



YEARS

HARMONY

PUBLIC SCHOOLS



HARMONY AT 25

A Story of People and Purpose

In honor of its 25th anniversary, Harmony Public Schools presents this special publication as a reflection of its journey—not solely through timelines or milestones, but through the stories of the people and programs that have shaped its past, present and future. Rather than a traditional historical account, this magazine captures the spirit of Harmony through personal narratives and impactful moments. Each story offers a glimpse into the

values, challenges and triumphs that define the Harmony community. By highlighting individual contributions and experiences, the publication underscores a central truth: the strength of Harmony Public Schools has always been its people. Through their dedication, innovation and resilience, these individuals have helped build a legacy of educational excellence that continues to grow and inspire futures.

Editorial Team

John Boyd
Chief
Communications
& Marketing
Officer

Susan Campbell
Director of
Communications

Tim Hallila
Visual Production
Manager

Lisa Proffit
Communications
Manager

Ajdina Selimovic
Communications
Manager

Shadan Gunonu
Media Production
Manager

Allen Reid
Media Production
Manager

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A CONVERSATION WITH HARMONY CEO FATIH AY



Interview by John Boyd

In celebration of Harmony Public Schools' 25th Anniversary

As Harmony Public Schools marks its 25th anniversary, the milestone offers more than a moment of celebration — it's an opportunity to reflect on the journey, the mission and the enduring spirit that shaped one of Texas's most innovative public school systems. In this special interview, CEO Fatih Ay looks back on his personal journey from serving as a researcher at a higher education institution to the helm of a thriving, statewide charter network serving tens of thousands of students. Ay shares how a modest vision rooted in academic equity, STEM innovation, and student-centered values grew into a replicable, high-impact model recognized nationally

for excellence. He also reflects on pivotal moments that shaped Harmony's trajectory, the resilience and ingenuity that define its educators, and the organization's relentless pursuit of improvement — even amid historic challenges. Looking ahead, he shares a bold vision for the next era of growth, with a focus on workforce readiness, responsible AI integration, and empowering educators. This interview is not just a look back, but a hopeful, clear-eyed vision of what's possible when a community commits to giving every student the tools to thrive.

Tell us a about how you became involved with Harmony.

I was one of the founding team members of Harmony back in 2000 as part of a group of volunteers who were passionate about education and giving back to the community. At the time, we were mostly helping with after-school programs — tutoring students, supporting enrichment clubs, and doing whatever was needed to ensure kids had a safe and supportive learning environment.

Even then, our mission was clear: we wanted to build an education model that prioritized academic excellence and student success. It was a small, humble beginning, but full of heart and determination. What made it particularly exciting for me, as someone with a background in science and physics, was that we were already focusing on STEM education — well before it became a national conversation.

At the time, many students I encountered weren't adequately prepared for college-level science and math coursework. That was a wake-up call for me. It became clear that we needed to start much earlier — at the K-12 level — to build strong academic foundations. Harmony's approach gave us that chance, and I knew I wanted to be part of shaping it.

What was your first impression of Harmony and its potential?

Harmony was very small and modest at first. We had limited resources, and we were serving a relatively small number of students. But what struck me immediately was the strength of the model. It was clear that the need in the community was real, and demand for our schools grew rapidly.

Did I imagine that we would one day become a statewide network serving tens of thousands of students? Not at all. It's still incredible to reflect on. What we've built is, in many ways, a miracle — but one made possible through teamwork, shared vision, and relentless effort. Over the years, we've developed a replicable, scalable model that continues to deliver strong outcomes across very different communities. That's something I'm deeply proud of.

From volunteer to teacher to principal to CEO, you've had a number of roles in your time with Harmony. What has kept you the most motivated to keep pushing further?

It has always been — and continues to be — our student-centered mission. Every decision we make at Harmony is rooted in the belief that all students deserve access to a high-quality, future-ready education. That mission has never wavered. In fact, it has only grown more ambitious.

Seeing the tangible impact of our work is what motivates me. When you see a student go from struggling to excelling, or when a first-generation college-goer walks the graduation stage because of the support they received at Harmony — that's powerful. It reminds you that what we do matters.

It's also motivating to be part of a system that believes in continuous improvement. We're constantly learning, adapting, and finding new ways to better serve students. That kind of environment creates both a personal and professional drive to keep pushing forward.

