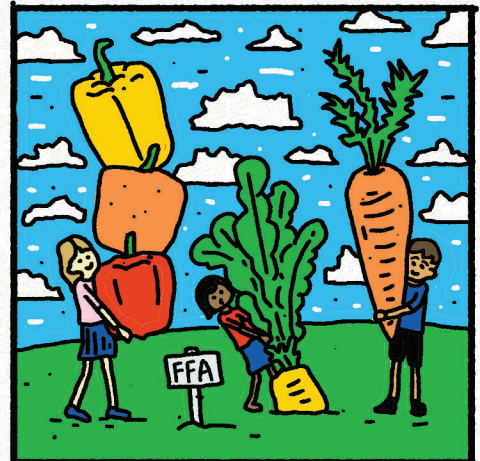
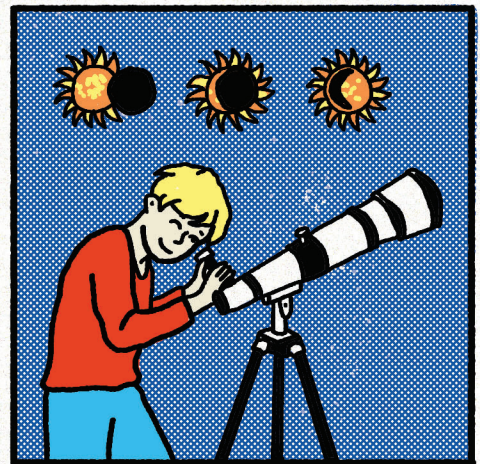
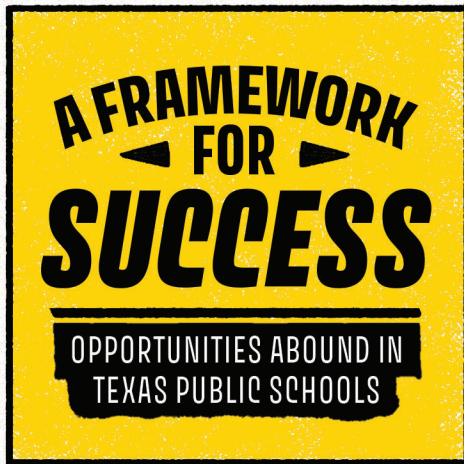


# Texas Lone Star

A Publication of the Texas Association of School Boards | Volume 42, Number 6 | July 2024







## FEATURED EVENT

**txEDCON24**

**SAN ANTONIO**

**SEPT. 27-29**



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Rolinda Schmidt, President-Elect, Kerrville ISD  
Tony Hopkins, First Vice President, Friendswood ISD, Region 4C  
Mary Jane Hetrick, Second Vice President, Dripping Springs ISD, Region 13B  
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Theresa Wagaman, Conroe ISD, Region 6B  
Mildred Watkins, La Vega ISD, Region 12  
Greg Welch, Clyde CISD, Region 14

## JULY

16 • TASB Facility Services: Asbestos Designated Person Training — Austin

17 • TASB Facility Services: Integrated Pest Management — Austin

18 • TASB Facility Services: Best Practices: Maintenance and Operations — Austin

## SEPTEMBER

12-13 • Mexican American School Boards Association Annual Conference — San Antonio

27-29 • txEDCON24 — San Antonio

28 • TASB Delegate Assembly — San Antonio

## OCTOBER

24-25 • TASB Conference for Administrative Professionals — Austin

## NOVEMBER

4-5 • HR Services: HR Academy — Austin

18-19 • HR Services: Advanced HR Seminar — Austin



### Call for submissions to District Voices!

We want to hear more about what is going on in local school districts around Texas and invite you to send us submissions for our new, occasional feature, District Voices. Do you have an interesting program to discuss?

Lessons learned as a school board member? For submissions or questions, contact managing editor Laura Tolley at [laura.tolley@tasb.org](mailto:laura.tolley@tasb.org). We look forward to hearing from you and your district!



For more information about these events or deadlines, visit the TASB website at [tasb.org](https://tasb.org) or call TASB at **512-467-0222** or **800-580-8272** toll-free.





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## MISSION STATEMENT

The Texas Association of School Boards promotes educational excellence for Texas schoolchildren through advocacy, visionary leadership, and high-quality services to school districts.

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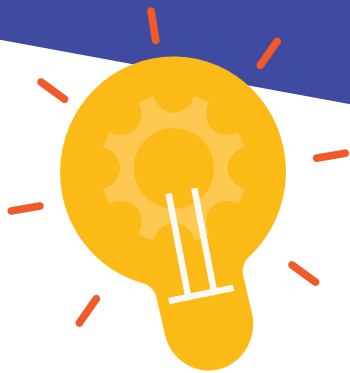






# MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

**txEDCON24 registration and  
housing opens July 23.**



**Register your delegate  
and alternate on July 23.**

TASA | TASB  
**txED  
CON24**

**Ideas. Insights. Inspiration.**  
*Shaping Public Education Together*

**Sept. 27-29 • San Antonio**  
**Henry B. González Convention Center**  
**[tasa.tasb.org](https://tasa.tasb.org)**







# REFLECTING ON OUR ROLE

Trustees dedicated to student success

by Armando Rodriguez

**A**s we embrace the summer months, it's an opportune time for us as trustees to reflect on the past academic year and strategize for the one ahead.

Our primary mission as trustees is to foster an environment where students not only succeed academically but also thrive in their extracurricular pursuits. We are the guardians of their educational journey, entrusted with the task of shaping avenues that lead to their holistic development. It's a role we serve with honor and passion.

Educators are the architects of our students' academic, fine arts, and athletic experiences, crafting programs that provide a well-rounded education. Yet, as trustees, we play a pivotal role in ensuring the sustainability and growth of these programs. We are the conduits between the schools and the community, tasked with garnering support and resources essential for their success.

It's imperative to recognize that student success extends beyond the confines of the classroom. While academic achievement is paramount, equally crucial are opportunities for personal growth, artistic expression, and physical well-being. Our role as trustees encompasses not only advocating for rigorous academic standards but also championing a diverse



Armando Rodriguez

array of extracurricular activities that enrich the lives of our students.

## Celebrating our students

As you read through the pages of this issue of *Texas Lone Star*, you will see a few examples of how students are achieving on many fronts in Texas public schools. Behind their accomplishments is a lot of hard work and dedication on the part of trustees, school leaders, educators, and staff who are working tirelessly to provide a rich learning environment for their students.

I know each of you also has their own student success stories from this past school year to celebrate. Congratulations to you and your students on another great year in public education!

But, of course, there is always more to do when it comes to taking care of kids.

## Looking ahead

As we embark on the summer break, I urge each of you to engage in collaborative endeavors with your fellow trustees, both locally and across the state. By pooling our collective wisdom and experiences, we can identify innovative strategies to bolster student performance and enhance the overall educational experience.

Summer presents an invaluable opportunity for professional development and networking. Let us use this time to participate in workshops, conferences, and seminars, where we can glean insights from experts in the field and exchange ideas with peers facing similar challenges. Together, we can cultivate a culture of continuous improvement within our school districts, propelling them toward excellence.

At the heart of our efforts lies a commitment to developing world-class educational systems that empower every student to realize their full potential. By working hand in hand with school administrators, we can cultivate an environment conducive to learning, innovation, and growth. It's through our collective dedication and unwavering resolve that we can pave the way for a brighter future for generations to come.

As we look to the future, let us remain steadfast in our resolve to champion student success. Let us seize the summer months as an opportunity to redouble our efforts and reaffirm our commitment to excellence. Together, we can shape a future where every child can thrive and succeed.

Hope you have a wonderful and fruitful summer!★

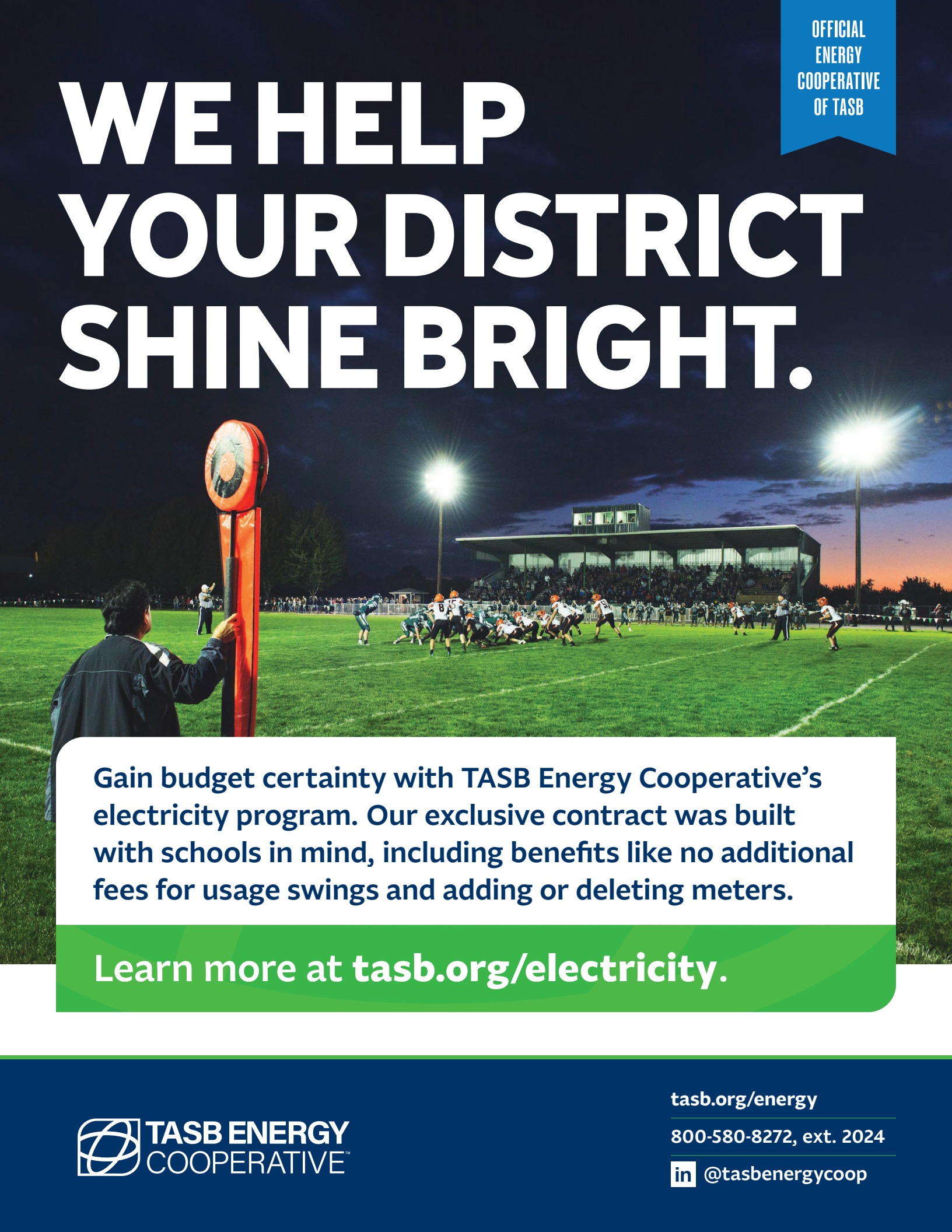
*Armando Rodriguez, president of the Canutillo ISD board of trustees, is the 2023-24 president of TASB.*



Armando Rodriguez, Canutillo ISD board president, speaks at the Canutillo High School graduation ceremony in May.



# WE HELP YOUR DISTRICT SHINE BRIGHT.



Gain budget certainty with TASB Energy Cooperative's electricity program. Our exclusive contract was built with schools in mind, including benefits like no additional fees for usage swings and adding or deleting meters.

Learn more at [tasb.org/electricity](https://tasb.org/electricity).





# ACHIEVING ON ALL FRONTS!

Student successes abound in Texas public schools

by Laura Tolley

**T**he July issue of *Texas Lone Star* is one of my favorites because it is dedicated to celebrating student success. No matter your role in Texas public education, the universal goal is to help students learn, thrive, and achieve. Students are the North Star. When they are happy, we're happy. When they triumph, we celebrate.

And so we celebrate the many achievements of Texas public school students in this month's pages of *TLS*. Whether it's in math, science, language arts, career and technical education, athletics, or other areas, Texas students racked up the honors and accolades this school year — once again.

But they didn't stop there. Their achievements included helping others. Students mentored fellow students. They got involved in their communities. They made life better for Texans.

## Telling students' stories

This issue is fun to produce because it not only includes stories written by TASB staff members, but it also has articles submitted by school districts from around Texas. We included several stories from each region.

The downside is we are only able to capture a small sample of student accomplishments, a snapshot of all the great work being done in public schools. We know that every school day, in every district, educa-



Laura Tolley

tors, school leaders, and other staff members are working hard to offer a range of educational opportunities to their students.

Throughout its 75 years of service to public schools, TASB has considered it an important goal to highlight the value of public education in Texas. Our history story this month is about the many ways the Association has worked to shine a positive light on Texas public schools and all the great things being done for students and by students. The annual "Good News" issue is part of that effort.

## Marking a milestone

As we reflect on this past year's accomplishments, I also think it's important to remember that Texas public schools have been serving students for a very long

time. I want to mention one small but mighty district that is marking a special milestone in terms of educating children.

