development is available and monitors staff development for effectiveness;

Stay abreast of developments in educational leadership and administration; and

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

We begin the month with a flurry of activities, beginning with recruitment activities for Head Start employees. Hiring dedicated teachers for our pre-k students remains a priority so we continually recruit for these positions. In addition, we introduce our new benefits coordinator to employees. She provides a wealth of knowledge ranging from health coverage to family leave to our employees and promotes an open-door policy for all who inquire about benefits and coverage.

The Early Childhood Winter Conference supplied professional growth opportunities and networking time for approximately 850 teachers. This year we included time to focus on social-emotional nurturing for both our students and teachers. The time spent to decompress, renew

and regenerate is very important, and educators heard that message from keynote Peter Reynolds and others.



We also share a heart-warming, social-emotional story about a little dog who is making a big impact on students at our Fortis Academy. Animals are good therapy because they lend unconditional love and are nonjudgmental.

Finally, we share good news about our Scholastic Art & Writing awardees. We will continue to share good news stories on this front and hope you'll be inspired by our area teen writers and artists who gained awards through our 16th annual regional competition.

By providing these activities and initiatives such as Scholastic Art & Writing and the Early Childhood Conference, I am meeting the Board's expectations of me as a highly visible leader as I act as the primary public face of HCDE. I am also establishing a culture among staff so that all strive to achieve excellence and do not accept mediocre performance and ensuring all supervisory staff administer personnel practices with consistency and fairness with respect for the individual.

HCDE BOARD

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Eric Dick

Vice President

Danny Norris

Board Members

Richard Cantu

Andrea Duhon

Amy Hinojosa

Don Sumners

Michael Wolfe

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Feb. 13

School Safety Solutions for Charter Schools
6300 Irvington
9 a.m.

Feb. 14

Bullying Documentary: Viewing and Discussion
6005 Westview
10 a.m.

Feb. 26

Board Meeting
6300 Irvington
1 p.m.

Feb. 28

Go Texan Day/Chili Cook-Off
6300 Irvington
11:30 a.m.