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# INSPIRING FUTURES

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WINTER/SPRING  
2022-2023



# INSPIRING FUTURES



## A Message From Our CEO

Success can be defined in many ways. At Harmony, we define success a little differently than most. In this issue of Inspiring Futures, you'll see some of the many ways we're helping our students and team members succeed through building relationships, shaping communities, and focusing on positive school cultures.

In this issue, you'll learn how focusing on relationships and culture helped one Harmony campus turn itself into one of Texas' best comeback stories. You'll also read how another Harmony school is living out its character values each day to make their campus a better place for staff and students.

We also share the story of two sisters who are now working side-by-side as teachers in the same Harmony campuses: one of many examples throughout our system of how working for Harmony means being a part of a family - both literally and figuratively.

You'll also find stories about inspiring students, innovative programs, talented team members, and how they've helped

Harmony succeed in becoming one of the most unique school systems in the country.

Speaking of successes, we're also proud to share that the publication you're reading now, Inspiring Futures, was recently awarded an Award of Merit by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for distinguished achievement in school magazines. We're proud of how far this publication has come and thank you for the feedback we've received from readers like you who want to learn more about Harmony's unique story.

We hope you find this issue of Inspiring Futures intriguing and engaging. Thank you for your part in helping make Harmony a success worth sharing.

Sincerely,

**Fatih Ay | CEO**  
**Harmony Public Schools**

*Harmony Public Schools is a public charter school system providing a high-quality curriculum that places a heavy emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Our engaging, hands-on, project-based approach allows students to design, build, and experiment on projects that provide real- world solutions to prepare students for college success.*





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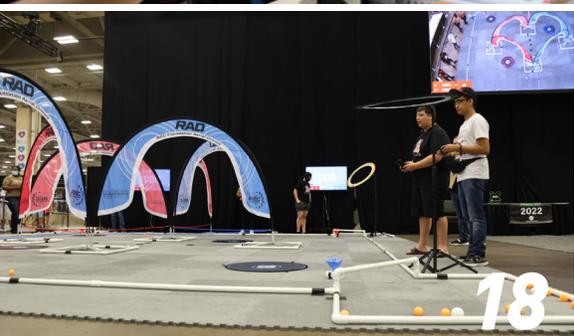
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# Tigers Are

# CHAMPIONS



## MORE THAN A BUZZWORD

Making School Culture a Reality *by Delfina Glenn*

“School Culture” has become a popular term in education, but what does it truly mean, why is it so talked about and why is it so important?

School culture can be defined as the core values, beliefs, and ideals seen in how a school is run where positive relationships are built among students, teachers, staff, and administration.

It is very easy to identify a campus that has a positive school culture. From smiling teachers, to a warm and welcoming front office staff, and nicely decorated hallways, the efforts are endless. And while it seems simple, positive school culture is not something that happens overnight.

“Post pandemic, school culture is more important than ever,” said Harmony School of Excellence (HSE) – El Paso Principal Adela Lannutti, who has made school culture a top priority at her campus.

their goals. If a student reaches their goal they get to ring a bell and write their name on the wall (without getting in trouble!). This motivates the students and allows their peers to celebrate each other’s successes.

Often, you’ll find Principal Lannutti excitedly interacting with students and her staff throughout the day.

“My goal is to provide a risk-free, family-oriented environment that fosters learning and builds character in our students,” she said.

Not only is HSE focusing on its students but on their teachers as well, by offering SEL and team building workshops along with recognizing teachers of the month. “HSE teachers are the engine that drive our school. It’s my role to make them feel heard, seen and that they are significant. I want to inspire them to understand that their work is essential and valuable.”

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***“My goal is to provide a risk-free, family-oriented environment that fosters learning and builds character in our students.”***

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Harmony School of Excellence - El Paso has six core values: Caring, Honest, Accomplished, Motivated, Prepared, Self Confident, (C.H.A.M.P.S.) that drive everything that it does.

These core values can be seen throughout the school from the moment you walk in the doors; from the large sign on the walls to the classrooms where teachers integrate them into their lesson plans.

HSE also has two areas in the halls where students can celebrate reaching

This positive school culture is spreading to the community, and Harmony could not be more proud of the effect it has had on everyone. Recently, Harmony School of Excellence - El Paso was voted one of the top charters in the annual El Paso Times “Best of the Border” poll where they poll the community to select the best local businesses and organizations.

With a commitment to character and culture, HSE-El Paso, shows no signs of slowing down. Their efforts are felt not only in the hallways of the schools, but the classrooms and communities. And that is what Harmony and School Culture is all about.



## A BOND LIKE NO OTHER

### Sister Duo Reunites at HSA-Grand Prairie

by Emma Lewis

Sisters have been known to share bonds that even their own parents can't figure out. At Harmony, the bond is greater and sweeter between a sister duo that spend their days together sharing more than just lighthearted sisterly gossip. Kristen and Samantha Auten are eighth grade teachers at Harmony Science Academy in Grand Prairie.

Not only do the sisters teach at the same school, they also live in the same apartment complex. Kristen says she was extremely nervous moving to a different state with her daughter, who is now a fifth grader at HSA - Grand Prairie, but being close to her big sister helped them both to thrive.

dad, stepmom, and brother, who also happens to be an educator. The oldest sibling, Samantha is older by "one year, three months, and twelve days," to be exact... which was made very clear by younger sister, Kristen. "She would tell me that all the time growing up because she was older, and now I get to all the time because I'm younger!" says Kristen.

Samantha moved to Texas during her senior year of high school to live with her mother, and then pursued a degree in education at Tarleton State University. Samantha then started teaching at Harmony Science Academy - Grand Prairie as an eighth grade math teacher.



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***"With reading and writing, there's never just one answer to everything."***

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Although the sisters have a lot in common, they also couldn't be more different. "When our grandmother asked Samantha why she wanted to teach math, she said 'because in math, there's one answer to everything,' and when she asked me, 'why do you want to teach English?' I said 'with reading and writing, there's never just one answer to everything.' It shows that we are just that opposite."

Samantha is currently in her 10th year of teaching while Kristen is in her fourth year, and they both have big plans for HSA - Grand Prairie. Samantha created a new club this year, the Campus Improvement Club, where students help maintain the campus by cleaning hallways, touching up paint, and learning how to use everyday tools. She has also collaborated with her sister to create a new library with the help of the Campus Improvement Club and Kristen's knowledge of library systems. Kristen discovered a book check-out app that can be used by anyone, so the library would be run by parent volunteers.