Located deep in the heart of the Texas Hill Country, the Doss School Consolidated Common School District celebrated its 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary on May 18 with a day-long festival that included a barbecue, bake sale, tour, and more. It ended with a one-act comedy play presented by Doss alumni.

"It was a huge success. We had more than 375 [people] in the afternoon and over 175 in the evening," said Pam Seipp, Doss' interim superintendent. "We are elated."

Known as "The Small School with a Big Heart," the Doss School was established in 1884 and is one of the longest continually operating public schools in the Lone Star State. Located about 20 miles northwest of Fredericksburg, the original limestone building still serves as a lunchroom and meeting room. It was recorded as a Texas Historic Landmark back in 1985.

The Doss district is a small one, with 25 students this past year in grades K-8, three teachers, an office assistant, a bus driver, a part-time custodian/maintenance staff member, and Seipp, who serves as the part-time superintendent and principal.

Everyone on staff is dedicated to helping students achieve, and Seipp said the community also is a consistent and important source of support to the district. "I believe that support is, without a doubt, a huge part of the ongoing story of the Doss School," she said.

Congratulations, Doss! And congratulations to all Texas public education students for another great year. You make us all so proud! ★

*Laura Tolley*

Laura Tolley is managing editor of *Texas Lone Star*.

Photo courtesy of Doss School Consolidated Common School District



Students and teachers gather around a limestone marker in front of the Doss School, a small rural district in the Texas Hill Country.

# SUPPORTING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

FOR TASB, IT'S NOT JUST A GOAL — IT'S THE MISSION

by Melissa Locke Roberts and Sylvia Wood

*Editor's note: In every issue of Texas Lone Star this year, the magazine will honor TASB's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary by writing about the positive impact the Association has had on Texas public schools through its high-quality services, visionary leadership, and skilled advocacy. Additionally, these articles will highlight the significant events, people, legislation, and issues that have shaped public education in Texas. Overall, these articles reflect how TASB and school leaders work hard together to promote educational excellence for all Texas schoolchildren.*

**A**s important as public schools are to the students and families they serve, they also play an enormous role in the Texas communities where they are located. Just as each Texas town is unique, so is the local district and what it means to its residents.

In many places, especially rural areas, the local school district doesn't just educate students; it also serves as the largest employer, the community gathering spot, and as a vital point of connection for generations of families linked by a common experience.

Yet, even with those meaningful advantages, TASB has long understood that it can't take support for public schools for granted, especially amid changing demographics, political divisions, and a shifting educational landscape in Texas.

"We're a big state with a daily influx of new residents who need information about public schools and what the function of the school board is here," said TASB Deputy Executive Director Tiffany Dunne-Oldfield. "Add to that a very complicated school funding system that needs explanation and a steady stream of misinformation about public schools, and we have a big task to keep the facts and good news flowing."

TASB teamed up with Aledo ISD to promote its Make Education a Priority campaign in 2011, with stakeholders carrying their message statewide and directly to the Texas Legislature.



Photos by TASB Media Services





The *TASB Talks* podcast was created in 2017 to share news about public schools in Texas. In 2018, the podcast was presented live at txEDCON in Austin. From left, former *Texas Lone Star* managing editor Roger White, TASA Executive Director Kevin Brown, and former TASB Executive Director James B. Crow.

That work has been central to the TASB mission for the past 75 years, with the goal of keeping the success of the state's public schools top of mind for lawmakers, the general public, and of course, parents who have many educational choices, including public charter schools, private schools, religious schools, and home schools. More recently, lawmakers have been debating adding education savings accounts or vouchers to that list of options, which would use public tax dollars to help subsidize those private options.

"From the very beginning, a top TASB priority has been to shine a positive light on all the great things happening in Texas public schools," said TASB Executive Director Dan Troxell. "It's an even bigger priority today because we want public schools to continue to stand out as the best choice for families."

Over the years, the work TASB has done to encourage support of public schools has been multifaceted — and relentless.

"TASB's approach to building support constantly evolved," said Karen Strong, who led the TASB communications and marketing division from 1988 to 2020. "Campaigns had to morph, and messages had to be refreshed to remain pertinent. As the environment around public schools changed, we had to renew our efforts continually. It's been a wild ride but an important one."

Not surprisingly, the biggest challenges have tended to coincide with specific issues that have come before the Legislature, namely school funding, testing and accountability proposals, and of course, voucher and privatization schemes.

"It seems like the voices against public education are growing louder and expanding to a degree," said Bret Begert, a Fort Elliott CISD trustee who served on the TASB Board of Directors from 2005 to 2017, including as TASB president in 2015-16.

Amid the false narrative being pushed by some special interest groups that Texas public schools are failing, Begert said TASB has helped show otherwise by sharing the real success stories on the power of public education to trans-

form lives and bring communities together. Those efforts have included marketing campaigns, special events, contests, giveaways, recognition programs, and resources like brochures, publications, websites, and podcasts.

"The future is bright because when you get past all the negative rhetoric, the facts will prevail," Begert said. "And the fact is public education in Texas is strong, and it's supported, and we're turning out educated students to make good citizens in the real world. And as long as we keep doing that and stay on track, I think the best days of Texas public education are ahead of us."

Just as in past years, TASB's efforts to showcase public education will continue to support the following goals:

#### ***To share success stories of public schools***

Parents of public school students have consistently given their schools high marks over the years. Even so, because there is increasing competition from nonpublic schools with large advertising budgets, the successes of public schools need to be shared. Other members of the community, including new residents and residents without children in the system, are not as aware of the good things going on in public schools and need reminders.

#### ***To clarify facts and correct misinformation***

Unfortunately, misinformation has increased over the years about the success rate of Texas public school students, the success rate of nonpublic schools, how schools are funded, and whether options like vouchers are good for the state. TASB's focus has been to stick to the facts and share them widely.

#### ***To explain public school funding***

Public school funding has consistently remained a lower priority in the Texas Legislature. Also, many Texans don't know exactly how schools are funded and how legislative changes impact their schools. So, diligence in clarifying what's going on at the Capitol is important.



At TASB's 2015 Business/Education Forum, TASB President Andra Self introduced a panel representing districts, businesses, and civic organizations from across the state to discuss successful school-business collaborations.

### ***To increase Texans' support for public schools***

Explaining legislative activity is just the beginning of increasing awareness about public schools. TASB has also found ways to make it easier for the average person to contact and/or meet with legislators, to help them voice their opinions through letters to legislators, and to train them how to be better advocates.

### ***To explain what school boards do***

Many Texans do not know what the responsibilities of the school board include. Defining the role of the school board and the duties of its members has been an important function at TASB.

### ***To help school districts market their schools***

In competition with nonpublic schools, public school districts need to market their schools and give parents solid information about the advantages of public education. With so much misinformation out there, it's important for schools to be ready to share statistics and success stories of schools in their area. TASB has provided training and resources to help with this effort.

### ***To recognize active supporters of public schools***

To highlight the good work going on in public schools and encourage support from communities, TASB has created a variety of commendation and recognition programs over the years.

### ***To collaborate with other groups in building support***

Building relationships with other organizations that actively support public education has been a top priority at TASB. Whether it's by having regular discussions, sharing materials, or co-sponsoring a major event together, the work TASB does with other groups is essential to helping spread positive news about public schools.



Photo courtesy of Northside ISD

Northside ISD Trustee Bobby Blount, shown here with a student, received the 2024 James B. Crow Innovation in Governance Award, created by TASB to honor those who have significantly influenced effective school district governance practices at the state or local level.

### **An ever-evolving effort**

In TASB's early years, disseminating information about public schools was limited to newspaper articles, mailed correspondence, and small forums. As new communication technologies popped up, the Association was at the forefront of adopting them.

Whether the latest thing was videodisc technology, the powerful new world wide web, or virtual events, TASB quickly became adept at it so there was no pause in communications about public schools. It will be this way in the future — because for TASB, public school support is its reason for being.★

*Watch for a future TASB history article that will focus on technological changes in schools and at TASB over the years.*

*Melissa Locke Roberts and Sylvia Wood are staff writers for Texas Lone Star.*



Photo by TASB Media Services

2023 Superintendent of the Year Martha Salazar-Zamora, Tomball ISD, received her award with Tomball ISD trustees (from left) John E. McStravick, Tina Salem, Michael J. Pratt, Mark Lewandowski, Lee McLeod, Matt Schiel, and Justin Unser. TASB established the SOTY Award in 1984 to spotlight outstanding district leaders.



# TASB WORKS TO INCREASE SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Building support for public education in Texas has always been one of TASB's main goals. Throughout its 75-year history, TASB has increased awareness in a multitude of ways. Here are a few examples.

## *Sharing good news*

- Education Is Everybody's Business campaign
- Annual special "Good News" edition of *Texas Lone Star*
- Good News About Texas Public Schools brochures in English and Spanish
- The Closer You Get, the Better They Look campaign
- Proud Products of Texas Public Schools
- Texas Public Schools Rock campaign
- I ♥ Public Schools campaign
- Student Video Contest

## *Encouraging participation*

- Stand Up for Texas Public Schools campaign
- Texans for Strong Public Schools campaign
- I Care. I Vote. campaign
- Make Education a Priority news conference (co-sponsor)

## *Correcting misinformation*

- Understanding Choice and Charter Schools forum (with the University of North Texas)
- The Big Lie About Public Schools teleconference
- Truth About Public Schools website

## *Explaining and clarifying*

- What Is a School Board? (publication, session, and webcast)
- A Call to Service for prospective school board members
- My Texas Public School website
- *Texas Tribune* Future of Public Ed symposium (co-sponsor)
- Social media campaigns
- *TASB Talks* podcast
- Publications, brochures, videos, and more

## *Expanding school marketing efforts*

- Speakers' kit to help board members share good news with community groups
- *Texas Express* service for districts with limited public information capabilities
- Training on how to market your school
- Infographics of good news messages for school district use

## *Recognizing public ed supporters*

- School Board Recognition Month
- Employer Commendation program
- Media Honor Roll
- Superintendent of the Year Award
- Business Recognition program and Business Education Forum
- James B. Crow Innovation in Governance Award

## *Collaborating with other supporters*

- Texas Association of School Administrators
- Texas School Public Relations Association
- Texas Association of School Business Officials
- Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members
- Mexican American School Boards Association
- Friends of Texas Public Schools
- Raise Your Hand Texas



Pasadena ISD students in 2014 were among thousands throughout the years who have shown thanks to school board members during School Board Recognition Month, initiated by TASB in 1993.

# SUPPORTING PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A LOOK BACK, AND A LOOK AHEAD

To get more insight into TASB's work in promoting public schools, we talked with Karen Strong, former associate executive director of Communications and Public Relations, and Tiffany Dunne-Oldfield, TASB's current deputy executive director.

## A look back with Karen Strong

*Q. TASB's efforts to raise awareness have ranged from printing messages on pencils to wrapping buses with giant ads, from hosting small public forums to producing podcasts. Which efforts stand out in your memory as being particularly needed at one point in time?*



Karen Strong

**A.** The Proud Products campaign started at a time when conventional wisdom was that to be successful in life you needed to go to a private school. We started looking at Texans who were greatly admired and discovered — surprise! Many had attended a public school. And they had good things to say about the public school they attended. The campaign really caught on. I began to hear more and more people say they were proud products of Texas public schools. Associations in other states even contacted us and asked if they could use the campaign name. It was great.

*Q. How has the public's perception of public schools changed in the last few decades?*

**A.** The biggest change has been the politicizing of public schools. When I was a kid, everyone believed in public schools. It was an accepted part of what the state would provide, and practically no one was against them. In the 1980s, we began to hear statements like "public schools are failing, we've got to do something different," which became a recurring sentiment in party platforms. Often, the criticisms have been unfounded, and it has been a TASB priority to correct them.

On the upside, however, over the years the perception of public schools has changed because they are now much better than they were! All of the Texas public education system has improved over the years, and public support has grown because of that. Kudos to the Texas educators who heard the criticisms and responded. For instance, when parents said, "I want a choice," public schools responded with an amazing range of opportunities.

## A look ahead with Tiffany Dunne-Oldfield

*Q. In what new ways is TASB working to share good news about public education and to correct misinformation?*



Tiffany Dunne-Oldfield

Since TASB's inception, advocacy has always been part of the mission. We're continuing to do all of the things the organization has done in the past, but we're putting more emphasis on helping the general public better understand key issues affecting their local schools so they can reach out to their lawmakers and advocate for students and teachers. During the 88<sup>th</sup> regular session and the special sessions that followed, we were very strategic in encouraging Texans to email and call their lawmakers and ask them to prioritize public education.

As part of that work, we're doing more research into public opinion so that we can better understand how Texans feel about important K-12 public education issues and share that information with members, lawmakers, and the general public. We're also being more vigilant in reaching out to any media outlets that share misinformation to ask for corrections and clarifications.