What were some of the more defining moments in your own journey with Harmony?

One of the most significant was the transition from teacher

to administrator. Leaving the classroom was not an easy decision. As a teacher, you see the direct impact of your work every day. You watch students improve with the right support, and that is incredibly rewarding.

But I realized that I could make an even greater impact by stepping into leadership roles — by working on systems and structures that support not just one classroom, but many. As an administrator, I've had the opportunity to help remove obstacles for teachers, design programs that scale, and ensure that our students have more consistent access to opportunities and support.

That shift — from individual impact to systemic impact — was transformative for me.

For those unfamiliar, what does the role of a CEO at Harmony involve? And where does vision-setting fit in?

The CEO of an organization like Harmony must wear many hats — but the most important is that of a visionary. You have to see not just what is, but what could be. And you have to set ambitious yet achievable goals that challenge the organization to grow beyond its comfort zone.

In education, there's a unique urgency. Our students can't wait for change. If we delay improvement by even a year or two, that could be the difference between a student staying in school or dropping out. That sense of urgency is always top of mind.

How would you define the spirit of Harmony Public Schools?

At its core, the spirit of Harmony is defined by a growth mindset. We never rest on our achievements. Even when others point to our model as a best practice in certain areas, we're still looking for ways to improve.

This mindset was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. While many districts took weeks or even months to respond, Harmony launched a concurrent online learning model within just one week. Our curriculum wasn't built for remote delivery, but our team came together, improvised and delivered.

That same spirit drove us to go beyond the classroom. We produced and donated thousands of face masks to first responders. We didn't settle for the minimum — our people asked, "What more can we do?" That's the kind of culture we've built.

Can you share another example of how Harmony has evolved to meet students' changing needs?

Absolutely. Originally, our goal was to prepare students for college through a strong STEM-focused, college-prep curriculum. But over time, we realized that simply getting students into college wasn't enough — some of our students were not finishing their degrees within four to six years.

We didn't blame the students, their families, or higher education institutions. Instead, we asked ourselves: What can Harmony do differently?

That led us to strengthen our college and career readiness framework by adding CTE programs and industry certifications. We want students to graduate not only college-ready but also career-ready and life-ready. This shift was one of the most impactful evolutions in our model.

What makes Harmony stand out compared to other public or charter schools in Texas?

Harmony is unique because we combine breadth with depth. Many schools focus on one specialty — advanced academics, dual credit, fine arts, or athletics. At Harmony, we strive to offer a well-rounded experience that includes all of these under one roof.

At a typical Harmony campus, you'll find dual credit opportunities, strong AP courses, CTE pathways with industry certifications, and in-house SAT and PSAT prep. Our model is intentionally built to be a one-stop shop for families, where students can explore their interests and prepare for their futures without needing to look elsewhere.

And what's more important is that these programs aren't reserved for just a select few. Our philosophy is "STEM for All" and "College for All." We ensure equity in access and opportunity, and we provide all of this tuition-free.

What do you see as Harmony's greatest academic strengths?

Harmony's greatest academic strength lies in the combination of a rigorous, high-quality curriculum and exceptional instructional delivery. Our academic program is not only well-structured but also implemented with a level of excellence that consistently yields strong results across our campuses.

Instruction at Harmony is deeply intentional and supported by robust intervention systems that ensure no student is left behind. When a student struggles, we act quickly with targeted support and data-informed strategies to close gaps and accelerate learning.

What truly distinguishes Harmony, however, is how we enrich this strong academic foundation with two powerful pillars: STEM and Career & Technical Education (CTE). Our commitment to STEM is embedded across all grade levels, providing students with critical thinking skills, problem-solving opportunities, and real-world applications of their learning. At the same time, our CTE programs expose students to industry-aligned pathways and certifications that prepare them for success in both college and career.

This comprehensive approach—high-quality curriculum, responsive intervention, and enriched learning through STEM and CTE — is what makes Harmony's academic model truly exceptional. It empowers students not only to meet standards but to exceed them, while preparing them to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Are there any exciting new programs or initiatives in development?

Absolutely. One of the most exciting areas we're currently exploring is the integration of artificial intelligence across various facets of the Harmony experience. We're developing several AI-driven tools and platforms designed to boost productivity for our staff, personalize learning for our students, and strengthen engagement with families.

