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Texas Lone Star

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14 • 2023 Council of School Attorneys Post-Legislative Seminar — Austin

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For more information about these events or deadlines, visit the TASB website at 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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CELEBRATING SUCCESS

Graduations highlight power of public education

by Debbie Gillespie

It doesn't matter if you are a trustee in a small town, suburban area, big city, or somewhere in between, there is nothing better than being able to celebrate your students and all the moments that help guide them to graduation and on to successful lives.

When you visit a campus or attend a school event, you see all of the wonderful things that are happening in Texas public schools today. You are keenly aware of all of the accomplishments and successes. You have seen how hard our teachers and campus staff work and you know about all the important things our students are learning and what they are achieving every day they are in school.

Those achievements run counter to the negative comments made about public schools, which makes me wonder if we are doing enough to share our individual and collective good stories. As they say, "Tell your story or someone will tell it for you."

So here is a good story I want to share with you. I had the great privilege of attending all 10 of our Frisco ISD graduation ceremonies in May. Each campus, every class of seniors, and every ceremony had its own energy and personality.

I heard speeches from the senior class valedictorians, salutatorians, presidents, and vice presidents, along with poignant remarks and advice from the cherished campus principals.

Almost every single one of these students spoke about the importance of relationships while recognizing teachers, friends, parents, and family members. They also talked about realizing what is important and shared some regrets about being so serious and not having a little more fun. You know, the things that can't be tested.

One principal took the time to talk about the incredibly long list of



Debbie Gillespie

accomplishments of the class of 2023 on his campus. That was just one school — Frisco ISD has 74 campuses, and it is still growing.

Although we celebrate our students and are incredibly proud of the hard work that comes with their many academic achievements, we know that our students are so much more than a grade.

So, how do we define success, either as individuals or as a district?

Success can be defined in many different ways, and the meaning is very different for every individual. You might measure success with personal goals, relationships, happiness, overcoming challenges, or maybe just simply by your own values, aspirations, and priorities, and not by someone else's standards or expectations.

A public school district's definition of success is also very individualized. We serve all students; however, our challenges may be different depending on the needs and goals of our communities.

We all want the same things for our students — for each one to reach their full potential and become caring, productive citizens who contribute to the workforce and the communities in which they live.

This is why so many of us have spent so much time over the last few months, or

longer, talking to legislators about funding our schools appropriately and valuing the education profession because there are some things that are nonnegotiables in contributing to any success model.

So, when we talk about the success of our districts, I go back to what our wise seniors said: relationships matter.

Strong relationships among students, teachers, and administrators are essential to the way our students learn and grow. However, we also cannot overlook the importance of family and community engagement and the positive impact those partnerships have on the success of any district.

In Frisco ISD, we greatly value all successes. At Frisco ISD, that includes five students who earned an associate's degree from Collin College before graduating from high school, a record number of National Merit Scholars, 360 athletes who participated in the Special Olympics track meet, and 10 Transition Services students who graduated from Project Search and are now gainfully employed. We also know that none of this happens without the countless volunteers and community members who contribute to all of our success in Frisco ISD.

Those are a few of the highlights of my district's awesome year. In this issue of *Texas Lone Star*, we are honored to share some of the many accomplishments that occurred in public schools across this state.

I know every district has its own achievements to celebrate. I congratulate you all on another tremendous year in Texas public schools. Let's continue to honor and share the good news about all the great things that happen in all of our districts every single day!★

Debbie Gillespie is the 2022-23 president of TASB.

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A COMMUNITY'S HEART

Public schools unite residents in Texas towns

by Laura Tolley

Each year, the July issue of *Texas Lone Star* honors the achievements of students, educators, and school leaders across the state. This “Good News” issue shines a well-deserved spotlight on the powerful benefits of public education in Texas.

The only downside to this special edition is that we can only showcase a small sampling of the many great things going on in public schools today. We all know there are countless success stories in public education across the Lone Star State.

One word kept coming up in this year's submissions and selections — community. There were inspiring stories of students helping their communities and residents giving back to their schools. A district's importance to its community, and the residents' love and commitment to public education stood out.

“The school district is the heart of this town,” Michelle West said of Marathon, a community of about 400 residents in far West Texas. And we know that many Texans echo her sentiment.

West is executive director of the Marathon Foundation, a nonprofit established in 2010 to support Marathon ISD, though it also helps other local entities. Her husband, Hayes West, is a Marathon ISD school board member. Their two daughters attended Marathon ISD this year, while their son was studying at West Texas A&M University in Canyon. You get the picture — the West family is deeply connected to public education.

The Wests and other residents of Marathon are celebrating some very good news for their children and town. The Marathon Public Library, which offers after-school activities and is a gathering spot for locals, recently announced it will get a \$1 million capital gift from a Dallas foundation to enlarge the library and renovate the little museum next door.

In addition, Marathon ISD is poised



Laura Tolley

to get a \$350,000 grant for a school safety project thanks to the efforts of U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales, R-San Antonio. Final approval for the grant money is pending. The funds will be spent in part to finally bring air conditioning to the district's 85-year-old gymnasium, where most school events are held. This is West Texas, y'all, and it can get really hot inside there, forcing school officials to open the doors. That's a safety issue, not to mention a matter of basic comfort.

“I do all of the sports, so I know how bad we need air conditioning,” said Madeline West, Michelle and Hayes' oldest daughter, who was a junior this past year. “We have to leave the doors open to let the air come through.”

It turns out that Madeline West played a big part in the Marathon ISD Mustangs' good news tale. She was an intern in Gonzales' Fort Stockton office last fall when she found out he was planning to visit Marathon.

“I asked him if he could come over to the school to see what the school district was like,” said the student council president. “I felt like that was a good move.”

She joined Gonzales and Ivonne Durant, Marathon ISD's new superintendent, on a tour of the district's two

schools, including the gym. Durant discussed the need for air conditioning.

Gonzales announced the grant this spring, saying the funding, once officially approved, will help pay for an AC unit, new doors that will automatically lock, and other safety measures. A student got the ball rolling for this good news story, and school leaders and community members pitched in to help make it happen.

Madeline West will graduate before the gym renovations are completed. But she will be back for games and events, like other Marathoners. “The stands are full for all of the games,” she noted. “The whole town comes. Our town is very supportive of whatever we do. That's another advantage of living in a small town.”

That's one small, good news story for Texas, but it's huge for that school district and town. And of course, there are similar scenarios being played out in other Texas school districts. People care about their public schools and students. Many of the stories in this issue highlight the efforts of communities and school leaders working together to benefit students.

Abernathy ISD, north of Lubbock, got its robotics program launched thanks to donations from a local business. The people of Utopia, a small community west of San Antonio, are working together to pass a school bond proposal, something that hasn't been done there in decades. Those are just two of the stories you will find in this issue about communities' commitment to their school district.

I hope you enjoy the July issue. We definitely enjoyed creating it for you!★

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



REACHING FOR THE STARS

North Texas students part of NASA program

A group of Math, Engineering, Technology, and Science Academy (METSA) students in the biotechnical course at Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD's R.L. Turner High School participated in the NASA HUNCH finals this spring at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. They built prototypes and developed solutions to problems faced aboard space stations.

Johanna Fraire, Denyse Silva, and Daitan Vo worked in class to figure out a method to sterilize 3D-printed medical tools in space. Their project, "3D-Printed Medical Tool Sterilization," was one of 33 from across the country chosen for presentation at the final critical review.

"This was CFBISD's first METSA team to get invited to the final critical design review in Houston," said Yaritza Ortiz-Rivera, R.L. Turner science teacher and METSA instructor. "This is an experience like no other, a real-life opportunity with impact beyond the classroom in both the science world and the community."

Projects in development

Throughout the year, students presented different stages of their project to panels of professionals and incorporated their feedback into their work. These presentations were used to determine which projects were moving forward and had the potential to solve the proposed problem.

Several METSA groups participated in the regional preliminary design review and moved on to the state critical design review. Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD's group advanced to participate in the national and final review, joining other selected students from 46 participating states.

At the final review in April, the students presented their solution to a pool of engineers, scientists, and astronauts, and were advised to continue their project and perfect it for next year. They were awarded certificates and letters of recommendation for their work, and their signatures were stamped in a locker that will travel



Photos courtesy of Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD



A group of Math, Engineering, Technology and Science Academy (METSA) students in the biotechnical course at Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD's R.L. Turner High School at the NASA Hunch finals this spring at the Johnson Space Center in Houston.



“This is an experience like no other, a real-life opportunity with impact beyond the classroom in both the science world and the community.”

— Yaritza Ortiz-Rivera, R.L. Turner science teacher and METSA instructor

in the next space mission. The group has also been presented with an opportunity to have either their whole project or part of their project fly into space for testing.

“We are extremely proud of the METSA students and their teacher, Mrs. Yaritza Ortiz-Rivera,” said Adam Grinage, principal of R.L. Turner. “Our kids are going beyond just putting Turner on the map — they are putting Turner in outer space. How many people can say their names are affixed to a space mission? Their work is astounding.”

In addition to traveling to Houston, the METSA team also participated in The North Texas NASA-VIPS Innovation Day later that same month. More than 50 projects spanning biotechnical health, engineering, and computer science were displayed. Each project featured working prototypes that were demonstrated to NASA engineers and flight surgeons. The NASA HUNCH choices align with the STEM career and technology pathways offered by the Texas Education Agency.

“The METSA students are now working on the entrepreneurial aspect of their innovation,” Ortiz-Rivera said. “They are seeking intellectual property protection and completing Lean Business Models under the guidance of the University of Iowa STEM Innovator, a STEM and entrepreneurial program.”

