

THE CONNECTOR

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

WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 7, 2020

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 1

COMMUNITY TIES

TOP STORIES

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Of Note...



Welcome back to the Connector! I will once again be sending this newsletter to the board each Friday afternoon to provide you with information about HCDE activities and our efforts towards achieving system goals.

The first week back to school is always full of joy with reunions, new faces and new processes. Add on a separation of 6 months and new safety protocols amidst an ongoing pandemic and you get a major change to routines and behavior.

This was a short week due to the Labor Day holiday, so it was busier than usual. I started the week by fulfilling my duties on the UIL State Executive Committee with a ZOOM meeting. I also met with Jamie Freely, director of the Center for School Behavioral Health, to discuss my presentation and participation at their annual conference in October. I am excited to represent HCDE in this forum and discuss my philosophy about leadership and racial equity, along with thoughts for how we can overcome systemic bias in education.

I also returned to my typical schedule of meeting with staff this week, while also following how our Return to Work plan unfolded each day. From what I can see, our plan is running smoothly and staff is settling into new routines. Every day we are processing close to 700 people through our doors with an online employee symptom assessment and temperature checks. Masks are required in all common areas and signs reminding everyone to continue healthy habits are placed throughout our buildings. Human Resources and Operations have done an outstanding job of creating systems to protect the health and safety of all employees, while leadership has emphasized these new protocols with staff.

One part of my new routine includes leaving the building by 4:30 p.m. each day so our facilities staff has ample time to clean each night. This has required some retraining for myself and many staff, but also serves as a mechanism to help us all maintain a healthy work-life balance.

I look forward to seeing you next week at our in-person board meeting. We have set up the board room to maintain appropriate social distancing for the board and audience. We will also be implementing a few safety protocols including mandatory masks in the board room and giving a disposable microphone sponge to all speakers (both staff and community) to change out at the podium when they speak.

It's definitely been one of the most memorable and unique first weeks of school for me. I look forward to continuing to provide first-class service to our students, staff and clients in the months to come.

Have a great weekend.

PROGRAM

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Harris County School Districts Bolstered During Pandemic with \$200,000 in Grant Funding from Education Foundation of Harris County

Supporting Harris County School Districts is the primary mission of the Harris County Department of Education (HCDE). In keeping with that goal, the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC), the philanthropic arm of HCDE, recently announced grant distributions of \$207,013 to local school districts focused on helping area districts cope with COVID-19 related resources.

The “Partners in Education Project” grant awards range from \$5,000 to \$15,000 to assist school district with needs varying from technology to pandemic health products to school supplies.

The grants were made possible by the HCDE Board of Trustees, who in April voted to appropriate \$500,000 in funding to support Harris County districts during the 2020-2021 school year.

“The Harris County Department of Education prides itself on filling the gaps in public education in our county,” said County School Superintendent James Colbert Jr. “At the beginning of COVID-19 we saw the unprecedented needs of the school districts we serve. Our board took immediate action to ask the foundation to administer grants to provide additional resources to directly support these needs.”

The 16 districts receiving the initial disbursement of grant funding are: Aldine, Alief, Channelview, Clear Creek, Crosby, Galena Park, Goose Creek, Houston, Humble, Katy La Porte, Pasadena, Sheldon, Spring, Spring Branch and Stafford. Applications were collected from district administration or the education foundation affiliated with each district.

Pasadena Independent School District and its PISD Education Foundation was the first district to announce its Partners in Education Project grant award from HCDE through the EFHC.

“Pasadena ISD is very appreciative of Harris County for its generous support of our students,” PISD Associate Superintendent Dr. Troy McCarley said. “This grant means

more than just providing resources for our virtual learners. It also means helping many students to accomplish virtual instruction.”

Pasadena’s grant project helps underserved students with MiFi devices and monthly Internet services so that students may complete virtual learning online assignments.

HCDE Board of Trustee Amy Hinojosa shared the good news of the grant with PISD administrators. She supports PISD as HCDE’s Precinct 2 trustee and resident of Pasadena.

HCDE Trustees serving on the EFHC Board include Hinojosa, Andrea Duhon and Michael Wolfe.

Colbert noted the grants supplement HCDE’s other services to districts including four special schools, professional development for educators, school safety, teacher certification programs, Head Start, school-based therapy and adult education.

“HCDE serves our districts in so many ways and we are thrilled to find yet another means of partnering with districts to support students and staff,” Colbert said.



Pasadena Education Foundation’s Andrea Nguyen, PISD Assistant Superintendent Dr. Troy McCarley and HCDE Board Member Amy Hinojosa

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The Benefit of Argument: 2 Cousins Named to Elite USA Debate Teams through CASE Debates

As cousins, CASE Debates team members Rodrigo Trujillo and Diego Castillo admit to being competitive, fueling one another on their Alief ISD team. After being selected this month to join the elite USA Debate and Development teams to compete in national and international arenas, the heat is officially on.

“It’s a big workload and we put a lot of hours into practice,” said Trujillo, a senior at Elsie high school. “Debate motivates me to learn more and gives me passion to improve constantly. It forces me to keep up with current events and builds this intrinsic motivation.”



Diego Castillo



Rodrigo Trujillo

The pair compete through World Schools Debate, one of two competitive debate formats. They have earned the unique honor of being the first two CASE Debates members selected for the National Speech and Debate Association teams. Only 15 students across the nation make the USA Development Team, which grooms student debaters for the USA Debate Team, an elite team of 12.