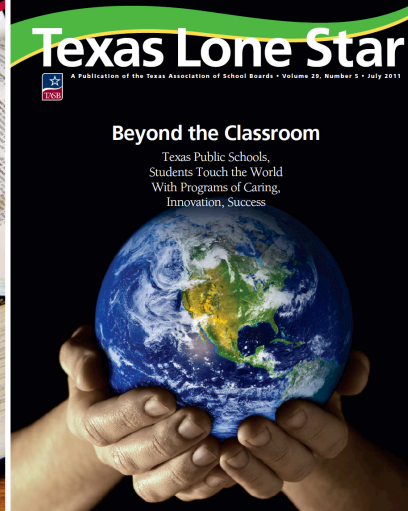
In today's politicized educational climate, there's absolutely no room for complacency, and we need to stay vigilant and proactive to combat misinformation or other efforts to weaken public confidence in our schools.

*Q. What's the secret to success when it comes to informing parents, communities, and legislators about public education in Texas?*

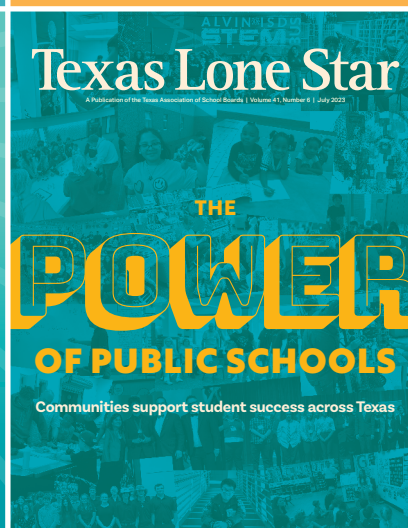
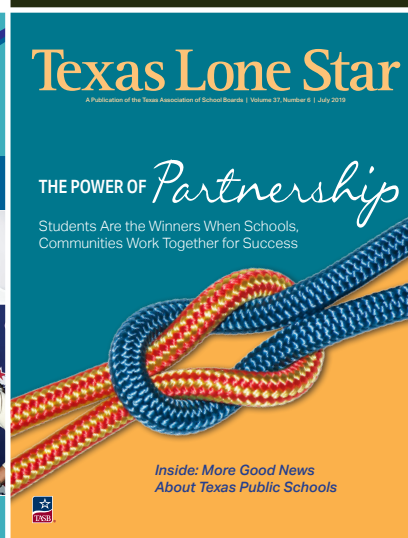
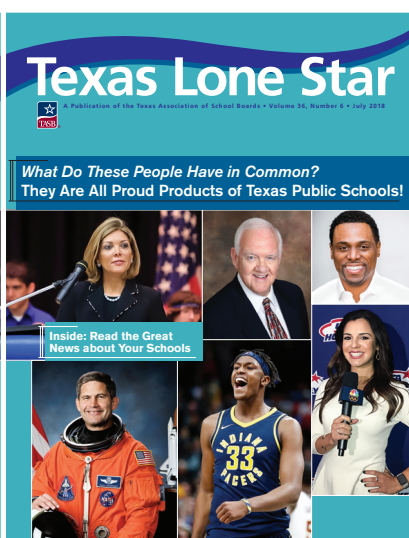
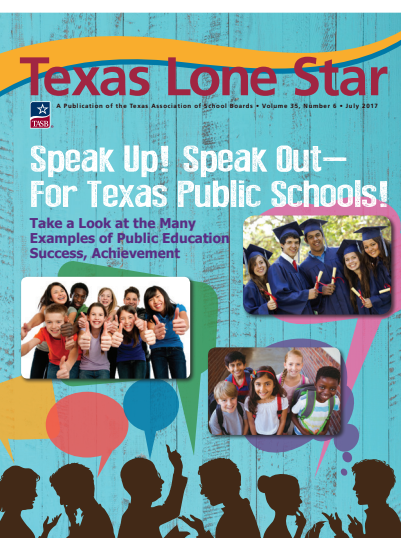
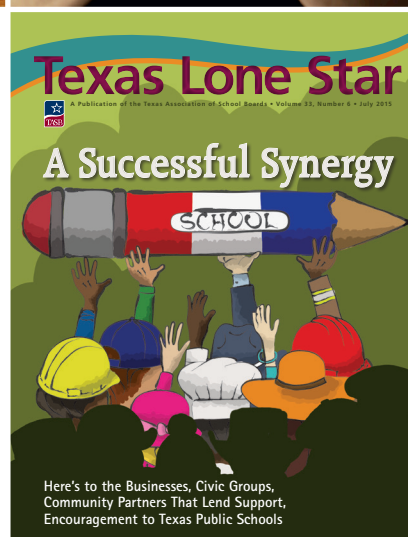
We just need to make sure we keep telling and sharing the great stories of Texas public ed on all of the communications channels available to us. We're investing more resources into short videos and targeted social media campaigns because we know social media is where we can reach a lot of people. At the same time, we're taking a more journalistic approach on our website and in our magazine because we know people want to hear directly from the school board members and other experts who are in the work.

What's most important is staying consistent, positive, and willing to try new approaches to cut through the noise and get people's attention.





Every year, Texas Lone Star honors some of the recent accomplishments of public school students across the state in a special "good news" issue. This issue shines a well-deserved spotlight on the powerful benefits of public education in Texas. Here are a few magazine covers from previous years.







# CREATING A MASTERPIECE

## Students transform a truck into a showpiece

by Beth Griesmer

**T**he whir of machine tools has become a familiar sound at Woodville ISD, a small district nestled in the lush green of East Texas. The students in Jesus "Chuy" Prieto's automotive class have put countless hours into restoring a 1951 Ford truck, transforming a battered relic into a testament of hard work and craftsmanship.

"Our students are very proud of the work they do, and I have been so impressed with watching our youngsters build their skills and confidence as they have turned a rusty truck into a showpiece," said Lisa Meysembourg, superintendent of Woodville ISD.

### Passing down a trade

Prieto brought 20 years of auto body shop experience and a desire to pass down his trade to his position at Woodville ISD. "He has built a program that engages and teaches our students at all the high levels of Bloom's while they learn workforce skills," Meysembourg said.

The complete rebuild of the Ford truck was the work of several classes over more than two school years. It was an important goal to preserve what they could from the truck, while incorporating parts from a variety of other vehicles.

"It's like seven trucks turned into one. It's come a long way from where it started," said Nery Jimenez, a junior at Woodville High School. Jimenez plans to get training to become a diesel mechanic and do body work after he graduates. "It has definitely influenced me a lot to where I want to be in the future," he said.

### Creating art

That was the whole idea for Prieto. He wanted to inspire students to learn how to custom build automobiles, not just repair them. "It's not just building a car," Prieto said. "It's like building a sculpture. So, it's an art form."

The students learned how to use a wide variety of power tools and developed skills in welding, electrical work, mechanics, engineering, body painting, and project management. They practiced by first refurbishing bicycles before they put their unique skills to the test on the 1951 Ford.

The finished product was not only a piece of art but also a tangible symbol of

the worth of working together, honing a craft, and pursuing a passion.

"Learning this trade, no one can ever take that away from you," Prieto said. "The knowledge goes with you everywhere you go."★

Beth Griesmer is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.



**A** Students and their teachers proudly showed off their hard work in March. From left to right, Angela Harris, Jesus "Chuy" Prieto, Nery Jimenez, Ethan Jacobs, and Brandon Bonin.

**B** The refurbished pickup truck represented the work of multiple classes over more than two school years.

**C** Original truck







# BUILDING LEADERS

## Buna ISD students have a role in district decisions

by Beth Griesmer

**A**dministrators and teachers know exactly what is on the minds of the students in Buna ISD, a small district north of Beaumont. Student ambassadors meet regularly with the superintendent to share ideas and serve as a catalyst for positive change throughout the school district.

"It's building leadership capacity, and not just in the valedictorian, the salutatorian, and the top 10," Tiffany Spicer, superintendent of Buna ISD, said about the monthly meetings she has with groups of students. "It's how can we find the gems across our district that have different backgrounds and varying personalities."

Ambassador groups include about 15 students selected by administrators and teachers from each of the Buna campuses — elementary, junior high, and high school. Meetings led by Spicer start with activities to encourage students to engage in discussions and use agreed upon norms to give them a safe place to share their thoughts and ideas.

"These meetings are very student driven," said Buna junior Stephanie Markle. "Student voice is very important because we all have different experiences. Everyone's voice needs to be valued and they need to know they will be heard."

### Shaping the future

This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and pride among students, empowering them to play an active role in shaping the future of their school community. By listening to the voices of its youngest ambassadors all the way up to seniors, Buna ISD demonstrates its commitment to student-centered leadership and creating a supportive environment.

Through open and candid discussions, Spicer said student ambassadors have advocated for positive changes and initiatives that benefit the entire student body. For example, students on all three

campuses wanted better conduct in the hallways. A solution that worked well this school year and will be carried forward is the use of electronic hall passes that foster more student accountability.

Another initiative with high student engagement and a tangible outcome was the calendar for the 2024-25 school year. After extensive discussions among all stakeholders in the district, the board approved a 4½-day school week for next year.

Student ambassadors did extensive research into the new calendar's viability, surveying students and reaching out to other districts. "They are proud," said Spicer about the new schedule. "They told everyone that they had a hand in it."

### Working together

The ambassadors have had thoughtful discussions about the dress code and cafeteria food. The students worked with the director of food services to bring in outside vendors and include "nutritional breaks" in the school day with grab-and-

go snacks offered in the afternoons.

"The ambassadors have also helped connect students to programs, such as in engineering and robotics," said Matthew Brandenburg, a Buna ISD junior. The students presented at TASB's Governance Camp in March and discussed the many ways the student ambassador program impacted the district's priorities, programs, and culture.

The 45 ambassadors presented the takeaways from the first year of the ambassador meetings to district administrators and staff in May. Spicer, in her second year as superintendent, emphasized the success of the ambassador initiative. Including the students in the district decision-making process has yielded positive outcomes and played a role in building the future leaders of Buna.

"Let's come to the table, let's get together, and let's do the work together," Spicer said. ★

Beth Griesmer is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.



Buna ISD students presented their ambassador program at TASB's Governance Camp in March.

Photos courtesy of Buna ISD



# SAVING LIVES

## Grant launches EMT program at Nacogdoches ISD

**N**o siren. No wheels. The ambulance simulation in the Malcolm Rector Center for Advanced Careers and Innovation at Nacogdoches High School can't go anywhere, but it comes with a pay-off for Nacogdoches High School students working their way toward an emergency medical technician certification.

The training device — a full-size mockup of the rear of an ambulance — was paid for by a Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) grant received last year. The \$133,270 grant received by Nacogdoches ISD is part of \$54 million distributed to public schools, community colleges, and technical programs to expand opportunities for Texas students to earn a license, certificate, or post-secondary degree.

The grant allowed Nacogdoches ISD to purchase and install industry-standard equipment for emergency care and services to enhance the simulation in the ambulance.

"This type of partnership is vital for making real-world training available to our students," said Coy Van Valkenburgh, Nacogdoches ISD's director of Career and Technical Education. "We were able to look at research provided to us and target what the region desperately needs, and one of those needs is EMTs."

Completing the EMT courses available at Nacogdoches High School provides students with a certification and moves them closer to entering the workforce upon graduation. Or, attending college or a university with the opportunity to work while completing their degrees.

"I'm so proud of this and the work Ms. Van Valkenburgh has done to obtain the grant and implement it to provide opportunities for our students," said Nacogdoches ISD Superintendent Gabriel Trujillo.

Texas House Rep. Travis Clardy (R-Nacogdoches) attended the grant presentation last year. Clardy authored the bill in 2015 that established the JET grants. ★

*This story is courtesy of Nacogdoches ISD.*



**A** A full-size mockup of the rear of an ambulance is a powerful training tool for Nacogdoches students.



**B** Students work on a mannequin in the ambulance simulation at Nacogdoches High School.

**C** Superintendent Gabriel Trujillo, Rep. Travis Clardy, and Nacogdoches ISD teachers attend a ceremony at Angeli-na College to accept a JET grant.







# THE CALL OF THE WILD

## Tyler ISD students host 'living zoo'

**T**he cafeteria at Tyler ISD's Bell Elementary School was filled with sounds of the wild as first-grade students hosted a Living Zoo this spring. From lions and tigers to snakes and kangaroos, families were invited to explore the wild world of exhibits created by these adventurous explorers.

First-grade teachers Gracie Aguillard and Maricruz Diaz had tasked their students with studying one type of animal and then hosting the immersive experience, where students dressed up as the animals they had researched.

Excitement rippled through the room as parents and siblings entered the cafeteria, where they were greeted by a jungle

of vibrant costumes and enthusiastic young voices. Each student had become an expert on their chosen animal, ready to share fascinating facts with those who had come to see them in their new environment.

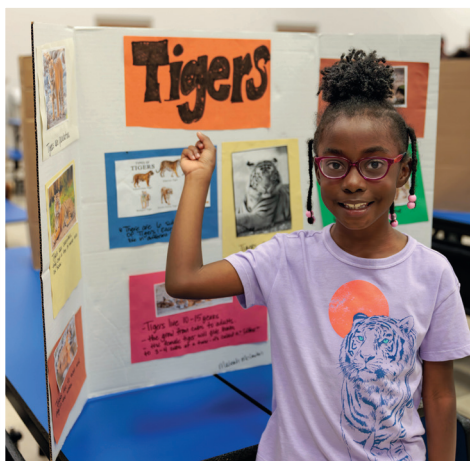
"Tigers are mammals so they are warm blooded," explained first-grade student Maleah. She even let out a loud roar!