The sisters were born in Ardmore, Okla., where they grew up with their

Meanwhile, Kristen pursued a degree in English at East Central University in Ada, Okla., where she would later begin her career teaching high school English, but deep down something was missing from her life: Her big sister Samantha.

After much thought and planning, she and her daughter moved to Texas and accepted a position at a high school as an English teacher. After settling into her new position, Samantha mentioned a position at the Harmony campus where she teaches. Kristen quickly jumped on the opportunity and pursued an eighth grade English teaching position at HSA - Grand Prairie instead where she teaches today. The sisters were reunited!

As they look to the future, the sisters are excited for Harmony as it continues to grow and evolve into the successful campus they and their colleagues work so hard to achieve. The pair is grateful for their campus and the opportunity to teach alongside one another, but one thing has remained the same: Their strong sisterly bond, and inspiring their students each day.



# Safety First & Always

## Harmony Creates a Secure Learning Environment *by Jennifer Sabin*

Safety has always been an important issue for parents, faculty, students and staff throughout the years. It's a topic that takes priority right along with testing scores and classroom sizes. At Harmony Public Schools, a commitment to safety ensures everyone who steps foot on one of the 60+ campuses is kept secure during their visit.

Safety drills were created to prepare students and staff for emergency situations to create muscle memory, and to help school administrators evaluate and address flaws and successes in their emergency procedures.

When performing these drills, Harmony follows the Standard Response Protocol (SRP). This method was developed by the "I Love U Guys" Foundation, and provides procedures and common language amongst all campuses.

The State of Texas requires all open enrollment charter schools to perform the following drills, which Harmony has successfully implemented:

### **Secure Drill: 1 per school year**

Schools use the Secure Drill procedure anytime there is a threat outside of the school building/perimeter. An example would be police responding to a bank robbery close to the campus. To drill this, campuses bring all students and staff inside the building and do not let anyone in or out. All activities inside the building can continue as normal.

### **Lockdown Drill: 2 per school year (one per semester)**

A lockdown is used anytime there is a threat inside the school building and students and staff do not have time to evacuate. During a lockdown, teachers will make sure the classroom door is locked and barricaded. In the case of an actual event – alerts and information will be given to allow students and staff the information they need to determine if they should lockdown or if there's time to evacuate.

### **Evacuation other than Fire Drill: 1 per school year**

Evacuation is utilized when the campus is no longer safe. Staff and

students evacuate the building in accordance with the predetermined evacuation routes. Some examples of when a campus would use this are: gas leak, bomb threat, and possibly utility outage.

### **Shelter-in-Place for Hazmat Drill: 1 per school year**

Shelter-in-Place for Hazmat occurs when there is a hazardous material spill outside of the campus. Students come into the building and the building is sealed (A/C turned off, windows and doors sealed).

### **Shelter for Severe Weather Drill: 1 per school year**

Shelter for Severe Weather occurs when severe weather such as a tornado or severe storm are occurring around the campus. Students will move to safer areas in the building away from windows.

### **Fire Evacuation Drill**

School districts and open-enrollment charter schools should consult with their local fire marshal and comply with their local fire marshal's requirements and recommendations. If a district does not have a local fire marshal, it shall conduct four per school year (two per semester).

### **Hold**

Harmony does not drill for this procedure but uses it quite often on campus. During a hold, teachers are asked to keep all students contained in the classroom. Holds are used for several reasons, including medical emergencies occurring on campus, drug dogs checking hallways, or a student in the process of de-escalation. While a classroom is in a Hold, teachers are able to continue teaching as normal.

All campuses have a trained safety committee that conducts these drills through a predetermined schedule. These committees regularly review how well the drills are operating and to determine if any changes need to be made. As a commitment to safety, Harmony continues to implement safety standards across all campuses while reassuring parents that their children can focus on learning.

# Community Partnership Highlights



## Central Texas

Harmony Central Texas was proud to partner with University of Texas running back and Heisman Trophy contender Bijan Robinson, who provided over \$3,000 worth of clear backpacks for students at Harmony School of Excellence. In addition to providing students with brand new backpacks, Robinson also met with the high school football team and shared his journey from high school to college and his experience as a collegiate athlete attending UT-Austin.

- Victoria Mancha



## Houston North

Thanks to volunteers, teachers, and the Libre Institute, English as a Second Language is now provided each Saturday at Harmony School of Technology and Harmony School of Discovery, for parents and friends of Harmony students.

*"I am attending the ESL classes because now that my kids are older I want to improve myself and would like to study nursing. I also want to set an example for my kids and let them know it is never too late to follow your dream."* Aguilar, J.

*"I am grateful for the opportunity to improve my English. I want to help my kids in their classes and their life. We have to make an effort to learn the language because we live here, thank you for the opportunity."* Siguense, C.

- Isabel Garcia



## Houston South

Texas House of Representatives member Ron Reynolds has been a longtime Harmony advocate for School Choice. He values good education as a foundation for a better future. From speaking to students about how legislation works, to supporting growth and initiatives for high quality education, he is always dedicating his time. Rep. Reynolds is consistently making an impact on our students, staff and families lives by listening and showing up.

- Anh Gilmore



## North Texas

Harmony's partnership with the City of Fort Worth has expanded, from hosting now Mayor Mattie Parker as a commencement speaker to securing Mayor & Council Staff, Joaquim Carvalho, to speak to the Service Leadership Society.

Council member of District 6, Dr. Jared Williams, spoke at a Fort Worth groundbreaking and met the Solar Car & Robotics teams. Dr. Williams, a Ph.D. in Environmental Education, will return this fall to speak to Fort Worth high school students.

- Rebecca Murry



## South Texas

Haven For Hope is a newly established Harmony Partner In Education for South Texas District. Their nonprofit organization is a foundation for the beginning of a strong relationship because of the invaluable services they provide to families in need, specifically those that are homeless or on the verge of being homeless. They recently visited Harmony School of Innovation - San Antonio and presented to families about the resources they have available to assist in helping end homelessness by empowering families to transform their lives.