CASE Debates is a four-year-old, afterschool debates program created by the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids). It is funded with a budgeted \$238,000 in the 2020-2021 school year by Harris County Department of Education (HCDE). CASE

for Kids, a division of HCDE, collaborates with local school districts and charter schools through a model provided by the Houston Urban Debate League (HUDL) a nonprofit promoting academic and advocacy skills among urban teens through debate.

Last year, 18 high schools in Harris County participated in CASE Debates, a program with no cost to the district, school, teacher or student. Stipends and training are awarded to teachers like Elsie High debate coach Ashley Freeman, who signed up to coach CASE Debates teams for the past four years and has navigated her team to several championships. Students participate in local and state debate competitions which have lately switched to virtual platforms.

“A key advantage to participating in CASE Debates is that the program provides guided lessons for both the students and teachers to train them in the fundamentals of debate,” CASE for Kids Director Dr. Lisa Thompson-Caruthers said. Toni Candis, coordinator of the HCDE CASE Debates program, credits debate as a way for students to foster skills learned in public speaking, analysis, organization, research, teamwork and critical thinking.

“Debate is also proven to improve student’s grade point average and literacy scores while increasing the likelihood of attendance, high school graduation and college matriculation,” Candis said.

Trujillo, 17, says debate opportunity might not have been possible without CASE Debates. Lower socioeconomic communities typically can’t support costly programs which are more common in affluent communities.

“CASE Debates pushes students to learn about things that they aren’t taught in the typical academic classroom,” he said. “It provides a foundation for meaningful learning, not just algebra—but also government and social affairs.”

[Read more...](#)

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Back to School 2020 Combines Learning Models: Head Start, Schools, Adult Education

Students in the Schools Division and Head Start returned to school with both in-school and virtual learning on Sept. 8. Head Start students remain in virtual instruction as teachers use Microsoft Teams and Frog Street Curriculum.

Schools uses combined learning models according to the needs of the districts we serve. Approximately 35 percent of Schools Division students returned to class in person. Schools uses Microsoft Teams as a communications platform and individualized learning programs for each student. Learning is synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (students completing work on their own time).

Adult Education students return to class Sept. 25 for GED classes and Oct. 5 for ESL classes with online learning using synchronous instruction. An interest survey is used to recruit students through the HCDE website: www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education.



A student returns to school at ABS West.



A bus monitor greets a newcomer as ABS West opens its doors to students for the first time.

Center for Safe and Secure Schools Adds COVID-19 Checklist as it Performs School Safety Audits



View the video to learn more or email CSSS Director Julia Andrews, jandrews@hcde-texas.org.

<https://youtu.be/9iayagrFkqc>

School Safety and Security Audits are routine work for Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS). In addition to accessing factors like security, those audits now include COVID-19 precautionary measures.

CSSS recently released a video which highlights some of the best practices put forth by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for school districts. Those include social distancing being aware of COVID-19 symptoms. They also include personal protective equipment like masks and desk shields for students and staff.

The video is being circulated via HCDE social media and website and distributed to the news media.



HCDE Staff Return to Work to Support Local Districts, Students Convocation Presented Online; Numerous Safeguards Put in Place for Staff, Students

As HCDE staff returned to work this week, they were supplied a lunch kit which included personal protection equipment like facemasks and hand sanitizer as back-to-school 2020 officially begins.

Social distancing, desk shields and signage help limit contact with other employees and protect both teachers and students.



Convocation or annual staff was provided online, and explicit precautionary safeguards based on CDC guidelines were put into place at all HCDE buildings.

If you missed it, you may view the Convocation 2020 video here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bvWy1_0-oI

SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT... WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week, HCDE activities demonstrated I have met the following Board expectations:

Superintendent Objective D: Community Relations

- Work with other governmental entities and community organization to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way.
- Establish and maintain a program of public relations to keep the public well-informed of the activities of the Department, affecting a wholesome and cooperative working relationship between the Department and community.

Superintendent Objective H: Board Relations

- Interpret and support board policy and decisions to staff and community.
- Maintain a positive and professional working relationship with the board.



As the pandemic continues to affect our communities, we are needed now more than ever. This week we began sharing information about the grant awards you supported from the Education Foundation. As we provide the announcements to Harris County school districts, we are also letting the public



know about the work the Education Foundation is doing for the good of the districts.

We also share great news about CASE Debates which is a program directly funded by HCDE. Two team members were named to a national team. It's a first for CASE Debates and a first historically for underprivileged youth who are supported by CASE Debates and the Houston Urban Debate League.

Finally, as the Center for Safe and Secure Schools provides school safety audits, CSSS is including COVID-19 prevention guidelines through a checklist of best practices provided through the CDC.



As my function as primary ambassador for HCDE, I am striving to present a positive, professional image of myself and the Department. I am also acting in accordance to the Board's expectations of me to uphold a highly visible and positive profile in the Harris County community.

HCDE BOARD

Board President

Eric Dick

Vice President

Danny Norris

Board Members

Richard Cantu

Andrea Duhon

Amy Hinojosa

Don Sumners

Michael Wolfe

UPCOMING EVENTS:

September 16

Board Meeting

Conference Center

1 p.m.

WORKSHOPS

(Online only)

September 16

Houston Science

Educators' Leadership

Association Meeting

10 a.m. - 1 p.m.

September 18

Master It! Integrated

Reading and Writing in

the PK-5 Bilingual and

ESL Classroom

9:30 - noon