Interesting facts were given about eels, adders, squirrels, kangaroos, and

beluga whales, as some of the first graders demonstrated how they jump or fly.

As families filtered through, laughter and learning filled the air. The Living Zoo wasn't just a showcase of animals; it was an example of the curiosity and creativity of younger students at the East Texas district.★

*This story is courtesy of Tyler ISD.*



First-grade students at Tyler ISD's Bell Elementary School hosted a Living Zoo event this spring in the school cafeteria. Students dressed up as lions, tigers, snakes, and more, and they also created informative exhibits about the animals. They were joined by their parents as well as other children and school leaders at the zoo event.

Photos courtesy of Tyler ISD





# A COMFORTING CAUSE

## Dogs support students, staff

by Mary Ann Lopez

As she walks the halls at Cypress Creek High School, colleagues notice how calm, cheerful, and relaxed CeCe is when she connects with students. As anyone who works in a school knows, some days are ruff. But CeCe does whatever the job requires, whether sitting quietly as students talk, making classroom visits, or even rolling over for a belly rub.

A five-year-old golden retriever, CeCe is one of four comfort dogs that serve students at Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, located about 30 miles northwest of Houston. She's a true professional, trained as a comfort dog to support students and staff.

"She loves her kids," said Tammy Maaz, a coordinating counselor at Cypress Creek High School and one of CeCe's handlers. "When I take her out into the hallways in between passing periods, she will literally just lay down in the middle of the hallway and the kids, as soon as they see her, they light up. Their moods change and they all stop. They have to say 'hi' and they have to love on her."

### Paw-sitive support

The district "onboarded" its first comfort dog, Skye, in 2021 after it formed a mental health intervention team, which was charged with using different initiatives to support students who struggle mentally and emotionally, said Franklin Sampson, director of guidance and counseling at Cypress-Fairbanks ISD. The district then added three additional dogs, including CeCe.

The district's comfort dogs received 18 months of training and are trained as AKC (American Kennel Club) certified comfort dogs. Their handlers also went through training to learn commands and to use the dogs effectively, Maaz said, adding she is an AKC certified comfort dog handler. The district worked with Interquest C.A.R.E.S., which provided the dogs and training and does ongoing support as needed.



When the district decided to use the comfort dogs on campuses, it wanted the dogs to be present in the counselors' offices when they were meeting with a student in crisis, as well as to have the dogs walking the halls, providing students with a reward, Sampson said.

"She's an absolute asset to us," Maaz said of CeCe, adding that when students are experiencing challenges, CeCe is there for them. The results are often immediate — students are able to relax and gain emotional regulation, allowing them to calm themselves.

"She really just works wonders one on one with the kids," Maaz said.

### Going to the dogs

Comfort dogs and social-emotional wellness dogs are making their way into more districts across Texas. Another district using these special dogs to support students and staff is Lancaster ISD, located about 15 miles south of Dallas.

Returning to school full time after the pandemic, counselors saw greater numbers of students dealing with high levels of



depression and anxiety, said Meca Anderson, social emotional district counselor at Lancaster ISD.

"Students found it hard to be on campus and to stay on campus," she said. "Everyone was dealing with a loss."

Sampson and Maaz both noted that there was a change in student behavior post-pandemic that necessitated different interventions.

Lancaster ISD started its program in December 2023 with its first dog Angel, a French bulldog. It has since added two additional dogs, Bayou and Blue. Having the dogs has been a game changer for students and staff, she said.

"The staff say, 'I can now come to work knowing the service animal is going to be here and I have that support,'" Anderson said. "It's a heavy lift every day with the challenges that come. It softens the load that they have."

The district's principals reach out to request campus visits from the dogs, and





on, you can kind of decompress and it immediately takes that [level] 10 to a five," Maaz said. "I've seen that as I've worked with a lot of our students."

And CeCe knows the difference between work and play. Once her special collar goes on, she's in work mode, ready to support her humans. She doesn't bark; she just listens and lets students love on her as needed, Maaz said.

"Students say this is their favorite 'person' on the campus," she said. "They say the dog is the best thing that ever happened to the campus."

At both districts, the dogs have specific handlers who receive training, and the dogs also live with district staff. When they aren't working, they are living the lucky dog life.

Sampson said that Cypress-Fairbanks

ISD did research and planning before bringing the dogs on campus, trying to think of every scenario that might happen during the dogs' onboarding. For districts that are considering bringing comfort dogs to their schools, he said the program should be well thought out and have guidelines in place that drive the mental health support initiative.

Maaz and Sampson agree that the benefits of the comfort dogs for students and staff outweigh any challenges.

"They are just remarkable animals," Maaz said. "And given the chance, they can do great things in healing and regulating peoples' emotions."★

Mary Ann Lopez is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.

**A** CeCe sports a blue tutu at the Cypress Creek High School prom as she connects with students attending the event.

**B** At Cypress Creek High School, CeCe and some students pose for a photo as they celebrate the comfort dog's fifth birthday in November 2023.

**C** Meca Anderson, a social emotional district counselor at Lancaster ISD in North Texas, walks with Blue, Bayou, and Angel.

**D** CeCe and Tammy Maaz, a counselor at Cypress Creek High School and CeCe's handler, pose for a photo during the solar eclipse in April 2024.

Photos courtesy of Tammy Maaz and Cypress-Fairbanks ISD

each campus might have different needs and requests, Anderson said. The dogs may make visits to classrooms or just be present in the hallways.

"What's happening in the world today and in the lives of students, there are so many unresolved issues and trauma that they're exposed to in the home, and it comes to the school and impedes learning," she said. "They don't know how to handle the anger outbursts."

The dogs help students with mind, body, and spirit, she said. A student who is emotionally dysregulated and has the dog there for support may find calm.

Maaz agreed, saying that in her district the dogs have been a tremendous help, in particular when the students work with counselors on plans to help them reduce anxiety, learn to cope, and not to spiral out of control. Part of their coping strategies are to visit with the comfort dogs.

"Because we all know that sometimes, just having an animal you can love

## It's not a meeting. It's being an advocate.

“At Delegate Assembly, I want to make sure our district's voice is heard. The small rural districts don't always have the same needs and issues that the large districts have.”

— Camille Eckersley,  
Bluff Dale ISD (Region 11)

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**TASB**







# PAVING THE WAY

## Dickinson students put safety in the driver's seat

by Beth Griesmer

**M**embers of a high school student council embarked on a mission this year to promote driver awareness and responsibility among their peers at Dickinson ISD. The small district located along the Gulf Coast west of Galveston took a proactive approach to a subject not typically tackled by teens.

Dickinson ISD collaborated with Teens in the Driver's Seat, a national safety program, to develop a comprehensive driver awareness program tailored to the needs of its students. The program aimed to educate young drivers about the rules of the road and to instill a sense of responsibility and mindfulness behind the wheel.

"Through this partnership, our school community has been taught to prioritize safe driving, with student council serving as a catalyst for spreading impactful stories and educating students about the importance of safe driving," said Jaila Oatis, a Dickinson High School student council member.

### Empowering safer drivers

Teens in the Driver's Seat provided educational resources to empower Dickinson High School students to educate their peers about the perils of distracted driving and promote safer driving strategies. The student council set up information booths throughout the school year with giveaways and activities to encourage awareness of safer driving practices.

One of the more powerful moments in the teens' campaign was the story shared by guest speaker Tyson Dever, who was paralyzed as the result of an accident caused by a distracted driver. His firsthand account of the permanent damage caused by a distracted driver had a lasting impact on the high school audience.

Dickinson ISD shared the success of their teen driving awareness program at TASB's Governance Camp in March.

"Watching and listening to all the DHS



Dickinson High School students demonstrated their driving safety initiative at Gov Camp in March. Trustees from across the state stopped by their booth to chat with the students.



Photos by TASB Media Services

student council students involved with the Governance Camp presentations and demonstrations was inspiring," said Carla Voelkel, Dickinson ISD superintendent. "The opportunity to share innovative teaching ideas from our classrooms and special projects reinforces the importance of our work and commitment to public education."

### Shaping the future

Through the student-led initiative this year, students at Dickinson High School gained valuable insights into the dangers of reckless driving, the importance of

seat belt usage, and the consequences of distracted driving. The collaboration with Teens in the Driver's Seat and commitment to safety paved the way for long-term benefits to the community.

"By engaging the school community in meaningful conversations, we are shaping a future generation of drivers who prioritize safety and demonstrate a determination to reduce accidents and save lives," Oatis said. ★

Beth Griesmer is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.





# SERVICE LEARNING

## Students donate time, supplies

**F**ort Bend ISD students from two Sugar Land Middle School clubs donated art supplies and participated in an Easter egg hunt this spring. The students visited a Houston area preschool program for children who have experienced homelessness.

"This is the second year in a row that the clubs have worked together to help this wonderful program," said Roderick Martin, a Fort Bend ISD social worker. "Our students really enjoy it, and they are learning about service."

Students from the two clubs — Accepting Responsible Male Strengths (ARMS) and We Imagine New Possibilities, We are Girls Soaring (WINGS) — met with children in the House of Tiny Treasures program. During the visit, the students participated in an egg hunt at the preschool's outdoor play area. The club members also surprised the children with bubbles, which everyone enjoyed. Martin said that the preschoolers' smiles, laughter, and excitement were evident as they ran around, and this showed

the Sugar Land Middle School students the positive impact their acts of kindness and generosity can have on others.

"The children at the House of Tiny Treasures have also made an impact on the students in our clubs," said Kimberly Seright, Sugar Land Middle School counselor. "It was their idea to return to Tiny Treasures this year."

Located in Houston's Third Ward, SEARCH Homeless Services runs the preschool program. SEARCH representative Cyan Reed said, "the kids are so excited for this day!"

The program gives children a safe environment where they can spend time when their parents must leave for appointments or to take care of other needs. The program also offers bus service for children who live in shelters with their parents.

"While we're helping the parents, we are also helping their kids," Reed said.

The House of Tiny Treasures provides early childhood education, nutritious meals, art and playtime, and speech therapy to help children thrive and succeed. ★

*This story is courtesy of Fort Bend ISD.*



At Fort Bend ISD, a group of Sugar Land Middle School students brought some fun and joy to the lives of several children who have experienced homelessness. The middle school students donated art supplies and hosted an Easter egg hunt for children in the House of Tiny Treasures program. The Sugar Land students had fun with the children — and they also learned about how gratifying it is to help others.



Photos courtesy of Fort Bend ISD





# COMMUNITY OUTREACH

## Santa Fe ISD works to connect with senior citizens

**O**ur Community, Our Legacy, Our Future! That's the motto at Santa Fe ISD, located between Houston and Galveston. The district strives to make sure that every decision made is centered around each word in its motto.

They take their commitment to include the community seriously. When the district's communications team realized that there was a group of individuals, local senior citizens, who were not fully included in the district's "Our Community" piece of the motto, it worked on a solution. The team took action to connect with senior citizens and show them all of the great things happening at the district — and students helped. The effort was called the Senior Warrior Program.

Four events were planned for the past school year, and most were student focused and student led. Santa Fe ISD leaders believed it was important to make sure that the Senior Warriors met with students and teachers and heard firsthand what they were learning and doing.

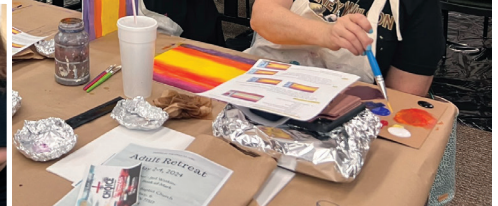
The first event was technology based. The Santa Fe ISD director of technology discussed identity theft, internet safety, password protection, and scammers. Those attending this event also learned how to take quality photos on their cell phones and how to use QR codes.

The next three meetings were led by the Santa Fe High School Floral Design, Culinary Arts, and the Advanced Arts groups.

Senior Warriors created a fall pumpkin craft, took a cookie decorating class, and painted with a Santa Fe ISD twist! High school students participated in these programs with the senior citizens.

Attendance for these events increased as senior citizens spread the word about them in their communities. The district received excellent feedback from the seniors, who even requested a summer meeting.

Santa Fe ISD plans to continue its outreach efforts in the senior citizen community in the 2024-25 school year. ★



Santa Fe ISD's communications team created the Senior Warriors Program, an effort that connected students with local senior citizens this past school year. There were four events this year, most of which were led by students. The first event was technology based, and the next three meetings were led by the Santa Fe High School Floral Design, Culinary Arts, and the Advanced Arts groups. Santa Fe ISD plans to continue the Senior Warriors Program.

Photos courtesy of Santa Fe ISD



*This story is courtesy of Santa Fe ISD.*





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# QUINCEAÑERA CONFERENCE

## Harlingen CISD event helps empower, celebrate girls

**H**arlingen CISD's Multi-Language Department hosted the second annual The Power of La Quinceañera conference, a culturally meaningful endeavor developed to empower and celebrate the district's female emergent bilingual students in their freshman year of high school.

The unique conference, held March 7 at the district's Dr. Abraham P. Cano Freshman Academy, provided 90 quinceañeras with an opportunity for reflection, growth, and planning for the future while celebrating their 15th birthday milestones — with a twist.