On the instructional side, AI will help us create more tailored learning experiences — allowing students to move at their own pace, receive targeted support, and deepen

their understanding of complex subjects. For teachers and administrators, AI has the potential to streamline time-consuming tasks, freeing up more time for meaningful interaction and instructional planning.

We're also building tools that will empower parents to become more active partners in their child's learning. These systems will provide greater visibility into student progress, learning goals, and classroom engagement, helping families stay connected and better support their children at home. As these projects continue to develop, we look forward to sharing and releasing them as they become available.

What are some of the biggest growth opportunities for Harmony today?

Talent retention and recruitment are always top priorities. The success of any educational model comes down to the people delivering it. We're actively looking for ways to better support, train, and compensate our educators.

Student retention is also critical. Many students arrive at Harmony a year or two behind. The longer we can keep them, the better we can help them grow academically and socially. Retaining students allows us to shift from remediation to acceleration.

And then there's responsible AI. We're preparing to teach students how to use AI tools effectively and ethically. It's a challenge, but also a tremendous opportunity to enhance learning and innovation.

Looking ahead, what are your top priorities for the next five years?

First, we're committed to creating a competitive compensation structure for our staff. We must remain an attractive destination for top talent.

Second, increasing productivity is essential. With inflation, rising construction costs, and tighter budgets, we need to find smarter, more efficient ways to operate. AI and other technologies will play a major role in that transformation.

Ultimately, our top priority is maintaining and elevating the quality of education we provide — ensuring every student, regardless of background, has the tools and support to thrive.

If you could go back to the year 2000 and give yourself one piece of advice, what would it be?

I'd tell myself to stay the course. There were many uncertainties in the beginning. What we were building wasn't proven yet — it was a hypothesis. But we believed in it.

Looking back, it was absolutely worth it. The results speak for themselves.

Finally, what keeps you personally motivated about leading Harmony into the future?

For me, it's all about the impact. Seeing Harmony help students close achievement gaps, succeed in college and career pathways, and become leaders in their communities — that's what keeps me going.

We're not just running schools. We're changing lives. And that's the most fulfilling work I can imagine.



MEET the BOARD



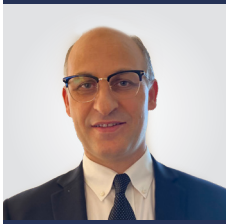
Dr. Oner Celepcikay (Board Chair) is a Senior AI Engineer at IBM and adjunct professor at Rice University. He has been a key contributor to Harmony Public Schools since its founding, leveraging his expertise in AI, data science, and STEM education leadership.



Mrs. Helen Sherwood (Second Vice Chair), is a former Senior Research Librarian at Texaco. She brings extensive experience in STEM education outreach and volunteer leadership to the Harmony Public Schools Board.



Dr. Hakduran Koc (Secretary) is a professor and Chair of the Engineering Department at University of Houston-Clear Lake. He is a distinguished educator and active community leader in engineering education, accreditation and STEM outreach.



Dr. Mehmet Argin is Dean of the Engineering Center of Excellence at Houston Community College. He has extensive experience in STEM education, workforce development and K-12 charter school leadership.



Ms. Laura Gonzalez is a Harmony alumna and Program Manager at EMERGE Fellowship, where she promotes student success by advancing college access, persistence and career development.



Ms. Kimberly D. House is a former manager with extensive experience in the administration of federal grants. She is a passionate advocate for youth education initiatives, and is the co-founder of a college scholarship fund.



Dr. Simon Koch is a member of the Computer Science faculty at Rice University and former professor at the University of Central Arkansas. He brings deep expertise in biomedical data research and more than \$20 million in grant-funded projects to the Harmony Board.



Q & A WITH HPS BOARD CHAIR

DR. ONER CELEPCIKAY

As President of the Executive Board, how would you describe the board's role in shaping the direction of Harmony Public Schools?

Our role centers on oversight, governance, and policy development. We are fortunate to work with one of the most capable CEOs and leadership teams in the nation, which makes our job easier. Nevertheless, it remains our duty to ensure that the direction of HPS aligns with Harmony's mission and core values — empowering students through a high-quality, STEM-focused education.

What guiding principles or values does the board prioritize when making major decisions?