- Tiffany Flores

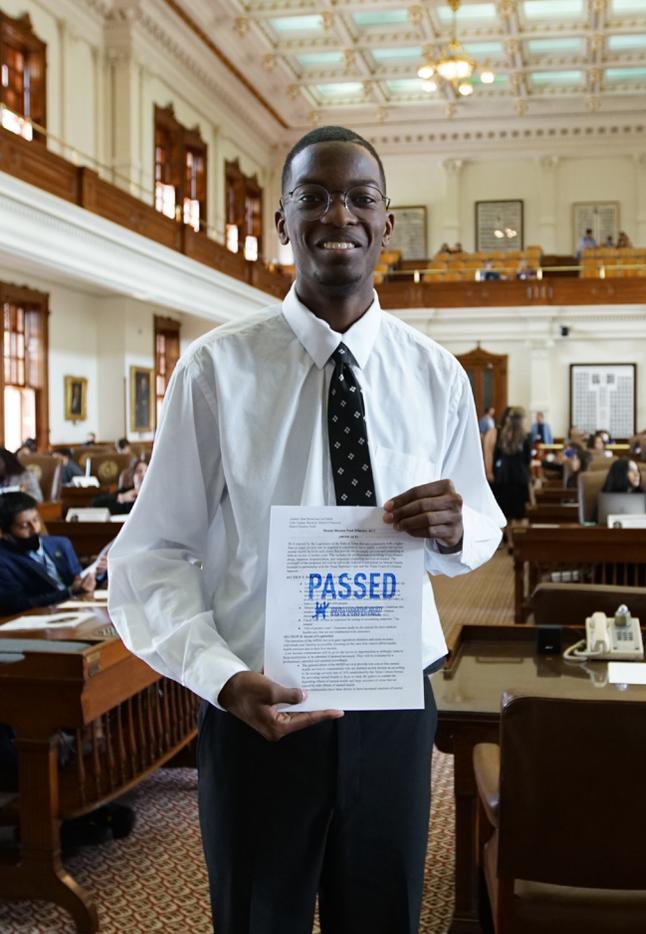


## West Texas

Harmony West Texas teachers received a special training from DEA Public Information Officer Carlos Briano on how to spot THC products due to the district's proximity to the New Mexico border. We will continue to develop this relationship with the DEA.

- Salomon Chavira





# ***FUTURE LEADERS TAKE THE STAGE***

## **Service Leadership Society Practices Lawmaking at the Texas State Capitol**

*by Lisa Proffit & Kaan Camuz*

Nothing is more impressive than 150 Harmony high school students seated at the historic desks of the Texas House chamber. This past April was one of those monumental days as students from 17 Harmony high school campuses gathered for the 1st annual State Conference.

The Service Leadership Society is a club for students to explore meaningful public policy topics, conduct research, form opinions, and develop a “bill” to address the selected public policy issue.

Throughout the bill design process, students learn the intricacies of Texas’ legislative process including how a bill becomes law. During the spring semester, SLS clubs gather for a state conference to present bill drafts to their peers and have the opportunity to debate and vote on bills.

“I loved the feeling of sitting in the chamber debating policy with fellow students,” raved Rodolfo Arzaga of Harmony Science Academy - El Paso.

The Service Leadership Society (also referred to as SLS) was started over six years ago with almost 200 members in its inaugural year and shows no signs of slowing down.

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***“I loved the feeling of sitting in the chamber  
debating policy with fellow students.”***

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This school year, all 24 Harmony high schools have SLS clubs as a part of their afterschool programs, a goal that Harmony’s PR and Outreach Departments have worked so hard to achieve.

With membership increasing and interest growing, numbers for the 2022-23 school year topped 300+ statewide. After inception, the program strengthened and grew and then in August 2021 was introduced to all HPS high schools.

“It felt so surreal to sit in the capitol building, in the house chamber. I liked putting myself in the shoes - or chairs - of our elected officials,” added Kyanna Ollison of Harmony Science Academy - San Antonio.

With a mission that aligns with Harmony’s goals and values, participation in SLS provides high school students with a vision of what it means to be a part of and contribute to the broader community. They practice the process of democracy leaving them excited to be involved in their community, state, county, and world.

Elected officials from city, county, state, and federal levels are invited to attend club meetings. SLS continuously draws elected officials into Harmony campuses because students pick topics that are relevant and many times reflective of the issues in the legislature.

This interaction gives students a gateway to develop relationships with the officials that could one day lead to a nomination, award, internship or ultimately a job.

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*“I liked putting myself in the shoes - or chairs - of our elected officials.”*

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“The Service Leadership Society provides a venue for scholars to practice leadership, duty, and service,” explained Maximiliano Zapata, a teacher and SLS sponsor. “Most importantly, it allows scholars to practice said virtues at a government level, which many argue is one of the prime ways to solve community problems. We owe it to our posterity to teach them about good governance so they can reap the rewards of a healthy democracy.”

Planning for the 2nd annual State Conference is underway and will be a two-day event to ensure that students have time to present and successfully debate their bills. In April 2023, the Texas state capitol will welcome over 300 Harmony Students, teachers, sponsors, and chaperones.

For many SLS club members, the State Conference was the first time they walked in the halls of the Historic Texas State Capitol, leaving a lasting impression.

## *OUR MISSION*

**The Harmony Public Schools Service Leadership Society is designed to foster a deep understanding of and appreciation for the legislative process by assisting students in public policy research, discourse, and debate.**





## THE PRIDE IS IN THE DETAILS

### The Story Behind Harmony Science Academy - Waco's Dramatic Turn-Around

by John Boyd

Harmony Science Academy-Waco is not the same school it was three years ago.

Old beige walls with the scuffs of a thousand elementary-age handprints now gleam with a modern, soft bluish-gray. A brand new service kitchen in the cafeteria cranks out fresh, hot meals each day to rave reviews from the student. Giant tiger murals adorn the front lobby and hallways throughout the building.

"Tiger Pride," they read.

The phrase is the school's official slogan, but also an often-repeated call-to-action for anyone in the vicinity to be their best.

"Tiger Pride" is all that needs to be said for any student in earshot to stop talking, form a line, and check to make sure their uniforms are tucked. In the classroom, it means pay attention, participate, and always try one's best.

"The teachers push us to our limits," Jayden S., a fifth grader at HSA-Waco, said. "Even if we think we can't go further, they always bring us up – even when we're down."