The event's goal was to reinforce the students' mindset, giving them the opportunity to reflect on their future and understand they have control over themselves and their education. Students participated in activities focused on self-management and relationship skills, career and college readiness, financial success, and self-appreciation.

"In our culture, quinceañera celebrations hold a special place. But with this event, we're taking it a step further than just the traditional pink dresses and having a big party," said Norma G. Garcia, the district's director of Multi-Language Department. "Our main purpose is to empower these young ladies to dream beyond ninth grade and high school. We want to focus on what's in their hearts and show them that there are many people supporting them and that success is within their reach."

### Many activities at event

Wearing matching T-shirts and tiaras, the quinceañeras participated in various activities led by Dr. ET & Company, an education consulting company. There were breakout sessions, hands-on activities, dance breaks, and opportunities to take photos of the event.

Students were treated to healthy snacks courtesy of the Cano Academy Child Nutrition team, a sit-down lunch,

and various desserts. Colorfully decorated tables and chairs set the scene for a festive atmosphere reminiscent of a classic quinceañera celebration. A dazzling illuminated "15" sign stood out as the perfect spot for capturing memorable photos.

"I hope that they take away with them the power they have within themselves of being bilingual first of all, the power of being women, of being independent," said Edith Treviño, the conference's keynote speaker and founder and CEP of Dr. ET & Company. "Loving oneself is crucial; one doesn't need external validation to do so. Learning to be confident and believe in yourself, walking into a room and not feeling like you have to shrink for anybody. It's all about empowerment. We just need one person to tell us that we are bright, that we are smart, and that we can handle this, and we can take part in any situation and make it happen."

As part of the quinceañera celebration, each student received a special gift. The

gifts were made possible through the generosity of various community members and businesses.

At the end of the event, students were presented with a certificate recognizing their completion of the conference. The conference was made possible thanks to a generous grant from The Raul Tijerina Jr. Foundation.

"Our quinceañera celebration was a success," said Garcia. "As our second event, it's a testament to our commitment to continue providing this empowering experience to our girls. More than a conference, it was an opportunity to impact our students and remind them that they matter, that they are good enough, and that they can achieve success. They need to believe in themselves to succeed, and it's up to us as educators to help them do that."★

*This story is courtesy of Harlingen CISD.*



Harlingen CISD's Multi-Language Department hosted the second annual The Power of La Quinceañera conference earlier this year. The unique event provided 90 quinceañeras with an opportunity for reflection, growth, and planning for the future while celebrating their 15th birthday milestones. Students participated in activities focused on self-management and relationship skills, career and college readiness, financial success, and self-appreciation.



Photos courtesy of Harlingen CISD





# FUTURE EDUCATORS

## District program helps prepare students to teach

**T**hrough a partnership with four universities, Northside ISD in San Antonio offers a Teacher Residency program that gives future teachers a head start on their first year of teaching.

The Professional Learning Department oversees the placement of all clinical teachers (formerly called student teachers) in Northside ISD due to the continual support provided to teachers from preservice all the way to retirement.

A branch of clinical teaching is called the Teacher Residency program, which involves specialized preclinical and clinical teaching experience. Unlike a regular clinical teacher who typically “student teaches” the last semester of college, a residency participant can start during their sophomore or junior year.

The universities partnering with Northside ISD in this program are Texas Tech, The University of Texas at San Antonio, Texas A&M at San Antonio, and the University of Illinois.

“Anyone can apply to be a clinical teacher in Northside, but if someone wants to be in a residency program, they must apply, be recommended and interviewed by their university, and then if they pass all that, their name is sent along to Northside,” says Natalie Gray, director of professional learning. “Then, they are interviewed by a panel at NISD Professional Learning Department, and if accepted, they will be in our classroom longer than the actual university calendar.”

### What to expect

“We ask all our residency students to start the day that our teachers are back on contract so they can experience what it is like as a teacher from before students arrive through the last day of school,” Gray explains.

“By doing this, it is a much fuller experience, and we are getting to grow them the way that we want them,” she said. “They are getting to attend a lot of extra professional learning.”

Gray said that by experiencing the extra days and training, these students will be more prepared and know what to expect on the first day of school.

“Because they have the learning under their belt, they’ve already experienced extended periods of time in the classroom with students and received extra feedback from their mentor teachers and from their university professors, so they are just a better-prepared day-one teacher,” Gray said.

In fact, the residency program has such a great reputation that most residency students get hired immediately, and the vast majority are chosen as First-Year Teachers of the Year by their campus.

“Principals share that the teachers who have gone through the residency program are better prepared than any other people they hire as a first-year teacher,” said Jenny Yim, K-12 specialist in the Professional Learning Department.

When asked why someone would

want to consider the program, Yim said, “It builds their confidence and gives them more experience so that they are not as overwhelmed in their first year. And being in the district, they learn about the vast resources that NISD has to offer to help support them.”

### Gratitude from the graduates

Christina Cruz, Angelica Ruiz, and Alma Gonzalez are three recent “graduates” of the Northside ISD Teacher Residency Program, and all three are now employed as Northside ISD teachers.

“The residency program is very supportive, is a great resource, offers a ton of workshops, and we learn something new every time,” said Ruiz, who is now a fifth-grade bilingual teacher at Passmore Elementary School in Northside ISD.

“I love that we are coming out of this program ready to go, very prepared, and very excited,” said Gonzalez, who is now a first grade ESL teacher at McDermott Elementary School in Northside ISD.

“The residency program allowed us to learn more about the life of a teacher and showed us how a school operates through the lens of a teacher,” said Cruz, who is now teaching as an ECSE teacher at Northside ISD’s Rhodes Elementary School. “I know what to expect — this whole experience has helped me know that I’m in the right career field.”

“I am a teacher at heart,” she added.★

*This story is courtesy of Northside ISD.*



**A** Rhodes Elementary School teacher Christina Cruz and some of her students make slime.

**B** Alma Gonzalez works with some of her students at Passmore Elementary School.

Photos courtesy of Northside ISD



# RIO HONDO ISD LIFTS OFF

## School district prepares students for new enterprises

by Savanna Polasek

**R**io Hondo, a tiny town in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley, is roughly 47 miles from SpaceX's towering rocket production facility and test site.

It's the type of community where almost everyone comes together for events like Friday night football games at Rio Hondo High School. In this tight-knit community, most of the kids stay in the area after they graduate.

When big companies like SpaceX and ACCIONA Energía came to the region, the school district knew its students were poised for big opportunities. Rio Hondo ISD Superintendent Raul J. Treviño and his board rose to the occasion, leading the way for Rio Hondo High School to become a P-TECH designated campus in 2021. The first cohort of P-TECH students graduated this May.

"They're [school leaders] relentless in their pursuit of advancing education in every way possible for the district," said Jaime Lopez, Rio Hondo ISD's school board president.

"Our staff and our board are always looking to make things better. We're always working together as a team of eight," Lopez said. "It's unique for a school district of our size [approximately 1,500 students] to be able to offer career and technology pathways. For us to be able to do that, it's been a complete game changer for our district, but more importantly, for our kids."

Lopez, who has two sons who have graduated from the district, is looking forward to his youngest daughter trying the P-TECH curriculum when she starts high school this fall.

"We want to prepare our kids for industries that are growing, that lead to careers," said Lopez. To match the developing opportunities in the Valley, the district added a new engineering pathway this school year where students can learn how to program and earn certifications in Auto-CAD [computer-aided design].



**A, B** Rio Hondo ISD students are able to learn real-life career skills through the P-TECH program.

**C** A Rio Hondo High School student explores augmented reality at the Mobile Engineering Lab.

Photos courtesy of Rio Hondo ISD

"It was really just a lot of people coming together and deciding to do something different for the future of our city," said Treviño.

### Enhancing students' opportunities

Rio Hondo ISD is enhancing its STEM career pathways with a new, first-of-its-kind, mobile engineering classroom for high school students. The solar-powered mobile unit was obtained through the Texas Workforce Commission Jobs & Education for Texans (JET) Grant Program. It is fully equipped with a 3D printer, computers, monitors, industrial robots, and augmented reality headsets. The classroom will provide simulated workforce experiences through its augmented reality technology.

How can other school districts prepare students for new careers in their area?

"Embrace the opportunity and work at building a relationship with these big tech companies," said Treviño. "Most have a social impact model and do want to partner with local schools in the area. It's important for us to nurture that relationship as superintendents and principals, so they can see us as a partner in helping to create a pathway that connects students to those careers one day. Our school systems need to be malleable and ready to change our shape to provide our students the boost they need to obtain those careers." ★

Savanna Polasek is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.





# LIFTING WITH POWER

## Senior female athlete breaks records, barriers

**A** South San Antonio ISD student has made a name for herself embodying what school pride means while also exemplifying leadership skills on her powerlifting team.

West Campus High School senior Skylyn Ramirez was captain of the Cougars' coed powerlifting team this past year. Ramirez found that leading a team to success can be challenging, but she proved she was more than prepared to accept that level of responsibility.

Throughout her time at West Campus, she was involved in volleyball, softball, track and field, soccer, golf, and powerlifting — diversifying her athletic skills and understanding the essence of teamwork.

"As captain, you have to be all-in, even on your off days," Ramirez said. Her responsibilities included learning how to face challenges with grace and setting a good example for her younger teammates.

When encountering difficulties on and off the field, Ramirez has turned to her coaches for guidance and assistance with challenging obstacles. The most important life lesson her coaches gave her was a short but powerful message: Nobody is going to do it for you.

"My coaches have impacted my life as more than just a student athlete," Ramirez said. "They've been my number one support system in all my four years at West Campus."

Manuel Salinas, head powerlifting coach at West Campus, guided Ramirez for two years to prepare her for future competitive meets at the collegiate level. During Salinas's time as her coach, he saw her evolve from a junior athlete to a leading captain who inspired her teammates to be a positive influence on others.

"She was always so involved and dedicated as a junior athlete, we'd thought she would be perfect as captain in her senior year," Salinas said.

### Powerlifting explained

Powerlifting is a sport that tests



West Campus High School senior Skylyn Ramirez was captain of the Cougars' coed powerlifting team this year. She learned many things in that role, including how to face challenges with grace and set a good example for her younger teammates. Now it's on to college for Ramirez, who has been accepted to Texas A&M University-Kingsville, where she will join the powerlifting team and also major in biomedical science.

athletes' strength, form, and technical ability to perform three core lifts: deadlift, squat, and bench press. During competitive meets, the athlete is required to repeat each lift three times, increasing the weight in their opening, second, and third attempt.

After athletes have completed a total of nine lifts, judges score the athletes by adding up their heaviest lifts of each category and creating a grand total of points for them to be ranked.

In February, Ramirez competed in the last girl's qualifier at the Natalia Mustang Invitational. She stood out on the mainstage with a squat of 300 pounds, bench of 160 pounds, and deadlift of 305 pounds, which helped her receive her invitation to regionals.

Words of encouragement and excitement filled the air as Ramirez's coaches, family, teammates, and community rallied around her to show their unwavering support. "When it's a good meet day, and everyone is hitting new PRs [personal records], it's a great feeling as a team," Ramirez said.

### Being a team leader

Leading a coed sports team and maintaining high performance can be difficult tasks to balance. Effective communication is the number one skill Ramirez has used to work on a team that has a variety of personalities, learning styles, and ways to support each other. Now, she has the opportunity to use her communication skills and apply them to a new

chapter in her education, athletics, and life.

With the assistance and mentorship of her coaches, she feels equipped to take on the next level of athleticism: Ramirez has been accepted to Texas A&M University-Kingsville and will be joining its powerlifting team. For the next four years, she will be majoring in biomedical science and her goal is to enter the career path of sonography.

"I'm excited to see what's in store for me at Kingsville and how living on campus will be," she said.

### Beyond athletics

This past school year, Ramirez also was a member of student council, dedicating time to organizing events, leading school activities, and being the voice of West Campus' student body.

And in May, Ramirez was one of two students selected for the Cougar of the Year award, an honor given to students who exemplify great character, school spirit, leadership, and dedication.

"Skylyn was well deserving of the Cougar of the Year award," said Ricardo Marroquin, the principal at West Campus. "I could not be prouder as Skylyn is not just committed to her athletics; she is completely committed to West Campus."★

*This story is courtesy of South San Antonio ISD.*

Photos courtesy of South San Antonio ISD



# PITCH NIGHT

Where innovation meets opportunity

by Savanna Polasek

**W**ith stage lights beaming down, a group of five teens wearing matching green T-shirts and wide-leg denim jeans stood shoulder to shoulder. Facing them was a panel of judges ready to ask tough questions about the students' business proposal for an innovative portable barbecue smoker, including everything from its design to a marketing plan.

This event wasn't *Shark Tank* but Pitch Night at Vista Ridge High School in Leander ISD, where entrepreneurial students have the unique opportunity to take part in a business program known as INCubator that could lead to seed funding for the very best idea.

"My favorite part of INCubator is definitely learning the fundamentals of starting a business," said Vista Ridge High School student Bryce Rogers, whose team pitched their smoker under the company name of Bear Box. "That's something you don't get to learn every day."