While many principles guide our work, two stand out above the rest: data-driven decision-making and the unwavering belief that student outcomes come first. With every major decision, we ask ourselves: “Will this enhance academic excellence?”, “Will it expand opportunities for all students?” “Does this align with our mission and core values?” Each of these answers must be backed by evidence. As both a data science educator at Rice University and a practitioner at IBM, I firmly believe in the adage: “In God we trust; everyone else must bring data.”

Looking ahead, what are the board's key goals for Harmony for next 5 to 10 years?

We are currently in the final stages of approving our next five-year strategic plan, which will include clear goals and measurable outcomes. That said, a few key priorities already stand out. First and foremost, we aim to enhance our curriculum and elevate the quality of learning taking place in our classrooms. The world is changing rapidly. Artificial Intelligence is transforming not only how students access information but also what the future workplace will look like. Our curriculum and instructional methods must evolve accordingly. Another major goal is to invest in the

development and support of our frontline educators, ensuring they are equipped to guide students through this new era of learning.

On a more personal note, what motivates you to serve on the board, and what has your journey with Harmony meant to you?

I was fortunate to be one of the graduate students and academics who helped open the very first Harmony campus, Harmony Science Academy in Houston. We posted signs, set up tables and organized events to recruit our first group of students. But one experience stands out as especially formative — when I volunteered to lead our very first grant-writing effort. It was a modest request at the time — just \$50,000 for a wireless mobile lab with 24 laptops. In 2001–02, this was a major innovation. Despite my graduate coursework and a busy schedule, I committed just two hours a week to the application. When the grant was approved and I saw the impact it had on students' learning, I felt both proud and humbled. I had nearly declined, thinking I was too busy — yet even a small investment of time had a lasting, tangible impact. That moment opened my eyes. As adults, even a limited amount of volunteer time can make a meaningful difference in a child's life. Soon after, I joined the board — and I've been part of Harmony's journey ever since. Over the years, I've had many similar moments, and those experiences continue to fuel my passion for service.

Serving on the board has been the honor of a lifetime. Watching a small, shared vision grow into a national model serving tens of thousands of students is profoundly humbling. And the impact continues to surprise me — in fact, just recently in my graduate class at Rice University, a student introduced himself and mentioned that his son had graduated from Harmony. It was a full-circle moment that reminded me how far we've come — and why the work still matters.

ORIGINS





“I think this is a miracle.”

Harmony Public Schools
CEO Fatih Ay

FIRST CLASS

by Ajdina Selimovic



Harmony's early families took a chance when enrolling in an as-yet unknown charter school. For one member of Harmony's first graduating class, that gamble is still paying off.

Octavia Biresaw-Cobb's journey with Harmony Public Schools has come full circle.

Today, in addition to being a married mom of two, she's a campus testing coordinator for federal programs at Harmony School of Excellence-Katy. There, she helps middle and high school students prepare for graduation and their bold futures ahead.

However, when Biresaw-Cobb first came to Harmony in 2003, she was just a student herself, also preparing for graduation and beyond. As a member of Harmony's very first class of graduates in 2005, she has witnessed the school system's growth right alongside her own.

"It felt like a family because it was so small," Biresaw-Cobb said of her early days at Harmony.

At the time, the school was a tight-knit community, and her experience as a student provided a unique perspective on Harmony's growth.

As one of the earliest students to walk the halls of Harmony Science Academy-Braeswood, Biresaw-Cobb vividly recalls the sense of adventure and uncertainty that came with being part of something so new.

Resources were limited and much of the school's structure was still developing, which only strengthened the resolve of its students and staff. Teachers wore multiple hats — mentors,



counselors, club sponsors — and their dedication left a lasting impression on her. Despite the creative chaos, there was a deep sense of ownership and pride. Every school event and milestone felt monumental. It wasn't just about learning in the classroom; it was about laying the groundwork for future generations.

Since her graduation, Biresaw-Cobb has witnessed Harmony's evolution.

"The events are larger, and the schools are bigger," she said.

While Harmony began as a small, family-like community, it has grown into a dynamic educational network. Despite this growth, she maintains close relationships with her former classmates.

"We have remained really good friends over the years," she said, emphasizing the strong bonds formed during her time as a student.

Biresaw-Cobb's path took a significant turn in 2009 when, after completing an internship, she began working at Harmony School of Ingenuity. She had always felt a strong connection to the Harmony community, and the internship allowed her to further explore her passion for education.