NASA’s HUNCH Program is a way for students of all skill levels to develop innovative solutions to problems posed by life on the International Space Station. Many of the projects are items personally requested by the ISS Crew to help ease living conditions aboard the station, giving students the opportunity to really make an impact on the lives of astronauts.★

This story is courtesy of Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD.

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Legal Services



LEARNING LIFE SKILLS

Rice ISD students benefit from leadership program

Spirit, determination, trust, and respect are priorities at Rice High School. An ongoing partnership with the Rice ISD school and the local Chick-fil-A gives students the opportunity to focus on these and other important characteristics.

The CFA Leadership Program provides students with online resources and materials to learn about leadership traits. The group then puts the students' skills to use by having them complete community service projects throughout the year.

The junior class kicked off the school year with a rally to help students understand the program's goals and purpose. Last November, Chick-fil-A donated children's books to help with the group's first major project: organizing care packages with books and handwritten notes of encouragement for students at Rice ISD's elementary school. As a group, they went to hand-deliver the packages and read to classes.

Leadership students said the best part about the experience was all the smiles. Surprised at how grateful the elementary students were to interact with them, the students in the leadership program said the project helped them realize that they should always try to be good role models.

Darrion Chatman, one of the participants in the leadership program, was also selected by staff to attend the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership Conference last summer. The experience changed him.

"The most important thing I have learned from HOBY and being in Chick-fil-A Leadership is to always stay positive, even if things are going bad because you always have people looking up at you even if you don't know it," Chatman said, adding that the skills he learned will give him the opportunity to "help a lot of people in life."

This spring, the aspiring group of

leaders spent a day cleaning the Mike Dickens Memorial Park, which is an integral part of the Rice ISD community.

When asked how the program has helped them grow, students shared several examples, including the importance of learning new things, getting outside of their comfort zone, and working together. Their teacher, Channing Coffey, believes the program helps students realize they are a part of something bigger than themselves.

"They have more of a sense of pride in themselves and in their community," Coffey said.

Prioritizing soft skills like leadership and service are a critical part of preparing well-rounded students for the future, and district staff members look forward to continuing this tradition at Rice High School.★

This story is courtesy of Rice ISD.



Rice ISD students from the high school pose with students from the elementary school. The high school students, members of a leadership program, organized care packages this school year for the younger students.

Photo courtesy of Rice ISD



COUNTING CHICKENS

Sunnyvale ISD offers farm project to students

Sunnyvale Intermediate School math teacher Lisa Stovall is bringing a wide range of knowledge and experience to her students through a multiyear Engaged Learning Unit involving the care and keeping of chickens.

This cross-curricular, student-led project allows her classes to practice empathy, work outdoors, and become familiar with how to care for the animals, all while building mathematic skills.

"The chicken project incorporates many areas of my classroom and includes my junior FFA kids' group also," Stovall said. "Students will be responsible for collecting eggs, promoting them, and selling them. This helps with financial literacy."

In addition to math topics addressed through the project like budgeting, decimals, and estimation, students write about the chickens in English language arts and reading classes, study the life cycle of chickens, and gain valuable real-life and social-emotional skills.

"It teaches the kiddos how to care for something other than themselves," Stovall

said. "They form bonds and relationships over taking care of the chickens."

Initially, Stovall kept the chickens in her classroom. But after visiting three different schools with outdoor learning spaces, she decided that this unique type of space was just the thing to bring to Sunnyvale ISD. Stovall also has plans for the outdoor learning space that will add

to students' opportunities to learn and explore.

"We want to have a butterfly garden, a garden to raise chicken treats, and hopefully someday bees will be incorporated," Stovall said. "This is a great way for students to be outside and learn."★

This story is courtesy of Sunnyvale ISD.



Sunnyvale Intermediate School students hold a baby chick.

Photos courtesy of Sunnyvale ISD

Sunnyvale Intermediate School students in the outdoor learning space that houses chickens.



TUBAS, STUDENT, AND COACH

Wylie ISD educator helps quarterback stay in band

In the band hall at Wylie ISD's McMillan Junior High during fourth period, one of the students stood out this year. Sitting in the next to last row, playing the tuba, he had a full beard and wore a coach's windbreaker.

He was a bit rusty. After all, it's been 10 years since he played an instrument in his own high school band in St. Francisville, Louisiana.

"It took a little while to come back to me," McMillan football coach David Cazabat said about playing the tuba with the eighth-grade band.

Attending a small 3A school, Cazabat played high school football and was in the band.

"Where I'm from, they encourage you to do everything," Cazabat said. "It's a good thing to be well rounded."

He likes to pass that lesson on to his students. Cazabat teaches college and career readiness, and he coaches football, track, and cross-country.

"It's our job as teachers to share our experiences and build relationships," Cazabat said.

When they learned he used to play tuba, school band directors Kimberly Hernandez and Pete Jodal invited Cazabat to visit their band hall anytime.

Part of the class

When Cazabat took them up on their invitation, he sat next to a tuba player, who was also the quarterback of his football team.

"After I sat down, Mr. Jodal brought me a tuba, so I started playing," Cazabat said.

Eighth-grader Daylon Gordon was taken aback. He had already spoken to Cazabat about how he wasn't sure how to balance all of his extracurricular activities.

"I had a heavy workload with sports and training," Gordon said. "I was starting to lose interest in band."

Hernandez continued teaching the class and treated Cazabat as if he were one of her students.

"She called on individual students to play the scales; then she called on me to play them," Cazabat said.

Hernandez even had the football coach read sheet music.

"The whole class loved having him there," Gordon said. "They all welcomed him."

Playing tuba with Cazabat reignited Gordon's love for band.

"I like playing tuba," Gordon said. "I like my part; we lead the bass line."

Playing football and the tuba aren't the only things Gordon and Cazabat have in common. Gordon is from Louisiana, too. He and his family moved to Wylie in Collin County eight years ago.

"My mom wanted a better life and school district for us," said Gordon, who hopes to play college football for Louisiana State University.

It's evident that Cazabat builds strong relationships with his students. As he walks down the halls, they stop to tell

him the good news happening in their personal lives.

"I want them to learn from my experiences," he said. "There are things I wish I would have stuck with, like baseball. I encourage my students to try everything. I want them to look back and know this is something they will have with them for the rest of their lives."★

This story is courtesy of Wylie ISD.

From left: David Cazabat, football coach at McMillan Junior High in Wylie ISD, and student Daylon Gordon.



From left: Daylon Gordon, a student at McMillan Junior High in Wylie ISD, and David Cazabat, the school's football coach, practice the tuba.

Photos courtesy of Wylie ISD



IN SERVICE TO OTHERS

Caddo Mills ISD sponsors community program

What could we do if everyone gave just a little more effort? This is the question Caddo Mills ISD officials asked when they started their annual community service day five years ago.

District officials wanted to instill the actions of servant leadership in their students, so they implemented the theme “212 Day,” based on the book, *212: The Extra Degree*, by Sam Parker and Mac Anderson.

Teachers read the book to their students, explaining that at 211 degrees, water is hot. At 212 degrees, it boils. With boiling water, comes steam. Steam can power a locomotive. With one extra degree from everyone, big things can happen in this small, but growing community 30 miles east of Dallas.

Each year, Caddo Mills ISD students create a list of ways to give back to their community. They have painted the local park playground, planted flowers downtown, helped the elderly with yard work, and built a sidewalk and firepit for wheelchair access at a local equine therapy facility.

Younger students get involved by writing letters to the military and first responders and sending military care boxes to Caddo Mills ISD graduates.

A favorite activity among students is to travel to local nursing homes where they paint residents’ fingernails, play board games, and sing. Students return with stories about the “good old days” from the residents.

The activity list grows each year, and the one-day event can continue throughout the year when the need arises. Caddo Mills ISD students have found themselves with that one extra degree of giving back to their community.★

This story is courtesy of Caddo Mills ISD.



Photo courtesy of Caddo Mills ISD

Caddo Mills ISD students play games with nursing home residents as part of the district’s community service efforts.



LEGAL STUDIES

Belton ISD's new program focuses on the law

Isabelle Ryals had been looking for a potential career. Something English-y, mused the Belton ISD New Tech @Waskow sophomore. Then she discovered her high school's new legal studies program.

"It's just very captivating to get lost in a case and figure it out," Ryals said. "And once you finally have it, it's such a good feeling to know you can walk up in front of as many people as you have to and fight for something because you've done so much research behind it."

Belton ISD's New Tech project pathway began offering a legal studies program last August. By March, the appellate team of Ryals and Cayden Ratliff had placed sixth at the state YMCA Texas Youth and Government competition — just one place shy of qualifying for nationals.

Neill Plemons, the program's coordinator, said the students spent months preparing for the competition.

"The legal program is a cornucopia of benefits for students ranging from the academic to the civic," Plemons said. "Students use real cases and work that pushes their critical reading and writing skills as they synthesize information across multiple documents."

Ryals and Ratliff said they poured over eight precedent case studies from the U.S. Supreme Court and the Texas

Court of Criminal Appeals — about 50 pages each — in preparation to write their legal brief for the district meet.

They also had to prepare an oral argument, which is more of a conversation with the judge rather than a speech.

"You have to be prepared to answer any question from the judge," Ryals said. "You're interrupted and then have to keep going after that."

Ratliff said the secret was painting a picture that went with their side of the argument.

"That was what took the longest time for me — the memorization and getting it right," Ratliff said. "In the beginning, I struggled with comprehending exactly what we were arguing. But once it clicked, it came really fast and was really easy."