Learning about entrepreneurship is a key goal of the INCubator program, which first began in Leander ISD in 2017 at Vista Ridge High School before expanding to Vandergrift High School in 2018. The INCubator class, which has been thriving ever since, is part of a larger curriculum called Uncharted Learning that also offers opportunities at the district's elementary and middle schools. This past school year, 272 students at Vista Ridge and Vandergrift participated in the INCubator program. There also were 557 middle school students in the mxICUedu program and 1,078 elementary school students in the freshINCedu.

This learning opportunity is funded in part by the Leander Educational Excellence Foundation, which provides \$25,000 in annual funding to support the program, including the capstone project, which culminates in the Pitch Night competition.



A



Photo by Savanna Polasek

B

As part of the curriculum, the program draws on area business experts and entrepreneurs who provide mentoring and coaching to students throughout the year on topics that range from public speaking to finance and marketing.

"Seeing the students' growth, from tentative steps to confident strides, is a privilege that continually inspires and invigorates," said Bob Blomquist, who has decades of business experience, serves as a board member for the Vista Ridge High

School INCubator program, and is a coach for INCubator student groups. "It truly gives me hope for the future."

The program already has had its successes, including student Morgan Maguire, a TikTok star who completed the INCubator class this year and plans to pursue a career in marketing.

"This class is very different compared to what else is offered," she said. "It's hands on and it's about creating something. We create a real business; it's not simulated."





- A** Vista Ridge High School students line up on stage before the judges announce the winner of Pitch Night, the capstone to their INCubator entrepreneurship class.
- B** Sydney Ross and Saniya Oak co-founded their nonprofit, Spike Sight, their senior year through the ACCEleratoredu program.
- C** Entrepreneur Emlynn Jones shares her journey with Vista Ridge High School ACCEleratoredu students.
- D** Bruce Gearing, superintendent of Leander ISD [seated, wearing jacket], and school board members encourage the Vista Ridge High School ACCEleratoredu class with a visit in April 2024.

Photos A, C, and D courtesy of Leander ISD



Students in INCubator begin the school year by forming teams and creating business models. The teams then present their business models to mentor volunteers in a round-robin format, asking questions and seeking advice. Each team is matched with a mentor to support the team for the remainder of the school year. Throughout the year, local entrepreneurs teach classes.

For some students, the program is a natural next step in their business elective track, while for others, it's a chance to try something completely new.

Students who successfully complete INCubator move on to the ACCEleratoredu class in their senior year to take the first steps toward making their dreams a reality. Many begin to fundraise, develop technologies, and file LLCs.

Businesses created in the two-year

program do go on to succeed in the real world. For example, Gazelle is a recent startup that helps landowners in Africa lease their land to solar companies to harvest solar energy.

"I love that by not being afraid of the paperwork and technicalities, I teach them to think big and think of ways to change the world," said Dana Jones, who retired in May after teaching the marketing, INCubator, and ACCEleratoredu programs at Vista Ridge High School.

"Our goal is to educate students on the process of launching a startup and many, many, many students have gone on to start other startup businesses. We take them through the entire process, in a real-world environment, and they aren't afraid to repeat the process," Jones said.

The culmination of the program is

Pitch Night, where only five of the 14 INCubator teams were selected to participate.

On this particular May evening, the stakes were high for the students taking part in this capstone event.

Whoever won would advance to the ACCEleratoredu program and secure a starting round of funding to launch their idea out into the world. The recognition can also help them obtain more investors. Those who don't win the funding often turn to GoFundMe to launch their businesses.

For Rogers and his Bear Box team, the pitch went well, and it didn't hurt that the students were able to offer the judges a taste of barbecue.

But the competition was stiff, and in the end, a different team of students took home the coveted seed money, thanks to their work developing a new fashion app aptly titled WearABLE, which uses AI and social connections to help users decide what to wear each day.

Next school year, the WearABLE group will have the opportunity to further develop their plan in the ACCEleratoredu class, which serves as a launching pad for businesses that begin in the INCubator program. ACCEleratoredu gave recent graduates Saniya Oak and Sydney Ross the guidance and connections they needed to co-found a nonprofit in their senior year, which they plan to continue working on in college.

"It was really helpful that it was more experience-based and interactive because business is one of those things you can learn about on paper, but it's better to do in practice," Oak said. ★

*Savanna Polasek is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.*





# TAKING FLIGHT

## China Spring program inspires engineering students

**C**hina Spring ISD partnered with an educational nonprofit this year to help inspire the next generation of engineers by giving them the opportunity to build an airplane. In collaboration with Tango Flight, students in an advanced engineering class at China Spring High School worked on constructing a VAN'S RV-12 aircraft from scratch.

Noticing a shortage of pilots, engineers, and certified mechanics, the founder of Tango Flight decided to partner with high school engineering programs to offer students an opportunity to gain valuable hands-on experience. The first Tango Flight program began in 2016 at Georgetown ISD.

Recognizing the value of providing students access to unique educational opportunities, China Spring ISD school leaders decided to get involved in the Tango Flight program this past school year.

The Tango Flight program is housed within China Spring ISD Career and Technical Education programs. Students enrolled in the CTE programs graduate from China Spring ISD with an industry-based certification. Those in the Engineering-Tango Flight CTE program graduate with an Autodesk Associate Fusion 360 certification.

On the first day of the program, students in teacher Jeff Bray's class walked into an empty workshop, where they were greeted by an array of seemingly random parts, tools, and a blueprint of an airplane. Three days a week, these students learned to read a blueprint, identify mechanical pieces, and slowly but surely piece together what would become a fully working airplane.

Building the plane is a two-year process. The group that started constructing this past year were juniors, and they will complete the plane next year as seniors. The plane is expected to be ready by spring 2025, when the students who built it will be able to see it taxi down a runway and fly.

A key element to the success of this program is mentorship. China Spring ISD leaders will continue to look for additional partnerships with professionals who have engineering, aviation, or mechanic experience to help future classes. ★

*This story is courtesy of China Spring ISD.*



Through a partnership with an educational nonprofit, China Spring High School students in an advanced engineering class started to build an airplane from scratch this past school year. The project is a two-year process. The plane is expected to be ready by spring 2025, when the students who built it will be able to see it taxi down a runway and fly.

Photos courtesy of China Spring ISD





# AGRICULTURE INTERESTS

## Comal ISD FFA teams advance to national competition

Comal ISD recently had three Future Farmers of America teams win state career development events (CDEs) to advance to the national competition this fall.

The wool team from Canyon High School, the agriculture sales team from Canyon Lake High School, and the milk quality and products team from Smithson Valley High School won the state titles at the April competition. They will compete at the national contest in late October during the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The wool contest team included four team members who each evaluated fleeces for fineness, length, and yield; ranked fleeces within a group; and gave reasons for their placements in the classes.

Canyon High School State Wool Team Champion: Coach Lance Jonas

- Lauren Albracht, ninth place individual
- Marshall Ehlers, seventh place individual
- Callie Henderson, second place individual
- Cassidy Henderson

The agriculture sales four-member team had to demonstrate the professional sales process, including customer relations, advertising and promotion, communications skills, and product display. Members also completed an exam, presented a project summary, and made a sales presentation for an agricultural product. They completed one of four practical problems and cooperatively solved a market analysis problem.

Canyon Lake High School State Agriculture Sales Champion: Coach Emily Gwinn

- Grant Cover, third place individual
- Dean Platt
- Carson Reinartz, fifth place individual
- Dylan Wunderlich

The milk quality and products team members had to develop an understanding



of quality production, processing, distribution, promotion, marketing, and consumption of dairy products. Team members completed a written exam, evaluated milk samples, identified cheeses, and distinguished real and artificial dairy foods.

Smithson Valley High School State Milk Quality and Products Champion: Coach Emily Reiley

- Hannah Daniel
- Claire Schaeferkoeter
- Kennedy Surratt, third place individual
- Alora Snowden, eighth place individual

Students who compete in CDEs build on what they learn in agricultural classes,

A Canyon High School FFA students won the state wool team title in April to advance to the national competition this fall. Wool team members evaluated fleeces for various qualities and ranked them.

B Smithson Valley High School FFA students won the state milk quality and products team title in April to advance to the national competition this fall. This competition included completing a written exam, evaluating milk samples, identifying cheeses, and distinguishing real and artificial dairy foods.

C Canyon Lake High School FFA students won the state ag sales team title in April to advance to the national competition this fall. This competition included taking an exam, presenting a project summary, and making a sales presentation.

Photos courtesy of Comal ISD

challenging themselves to put their knowledge into practice. The competitions are designed to prepare students for a career in agriculture, testing and challenging their technical, leadership, interpersonal, and teamwork skills as well as testing their knowledge of the subject matter.

Each of the Comal ISD state-winning teams includes graduating seniors who plan to attend college in the fall and pursue agriculture degrees. From animal science, agriculture communication, agriculture business, and other ag-related areas, these students have gained a strong foundation through Comal ISD's agriculture, food, and natural resource career cluster and related programs.

Comal ISD also had six additional teams that qualified for state with five finishing in the top 10 at the state competition.★

*This story is courtesy of Comal ISD.*



# GIVING BACK

## Students lead cereal drive in Georgetown

**S**tudent council members at Georgetown ISD's McCoy Elementary worked several weeks this year collecting donations for The Caring Place, a nonprofit organization in Georgetown. The students asked their peers to donate boxes of cereal, a pantry item that the organization often runs out of.

"When we saw how much cereal we had actually collected for The Caring Place, that was my favorite part of this whole thing," said fifth-grade student Nathaniel Dekeratty. "It made a huge impact."

By the end of the drive, student council members had collected 375 boxes — that's 455 pounds — of cereal, enough to keep the pantry full for four days. When the students delivered their donations to The Caring Place, they got to tour the facility and learn more about the workings of a nonprofit organization.

"When we toured the pantry, the cereal shelves were almost empty," said Cathy Childs, a school interventionist and student council sponsor at McCoy. "It was really a 'wow' moment for the kids because they got to see how their work was making a difference."

During the cereal drive, students created posters, advertised around the

school, and used graphs to track donations from every grade level.

"We brought the entire school together to give back to our community," said fifth-grade student Olivia Dees. "It was hard work, but it was worth it because we got to give it all to others in the end."

### Learning to give back

This was the second year that the student council has organized a cereal drive and one of the many fundraising projects that they have worked on.

"It's important for kids to learn about giving back at an early age and know that there are available resources to do so," said Childs. "Our students learn that volunteering your time, working together, and a little contribution makes a big impact on the lives of others and connects you to the community you call home."

Fifth-grade student Madison Martinez was so moved by the work of The Caring Place that it inspired her to consider a career in philanthropy.

"I had this moment where I felt like I could really do this for the rest of my life, helping those in need," said Martinez. "It just made me happy to see what we can accomplish through collaboration and teamwork."

The giving doesn't stop there. Every November, McCoy Elementary School's student council at Georgetown ISD hosts a Turkey Chase to raise money for scholarships and local organizations. This past year, students raised enough to donate \$1,000 to the Exceptional Georgetown Alliance and put \$500 toward a student scholarship for McCoy alumni.★

*This story is courtesy of Georgetown ISD.*



Student council members at Georgetown ISD's McCoy Elementary School led a food drive earlier this year to collect boxes of cereal for a local food pantry. They ended up collecting 375 boxes, or 455 pounds, of cereal for The Caring Place. The students also got to tour the facility and learn more about the workings of a nonprofit organization.

Photos courtesy of Georgetown ISD







# LOOK UP IN THE SKY!

## North Texas astronomy students study eclipse's path

**A**s eclipse mania captivated the world over, the April 8 celestial event was extra special for Grapevine-Colleyville ISD's Colleyville Heritage High School astronomy students in Tanner Hannah's class.

Students in this North Texas school district got to see firsthand what they had been studying in class, and they got to do it using professional-grade telescopes. "It's basically the best thing ever in astronomy, you could say," senior Bradin Pritchett stated as he carefully adjusted one of the telescopes on the school's lawn 30 minutes prior to totality. "When you look at the sun on any given day, it's just a bright ball of fire and light. You really can't get much detail, but today you will."

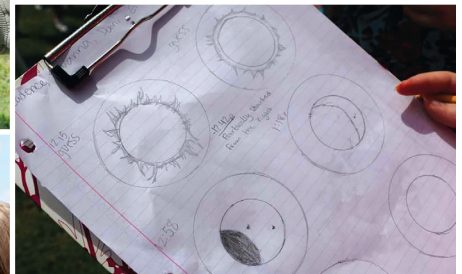
The class was setting up four professional-grade telescopes, including three Dobsonian telescopes and one Hydrogen-alpha solar telescope, to track the path of the eclipse and see features of the sun's corona — all things they had been taught.

In astronomy class, the students had studied astronomical objects in the universe as required by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, and students could also participate in night labs.

"We have one night lab about every month where we use the telescopes to see stars or planets far away," Pritchett added as students continued adjusting their equipment and took turns peeking in through the lens, reporting to each other what they were seeing. Sketches of the sun's corona and the time were also being recorded on clipboards.

Suddenly, the sky began to darken and students, as well as teachers, remarked that the temperature was feeling cooler. Totality was nearing.

"You can see the corona!" one student shouted with excitement, which was followed with cheers and rounds of applause. Totality had arrived. Another student could be heard saying, "It's so beautiful; that's crazy!"



Grapevine-Colleyville ISD's Colleyville Heritage High School students prepare to watch the solar eclipse, a rare celestial event that occurred in April. The astronomy students saw firsthand what they had been studying in class during the school year.