"I found a good group of people at Harmony. It felt like the right fit. I didn't necessarily plan to choose a career in education. It chose me when Harmony called me."

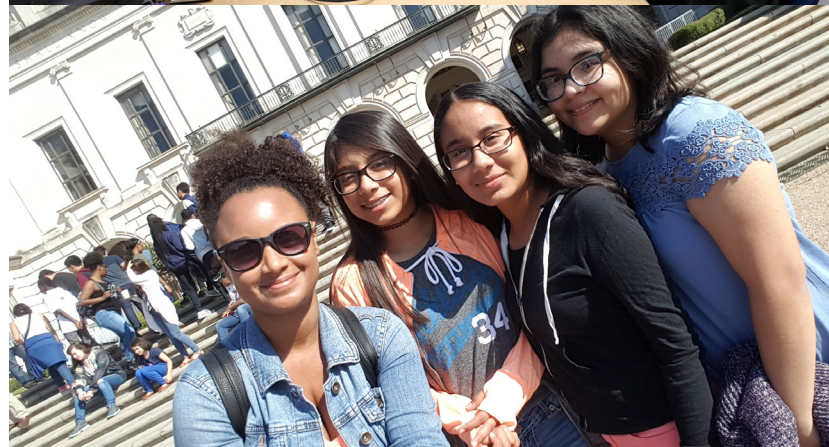


"I found a good group of people at Harmony," she said, describing the supportive and collaborative environment that encouraged her to stay.

Her decision to work for Harmony was a natural next step. "It felt like the right fit," she said. "I didn't necessarily plan to choose a career in education. It chose me when Harmony called me."

Now two decades after first coming to Harmony as a student, Biresaw-Cobb said she still feels a deep connection to her work, as well as fulfillment from being a part of the Harmony community. For Biresaw-Cobb, education isn't just a job. It's a passion and a calling she can't imagine leaving behind.

"It's hard," she said, "to imagine anything else."



Founding Fathers

by Lisa Proffit

They didn't realize they were pioneers at the time, but Harmony's earliest educators share their recollection of what it was like launching a legacy.



Dr. Edward Caglar and Ramazan Coskuner are among the pioneering educators who took a bold leap of faith to help launch Harmony’s first campus in Houston.

Although they did not know each other at the time, both men responded in 2000 to a call to teach high-quality STEM classes at a newly founded charter school in Houston.

Despite having minimal teaching experience, they wholeheartedly embraced a vision to deliver rigorous STEM education to all students. Twenty-five years later, they continue to serve Harmony and its students. Coskuner is the area superintendent of Harmony Public Schools-Houston South/West, and Caglar serves as executive director of expansion and construction.

Their journey reveals a deep and enduring dedication to the educational advancement of children. Dr. Caglar and Mr. Coskuner overcame initial uncertainties and became key figures in a transformative effort that changed the lives of countless underserved students and families. Their work helped redefine STEM education not only in Texas but also on a national scale. Teachers, students and families who joined this movement became pioneers of a new era in education.

The two educators have worked side by side for more than two decades, united by a shared long-term vision.

While there may be no official recognition for educators who take such extraordinary risks on behalf of their students, the success stories of early Harmony students — particularly in STEM competitions — stand as a testament to their silent support and relentless encouragement.

If there is one word that encapsulates Dr. Caglar, Mr. Coskuner, and the other trailblazers who laid the foundation for Harmony Public Schools, it is “courageous.”

experience sparked my interest in teaching. I wanted to work with students and help them become good citizens.”

Tell us about the early days of Harmony.

Caglar: “I already had five years of teaching experience, so I wasn’t new to the profession. But it was my first year in America and my first time teaching American students, which was a challenge. I had to learn about the culture and how to connect with them — that was the difficult part. As for teaching math, Harmony didn’t have a curriculum at that time, but textbooks provided by the state included the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards, so we were able to teach. However, classroom management was a learning curve for us.”

Did you feel like a pioneer?

Caglar: “I didn’t feel that way at the time. But now that Harmony has reached this stage, yes — I think about it now. I never imagined Harmony would grow this big!”

How did it feel to be able to watch that growth happening in real time?

Coskuner: “It was, of course, very interesting to experience a new culture and environment. I remember getting videotapes from Region 4 to learn how to present subject matter to my new students. I patiently worked through them and learned how to modify our lesson plans and personalize them based on the student population we had.