Plemons is most impressed with the improvement he's seen in his students' public speaking skills.

"Students are terrified at first but quickly adapt to the courtroom setting," he said. "By the end of this past competition, students who were normally shy or soft-spoken in front of a room can now own the space and speak with confidence."

For Ryals, a career in law is definitely in her future.

"We have friends who complain about how much we talk about it," she said. "It takes over your mind in the best way possible."★

This story is courtesy of Belton ISD.

Belton ISD students and staff who are involved in the district's new legal studies program, part of Belton ISD's New Tech project pathway.



Photos courtesy of Belton ISD



YOUTH ARTS MONTH

Austin ISD event showcases students' creativity

Austin ISD celebrated Youth Art Month in March, showcasing more than 2,000 student works.

The event is a culmination of the district's visual arts curriculum. Each piece of artwork serves as a formative assessment, providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their growth as artists, exhibit knowledge and skills learned, and communicate their unique and personal message to viewers.

The art show is presented every year at the Austin ISD Performing Arts Center, and all district art teachers curate works from their students for display. The show lasted the entire month of March to coordinate with National Youth Art Month, and weekend and evening visiting hours were included.

Each year, the district also holds contests for a T-shirt design and three billboard designs — one each for elementary, middle, and high school. The 10 billboards are displayed around the city proudly proclaiming the importance of visual art to the Austin community.

"Art to me is a language with no barriers. It's a way to communicate thoughts, feelings, and the world to anyone willing to listen," said student Haley F., a Crockett High School sophomore.

Cat M., a junior at Crockett High School, said art "has been a way I am able to express love to myself and the people I am connected with. Art becomes essential when people find meaning in it. Art gives me a voice and I have fun."

Sophie G., a third-grade student at Davis Elementary, learned the art technique Zentangle for her entry. The Zentangle method uses structured patterns, called tangles, to create combinations of dots, lines, simple curves, s-curves, and orbs.

"In art, you can be creative and learn new techniques. I really like Zentangle," she said.

Austin ISD noted that research shows that students enrolled in the arts have higher school attendance, and those who complete more arts courses

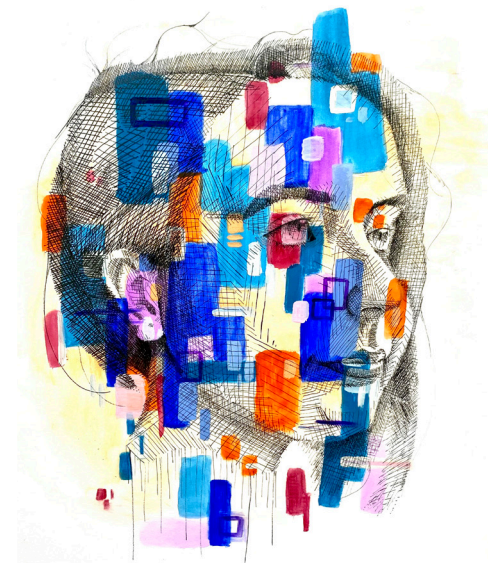
have up to a 15% higher pass rate on standardized tests. Additionally, one in 15 jobs in Texas is part of the creative sector, highlighting the importance of the arts in society.

Austin ISD provides young artists with ample opportunities to explore various art forms, hone their skills, and share

their unique stories with the community and the world beyond.

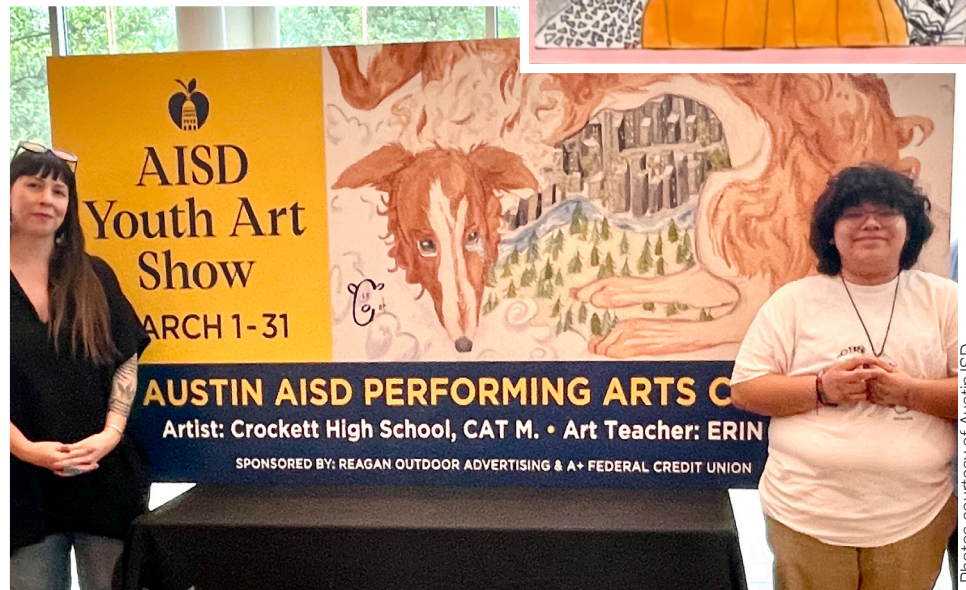
The many works of art shared during Austin ISD's youth art month show that, in Austin, children have a lot to say to the world.★

This story is courtesy of Austin ISD.



Artwork by Haley F., a sophomore at Austin ISD's Crockett High School.

Artwork by Sophie G., a third-grade student at Austin ISD's Davis Elementary School.



From left: Crockett High School art teacher Erin Lane and student Cat M. stand beside one of the billboards created for the event featuring the student's artwork.

Photos courtesy of Austin ISD



HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

Utopia ISD is the pride and joy of this small town

The squeak of shoes on the polished gym floor mixed with the calls to “pass!” as a jumble of high school students played basketball in PE class on a sunny morning in May. “This gymnasium is the heart of the community,” said Utopia ISD Superintendent Michael Derry.

This special community, located in the rugged part of the Hill Country west of San Antonio, has wholeheartedly supported the single-campus school district of 212 students – and it’s now considering another way to help the students, an initiative common in other districts but something Utopia hasn’t done in decades.

“They are passionate about their kids, and they want the best for their kids,” Derry said about the community’s involvement in his district. “I’m just really excited.”

Derry started a strategic planning process two years ago to find out what the community as a whole wanted for the school district. They had 54 members on the committee and conducted facilities tours as part of the partnership to create a five-year plan to bring building and safety updates to the campus.

“It is the hub of the community,” Derry said about the school district. “The gymnasium is packed at every game. It’s the largest employer in the community. Everything revolves around the school district.”

Calling for a bond

After the extensive planning process, the community consensus was the district needed to replace the main building, which was built in 1927 and has a hodgepodge of additions made over the years. “People have said we got to do something,” Derry explained. “We’ve got to build something.”

Utopia ISD will be calling for a bond in November. The district hasn’t passed one since the 1970s, according to Derry.

When he came to Utopia ISD three years ago, the business manager, Karen Heideman, was doubtful about his hopes for the district. “She told me when I first

got here, ‘We don’t pass bonds in Utopia,’ and now she is on the bond committee.”

On a typical afternoon in May, Derry was out checking an electric gate while



Utopia ISD teacher of the month for May Jennifer Keeney stands with Principal Julia Mazurek, Wayne Moore, board president, and student of the month Paisley Culpepper.



Utopia ISD Superintendent Michael Derry discusses recent safety measures at the May board meeting. From left: Jena Smothers, Chad Hillis, Wayne Moore, Michael Derry, and Sugar Bennett.

chatting on his cell phone with the company about panic buttons for classrooms. He cheerfully chided a group of middle school boys to slow down as he strode across the small courtyard that has been enclosed with fencing since his arrival to the district. “The main thing to me is the safety of the kids in Utopia — a new facility and getting rid of what is not safe.”

Successful students

The facilities committee, a mixture of Utopia ISD trustees, staff,

and community members, met recently to discuss the bond issue, including the potential impact of rising property valuations in the area. The group lamented how the timing of valuations may have negatively impacted the bond results in neighboring Bandera ISD, which did not pass its bond in the May election.

“You have to be very unselfish and think about this community and this town,” said Chad Hillis, a Utopia ISD trustee, as the committee talked about what a bond requires of the community.

The next phase of the process will be determining the exact scope of the bond and educating the community about the purpose and financial impact. “We’ve got to have salesmen,” said Wayne Moore, Utopia ISD board president.

Ideally, the bond would allow for a new building for students in grades 5-12 on a plot of land at the front of the campus, a new CTE building with a welding classroom, a new HVAC for the gym that does not have air conditioning, and new track and tennis courts.

“It was not the superintendent. It was not the school board. It was the community,” Derry said. “I think it is just fantastic the way they’ve rallied around the school.”

At the May school board meeting, 28 students were recognized for being UIL regional and state qualifiers and winners, including two first place winners in the state tennis championship. From buying cakes to sending the 14 seniors on a trip to the Bahamas to serving on committees, there is strong community support.

“There are great things happening in Utopia, Texas,” said Derry. ★

This story is by Beth Griesmer, a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.



Photos courtesy of Utopia ISD



UIL qualifiers and winners were recognized at the May Utopia ISD board meeting.



MOBILE LEARNING

Alvin ISD effort brings books, STEM to students

Alvin ISD launched an initiative in 2016 to bring literacy and other learning opportunities directly to students right in their neighborhoods. With a \$10,000 donation from the Alvin ISD Education Foundation, the foundation helped the district launch what would become a hugely successful program, putting more than 100,000 books in students' hands over seven years.