This school year, everything feels a little new – a little reinfused with Tiger Pride – at HSA-Waco. But it's not just the new paint, updated kitchen, or fresh murals.

After years of effort and collaboration between students, the campus

greeted this school year with news that it had made not only Harmony's biggest leap in the Texas Education Agency's annual accountability rating, but is one of the biggest comeback stories in all of Texas education.

By slashing the number of students who failed to pass STAAR, and helping low-income students and minority students better achieve academic success, Harmony Science Academy-Waco jumped from a failing "F" grade from the TEA in 2019-20 to a solid "B" (83) in 2021-22.

"What we did was unrealistic," Principal Tanisha Johnson said. "We were supposed to reach for the sky and we hit the moon."

HSA-Waco's dramatic overhaul isn't just a success for the school, it's also a success for the neighborhood it calls home.

In the year that HSA-Waco scored an "F" on its TEA Accountability Rating, three other elementary schools in the immediate area also scored a "D" or worse. No elementary in the neighborhood – which includes ISD schools, magnet schools and Montessori schools – scored better than a C-minus (71).

Unlike ISD schools, though, which are afforded a long leash and lengthy timetable to fix struggling campuses, charter schools like HSA-Waco can quickly lose their operating license in a matter of a few years without rapid improvement.

None of Waco's other struggling schools faced a similar challenge ... nor were any about to pull off the turn-around that HSA-Waco accomplished.



## FISSURES & FIXES

Blanca Centeno won't be the first person most visitors will likely see when visiting HSA-Waco for the first time – but she likely will be the person a visitor most repeatedly sees. She is always on the go: ducking into one classroom to take photos to post on Facebook, then across campus to another classroom to pull a group of bilingual students for instruction, then back again for a team meeting, and on-and-on, wearing grooves in the tile floor from all of the back-and-forth.

Currently, she serves the dual role of campus Engagement Coordinator and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Coordinator. The campus has been her home, though, since before it even opened.

"A really good friend of mine called and said she had heard they were opening a new school and said 'I want you to go with me to this meeting – I just want to hear what they have to say,'" Centeno said.

The meeting was held in what is now a pizza parlor near the current HSA-Waco campus. Most of the questions asked pertained to Harmony's STEM curriculum and the difference between an ISD school and a charter school.

Both Centeno and her friend were teaching in a nearby school district, but what she heard about Harmony's STEM-based curriculum and student culture seemed like it would be a good fit for her sons, who both excelled at math.

Centeno was sold when one of her sons, who has mild cerebral palsy, raised his hand in the meeting and asked principal (now HPS Deputy Superintendent of Schools) Umit Alpaslan what the school would do if he were bullied like he was at his current school.

"We're not going to tolerate that," Alpaslan told him.

That night, the family made their decision.

"Let's try it out," Centeno told her sons. "If it's not going to work, we'll try something else."

Fifteen years after that initial interest meeting, both of her sons have graduated from both Harmony and top Texas colleges. Both have also started successful careers in STEM. Centeno herself has transitioned from a Harmony parent to one of its longest-tenured employees.

Centeno was one of several Harmony team members who said they had a sense that the campus was starting to lose its footing prior to receiving the "F" rating from the TEA in Fall 2019. Some of the school's top teachers and leaders had been moved to the newly-opened Harmony School of Innovation just a couple years before, leading to a reset in campus culture with so many new faces. The new and existing school staff all were deeply committed to student achievement but they didn't all seem to be pulling in the same direction. Fissures formed from inconsistent student discipline and staff accountability.

By the 2018-19 school year, team morale started to slip, and it was apparent that the school wouldn't be in for positive news when the next year's TEA ratings were released.

"We pretty much knew it wasn't going to be good," Centeno said. "By then, we had already made some changes. But we had that looming over our heads."

When the ratings were released, many on the campus weren't surprised by the low rating.

Harmony's leadership went into immediate improvement mode.

A new principal was assigned to the campus, and some of Harmony's top leaders from nearby HPS middle/high school Harmony School of Innovation-Waco were reassigned to HSA to boost the struggling school.

Among them were Jill Remine and Cheryl Irwin, now HSA-Waco's assistant principals. Both had worked at HSA-Waco during better days.

"We both felt the same thing," Irwin said. "This is not an 'F' staff. This is not an 'F' campus."

"What happened?"



A primary factor in HSA's failing TEA score was poor performance on the previous year's STAAR test, so the new leadership team's first focus was academics.

"We knew we were on an upward climb," Remine said. "The staff was positive. We created new systems. We could see it in the kids."

Families also were feeling the positive changes at HSA-Waco.

The Govan family, like so many other military families in the Central Texas region, wasn't familiar with the Texas school system when they moved to Waco to start the 2019-20 school year.

They certainly weren't aware of HSA-Waco's "F" rating.

But HSA-Waco no longer felt like an "F" rated campus, either.

Nikki Govan said in other school districts, her son Zavion had struggled both academically and socially due to pre-existing learning challenges.

"We were dealing with a child that has ADHD, and we were coming from a district that had money to spend but they couldn't help," Nikki Govan said. "But they had resources at Harmony dedicated to helping him, and they identified that he is also Gifted & Talented."

"We wanted to show it," Remine said. "We wanted the kids to be proud of their school."

Then COVID-19 hit.

STAAR testing was canceled statewide.

Then the next two releases of TEA's annual ratings were also canceled.

For another 24 months, HSA-Waco was going to be stuck wearing its "F" rating with no chance to show that it had been improved.

For the first time, Blanca Centeno, the HSA mom-turned-teacher who had been with the school since its pizza parlor days, started to wonder if she had gone as far as she could with HSA-Waco.

"It was a couple of tough years," Centeno said. "I thought, 'I can't do this anymore.' I thought of leaving education."

#### A WORK OF CULTURE

July 15, 2021 was a day of firsts for Principal Johnson. Her first day as principal of HSA-Waco. First day as a principal anywhere, actually. Her first day to share her ambitious goal to turn around HSA-Waco with Irwin and Remine.

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## *"We wanted the kids to be proud of their school."*

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Prior to Harmony, it wasn't a surprise for Zavion to often come home with bad news about what was happening at school. So it was a shock even to him when he started coming home from Harmony at the end of the day with good news to share with his mom.