“It was a very small school, and it was tough. So, when you ask about pioneering — like Dr. Caglar said — I wasn’t thinking about it at the time. I was focused on surviving and

“Students needed to see the practicality of what they learned—by working on projects, identifying real-world problems, and developing solutions for the public.”

How did your Harmony journey start?

Coskuner: “I have always been passionate about teaching, especially math. I became a math teacher and worked in a few places before coming to the United States. When I heard about Harmony and its STEM focus, I felt I would be a good fit for this new school system. I applied and was accepted.”

Caglar: “My background is in mathematics education. After working in several locations, I decided to move to Austin for my master’s degree. While pursuing my degree, I learned about Harmony and was offered a position.”

Why did you start teaching, and what about teaching fascinated you?

Coskuner: “Multiple teachers influenced my life and set me on a good path. For some reason, I really liked math, and I knew that teachers don’t just teach numbers — they also teach essential life skills. I felt it would be meaningful to work with students, help them develop these skills, and guide them toward their dreams, whatever they may be. I believe teachers are the ones who inspire kids to dream big.”

Caglar: “My family includes several teachers, and my uncle was a math teacher. When I was in middle school, I visited his house while he was grading papers, and he asked me to help. He taught me some of his grading criteria, and that

learning how things were done in the United States. But by the end of the school year, we were successful. The students learned a lot, and within a couple of years, we showed great progress.

“Now, Harmony has more than 40,000 students and over 60 campuses. We started with one campus and 200 students — now look at where we are. Now I can say I’m proud to be one of the first teachers in this growing network.”

What was it like recruiting students to a school system that was brand new at that time?

Caglar: “I started right around the beginning of the school year, so I was not part of the original recruitment process. But I knew that those 200 students had chosen to attend our school — it wasn’t the school they were assigned to — and that motivated me. The fact that parents and students wanted to be there inspired us.

“We started doing home visits and learned why families chose Harmony, which was even more motivating. The encouragement we received from parents kept us going. The students were very young — only sixth- through eighth-graders. They were getting an excellent education, but they didn’t fully grasp its significance yet. That pushed us to continue our work.



“In the following years, I became involved in recruitment. I remember going out to post street signs, helping the school mail brochures, sealing envelopes, and taking them to the post office. There were so many efforts in those early years.”

Why were those home visits so important?

Coskuner: “Home visits and STEM have been a signature of Harmony from the beginning. We visited our students and their families with the same core purpose we have today: to build stronger relationships with parents, get to know them better and understand who they are.

“At the same time, home visits help families understand who we are as educators. We are part of their support system — not just their child’s teacher, but an extension of their family, working together to help their children succeed. During these visits, we explain what we are doing in terms of curriculum, safety and discipline, ensuring parents have a clear understanding and a chance to ask questions.

“Home visits open the lines of communication. Parents know they can reach out to us anytime, and we will be there when they need us. This builds trust, and in turn, sends a positive message to students—they know we are truly there for them. This is why Harmony started home visits: to create a sense of community with parents. Over time, families began to trust us, recommend us to their friends and relatives, and feel confident sending their children to our schools.”

Caglar: “I remember my first home visit — it was with a student who had been misbehaving. It was not only my first home visit but also Harmony’s first, and coincidentally, it was the student’s birthday. During the visit, his mother and I quickly realized there was a lack of communication. Without directly asking personal questions, I was able to understand more about the student and his situation.

“The visit also helped his mother recognize our cultural differences, and we began working together. After that, the student’s behavior changed — he started seeing me as more than just his math teacher, but also as an ally.

“During that first year, we visited most of our students. Those visits helped us build a family-like environment at school, where teachers and students were more than just classroom figures — we were a supportive community.”

What other roles did you take on besides just being a teacher in those early years?

Coskuner: (Smiling) “I was the first ‘lunch guy’ at Harmony. We served both breakfast and lunch, and I handled lunch service, collected money, prepared reports and kept track of students who qualified for free or reduced-price meals. I quickly learned all the students’ names because I needed to know who they were. In my fourth year, I also worked in finance. Yes, we wore multiple hats.”