The Book Bus was so well received that in May 2022, Alvin ISD unveiled its second mobile outreach program, a "Magic STEM Bus that Ignites Curiosity." The Alvin ISD STEM Bus is a learning resource designed for teachers and students from pre-K through 12th grade.

"Of course, the most important part is developing a program that is valuable to our students and the community," said Ana Pasarella, Alvin ISD's director of family and community engagement. "What this means is really understanding what is important to them so that we can effectively tailor our community outreach."

STEM education often requires a lot of expensive equipment that schools cannot afford or maintain. Alvin ISD found a solution to overcome this obstacle, gutting an old district school bus, stripping it down, and transforming it into a mobile learning lab that travels from campus to campus during the school year. During the summer, it visits all the summer school locations throughout the district.

Donations help fund effort

In 2019, the foundation made the first \$40,000 donation to get the STEM Bus project started; then the district received an additional \$150,000 from its community partners through sponsorships and grants, which made the program a reality. The district provides the bus drivers and maintenance for the bus.

Both the STEM and Book buses have made it easier for many of the district's students to gain access to educational

tools and resources, said Earl Humbird, Alvin ISD school board president.

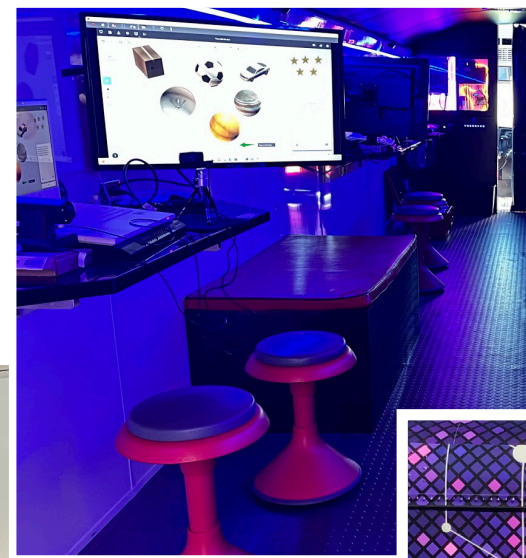
"The STEM Bus inspires our students to explore and engage with science, technology, engineering, and math in a hands-on and interactive way, while the Book Bus opens doors to a world of knowledge and imagination that might otherwise be inaccessible to some of our students," Humbird said. "Together, these programs are making a real difference in the lives of our students and the community as a whole."

Students have played a role in the success of both programs. Renovation of the Book Bus and gutting and prepping the STEM Bus was done in-house with students from the career and technical

education, construction, auto-tech, and welding programs helping to prepare the buses for their future uses.

Internship offered

A STEM Bus internship was created for high school students interested



Alvin ISD STEM Bus interns had the opportunity to get real-world experience and visited HP to learn more about STEM careers.

in science, technology, engineering, and math subjects. In its first year, 32 students were chosen for the highly selective internship. The interns facilitate the learning stations for students at the elementary and junior high levels. The interns also serve as ambassadors for the STEM Bus at state and regional showcases.

In return for their efforts, interns receive real-life experience, community volunteer hours, and are given letters of recommendation for their college applications, Pasarella said.

Juan Castillo was a STEM Bus intern. He said the experience expanded his knowledge base and allowed him to see how one person could make a difference in others' lives. He shared his experience in his college applications and credited his STEM Bus internship with setting him apart from other students. He was one of 87 students selected for a full-ride scholarship to Columbia University.

Both the Alvin ISD Book Bus and STEM Bus are extremely "cool," eye-catching sights as they travel from school-to-school, Pasarella said. The STEM Bus can also be found at community and district events, and special campus programs that encourage student exploration.

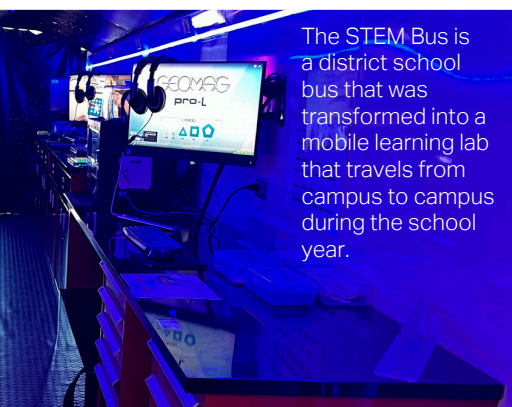
"Our STEM Bus and Book Bus continue to make a profound impact on our students and community," said Carol Nelson, Alvin ISD superintendent. "By bringing these resources directly to our neighborhoods, we're breaking down barriers to education and inspiring the next generation of readers and innovators. These two programs represent

our commitment to providing equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their background or circumstances."★

This story is courtesy of Alvin ISD.

"The STEM Bus inspires our students to explore and engage with science, technology, engineering, and math in a hands-on and interactive way, while the Book Bus opens doors to a world of knowledge and imagination that might otherwise be inaccessible to some of our students."

— Earl Humbird, Alvin ISD's school board president



The STEM Bus is a district school bus that was transformed into a mobile learning lab that travels from campus to campus during the school year.



Photos courtesy of Alvin ISD

The Alvin ISD STEM Bus launched in May 2022 and has allowed the district's students to explore and engage with science, technology, engineering, and math.

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OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Senior's health kick leads to other triumphs

It all started with a bike ride.

When Klein Forest High School senior Ryan Nguyen cycled from his house to downtown Houston's Buffalo Bayou and back for the first time — 34 miles — he began to truly understand that his mind could be his enemy or his greatest asset.

"After I started exercising, I lost 25 pounds and figured out that I can push my mind," Nguyen said. "I wanted to improve myself as an individual, and that has been my biggest journey: realizing what I wanted to do with myself and aspiring for the top of the mountain."

The top of Nguyen's mountain so far is his recent acceptance into Yale University, his dream school, with a full-ride scholarship majoring in philosophy on a pre-med track.

"I wanted to aim high for a school like Yale University because my parents are immigrants from Vietnam who always wanted to make me happy — it's the whole reason they moved to the United States," Nguyen said. "I want to repay them. I want to change our status from low income to something grand because they deserve it after all they've done for me."

Overcoming barriers

While his academic commitment was evident in his success in rigorous courses at Klein ISD, few knew how he climbed over barriers at home.

"The only worker in my family has always been my dad. I have a bedridden grandmother and my mom stays home," Nguyen said. "I used to be dissuaded from doing extracurricular activities because we didn't have ready access to transportation. I began cycling to get out of the house and it helped with my mental health."

After joining EMERGE as a junior, Nguyen's journey began to blossom. The program helps high-performing students from underserved communities attend and graduate from selective colleges and universities. Nguyen went from a student who was always reserved and reluctant to step out of his comfort zone to a leader whose confidence and determination took him to new heights.

"The opportunity to become involved in leadership positions at Klein Forest allowed me to grow my skills in communication, professionalism, and speaking with adults in general," Nguyen

said. "These skills are part of what helped me get into summer programs where I was able to travel to South Africa for a month on my own and study philosophy at Rice University."

Making connections

Stepping out of his shell and making connections taught Nguyen that the resources he needed were around him, and all he had to do was tap into them.

"The best thing you can do is just talk to someone," Nguyen said. "Through my advisor, I was able to be part of the EMERGE mentorship program where my mentor, a Stanford undergraduate and Harvard Law School graduate, helped me with my applications."

The motto at Klein Forest High School is "Be the Legacy." Nguyen hopes his legacy will grow into one that allows other Golden Eagles to take leaps and get into the top universities in the world.

"I have a sense of obligation to give back to others," Nguyen said. "I need to tell them about the combined information and knowledge that I've gathered from so many different people. I want to do something that will benefit a lot of people." ★

This story is courtesy of Klein ISD.



High School senior Ryan Nguyen has been accepted to Yale University, with a full-ride scholarship majoring in philosophy on a pre-med track.



Senior Ryan Nguyen poses outside Klein Forest High School.

Photos courtesy of Klein ISD



SCIENCE EXCELLENCE

Conroe ISD senior a finalist for national honor

At Conroe ISD, Woodlands College Park High School senior Siddhu Pachipala was selected as a top finalist in the Regeneron Science Talent Search 2023.

Pachipala, who plans to enroll at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology this fall, claimed ninth place out of the 40 national finalists and received a \$50,000 award. Regeneron Pharmaceuticals Inc., and the Society for Science, the sponsors, announced the finalists in January.

Pachipala's project was the SuiSensor, a novel, low-cost machine learning system that can analyze journal entries as a means to gauge patients' suicide risk. His work suggests an individual's writing could be correlated with their psychological health and risk of suicide.

Pachipala was also named the

Seaborg Award winner and given the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Regeneron Science Talent Search Class of 2023. The finalists chose Pachipala as the student who most exemplifies their class, and the extraordinary attributes of nuclear chemist Glenn T. Seaborg, who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1951 and served on the Society's Board of Trustees for 30 years.

In addition, Pachipala was one of 151 high school seniors across the nation who were selected as 2023 U.S. Presidential Scholars. The Presidential Scholars program selects scholars based on their academic success, artistic and technical excellence, essays, school evaluations, and transcripts, as well as a demonstrated commitment to community service and leadership.

Now in its 82nd year, the Regeneron Science Talent Search is the nation's oldest and most prestigious science and math competition for high school seniors.