"He came running in one day and asked 'Who put me in Honors?' Nikki Govan said. "I told him 'You did! With your grades – you did!' I felt for the first time he was in a school where people cared about him."

Successes were mounting. Attitudes were changing. HSA-Waco's students and team members started looking forward to proving how far the school had come.

Throughout the previous 10 years, the three leaders had crossed paths as they individually grew their careers at HSA-Waco and its sister campus Harmony School of Innovation-Waco.

July 15, 2021 was their first day as a trio, though, and their first challenge wasn't just a failing rating, but a loss of momentum to fix it.

In the two years since the "F," some things had improved, but if a lack of cohesion, consistency and culture had been a problem before COVID, having the school emptied and its community separated by the pandemic had only exacerbated the remaining issues.

"It was kind of the perfect storm," Johnson said. "It seemed very nice on the surface, but underneath there were all of these emotions going on that had not been settled or resolved."





For two weeks, Johnson, Irwin and Remine met each day alone in the school and sorted out the academic and cultural issues that needed to be addressed before the school could move forward.

“We had to figure out within ourselves how to be in a good place,” Johnson said. “There were some tears from just the drama. And there were some tense moments, but once that wall was broken down it was the turning point of what would become the best year together.”

“That is where the trust was built – those two weeks when no one else was there but us. Even though my vision was we were going to be a ‘B’ campus, we had to get through that before I could share that with them.”

Johnson’s “B” prediction was met with not-so-silent skepticism.

“I’m the realist of the group,” Remine said.

“OK, we came in here,” she said, holding her hand just an inch above her desk.

“And here’s the bar,” she stretches her hand above her head.

“And three years of COVID have gone by and we’re down here now,” and Remine lowers her hand back to her desk.”

Despite the reality of the obstacles they faced, Remine and Irwin both bought in – because they bought in on Johnson. Together, they developed an official slogan: “There’s nowhere to go but up.”

This time, Johnson wanted to try something different. Immediately after the failing rating, the campus tried to fix its problems by focusing largely on its academic issues as a way to increase STAAR scores and boost the overall rating.

Academics were important to Johnson, but she wanted to tackle them in a round-about way by focusing the staff on something else: school culture.

“That is the thing I love to focus on,” Johnson said. “Building relationships. Making people heard. Doing the best to resolve any issues that I heard to the best I can.”

The first step involved getting both returning staff and new hires onboard with the plan when they arrived on campus in August.

To build camaraderie, the staff was broken into micro teams, each with group activities, team planning sessions and a system for relying on each other when the going got tough.

For instructional matters, they clung closely to their “Arc of the Year” – a research-based blueprint to the school year that outlines the areas in which instructors need to be effective for students to achieve, such as Building Common Expectations.

“I was lucky to have a staff that said, ‘We can do this,’” Johnson said. “‘You believe in us. We believe in you.’”

Small victories were celebrated. Each week, when the Harmony district and central offices released their updated data on everything from classroom walk-through completion to the newest MAP test scores, HSA-Waco moved a little higher up the Harmony rankings. Eventually, they started to see themselves at or near the top in most categories.

“From those moments, the staff started to believe what I believed,” Johnson said. “They’re capable of greatness. They’re going to do amazing things. It was nice for everyone to see Waco at the top: Waco, Waco, Waco!”

Outside the campus, the first sign of the improved culture was an increase in parent engagement. HSA-Waco parents have always been very involved with their students’ campus from afar, but direct parent engagement has at times been difficult for many families due to the economic realities of life on Waco’s west side.

In the past 50 years, the neighborhood was gutted again and again of good jobs: first when businesses followed the development of Interstate 35 to the east side of town, and then again in the early 2000s when an economic bust stripped two of its largest employers in just a couple of years.

Here, about 1-in-10 kids live below the poverty line – a rate higher than the national average. At HSA-Waco the number of students classified as economically disadvantaged is even higher: about 85 percent.

For many, their parents don't have just one job – they have two or three to help make ends meet.

For HSA-Waco's rebuild, parents were ready to invest.

By October, HSA-Waco was among Harmony's leaders in family home visits, and the annual fall festival was among its most well-attended ever. A "fill the fridge" soda drive for the school staff a few months later resulted in an overflow of aluminum, with more cans arriving on campus each day than there was room to store them. A similar supply drive for classroom reading centers had to be stopped short when the final storage option – the assistant principals' offices themselves – became overstuffed.

"Everything we did," Johnson said, "was a work of culture."

From Johnson's call, Jackson arranged for maintenance and purchasing support for Johnson.

But mostly, she did what Johnson said she needed from her most – to listen.

"She was just overwhelmed with everything that was happening," Jackson said. "She was doing all the purchase orders, the payroll, and that was taking over and she couldn't be in the classroom as much as she wanted to, and she started to have doubts that they were going to be able to make it."

That was the moment Johnson said her staff saw her break for the first time – and the only time.

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## *"Everything we did was a work of culture."*

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By late spring, though, the good vibes were starting to run low on gas.

April is always a busy time for schools, when year-end wrap-up hits at the same time as budgeting and preparation for the next year begins. With the campus business manager on family leave, purchase orders for the final supplies HSA-Waco would need to make it to the end of the year were piling up. So were maintenance issues, with no maintenance team member to address them.

Looming over it all – just a few short weeks away – was the first STAAR test in three years, which would in large part determine whether Johnson's new focus on campus culture was a success or failure.

"I remember being under my desk crying," Johnson said. "That was the moment I broke."

Johnson called Serena Jackson, then HPS North Texas' Assistant Superintendent of Programs for elementary schools. Jackson had been an elementary principal at a low-performing campus once, too, and also had been credited with helping turn it around. She also had been assigned as HSA-Waco's coach for Johnson's rehab project.

"They saw Mrs. Johnson in there crying – but then she got up. And she got back to work," Johnson said.

### **A NEW GOAL**

A month after Johnson's under-the-desk phone call to Jackson, Harmony's North Texas District announced an innovative approach to school administration.

Previously, the district had been Harmony's largest at 19 schools. However, to provide more focused support to schools and students, in May 2022 the district decided to split into two sub-districts: one for students in Grades 6-12, and one for students in PreK-Grade 5.

Jackson was named the new superintendent of HPS North Texas (Elementary).

Among other duties, the new title meant that Johnson's former coach would also be the first to hear HSA-Waco's new TEA rating to start the 2022-23 school year.