Caglar: “Yes, probably a little bit of counseling too. In those early days, there wasn’t much money. We assembled furniture, lockers and desks. Teachers and students helped with painting and all sorts of tasks. I lost count of how many times I went to Sam’s Club to buy copy paper.

“We were young — I was 28 years old — and we had 200 students with maybe 30 teachers. It truly felt like a family environment.

Coskuner: “It was a brand-new school, so there was almost nothing. We had to set up everything — the lockers, the classrooms, the labs and more. We invited parents to help, even though they didn’t always know what they were doing.

“It was the first time parents had seen a school engage them in basic operations. All staff pitched in, and parents were eager to help in any way they could — whether it was painting, assembling furniture, moving items or cleaning.

What were some of the biggest challenges?

Coskuner: “As a teacher, I believe classroom management was the biggest challenge. We knew the content — there was no issue with the math itself — but understanding how things were done here and ensuring students stayed engaged was new to us. We had to learn how to manage the classroom and establish clear rules.

Coskuner: “You need to have consistent classroom rules and keep reinforcing them. Setting up routines was challenging. We initially assumed that students would always pay attention, but we quickly realized we had to present ourselves in a way that captured their interest. Teaching isn’t just about delivering content — you have to sell what you’re teaching.

“It wasn’t as simple as walking in and starting a lesson. I missed that part at first, so it took time to adjust. Like I said, I watched a lot of videos to learn different discipline strategies, how to connect with students, and how to effectively manage a classroom. That was the biggest challenge.”

How has STEM education changed since Harmony first helped pioneer it here in Texas?

Caglar: “Harmony has been a STEM academy from the very beginning. We had Science Olympiad and science fair teams that reinforced the concepts taught in the classroom. Students needed to see the practicality of what they learned — by working on projects, identifying real-world problems, and developing solutions for the public. That made a big impact.

“Computers were also part of the curriculum, but most students had never taken computer classes before attending Harmony. Looking back, I see that we now have more dedicated staff for STEM activities and courses, which has strengthened STEM education even further.”

Coskuner: “Harmony has always been a school of choice, offering a strong STEM program from the beginning. In Texas, students began choosing us over their ISDs (independent school districts). ISDs took notice, especially when our students consistently placed first and second in science fair competitions. They realized they needed to compete with us.

“Although ISDs had more resources, we achieved better results with fewer resources, and our students were proof of that success. Harmony became an example for them — showing how STEM education could be done effectively. ISDs recognized they had to change their approach to teaching STEM or expand their offerings to remain competitive.

“In a positive way, we brought more choices to our communities. Now, ISDs have a model of strong STEM education that operates efficiently with fewer resources. This has raised the bar for all the communities we serve”

Caglar: “I want to share an experience I had while attending an ISD’s gifted and talented (GT) event at one of their magnet schools. What stood out was that what they were doing for their GT students, we were already providing for all students in our mainstream classrooms.

“Harmony believes in STEM for everyone, while many other schools are selective about who gets access to STEM classes. We introduce STEM education as early as kindergarten because we believe it’s for all students, regardless of their background.

“For our elementary students, we have makerspaces that provide hands-on learning opportunities. No matter their ethnic or socioeconomic background, every student has access to these experiences. Then, when they reach high school and college, they can choose whether to continue in STEM or explore other fields.”

What is the most rewarding aspect about your job today?

Coskuner: “Our alumni! Since 2000, we have had so many students. Now, in my district alone, we have more than 50 to 60 staff members who were once Harmony students. Seeing young people return is the most rewarding part — it brings back memories of the good old days.

Caglar: “I would say the same — our alumni are the most rewarding part of this job. In my current department, I have three alumni who are now building schools for Harmony. Our alumni are everywhere — not just in teaching, but in administration, counseling, communications and public relations. It’s incredibly rewarding to see students earn their degrees and then come back to where they came from.”

(Top left) Ramazan Coskuner and Dr. Edward Caglar share stories at the site of the first Harmony Public Schools campus.

(Bottom right) Caglar and Coskuner stand in the school’s former cafeteria.





Growing from the STEM

by Robert Thornton
Curriculum Director
Social Studies, gr. 6-12; Core4 Facilitator

For the past 25 years, Harmony Public Schools has been a nationwide leader in STEM education. See why the school chose STEM as the foundation of its curriculum and how STEM at Harmony has evolved.