Many past winners continue to pursue innovation for the good of society and the planet. Program alumni have received some of the world's most coveted science and math honors, including 13 Nobel Prizes and 22 MacArthur Foundation Fellowships. They also have become the founders of many important science-based companies, such as Regeneron co-founder, president, and chief scientific officer George D. Yancopoulos, M.D., Ph.D., a 1976 Science Talent Search finalist and top winner. ★

This story is courtesy of Conroe ISD.



Photo by the Society for Science/Chris Ayers Photography

Woodlands College Park High School senior Siddhu Pachipala, second from left, was a finalist in the Regeneron Science Talent Search 2023.



READY, SET, TEACH

Students get authentic teaching experiences

For some students at Friendswood High School, going to class this year looked a lot like going to work. The juniors and seniors in the Ready, Set, Teach program ran the Little Mustangs Preschool – from planning the lessons to managing classroom behaviors.

“For me to be able to teach students how to be great teachers is a dream job,” said Brooke Holtvluwer, who brought her 20 years of teaching experience in Friendswood ISD to the district’s education and training program. “Growing

teachers in our district is a passion of mine.”

The high school partnered with the Friendswood ISD Education Foundation to renovate a couple of computer labs into a laboratory early childhood classroom, complete with a playground and its own entrance into the high school building. Little Mustangs Preschool opened Oct. 4 to 15 students ages 3-5 years old. The preschool operated Tuesdays through Fridays during two high school class periods, from 9 a.m. to noon.

Engaging and innovative lessons

The 16 students in this year’s Ready, Set, Teach program were divided into two groups on two-week rotations, with one group in the preschool classroom and the other group planning lessons and handling the administrative side of running the preschool. Using a lesson plan template, the students learned how to differentiate the curriculum and develop themes that incorporate key concepts and skills, such as shapes, colors, letters, and fine motor skills.

“We have teachers and administrators observe our classroom and give us feedback on lessons they are teaching,” Holtvluwer said. “I had one teacher email me afterwards and say, ‘Could you send me their lesson plan?’ They do have great ideas.”

The students took turns being the lead teacher for the week, while the others supported classroom activities. They kept to a set schedule that started with a table activity as the preschoolers arrive for the day, whole group floor time, and then centers that allowed for peer interactions.

“We all have very different learning styles, we have different teaching styles, we have our own philosophies and beliefs on what we value that our students will need,” said senior Lauren Barker. “The preschool has provided us the opportunity to learn and grow in ourselves, but it has also taught us that communication is the key to having a well-organized classroom.” ★

This story is by Beth Griesmer, a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.





PUTTING LOVE INTO WORDS

Tyler ISD's youngest students write book

This year, the Head Start students at Tyler ISD's Orr Elementary School participated in writing and publishing a book titled *I Love School*. Their contributions to this special book included personalized drawings and sentiments of what they love about their school.

Inspired by Orr Elementary School Principal Lauren Smith, a published author, the children wanted to share how they have grown to love books and their understanding of what an author and an illustrator do. Smith wrote *Thoughts of a Brown Child*.

Their teacher, Latraya Lane, also helped her students host a book signing for classmates and family members.

"We just sat down, and I was like, 'Okay, guys, we're going to publish a book. What would you like for it to be about?' And they just started talking about school, and they would say, 'Hey, I love it when we do this,'" Lane told KETK-TV news in Tyler.

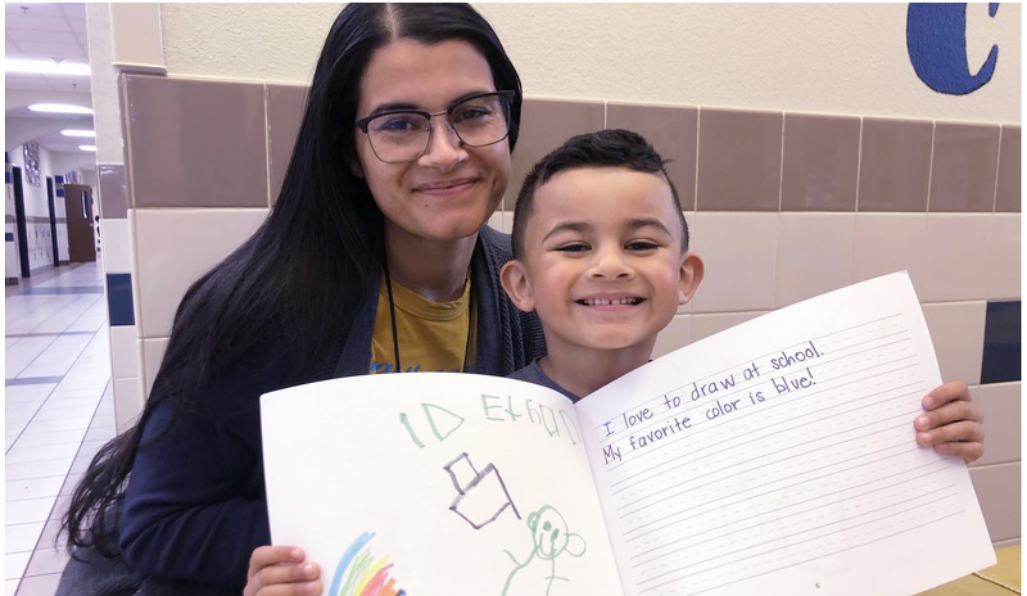
The four- and five-year-old students dedicated each page to writing something they enjoyed about class. Students also illustrated the book.

"When they first started, they didn't like books. They were like, 'Why do we have to read a book? We don't like books,' and then they fell in love with it. So, after we learned what the author and the publisher were, I was like, 'Yeah, guys, we're doing this,'" Lane said.

Smith told KETK that the book project will help the children see their own potential.

"This is just the beginning of all the excellent things they can accomplish, all the things that they have in the future, and that's what we're here for," said Smith.★

This story is courtesy of Tyler ISD.



Photos courtesy of Tyler ISD



This year, the Head Start students at Tyler ISD's Orr Elementary School wrote, illustrated, and published a book titled *I Love School*. They also hosted a book signing at the school for classmates and family members.

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COOKING TO SERVE

Kitchen skills part of Lufkin ISD mentoring effort

Lufkin businessman Jeremy Torres knows his way around a kitchen. He does some catering and says he gained valuable kitchen experience when he participated in 4-H programs as a kid. This school year, he wanted to give back to his alma mater, Lufkin ISD.



Families enjoy a meal prepared by Lufkin ISD students who are part of a mentoring program.



Lufkin businessman Jeremy Torres helps students prepare chicken parmesan.



Lufkin ISD students serve a meal they prepared for their families.

Photos courtesy of Lufkin ISD

“Jeremy reached out several weeks ago and said he would like to do something to give back,” said Daniel Spikes, assistant superintendent of Lufkin ISD’s administrative services. “He has a catering business and he wanted to use his skills and resources in any way we could think of that would be helpful.”

“I wanted the kids to give back to their families and eat something they haven’t eaten before”

— Jeremy Torres, a Lufkin businessman

Spikes, along with Paul Jackson, a Lufkin ISD police officer, co-founded a Lufkin ISD mentoring program for young male students in grades fifth through eighth who participate in learning leadership skills and projects that

benefit their community. Local volunteers and businessmen help the group, which had about 22 students this year.

Torres’ idea was to teach young men how to cook and serve their families. And not just any meal, but chicken parmesan, asparagus, pasta, salad, and garlic toast topped with prosciutto and cheese.

“I wanted the kids to give back to their families and eat something they haven’t eaten before,” said Torres.

And the students and their families loved it!

Torres’ catering business supplied most of the ingredients for the meal. He reached out to Carpenter’s Way Baptist Church to use its kitchen and to Brookshire Brothers, which gave the group a gift card that was used to buy spices to complete the meal.

“When Paul Jackson approached me with the mentorship idea, [I thought] this is what it’s about — exposing our students to different opportunities,”

Spikes said. “They’re not going to like everything but just be exposed to it. This will give them more opportunity to find their niche or what they could be passionate about.”

Spikes was impressed by how some of the students already had kitchen skills. In all, there were 70-plus family members who were served a meal.

“We have to give credit to the families,” he said. “We all recognized that some kids were handy around the kitchen. Some were naturals — we want the students to know it’s OK to enjoy cooking.”

“The food was great! It was really good,” Spikes said. “What he did [was make] it simple and easy even though it seemed complicated.”★

This story is courtesy of Lufkin ISD.

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NEEDLE AND THREAD

After school club helps students get 'sew' ready

From learning the basics to hand sewing projects, students at Corpus Christi ISD's Faye Webb Elementary have been pushing the boundaries of what's possible with a needle and thread.

Kathleen Day, Webb's administration assistant, happily took on the role of sponsor of the sewing club, which meets after school every Tuesday and Thursday during the school year. Day has a love for sewing and wanted to share her passion for home economics. She begins by teaching students the basics and then how to operate a sewing machine.

Sewing club has become a beloved activity for students, providing a fun and creative outlet for them. Students look forward to getting together and working on their latest projects, and many of them have made impressive achievements in one of the world's oldest art forms. The sewing activities have helped them build confidence in their skills and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Valentina Romero-Sanchez, a fifth grader at Webb, began her passion for sewing at age 8 and was ecstatic when she heard about the sewing club. The club has different projects, including creating a plush animal of the student's choice.

"My favorite project has been making this bear," Romero-Sanchez said. "It was more challenging to me."

Romero-Sanchez said she looks forward to learning more about the sewing machine in future club meetings.

Overall, sewing club has been rewarding to students. It's a great way for students to express themselves creatively and build lasting friendships.

"I hope my students can take this skill with them forever," Day said. "I want them to be able to hem a pair of pants and sew a button back on when they need to one day." ★



Photo courtesy of Corpus Christi ISD

This story is courtesy of Corpus Christi ISD.