The rating was released on an August Friday morning, and coincidentally,





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***“Having seen the transition of the staff and the culture, you can tell it’s different.”***

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Jackson was already on her way from Dallas to Waco to visit Johnson and her campus for a meeting to go over the year ahead.

“I got a ding on my phone,” Jackson said. “I saw the subject line and I said ‘I need to open this! I need to open this!’”

Even though she was only 15 minutes from campus, she immediately pulled over. Interpreting a spreadsheet of scores on her cellphone was tricky, but she was pretty sure of what she saw.

“I called Mrs. Johnson right away,” Jackson said. “I told her, ‘I think I have really good news for you.’”

Johnson was waiting for Jackson in the lobby. The two quickly hurried back to the principal’s office, closed the door and popped open Jackson’s laptop.

“I was in my office next door,” Remine said, “and I heard blood-curdling screams from the principal’s office.”

Remine and Irwin rushed in to find Johnson crying over her computer.

Remine began crying. Irwin was just in shock.

Then together, the four started celebrating.

HSA-Waco had earned its “B.”

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Despite her campus’ success of 2021-22, Johnson isn’t quite ready to predict an “A” for HSA-Waco’s next rating cycle.

“We want to maintain,” she said.

Despite how far the school has come, she and others in district and campus leadership still see areas in which the school can continue to improve. A particular focus will be continuing to bring up STAAR scores in order to further improve its Student Achievement metric

Early in the school year, the signs were everywhere that the school is again on the right path. By August, teachers already were working with students on elements of the Arc of the Year blueprint that in 2021-22 were covered in December and January.

“It’s very positive now,” Centeno said. “Having seen the transition of the staff and the culture, you can tell it’s different. Yes, the staff is tired because it’s hard work. But they also want to do it. And I also see the excitement from the kids and what they’re doing.”

Between periods one Friday afternoon, a boy stopped an administrator in the hallway to ask, “Are we about to take the STAAR test?”

It was late August – he wouldn’t have to worry about STAAR for another eight months.

But instead of being reassured by the news, he groaned.

“Aaaaw!” he said, comically storming away. “But I’m ready for it now!”

The campus may not be expecting an “A,” but everyone on it – from Johnson to her team and their students – now expects to achieve.

Because Harmony Science Academy-Waco is not the same school it was three years ago.



## MORE THAN A SAYING

### “Project Lead The Way” Does Exactly That for Harmony Students *by Sarah Dugas Richard*

“Leading the way” is an adage that has been echoed for centuries, but still gets lost in translation many times.

At Harmony Public Schools, leading the way in education is more than just a saying – it’s a mantra that’s constantly pursued. One way HPS does this is through its partnership with Project Lead the Way (PLTW), a nationwide nonprofit organization that aims to provide a transformative experience for PreK-12 students and teachers. As a way of engaging classrooms while empowering students and teachers to develop and apply real world skills, PLTW has recognized hundreds of schools for their commitments to providing technical skills while activating critical-thinking skills. And of course, Harmony prides itself on being among that number.

PLTW is not just a classroom experience, but also a tailored plan that captures students at all grade levels in order to engage, prepare and instill practices. Whether it’s PreK-5 students tapping into their “exploratory natures” through hands-on, interactive learning or Grades 9-12 where students immerse themselves in the roles of biomedical science professionals solving real-world challenges while gathering firsthand experience as a problem solver and innovator, students are readily prepared to pursue their intended careers while making a difference.

Recent studies have shown that students involved in PLTW consistently outperform their peers and are better prepared for post-secondary studies than their non-PLTW peers.

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***Recent studies have shown that students involved in PLTW consistently outperform their peers and are better prepared for post-secondary studies than their non-PLTW peers.***

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Each year, PLTW recognizes just a rare few hundred schools for their commitments to providing technical skills while activating critical-thinking skills. This cycle, only 191 high schools out of more than 15,000 nationwide were recognized as PLTW “Distinguished” campuses. Ten came from Harmony.

To earn this honor, these schools adopted a standard of applying real-world experiences inside the classroom. With a focus in engineering, computer science and biomedical science, the program allows districts to integrate their mission into the rubrics developed for a seamless classroom experience that prepares students for future careers in their respective fields.

Harmony bases its core principles on many driven opportunities through a collaborative atmosphere, a quality student-centered program with an emphasis on STEM, and a partnership with PLTW that has only added to the educational structure. At Harmony, we continue to “lead the way”, while looking for new and innovative approaches to provide a world-class education to all students, regardless of their backgrounds.





Syed Hasan



Jasmine Richardson



Farhad Fatih



# FULL CIRCLE

## Harmony Alumni Return as College Counselors *by Candice Keutzer*

There is something to be said about coming full circle: To end up where you started as a brand-new version of yourself. That’s exactly what happened to not one, but three staff members at Harmony School of Innovation – Sugar Land. Jasmine Richardson and Farhad Fatih are College and Career Counselors at the high school while Syed Hasan serves as the new Dean of College and Career Services. All three were once Harmony Public School students. Each of them is a success story of the very program they now serve.

The College and Career Service program started with a passion to help Harmony students stay on track beyond their grade school careers. The program seeks to ensure each student gets the guidance they need to not only be college-ready, but career ready. College and Career counselors continue to support students for at least two years after they have graduated from Harmony. They help with mentoring and continue to push students toward their goal of successfully earning their college degrees.

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*“Having the opportunity to give back to my Harmony community has meant the world to me.”*

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Hasan, who serves as the new Dean of College and Career, credits the Harmony program with helping him get into his first choice of college, The University of Texas – Austin. “The special attention and direction that my counselor gave me during the whole college application helped me get to where I am today,” said Hasan.

Part of Hasan’s success as a College and Career Counselor, and now Dean is that his background mirrors those of his students. “As a first-generation student, I am thankful and blessed for the support and guidance I received by my teachers and counselors. Having the opportunity to give back to my Harmony community has meant the world to me,” said Hasan.

Now he reaps the rewards. Perhaps one of the greatest compliments Hasan ever received came from a former student who graduated in 2015. This student, like him, was the first in her family to go to college. She called Hasan when she was accepted to Georgetown University. He says he will never forget the excitement and emotion he felt from the phone call when she broke the news. Recently, Hasan found out this student is now a counselor for one of the Harmony campuses and that he inspired her to become a counselor.