Photos courtesy of Grapevine-Colleyville ISD

A few minutes later, normal daylight began to return, but the students continued looking through the lenses and sharing what they had just experienced together.

"You can see how focused and excited they were," Hannah said. "It's one of those 'aha' moments, connecting what they learned in the classroom. It's also a memory from high school that they will have for a lifetime."

Pritchett agreed.

"It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for specific people in a specific area," Pritchett shared. "We were very fortunate to be on the path."★

*This story is courtesy of Grapevine-Colleyville ISD.*





# AMPLIFYING STUDENT VOICES

## Irving ISD launches student influencer program

**A**t Irving ISD, one of the responsibilities of the Marketing and Communications Department is to raise brand awareness and tell the story of the district. Who better to tell the story than the main characters — the students? This is how the Irving ISD Student Influencer Program was born.

This initiative provides high school students the opportunity to gain real-world experience in various areas of marketing, including social media and content creation, event management, and more — all while using their voices to advocate for the district and its offerings. The Student Influencer Program represents everything Irving ISD stands for — empowering and fostering students' full potential.

The program was officially launched in October 2023, with nine students selected from across the district's four comprehensive high schools to represent their campuses and Irving ISD.

Students underwent a thorough selection process, which included getting approval from their principals, submitting an application and video stating why they wanted to join the program, collecting recommendations from their teacher and counselor, and participating in in-person interviews with members of the Marketing and Communications team.

### Getting involved in various programs

The nine students selected as the inaugural Influencer cohort range from sophomores to seniors, and they are all heavily involved on campus — from athletics to fine arts to career and technical education programs. Internal and external students alike can look at this cohort and see someone they can relate to.

"This initiative gives high school students an opportunity to have their voices amplified while establishing the brand of the district from their perspective, which I love. Our students are the reason we're able to do what we do each day, and it's exciting to see how our Student Influencers



are showcasing all of the great things our district has to offer. I am so proud of them and the work they're doing," said Irving ISD Superintendent of Schools Magda Hernandez.

This year's influencer cohort had a strong start. For social media content, influencers worked closely with the digital media and marketing coordinator to determine the type of content that will be published and how it will be captured. They then receive one-on-one training during the editing process.

Influencers got a first-hand look at the entire process of content creation, from conceptualization to publication. In this first year of the influencer initiative, the focus was on creating content for the district's Instagram account, where the audience is primarily students.

### Social media stats improve

That yielded impressive results. Since the program's inception, there has been a 17% increase in followers on Instagram, with influencer content getting a lot of attention. Influencers were also involved



with districtwide events coordinated by the Marketing and Communications team, including the annual State of the District and Teacher of the Year celebration with roles varying from emceeing to serving as



stage and production assistants and ushers. Nimitz High School Student Influencer Mya Young was enlisted to serve as a speaker on the main stage at the State of the District to share her success story as a student in Irving ISD. For her, that was one of the highlights of being in the program.

"Since being in this program, I've been able to give the public an inside look into my life as a student-athlete and share my success story at State of the District. Being a Student Influencer is being a leader not only on your campus, but for the district as well," said Young. "I would encourage other students to apply for this program because you never know what can happen. If you don't think you're a leader, this program will definitely shape you to be a leader."

Irving High School student influencer MaKenna Hearne also spoke at this year's State of the District event as the emcee — something she has never done before.

"My AVID [Advancement Via Individual Determination] teacher recommended I apply for this program because it'd not only look good on my resume, but it's also

great experience and an opportunity to learn more about myself and the district. I'm in the business/marketing program at school, so this is also another opportunity for me to get experience in marketing and social media," Hearne said.

The Student Influencer Program's goal is to create a network of district influencers who will one day return home to continue paying it forward to the next generation of students. This innovative program develops the next generation of multifaceted marketing and communications professionals, showing students the power of their "influence" and how it can be used to positively impact their school, their community, and the greater Irving ISD community.

As the program demonstrates, influence expands far beyond simply what the audience sees on social media. It is how they choose to use their voice to share not only their story but ultimately the district's, as they are Irving ISD's "why."★

*This story is courtesy of Irving ISD.*



Irving ISD students participated in the district's Student Influencer Program, which launched this past school year. This initiative provides high school students the opportunity to get real-world experience in social media, content creation, event management, and other areas of marketing.

Photos courtesy of Irving ISD

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# BUILDING EDUCATORS

## Sherman ISD prepares next generation of teachers

**S**herman ISD is growing the next generation of educators through its Education and Training program, which is more important than ever in the middle of a nationwide teacher shortage.

"It is essential that we identify and actively recruit students who demonstrate an interest in being future educators to maintain and improve our system of education as a whole," said Elizabeth Clayton, coordinator of Career-Military Workforce Development at the North Texas district.

"Students who are properly trained and supported early on and throughout the path of becoming a teacher are much more likely to be successful teachers who will stay in the profession."

The program teaches high school students education theory and strategies during their freshman and sophomore years. In their junior year, students observe teachers in the classroom. The program culminates in a hands-on practicum senior year.

"What they're fine-tuning now is their philosophy of education and what kind of teacher they want to be," said Linda Dorsett, an education and training teacher. "I've yet to run into anyone who doesn't like working with the kids in the classroom."

### Hands-on experience

At the end of the practicum, Dorsett requires her students to create a detailed lesson plan and teach it to their classroom. This is the final hurdle to completing the education program, and upon program completion with passing grades, students have a special opportunity when they turn 18.

"The district pays for my students to receive their Texas Education Agency educational aide certification," Dorsett said. "By completing our course, my students just have to fill out the paperwork and be fingerprinted to get a job as an educational aide."

The practicum students are like student teachers, and all elementary schools, both middle schools, and Perrin Early Childhood Center hosted practicum students this past school year, giving high school students the opportunity to work with a wide range of ages in a variety of situations.

"I help when kids do stations in the classroom, and sometimes the teacher will get me to help a student one on one who's really struggling to read test questions," said Addison Johnson, who did her practicum at Sory Elementary under second grade teacher Becky Cox. "I've really had to apply what I learned about small group skills, which is my favorite thing to do."

For practicum students in elementary classrooms, they may also help instill some skills beyond academics.

"When younger students are learning, it's not just about math or science. It's the whole picture," Dorsett said. "I had one student who had to try to teach some kindergartners how to run straight down a track."

For Madison Jarvis, who did her practicum at Piner Middle School, it was a bit of a different situation. She worked with the coaches and helped with their sixth-grade pre-athletics. As an aspiring teacher and coach, she had to learn about the tougher side of teaching.

"I've had to learn to stand my ground and not let some students walk over me," Jarvis said. "They listen to me, and I show them that I'm in charge."

Jarvis credited her desire to become an educator to Amy Thompson, a special education teacher at Sory.

"She was kind of like my mom back



At Sherman ISD, the district is preparing the next generation of educators through a program that teaches high school students education theory and strategies in their freshman and sophomore years, and then gives juniors the opportunity to observe teachers in the classroom. When they are seniors, the students get hands-on experience in the classroom and even the gym.

Photo courtesy of Sherman ISD

in elementary school," Jarvis said. "She's amazing and definitely my inspiration for teaching."

Practicum courses offer a glimpse into a career field, and Johnson appreciated the opportunity to more deeply engage in her future career.

"You get the hands-on experience of being in a classroom and have those moments where you teach something to somebody," Johnson said. "It also gives you a head start in college, because this is like what I'll do in college but at a smaller level."★

*This story is courtesy of Sherman ISD.*





# PAL-ING AROUND

## Wylie ISD high schoolers mentor younger peers

A third grader is not having a great day and isn't in the best mindset to learn. There's a knock on the classroom door. A high schooler asks to take the student down to the gym. It's the perfect timing. Just what the third grader needed — a break from the classroom to expel some energy and refocus.

Elementary students at Wylie ISD in North Texas are benefiting from the Wylie High School Peer Assistance and Leadership program, known as PALs.

PALs is a class for selected high school students who want to be a positive influence in someone's life. During the first term of the school year, these students are trained to work as peer facilitators. Then, they are paired up with students from feeder schools to visit and mentor once a week.

The course includes training in a variety of skills that enable PALs students to assist other students in having a more positive and productive school experience.

Varsity Basketball Coach Stephen Pearce has taught the PALs class at Wylie High School for the past five years. (East Wylie High School has a similar PALs program.)

"My favorite part about teaching PALs is seeing my students go to the elementary schools and watching the smiles between the PALs and the PALees," Pearce said. "The interactions are priceless."

During their PALs class, the high school students drive to other campuses to meet with their PALees Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, they share information about their week with their teacher and classmates.

This was Wylie High School senior Liya Abebe's second year in the PALs program.

"PALs is being a role model and being a leader," Abebe said. "I like playing with the kids and seeing them happy."

Varsity basketball player Kamsi Ikegbunam was a PAL to younger students at Davis, Draper, Tibbals, and Smith schools. "It's nice to inspire kids," Ikegbunam said.



Wylie ISD High School students mentor younger peers at other district schools through the Wylie High School Peer Assistance and Leadership program, known as PALs. Mentors play games and do other activities with their PALees.

Photos courtesy of Wylie ISD



"We like to play basketball in the gyms. Sometimes we'll play board games or go out on the playground."

Pearce has witnessed first-hand how his students are making positive connections with their younger peers.

Wylie High School senior Euaiel Aklile met his PALee early this past school year and developed a strong relationship with him.

"When the PALee saw Euaiel at a football game, the young one came up to [Aklile] and sparked a conversation," Pearce said. "You would think that a high school kid would say hello and brush

the elementary kid off, but Euaiel sat and talked to his PALee for much of the football game. He told me he was 'genuinely happy to spend time with the young elementary student.'"

In his 14 years of teaching, Pearce says PALs is his favorite class to teach.

"It's without a doubt life-changing for some of these young kids, who may be going through a tough stretch in their life, to get mentored by these PALs." ★

*This story is courtesy of Wylie ISD.*



# HARMONY IN THE HILLS

Generosity brings music back to small district

by Laura Tolley

**O**n a beautiful spring day toward the end of the school year, Fort Davis ISD elementary students gathered in front of the historic Jeff Davis County Courthouse to serenade proud parents and friends gathered on the grassy lawn. A few days later, residents congregated at the high school auditorium to enjoy middle school students performing the district's first-ever musical.

The music died nearly a decade ago because of budget woes in this small school district nestled in the beautiful Davis Mountains in Far West Texas. But it's back now in a big way, thanks to the generosity of a local resident who donated \$100,000 to revive the district's music education program.

"It's been wonderful," Fort Davis ISD Superintendent Graydon Hicks said, adding that the music program is not only back, but also better than ever. The program was officially resurrected in the 2022-23 school year, and school leaders continued to build on it this past year.

At the district of 170 students, there also was an all-female drumline performing at the Fort Davis Indians' six-man football games last fall, along with other musical activities for everyone to enjoy.

"It's been awesome," said Janlyn Reagan, a former district employee whose son performed in the courthouse concert. "Football games are a lot more fun."

Although football halftimes were silent for a decade, Hicks and the school board never gave up hope that they would somehow bring the high school band and other music back to the district. They carefully stored the instruments, believing that students would one day pick them up again and make sorely missed joyful noises.

"The board has been asking to have the music program back ever since it was cut," Hicks said. "I never gave up on it, but I had to have some help."

Generous help came the way of Don Witte, a Fort Davis resident who passed away in 2022 at age 85. "He was a very good man," Hicks said.

## **Inventor, musician, Texan**

Born in 1937 on a small farm in Henrietta, Texas, Witte moved with his family to Odessa, where he graduated from Odessa High School. He earned a bachelor's degree in physics from the University of Colorado and joined the Peace Corps, spending two years performing humanitarian services in Nigeria.

Witte was a creator, an inventor. He built his own home and other structures, worked on bicycle technology, and patented construction toys for children.

He had a lifelong passion for music. Witte started playing the violin at age four, joined the Midland-Odessa Symphony and Chorale [now the West Texas Symphony],

and formed a chamber music ensemble with friends in Fort Davis.

Witte wanted the children of Fort Davis to have access to a music education. "Remembering the positive impact music had on his life, Don wished for all young people to have the opportunity to learn music," according to his obituary.

After attending a couple of Fort Davis ISD school board meetings, Witte asked the superintendent in spring 2021 if he could meet with him privately. Sure, Hicks said.

When Witte came to Hicks' office, he explained that he wanted to do something truly meaningful for the district. A music enthusiast all his life, he wanted the district's students to again have access to a musical education. Then, Witte calmly told the superintendent he could help accomplish that by giving the district some money — a \$50,000 donation.



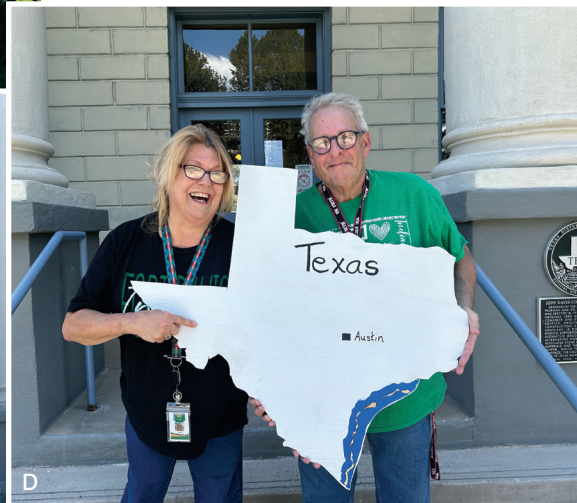




B



C



D

**A** Fort Davis ISD's elementary students performed a spring music program at the historic Jeff Davis County Courthouse for parents, friends, and other residents in this Far West Texas town. The district's music program has been revived thanks to a generous donation from a local resident who passed away in 2022.