Valentina Romero-Sanchez with the pink bear she created in Webb Elementary School's sewing club.



AGAINST THE ODDS

Judson ISD senior achieves despite hardships

Few students will actually say, "I love testing."

But Veterans Memorial High School senior Billy Braun thrives on them. Like any scientist or researcher, he sees them as problems that need to be solved — and becomes fixated.

That's the goal — to become a problem solver, a researcher — when he attends The University of Texas at Austin this fall, dabbling in chemistry, physics, or math.

"I don't want to limit myself to one subject," Braun said. "I want to explore and eventually get into graduate school."

Braun is a persistent idealist with an extraordinary story. Losing his academic medals during an eviction, having no relationship with his parents, and finding a purpose much later in school, statistics say college probably wouldn't be an option for him.

But he is literally one of the smartest high school students in the state, if not the country, winning first place in the academic decathlon in math, science, and social studies, and first overall.

"I don't like to say that I'm the best at this or the best at that because it's probably not true," a humble Braun said.

Getting a late start

Having attended Judson ISD's Salinas Elementary School, Kitty Hawk Middle School, and Veterans Memorial, his love for school didn't start until his sophomore year. He said he was just passing by.

"Rigor was more of an afterthought because I was just bored at the time. It didn't click to me that 'Oh, it's just because I'm not getting interesting problems or being able to apply this knowledge.'"

He was one of those students who needed a challenge and was [secretly] desperately looking for one.

Enter Veterans Memorial teacher Sandra Martin and the academic decathlon team — an academic competition between elite students.



Photos courtesy of Judson ISD

Veterans Memorial High School senior Billy Braun.

He finally found his challenge.

And he soared. Oh, did he soar.

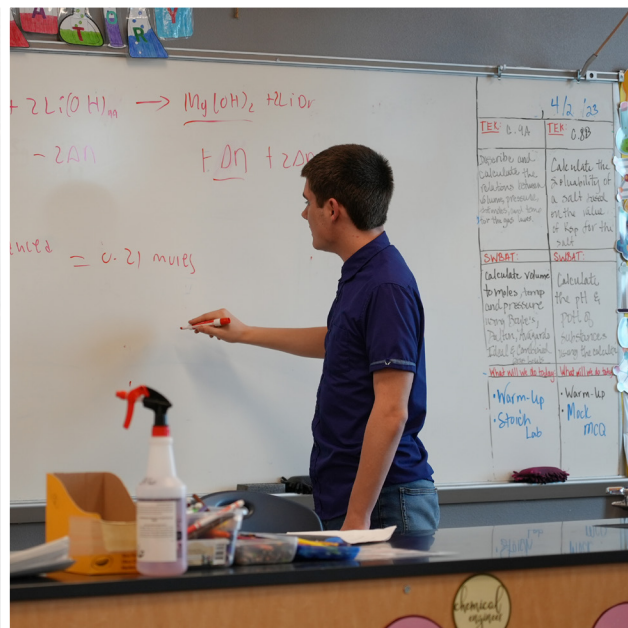
"It opened the doors for self-study," Braun said. "I got hooked on chemistry to start with. Eventually, I became obsessed with math."

Dedication to learning

His commitment to his academics, studying, and hunger for rigor and challenge led him to first place in multiple areas and first overall at the state level.

But when asked about his academic achievements, he responded by listing a slew of other students and teachers who have helped him along the way. Even though the interview was about him, he made sure to mention everyone else.

His humility makes him remarkable. And through incredible hardships — including eviction from his home and being estranged from his biological parents, he has continued to invest in himself and his academics, something no one can take away from him.



Veterans Memorial High School senior Billy Braun works on a math problem.

"I admire Billy's drive and perseverance," Veterans Memorial's chemistry teacher Diana Madrid said. "Because of his circumstances, the odds were stacked against him. But his situation gave him the drive to do something bigger. It's a huge reward as a teacher."

The next step is going to UT, where he plans to major in physics. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is also in his line of sight. Then, research after research after research, finding problems that need to be solved.

Braun's circumstances could have led him down a different path. But he is contradicting the stereotypes and doing the complete opposite — racking up academic achievements and pursuing his educational dreams.★

This story is courtesy of Judson ISD.



COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE

Raymondville ISD runs thriving clinic

Raymondville ISD Deputy Superintendent Ben Clinton's office is right about where he sat in biology class back when he attended high school in the same building. Now, Raymondville Early College High School has a thriving health careers academy in a wing near the current administrative offices. In April, the district added a health clinic serving district staff, students, and the community.

"I'm not going to lie; it took a ton of work. I never intended to know this much about healthcare," Clinton said.

After receiving Texas Workforce Commission and Texas Education Agency grants to start the health sciences academy 12 years ago when Clinton was the high school principal, the district used ESSER funds this past year to renovate some storage rooms in the health sciences wing to become a 2,000 square-foot clinic with three exam rooms, an X-ray machine, and a full medical lab.

High-quality healthcare

"It's accessible, high-quality healthcare for staff and students and the family of our staff, but also for public servants," Clinton said. He recently invited the 47 Texas Department of Public Safety officers training in the new headquarters across the street to come to the clinic for any healthcare needs.

According to Clinton, the idea for the clinic started during the pandemic when the district officially became a COVID-19 vaccine distribution hub for Willacy County and held weekly vaccine clinics. Clinton said city, county, and school district leadership got together and pushed the state for more vaccines to be made available in the county. The district took on the role of being a healthcare provider, and that planted the seed.

"Superintendent Stetson Roane has had our complete support on this



Raymondville ISD Deputy Superintendent Ben Clinton cuts the ribbon for the grand opening of the health clinic in April.

endeavor," said John Solis, president of the Raymondville ISD school board.

The board felt that having a medical clinic would complement the medical insurance that the district provides at no, or little cost, to employees and their family members, as well as provide an

Raymondville ISD Health Careers Academy students use state of the art equipment in pursuit of nursing certifications and college credits.



extra layer of care to the nursing program.

"The clinic is not a school room setting or class project but a fully operating medical clinic with fully licensed doctors, PAs, RNs, and technical assistants," Solis said. "There are many school districts that have nursing classes or programs, which offer the opportunities with associate degrees, and districts that partner up with medical centers/hospitals that provide some sort of medical assistance, but I believe that we might be the first school district that has its own medical clinic that will be run as a real business."

Hands-on opportunities

In partnership with Coastal Bend College, Raymondville ISD students can earn an associate degree, nursing certification, and up to 60 hours toward a bachelor's degree. "Students are doing some rotations in the clinic with walk-ins from the community," Clinton said. "Our staff does not necessarily want a student knowing their [community patients'] health issues."



Photos courtesy of Raymondville ISD

The health clinic provides services to Raymondville ISD staff, students, and the community as well as giving hands-on learning experiences for students in the Health Careers Academy.

"The clinic is not a school room setting or class project but a fully operating medical clinic with fully licensed doctors, PAs, RNs, and technical assistants."

— John Solis, Raymondville ISD school board president

Both district staff and students can use the clinic, which makes seeking healthcare much more convenient. Clinton described how the janitorial staff could get physicals without having to take a day off work. The school nurse can coordinate healthcare with parents through a telehealth conference and even send home schoolwork if a student is sick.

"Our board and our superintendent have this mindset that we constantly want to do better for students and our community."

The clinic accepts a range of health insurance and is in the process of obtaining Medicaid approval. Clinton predicts the clinic will be self-sustaining by the end of the year, while providing healthcare services to the community and one-of-kind learning opportunities for the health sciences students.

"The board members feel very proud that the clinic provides another way of supporting the entire staff, students, first responders, and in time, the entire community," said Solis.

The long-term goal is to be able to offer an array of medical procedures and assistance without having to drive 25 miles to the nearest hospital.

"In a small community like ours, it's essential that we work hand in hand for the success of our students."★

This story is by Beth Griesmer, a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.



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CARS AND A CAFE

Abilene ISD facility offers auto repairs, lunch

When The LIFT opened in August 2021, one of the goals was to have an automotive shop and restaurant in-house that could serve the general public, giving students real-world experience and providing the people of Abilene with a reason to check out the crown jewel of Abilene ISD's November 2018 bond election.

If that was the goal, consider The LIFT open for business.

Earlier this year, the automotive shop, which has been servicing automobiles since The LIFT opened, went public with an online registration system and point-of-sale system. And in March, the Sky Café began serving a lunch menu for the public with several different types of salads, sandwiches, entrees, and desserts.

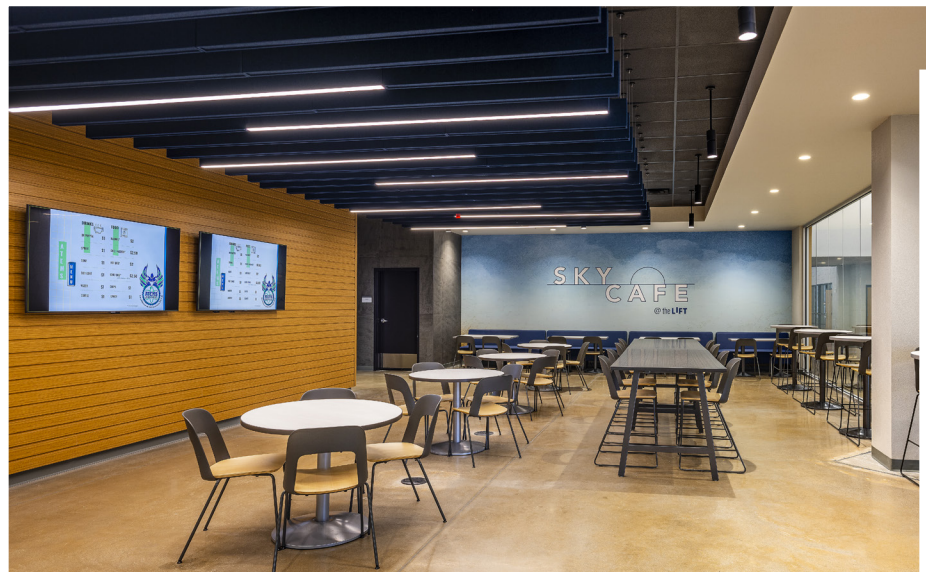
"It's been great to see students in both of these areas get real-world experience," said Jay Ashby, director of The LIFT. "But it also lets the public see how capable and skilled our students are in culinary and automotive areas. One group is preparing their lunch and serving them, and another is doing an oil change or performing another service on a car."