The circle-making continues. Not only is Hasan a proud Harmony alum, but he is also the dad of two Harmony students who just started Kindergarten.



# PILOTING A NEW COURSE



## Harmony's Drone Program Demonstrates Commitment to STEM *by Ajdina Selimovic*

Harmony Public Schools continues to excel in providing students with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) resources both on and off campus that prepare them for their future careers. STEM education and resources that are included are an integral part of what Harmony vows to offer all students throughout their educational years with their chosen Harmony campus. With STEM growing across the world, the use of STEM is being reflected in all walks of life throughout every aspect both personally and professionally.

With the rise of drone activity over the years, Harmony has dedicated itself to ensuring the excitement of drones is within reach of all students. Beginning in the 2021-2022 school year, campuses have been connecting students with the REC (Robotics Education & Competition) Foundation in order to participate in their Aerial Drone Competition.

Students have access to hands-on learning opportunities and the ability to compete with their peers during the process. Students have learned how to not only manage the flight of drones, but have also learned how drones have benefited society during times of need, including, but not limited to, natural disasters.

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*“Students have access to hands-on learning opportunities and the ability to compete with their peers during the process.”*

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Many competitions are held between December and February with students preparing at the beginning and end of the school years. The drone competitions have been featured on CW39 Houston after sparking interest with local Meteorologist Carrigan Chauvin. Other notable guests such as State Representative Dennis Paul of District 129 as well as Lisa A. McMichael and Michael D. Kennedy of Frese & Nichols, a consulting firm consisting of engineers, architects, scientists.

STEM academics and competitions are a key part of the school culture at Harmony as a manner of engaging students in communication skills, critical thinking and teamwork to positively affect their overall development while subtly preparing them for their future careers.

While Harmony prides itself on its students competing with their peers during city and statewide competitions attended by individuals of merit, students also participate in these activities daily at their Harmony campuses.

Whether it's in the classroom or after-school extracurriculars, the sky's the limit when Harmony embraces new and exciting aspects of STEM, and our students could not be more excited for the future.





## GROWING FOR GOOD

### Dr. Mustafa Altindag Makes the Move from Principal to Area Superintendent *by Tracie Seed*

As the Harmony Science Academy-Pflugerville principal from 2010-2013, Dr. Mustafa Altindag had a dedication to Central Texas that led him back to the district as the new area superintendent in 2022. Altindag has devoted the past 15 years in education to Harmony Public Schools in various roles spanning from math teacher and assistant principal to principal, assistant area superintendent, and most recently, Director of Instruction.

academic habits in instructional practices that will yield great outcomes while we are growing and opening new schools to serve more scholars.”

With the plans for two new campuses in Georgetown and Leander, Altindag references Census data, which shows that these are two of the fast-growing cities.

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***“The superintendent role allows me to continue to be very close to the students and impact their lives.”***

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Altindag is a first-generation high school and college graduate who credits his success to his parents’ encouragement and teachers’ inspiration.

“Their guidance and support helped me get into college, graduate and become a teacher. The discipline they instilled kept me going so I could help more and more students throughout my career,” Altindag said. “The superintendent role allows me to continue to be very close to the students and impact their lives.”

While Altindag plans to observe, experience and learn from the Central Texas campuses in his first year, one of his goals is to set “strong

“The new schools will be a great fit to meet the needs of the parents who are looking for quality, college-bound STEM education,” he said.

The new campuses will support greater educational outcomes in the Central Texas area, serving more than one-thousand Harmony scholars in each location. With new locations and opportunities, Harmony shows no signs of slowing down, and for Altindag that means more opportunities for building relationships while inspiring the future.



Harun Karan



# ***DIVIDE & CONQUER***

## **A New Approach to Education in the North Texas District** *by Susan Campbell*

Since Harmony’s first North Texas location opened in 2004, Harmony Public Schools has been proud to serve the families of Dallas/Fort Worth and Waco by providing its scholars the best tuition-free STEM-focused education possible – an education that meets their unique needs and prepares them for success.

Since then, Harmony’s North Texas District has grown by leaps and bounds. So much that the District chose to “divide and conquer” by branching into two distinct sub-districts in 2022-2023: one focused mainly on elementary learners, and one focused on secondary (6-12) scholars.

The move is aimed at providing students in North Texas with even greater support and access to resources throughout their educational journey at Harmony.

For elementary students, this means more specialized attention on early learning fundamentals, including establishing strong foundations in math and literacy, and building early connections to the principles of STEM.

For middle and high school students, this means an even greater focus on preparing scholars for college and their exciting futures beyond.

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***“This means an even greater focus on preparing scholars for college and their exciting futures beyond.”***

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To support this innovative new approach to education, a new area superintendent, Serena Jackson, was chosen to lead and support the elementary campuses. Jackson joined Harmony in 2008 as an English Language Arts teacher at Harmony Science Academy-Fort Worth, before being promoted to Dean of Student Culture and principal roles at Harmony campuses in Fort Worth and Eules. For the past two years, she has served as Assistant Area Superintendent of Programs for Harmony’s North Texas District. Jackson joins current North Texas District Superintendent Harun Karan as he has shifted his focus to lead and support secondary campuses. Karan’s career in education has spanned 27 years. Prior to joining Harmony North Texas as Area Superintendent, he was the Area Superintendent of Harmony’s South/West Houston District. He has also served as Science Department head, District Science Coach, Dean of Academics and Principal. He also spent 13 years of his career teaching Science and Chemistry. Karan holds a Bachelor’s degree in Science and Chemistry Teaching and a Master’s degree in Educational Leadership.



Serena Jackson

# Recent Accomplishments

The 2022-23 school year is already making history at Harmony Public Schools!  
Check out some of the accomplishments our students and team achieved during the 2022 Fall semester!



Highest percentage of “A” or “B” rated campuses by the Texas Education Agency among major Texas charter school systems



Seven “A” ratings in FIRST Financial Accountability Ratings from Texas Education Agency



Highest number of new student enrollment applications in a single day, single week, and single month



\$12 million grant from the Charter School Growth Fund for future development of new HPS campuses



Opening of three new campuses: Harmony School of Excellence-Katy, Harmony School of Science-San Antonio and Harmony Virtual Academy



\$5.2 million in Teacher Incentive Allotments awarded to high-performing HPS teachers statewide, including 180+ bonuses of \$10,000 or more



Record number of Questbridge Scholarship finalists (36)



Honor Charter Athletics League (HCAL) state champions in volleyball and flag football



Eight campuses recognized as official No Place for Hate schools by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)

# HARMONY AT A GLANCE



More than twenty years ago, Harmony Public Schools opened its first campus in Houston's historic Braeswood neighborhood.