**B** Fort Davis ISD Superintendent Graydon Hicks (standing in brown jacket) and other school leaders never gave up hope on restoring the district's music program, which was cut nearly a decade ago because of funding woes.

**C** Fort Davis ISD elementary students hold cutouts of different states and sing about the different capitals, a lesson they learned in the music program.

**D** Fort Davis ISD hired Mary Lynn McMichael as its music coordinator. Her husband, Chuck McMichael, is a percussionist and also works as an aide in the district.

Photos by Laura Tolley

Hicks was floored. "Say that again," he told Witte.

"When he explained what he wanted to do, I just couldn't believe it. I thought, you've got to be kidding," Hicks recalled.

Witte made another \$50,000 donation, as well, and the district is expected to receive some additional funds once his estate is completely settled, Hicks said.

### Building a music program

The instruments were joyfully brought out of storage and repaired. New ones were purchased. The district hired Mary

Lynn McMichael as the music coordinator, and music education classes began. Her husband, Chuck McMichael, is a percussionist and works as an aide in the district.

"The music teacher and her husband are working to develop the program from the bottom up, but they take advantage of opportunities with the older students," Hicks said. The couple organized the May concert on the steps of the courthouse, which involved elementary students in pre-K-fifth grade. Performing as a whole and in grade groupings, the newly minted musicians sang songs about the U.S. Con-

stitution, grammar, multiplication tables, and other educational subjects. A few days later, middle school students performed the district's first musical, a pioneer drama called *Hillbilly Hayride* by Tim Kelly.

District leaders and community residents are happy and grateful to have music back in students' lives. Hicks was able to thank Witte one last time back in 2022, when he went to his bedside, telling him quietly, "I want you to know you have changed the lives of these kids."

Witte's eyes were closed, but Hicks said a tear rolled down his face. "I think he knew," the superintendent said.

Witte passed away peacefully that night. But his love of music lives on in the Fort Davis Mountains in Far West Texas. ★

*Laura Tolley is managing editor of Texas Lone Star.*





# FIREFIGHTERS IN TRAINING

Midland ISD program includes hands-on training

**T**he thought of what lies ahead after graduation doesn't have to be a curiosity for high school students. Among Career and Technical Education's many offerings at Midland ISD is one that can spark an especially bright future starting in students' junior year.

Midland ISD students have the opportunity to receive firefighter and EMT training and earn certifications as part of a dual-credit program at Midland College. In cooperation with the college and City of Midland, students get hands-on training over the course of their junior and senior years.

"They get the same training as our adult students," said Capt. Ryan Collier, an associate professor of Emergency Medical Services and Fire Science Technology at Midland College. "They also get the same certifications, which gets them ready for jobs in firefighting once they graduate high school."

The dual-credit program has been in place since 2021, and out of the first graduating class, two Midland ISD students have gone on to work for the Midland Fire Department. Collier, who remains active with MFD, says he's thrilled they joined.

"To see my students join us at MFD, that's definitely a 'proud dad' moment for me," he said. And it shows a major goal for the program has been achieved. "We always need firefighters, and our hope is to have more students stay in Midland and join our local fire department."

Even MFD Chief Charles Blumenauer is excited.

"This program is a win-win for the community. It allows the Midland Fire Department to have a larger local pool of candidates, and graduates can begin a great career right out of high school," he said. "We get to see them training and working with other firefighters and instill in them immediately the culture of professionalism of the Midland Fire Department. We look forward to the continued growth of this program."

## More than a firefighting program

The program teaches more technical skills than firefighting. MFD requires all firefighters to be EMT certified, so seniors prepare for the Emergency Medical Technician Basic Certification exam, which they can take after they have their high school diploma.

The soft skills students learn are also incredibly important.

"Probably the number one thing we teach in this program is accountability," Collier said. "Firefighting is a dangerous profession. Are you checking your gear? Are you prepared? Are you following proper procedure? The team is relying on you to keep yourself safe and to keep them safe. We all look out for each other so we can be successful when serving the community, and accountability can be lifesaving."

There's also the sense of camaraderie that comes with being a firefighter.

"We're a tight group, and we talk a lot about what it's like at the fire station because a lot of life's moments happen there," Collier said. "Much of our time is devoted to the job, so things like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and birthday parties, we often all celebrate together at the station. We're really a big family, and it's part of what makes being a firefighter great."

Starting the process in high school is something Collier says he wishes he'd had the opportunity to do. "I would have loved to have been able to begin my journey to becoming a firefighter at 16, even if it were just to explore it as a career."

"And with the strong connection between the program and MFD, I tell all of my students that their two-year interview process starts now."★

*This story is courtesy of Midland ISD.*



Photo courtesy of Midland ISD

At Midland ISD, students have the opportunity to receive firefighter and EMT training and earn certifications as part of a dual-credit program at Midland College. These students get hands-on training during their junior and senior years.





# ROTC SCHOLARSHIP

## Plainview ISD student gets college full ride

For Plainview ISD student Mia Garcia, thinking about college had always brought up one huge reservation — the cost. Although she wanted to continue her education, the idea of going into debt to earn a degree raised doubts about whether she should go to college.

Just before Christmas, that worry was erased when Garcia learned she had been awarded an ROTC Scholarship that will cover the full cost of her college education, an estimated \$200,000.

Garcia plans to attend The University of New Mexico where she will pursue a degree in mathematical biology. Upon completion of her bachelor's degree, Garcia will be commissioned as an ensign in the U.S. Navy. In accepting the scholarship, she is committing to serve five years in the Navy and an additional three years in the Navy Reserves. Garcia hopes to serve on a submarine during her time in the Navy.

### Inspiring ROTC program

A few years ago, the Navy was not Garcia's first choice. She originally considered the Army to be her way to afford college costs. Once she became a part of the Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps at Plainview High School, she changed her mind.

"Through NJROTC, I fell in love with the Navy. I'm all Navy now," she said. When asked about her desire to be a submariner, Garcia said, "I've always been fascinated by submarines."

Her parents, Gilbert and Blanca Pena, have mixed emotions about their daughter's future service in the Navy.

"I'm anxious, but also excited," her mom said. "I'm very proud of her. She's worked hard since she was in elementary and has always received straight A's. She has been in the gifted and talented program. She's doing all the things I wanted to do when I was young. Mia will be the first in the family to attend a four-year college, the first to go into the military, and the first to receive a full-ride scholarship."



**A** Plainview ISD student Mia Garcia has been awarded an ROTC Scholarship covering the full cost of her college education. When she gets her bachelor's degree, Garcia will be commissioned as ensign in the U.S. Navy.



**B** Plainview ISD student Mia Garcia, an ROTC scholarship recipient, and Chief Brantley, Senior Naval Science Officer with the Plainview High School Naval Junior ROTC program.



**C** From left: Gilbert and Blanca Pena, Plainview ISD student Mia Garcia, and Chief Brantley, senior naval science officer with the Plainview High School Naval Junior ROTC program. The Penas, Garcia's parents, are excited about her future in the Navy.

Photos courtesy of Plainview ISD

Chief Brantley, senior naval science officer with the Plainview High School NJROTC program, said that receiving an ROTC Scholarship is difficult. A candidate for the scholarship is evaluated on their academic ability, physical fitness, recommendations from teachers and counselors, and a recommendation from the NJROTC.

Candidates are then interviewed by Navy officers who make the final decision. In his 15 years of working with high

school students, Brantley has had only six students receive a ROTC scholarship. When asked about Garcia, Brantley said, "She will be a good officer. That's what I see in her."

Once, when Garcia was talking to her mom about joining the Navy, her mom asked, "Are you sure?" Garcia responded, "I want to go out and help people."

This summer, Garcia will travel to Illinois for a 2½-week Naval Indoctrination course. She will begin her college career in Albuquerque in the fall. Following that, she will be enlisted in the Navy — all with the goal of helping other people.★

*This story is courtesy of Plainview ISD.*



# ILLUSTRATING CREATIVITY

## San Angelo ISD students create winning book

**T**wo Central High School students at San Angelo ISD created an original, illustrated book about the vital role bees play in their environment that secured them a spot in a national competition this summer.

Junior Avery Westbrook and senior Roman Moya produced the work for a children's literature project that called for students to write and illustrate an original children's book. The students then presented and read their original story to a panel of judges and answered questions about it.

"Roman and Avery were intentional with every detail, from their carefully created illustrations to the interactive questions, every piece of the book was written with young students in mind," said Theresa Maskill, Central High School's family and consumer science teacher and Moya's mother. "Writing this book was not an easy task. These students worked hard and learned a lot about themselves in the process. We are excited that their hard work has paid off and wish them nothing but the best as they prepare to represent our district in Washington, D.C."

The two Central High students were scheduled to compete this summer in the Texas Association of Future Educators (TAFE) in Washington, D.C.

Westbrook and Moya began working on *The Honey House* in September 2023 in preparation for the area competition in November 2023, which advanced them this February to the state competition, which they won.

### Writing *The Honey House*

*The Honey House* follows a group of bees as they learn the valuable lesson of keeping their meadow clean to ensure the well-being of their precious flowers, according to the two student authors.

"As young readers start on this colorful journey, they will witness the bees coming together, and committing to environmental stewardship. The story not only



entertains but also imparts fundamental values of responsibility and cooperation," the students said.

*The Honey House* is an educational adventure that takes young readers on a journey that sparks curiosity and environmental awareness. Throughout the book, Westbrook and Moya included interactive questions to keep readers engaged and learning.

"These kids have worked hard! They were so proud of the book and practiced their presentation and reading so much that their friends and family started asking where they could get copies," said Scarlet Rodriguez, Central High's TAFE sponsor and an education pathways teacher. "I looked into what it would take to produce copies of the book and we decided to turn it into a fundraiser for TAFE, our future teacher club. This has been such an exciting project, and it is so cool to see it turn into a published book. I'm proud of the work these two have put into their book and even prouder to have it as an example for future competitors. Avery and Roman have built a legacy in our TAFE chapter."

With assistance from the San Angelo Association of REALTORS, the two students were able to publish copies of *The Honey House* for the fundraiser.

San Angelo ISD school leaders noted

At San Angelo ISD, Central High School students Avery Westbrook, a junior, and Roman Moya, a senior, created an original, illustrated book this year about the vital role bees play in their environment. Westbrook and Moya began working on *The Honey House* in September 2023. They won the state competition this past February, claiming a spot in the national competition this summer in Washington, D.C. A local San Angelo business helped the students produce copies of the book.

Photos courtesy of San Angelo ISD



that the CTE Teaching and Training Pathway is just one more way, with rippling effects, to help further the important work of public education. The district offers the CTE Teaching and Training pathway for high school students aspiring to be educators to help them prepare for careers related to teaching, instruction, and creation of instructional and enrichment materials. This CTE pathway is also designed to familiarize students with the processes for developing curriculum, coordinating education content and coaching groups and individuals. ★

*This story is courtesy of San Angelo ISD.*



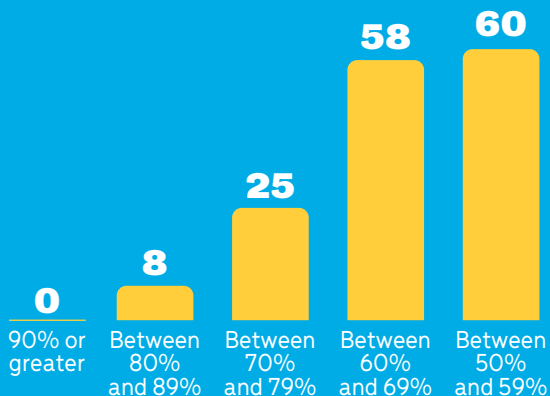
# A Closer Look

Texas school districts that want to renovate school buildings or build new ones need to ask their voters on a May or November ballot for permission to sell bonds.

Bonds are sold to investors to raise the money needed for capital projects, which include new facilities, additions, renovations, land acquisition, technology infrastructure, and costs associated with managing the construction process, such as design and project management.

School boards play a pivotal role in deciding whether a district will hold a bond election, including working with district administration to conduct a needs assessment, overseeing the district's financial position and ratings, and ordering the election.

Number of bonds approved, by percentage of voters supporting the proposition



## May 4 Election

Here's a closer look at the May 4 election outcomes for school districts across the state that asked voters to approve more than \$10 billion in bond propositions.



**119** School districts put bond propositions on the ballot

**208** Propositions on the ballots

**\$10.15B**

Total value of those propositions



**\$7.56B**

Total value of the bonds that passed

**151** Number of bonds that passed

**\$597.5M**

Amount of the largest single bond proposition passed



**\$2.59B**

Total value of the bonds that failed

**57** Number of bonds that failed

Source: TASB Planning and Research



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