The LIFT, which stands for Leadership and Innovation in Future Technologies, is a state-of-the-art, 120,000 square-foot campus in Abilene ISD that opened in August 2021. The LIFT also houses advanced CTE programs as well as the Academy of Technology, Engineering, Math, and Science, known as ATEMS, which is a degree-granting STEM high school.

Range of auto repairs

In the automotive shop, students do anything from essential maintenance [oil change, brake repair, and alignment] to more detailed work, including air conditioning and electronic system checks.

The Abilene Automotive Education Alliance helped provide The LIFT with some vital state-of-the-art equipment, technical assistance, and expertise.



Abilene ISD's Sky Café began serving a lunch menu to the public.

The alliance also offered a repair order system so the students could order equipment and have a point-of-sale system in-house.

"We also have a program through Ford Motor Company where they're able to get some certifications here, and if they walk into Arrow Ford [in Abilene] with those certifications, they'll be able to make more money than some-

body walking in off the street," said auto shop teacher Matt Parker. "The work aspect of this is so good for our students. They're getting real-world experience in this setting and that will only help them down the road."

Will Kirby, who also teaches auto shop, said the new equipment gives the students a leg up



on the outside competition.

“At Abilene High, we just had a big empty building filled with cars,” he said. “Now we’ve got lifts and an alignment lift and rack, alignment machine, and so many other things to give these kids a head start. We’re giving them a real-world experience at school and a new way to look at the class since it’s more like a real job.”



Photos courtesy of Abilene ISD

The exterior of the Leadership and Innovation in Future Technologies (LIFT), a state-of-the-art, 120,000 square-foot campus in Abilene ISD.

Upscale equipment

In the culinary arts area, students are also learning with state-of-the-art equipment, including ovens that can basically cook food without help from humans. They’re called combi ovens, and The LIFT has four for student use. The ovens can steam, bake, dehydrate, proof, grill, sear, and air fry with the touch of a button.

The LIFT hosted the retired teachers’ dinner in May with students using those ovens to prepare 200 pieces of chicken at once. Once diners completed their meal, all of the dishes were run through a commercial dishwasher, which is what the students use each day of service at The Sky Café.

“What [culinary instructor] Jonathan West has told the students is that he’s going to teach them how to use those ovens, but they may not start their career working in a place that has those kinds of ovens, so they have to know how to cook with traditional equipment as well,” Ashby said.

That new-school meets old-school approach is also used in the automotive shop.

“They might have a 1959 Chevy in there one day, and those kids have to

“It’s been great to see students in both of these areas get real-world experience”

– Jay Ashby, director of The LIFT

know how to work on that as well, and that’s what Matt and Will are teaching them,” Ashby said. “Our automotive and culinary kids are both learning in state-of-the-art facilities, and they’re learning skills that they wouldn’t have had the chance to learn without The LIFT and what we have here. But it’s also important that they’re learning customer service skills and old-school techniques, which will serve them well when they get into the real world.”★

This story is courtesy of Abilene ISD.



Abilene ISD’s automotive shop has been servicing automobiles since 2021.



Abilene ISD students work in the automotive shop.



LITERACY FIRST

El Paso ISD launches reading effort for first graders

The latest in an array of initiatives geared toward bolstering early literacy for El Paso ISD students began this year when community members visited 11 campuses to read to first-grade students.

Literacy First, a project that entails weekly reading sessions between a volunteer and two to five students launched in April at Aoy, Cooley, Duran, Hawkins, Herrera, Park, Powell, Putnam, Whitaker, Zach White, and Zavala elementary schools. In the following six weeks, 31 community volunteers visited schools during the students' enrichment period. All volunteers participated in training conducted by El Paso ISD educators before meeting with the students.

"Children begin learning from the time they are within their mommy's tummy," said Marivel Macias, El Paso ISD's chief equity officer. "They learn from everyone and everything they encounter. The Literacy First initiative calls upon community volunteers to pay it forward and donate their time to read with an El Paso ISD student. It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a willing volunteer to donate their time to instill the love of reading within a student."

At Cooley Elementary School, parent and volunteer Dayela Gillespie was among the first to sign up to read in the initiative. She read "Pete the Cat" to a small group of students in the school's library.

"One of my kids is in AIM and has a lot of trouble sounding out words and reading. I felt that there might be other first graders who, just like my kids, love to read but have a difficult time reading," she said. "I'm hoping they become more enthusiastic about going home with a book and telling their parents, 'Can we read this?'"

Roster of volunteers

Melissa Ortega, District 1 representative for the State Board



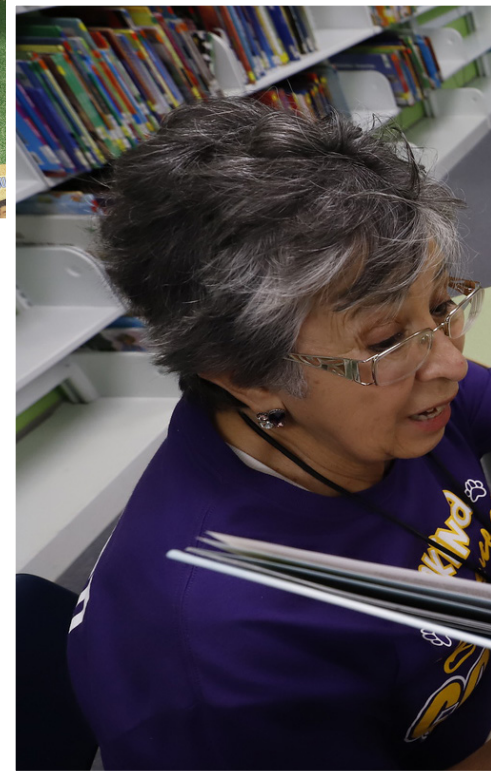
Photos courtesy of El Paso ISD

of Education, is part of the roster of volunteers who read to students. She said enhancing early literacy is an important facet of the development of young learners.

"Volunteers who read to children in our El Paso community are tremendously important because reading to students strengthens all kinds of literacy skills," Ortega said. "This includes their emotional well-being; it builds character, increases empathy, and improves feelings of happiness, fulfillment, and joy. I'm honored and delighted to participate in this program."

Literacy First comes on the heels of the spring launch of Buenas Noches, El Paso — a virtual literacy initiative featuring notable figures from El Paso ISD and the community reading children's books online.

"Providing these enriching literacy opportunities for our students will help not only strengthen their reading skills but also build a lifelong love of reading," El Paso ISD Superintendent Diana Sayavedra said. "We are grateful for our partners who have donated their time to read for Buenas Noches, El



"This includes their emotional well-being; it builds character, increases empathy, and improves feelings of happiness, fulfillment, and joy."

— Melissa Ortega, a State Board of Education member



Volunteers read books to several elementary students as part of El Paso ISD's Literacy First initiative.

Paso, and participate in Literacy First.”

Literacy framework

In addition to outreach, El Paso ISD also developed a new literacy instructional framework to increase students' opportunities to thrive. The district partnered with The New Teacher Project to design a framework

that supports literacy and biliteracy instruction, creates an optimal learning environment, and increases student success in the foundations of literacy — reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

To meet this end, El Paso ISD established a literacy design team in January. The team — comprised of teachers, librarians, campus teaching

coaches, campus, and district leaders, and other instructional staff — was led by Jacqueline Kennedy, the district's chief academic officer. The team met multiple times throughout the semester and finalized a framework that will be used also to evaluate and improve alignment of instructional materials and professional learning supports, while also drawing clear connections to the new changes in the STAAR redesign.

All of these initiatives align with El Paso ISD's emphasis on whole child development, which is a focal point of its recently adopted Hopes and Dreams Realized 2022-25 strategic blueprint. ★

This story is courtesy of El Paso ISD.



AGRICULTURE AWARENESS

Clyde ISD students learn to fish, garden

Callahan County 4-H teamed up with Clyde ISD Intermediate School this year to promote agricultural awareness for students through projects such as gardening,

the egg-to-chick cycle, and wildlife challenges.

Funding for the popular project was provided by the Texas Farm Bureau and Callahan-Shackelford Counties Farm Bu-

They cared for plants that help beautify the front of their school and grew plants indoors during the coldest months.



A student at Clyde ISD Intermediate School holds a radish grown at the campus.



Clyde ISD Intermediate School students study a fish as part of a wildlife course.

Photo courtesy of Clyde ISD

reau. Callahan County 4-H agents visited the Intermediate School twice a week throughout the year, and their guidance was pivotal to the program's success.