Since then, we've grown into one of the state's most trusted and recognized schools for college preparation, character education and STEM curriculum. See how we'll be expanding even further within the next few years to create even more opportunities for children across Texas.



## RECENT AWARDS

-  x 23  
Best High Schools in America  
(U.S. News & World Report, 2022)
-  x 19  
College Success Award  
(GreatSchools!, 2021)
-  x 7  
National School of Character  
(Character.org, 2020-22)
-  x 13  
State School of Character  
(Character.org, 2020-22)
-  x 7  
"A" Rating for  
Financial Accountability  
(Texas Education Agency, 2022)

## HPS STRATEGIC GROWTH PLAN

**61** CURRENT LOCATIONS    **18** PROPOSED LOCATIONS

\*Locations are approximate.

### STUDENT DATA

**40,716**

Students  
Enrolled  
PreK-12



Economically Disadvantaged



**67%**

English Language Learners (ELL)



**34%**

College Acceptance Rate



**94%**

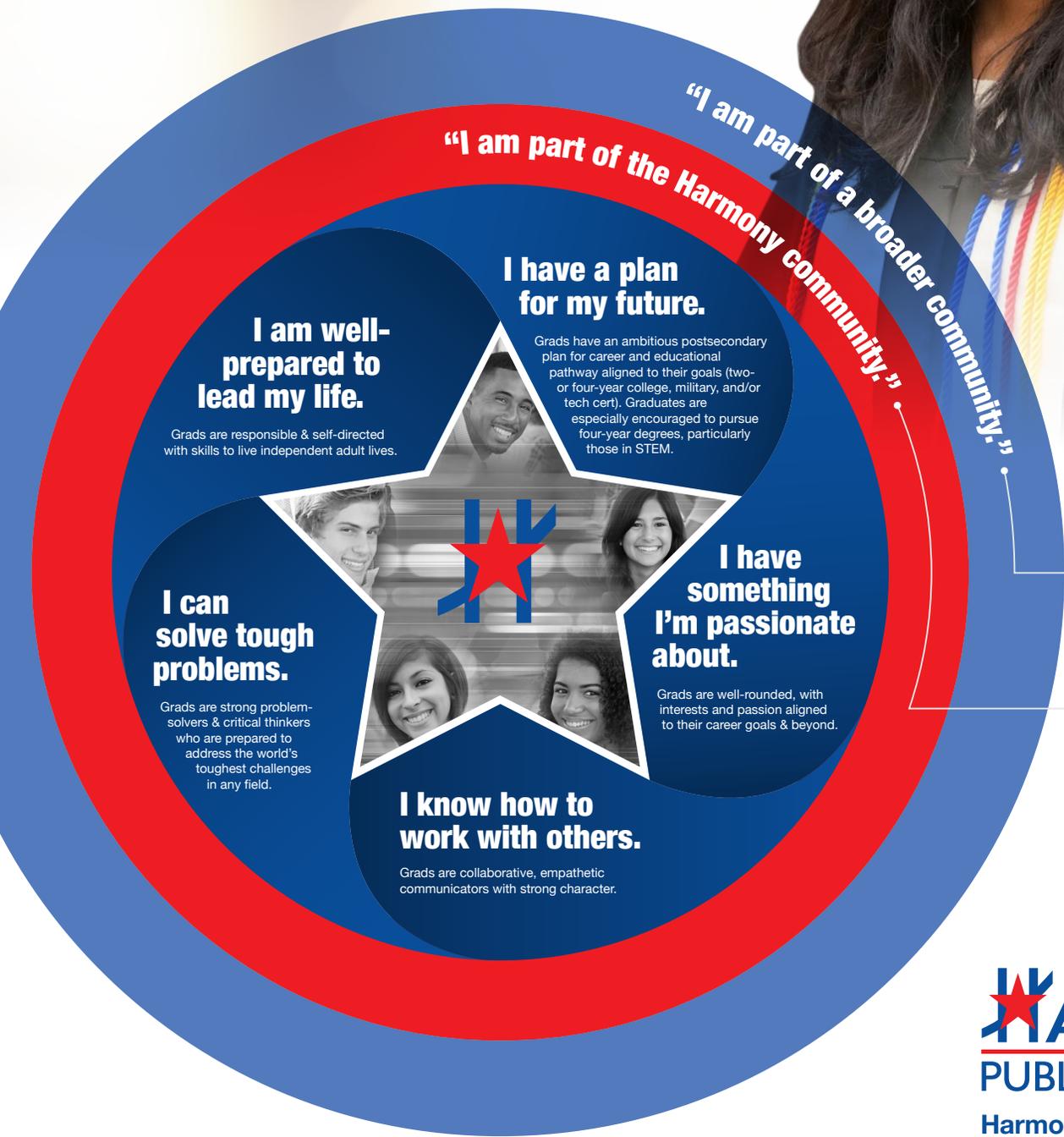
Graduation Rate



**100%**

# Harmony Public Schools Graduate Profile

Our North Star



**I am well-prepared to lead my life.**

Grads are responsible & self-directed with skills to live independent adult lives.

**I have a plan for my future.**

Grads have an ambitious postsecondary plan for career and educational pathway aligned to their goals (two- or four-year college, military, and/or tech cert). Graduates are especially encouraged to pursue four-year degrees, particularly those in STEM.

**I can solve tough problems.**

Grads are strong problem-solvers & critical thinkers who are prepared to address the world's toughest challenges in any field.

**I have something I'm passionate about.**

Grads are well-rounded, with interests and passion aligned to their career goals & beyond.

**I know how to work with others.**

Grads are collaborative, empathetic communicators with strong character.

**"I am part of the Harmony community."**

**"I am part of a broader community."**

Grads understand themselves as part of - and are ready to contribute to - **their community, state, country, and world.**

Grads understand themselves as part of - and are ready to contribute to - **the HPS community.**





Harmony Public Schools

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