Agents hosted a number of wildlife projects, including fish identification, knot tying, snake identification, and the egg-to-chick cycle. They also guided students through planting and harvesting radishes, spinach, potatoes, onions, broccoli, and brussels sprouts.

Students learned about various aspects of local wildlife throughout the school year. County agents used 4-H materials as well as materials from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Students' skills were tested through such activities as stringing fishing poles and casting off to catch fish during a Backyard Fishing Tournament. The experience promoted wildlife conservation and fishing safety and increased observation skills.

During the spring, the county's wildlife biologist visited students on campus. She assisted them in identifying various snakes and explained how the animals maintain themselves in their natural environment.

Staff and supporters of the project say the project's benefits include learning about how food is grown, prompting a shift in students' nutritional practices.

The gardening project increased the students' awareness of agricultural concepts. Although a handful of students had already participated in agricultural activities, none had expressed previous experience with gardening. Because of these activities, most students at the Intermediate School have now tasted a radish! Learning about how produce is actually grown helped spark an increased interest among students and their families in visiting grocery stores' produce sections.

In addition to the partnership with 4-H, students at the Clyde ISD Intermediate School participated in campus jobs, including tending to the campus garden. They cared for plants that help beautify the front of their school and grew plants indoors during the coldest months. Their continued involvement in this project promoted increased attendance and the development of leadership skills such as responsibility and planning.

Staff and supporters of the project say the project's benefits include learning about how food is grown, prompting a shift in students' nutritional practices, and development of work-ready skills such as observation and problem-solving. ★

This story is courtesy of Clyde ISD.

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COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Robotics program showcases students' new skills

Abernathy ISD's new middle school robotics program was a great success this year – both in terms of student achievement and community partnership.

The program was launched with the help of local business Bayer Lubbock Cotton Seed Production, which provided resources and support to get the program off the ground. Its true success, however, lies in the hard work and dedication of the students and teachers involved.

The Abernathy Middle School robotics program focused on teaching students the fundamentals of robotics, including programming, engineering, and design. Students worked collaboratively to build and program robots to complete specific tasks and challenges. This hands-on learning approach helped students develop important skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration, which are essential in today's rapidly evolving technological landscape.

A key component of the program was participation in various robotics competitions, which gave students an opportunity to showcase their abilities in front of a wider audience. Abernathy ISD



Abernathy Middle School students and teachers created a new robotics program and participated in competitions throughout the school year.



Photos courtesy of Abernathy ISD

“The success of
Abernathy ISD’s middle
school robotics
program is a testament
to the hard work and
dedication of the
students and teachers
involved.”

— Aaron Waldrip, Abernathy IS
superintendent

had multiple teams participate in several competitions throughout the school year. Their top team emerged victorious in the ultimate competition at the end of the season, winning every round.

“The success of Abernathy ISD’s middle school robotics program is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the students and teachers involved,” said Abernathy ISD Superintendent Aaron Waldrip. “The district is proud of its students and is committed to continuing to offer innovative and engaging learning opportunities that prepare them for success in the future.”

The partnership with Bayer was instrumental in the program’s success, demonstrating the importance of collaboration between schools and local businesses. The robotics program is an example of what can be achieved when schools and businesses work together to support student success.

By providing students with opportunities to develop their technological abilities and creativity, Abernathy ISD is preparing its students to be leaders in the 21st century workforce.★

*This story is courtesy of
Abernathy ISD.*

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GOOD NEWS BUILDS BRIDGES

How to connect your community through stories

From hands-on science experiments to rising test scores to the winning touchdown, amazing accomplishments are happening in public schools.

These achievements should be honored and celebrated within your district as well as in your community. Sharing news about your schools builds knowledge. Knowledge builds trust, creates allies and advocates, empowers people to speak up, and leads to greater understanding.

“I think sharing success stories and accomplishments about public schools is important because it shows the heart of what we do,” said Megan Overman, the new president of the Texas School Public Relations Association and executive director of communications at Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD in North Texas. “It honors the commitment of our dedicated educators and showcases the abilities of our talented students, and it calls attention to the positive, lasting, and transformational impacts that are happening in classrooms across Texas today.”

By sharing news about your schools, you’re creating a narrative and setting the tone for how people view your district.

“People tend to gravitate to negative messaging more than they do other messaging, so we have to ensure that we’re bringing a balanced reality into perspective, which is that our public schools are successful, and our students and teachers are accomplishing amazing things every day,” said Daniel Escobar, chief communications officer at Socorro ISD in El Paso. “Sharing good news about the school district builds trust and support within the community. It also helps improve our culture overall. Our employees and students take pride in

being part of a successful team and organization.”

But how do you share these achievements with your community? Following are some guidelines from TSPRA and school districts to consider when getting the word out about your district’s successes:

1. Communicate frequently.

Whether it’s a weekly newsletter, monthly magazine, or timely social media posts, communicating frequently loops your audience in, keeps them up to date, and connects them to the district. By communicating frequently, you become a

trusted news source and help keep accurate information front and center.

Plus, the more people know the more involved and supportive they can be. Communicating with your community could help pack the theater for the next high school musical or get more participation during teacher appreciation week. And providing detailed information about all aspects of a bond proposal may help it win approval from voters.

2. Meet your audience where they live.

Whether it’s the waiting room



or on social media, think about where your audience is located. For school districts that have a print publication, consider putting those newsletters and magazines in the waiting rooms of local mechanic shops and dentist offices — places where people can pick them up. Share bigger, weekly news with your local paper and use social media for more fun and timely posts. Other options include your district website, signs, and alerts.

3. Give the people what they enjoy.

People love to see photos of their children and friends. Share photos, quotes from students, and stories in addition to data points. When people can see the difference you're making, they begin to understand the real-world impact of your district's great work.

4. Recognize accomplishments and share your appreciation.

Recognizing students and staff for their exceptional work during school board meetings connects trustees with school superstars and has

reverberations of goodwill throughout the community. Awards can be presented each month or reserved for a special time of the year.

Sharing your gratitude and appreciation for staff is another way to recognize accomplishments. School board members can work together to write a letter of appreciation for teachers at the end of the school year, express their gratitude and thanks in November, or at the end of the first semester. Any occasion is a good time to share your support for the hard work of faculty and staff!

5. Collaborate.

Sharing your school news can bring the community together, build support for your schools, and unite people for public education. Think about who in your community you can collaborate with to tell your stories and share important information.

School district communications teams can support their team of eight by giving them updates, inviting them to events, and giving them tips and training

for posting online or talking to the press. For example, Overman's communications team in Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD provides news and updates to the board, and an annual communications update about their team and good news in the district.

"Interacting with our students and staff is always a good way for them [board members] to stay connected with their schools and be aware of what's happening," said Overman. "Trustees are local, elected officials, they're trusted in our communities, and they can be strong, informed ambassadors."

Meanwhile, Socorro ISD collaborates with their staff by empowering them to share positive school news on social media, many of whom are on Twitter.

In addition, follow organizations such as We Go Public, the Texas Association of School Administrators, Raise Your Hand Texas, and TASB on social media to make it easier to collaborate on advocacy efforts for public schools by sharing posts and increasing their impact.

You can also think outside the box: Eagle Mountain-Saginaw ISD gives realtors informational packets about their schools to share with new families in the area.★

This story is by Savanna Polasek, a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.





AN EARLY SERVANT MINDSET

Graduate continues helping district, community

Texas public education students are involved in a wide range of service activities, but only a few take the extra step of running for public office, specifically their own school board. Michael Valdez graduated from the Edgewood Fine Arts Academy in June 2022 and was elected to the Edgewood ISD school board in San Antonio in November 2022.

Valdez, now 19, is currently attending San Antonio College and majoring in public administration and policy with plans to transfer to the University of Texas at San Antonio. This summer, Valdez is interning with a San Antonio city council member. TASB talked to Valdez about his service on the Edgewood ISD school board, a district with more than 8,100 students. His comments have been lightly edited.

Q: Why did you decide to run for the board?

A: Throughout my educational journey, I was always involved with clubs and organizations in my school district. In middle school, I had the opportunity to be part of the teen board, an initiative created by Marisa Perez Diaz — who is currently a member of the State Board of Education — when she worked for our district. Being a member of the teen board, I understood I could make a difference in my community and be a voice for my peers, and that is what helped spark my interest in running for the board while I was in high school.

Q: What are your takeaways about serving the students, staff, and members of your community?

A: Having been on the board a few months now, I have learned that serving the students, staff, and members of my community is a big responsibility that one should not take lightly. I've done almost 40 hours of training this past year to make sure I learn about what it takes to make the important decisions we must make as a trustee.

Q: Have your views about service changed since you were elected?

A: My views of serving on the board have changed some as I have learned that most people are very appreciative and supportive of you serving on the board. But also, I've learned that to be heard, you must speak up, and it is important to take advantage of all the training opportunities provided by TASB so you can be prepared and able to be an effective board member.

Q: What impact have you seen trustees have on student outcomes?

A: Board trustees can have a significant impact on student outcomes as we are responsible for creating the vision of our district with measurable goals and ensuring there is advocacy and community engagement. It is up to the board to have systems and processes in place to ensure that student outcomes are being met and reviewed.

Q: What do you enjoy most and least about the role?

A: I have most enjoyed being a voice for my community and learning how



Photo courtesy of Michael Valdez

Michael Valdez, 19, was elected to the Edgewood ISD school board in November 2022.

I can advocate for all students to help ensure that they have a successful future. I have not enjoyed seeing the inequities that still exist in the funding of school districts. I will continue to advocate for change to ensure all students are given the resources and opportunities they need to be successful. ★

This story is by Theresa Gage-Dieringer, a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.



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