The curriculum at Harmony Public Schools isn't just a product of planning — it's a story of vision, innovation and relentless commitment spanning more than two decades. Harmony began with a small group of graduate students offering STEM-focused tutoring to incoming college freshmen who arrived at campus woefully underprepared for the academic leap from public high schools students to college coursework. From those early days, that initial group of tutors imagined — and ultimately developed — something bigger: a school system where students from elementary to high school would be immersed in STEM education and taught by passionate teachers committed to academic excellence.

“Back in 2000, the majority of our founding board members were academics from universities who had seen firsthand the lack of basic math foundation and students coming from right out of high school,” Harmony CEO Fatih Ay said. “They were not ready to take rigorous coursework, so they would end up taking remedial coursework. So that’s why STEM was the main focus.”

During its first decade of growth, HPS focused on identifying impactful teachers, and began creating teacher-led curriculum teams to draft curriculum guides and the first centralized assessments. These laid the foundation for

Harmony’s Curriculum Team

Bottom Row, Left to Right: Zina Hemingway (Fine Arts), Stavroula Rojo (Instructional Programs), Dr. Yen Nguyen (Education Technology & Chemistry), Sakine Toptas (Tech Apps & CTE Computer Science), Halim Sakarya (Science 5-8), Tiffany Ekarius (Math K-5), Dr. Carnita Thomas (Mentorship, PE), Risi Shittu (ELAR PK-2)

Top Row, Left to Right: Lisa Winnett (ELAR 6-12), Robert Thornton (Social Studies 6-12, Core4), Janet Nimer, (Science K-4, STEM K-8), Gurbey Demirturk (Gifted & Talented Programs)

a data-informed, teacher-driven academic model. Thanks to a series of federal grants, and the forward-thinking leadership of the late Dr. Ozgur Ozer, the HPS Academics team found itself immersed in cutting-edge research and innovative practices, integrating them into every layer of its curriculum design and teacher development.

As Harmony grew another decade, so did its vision. Project-based learning became a cornerstone — not just in certain classrooms, but across entire campuses and districts. Centralized assessment data fueled a “Custom-Day” approach, where students received personalized instruction in math and ELAR courses based on their specific strengths and needs.

Over time, Harmony’s Academics team grew to recognize that great instruction starts with great teachers. As Harmony rolled out grant-funded initiatives — such as a new teacher-evaluation program, performance bonuses, expanded teacher leader opportunities, and professional learning communities (PLCs). Harmony supported the rollout by developing aligned curricular resources and training instructional coaches across each district to help teachers implement them effectively.

Today, the Programs and College & Career Departments provide PreK-12 curriculum resources, coaching and training for Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) including principals, deans, counselors, instructional coaches, and teachers on every campus. The Harmony Core4 practices of Lesson Prep, Data-Driven Instruction, Observation Feedback and Practice-Based Professional Learning have guided the latest evolution of its curriculum.

Committed teachers in all subject areas at any grade level at Harmony now have the opportunity to be rewarded through the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA), thanks to curriculum-based Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) and ongoing, job-embedded professional learning guided by the Core4.

Meanwhile, scholars at Harmony Public Schools continue to experience benefits of data-driven, personalized instruction in core subjects like math and ELAR and have access to a growing catalog of courses tailored to their unique interests.

Over time, the academic teams expanded their course catalog to offer STEM programs as early as kindergarten, and dozens of career- and technical education courses to high school students with numerous graduation pathways designed to prepare them for college, careers and beyond.

As Harmony looks forward to the next 25 years of growth, educators and families of Harmony Public Schools can trust that its curriculum and professional development will continue evolving to meet the needs of students and reflect recent trends in education research.



Leading the Charge for Charters

by Lisa Proffit

Long-time Texas charter school advocate David Dunn shares his memories of Harmony Public Schools' early days and how the system became a leader for the charter school movement.

When education advocate David Dunn returned to Texas in 2008 after serving in the George W. Bush administration, he found a charter school landscape full of potential but lacking unity, direction and political support.

Among the scattered charter schools across the state, one network stood out immediately — Harmony Public Schools.

Already the largest charter network in Texas, Harmony had proven it wasn't just a promising start-up; it was a force for educational innovation.

But even Harmony, with all its success, was operating in an unsupportive environment, where charter schools were left to fend for themselves — isolated, underfunded and vulnerable to shifting policies.

That's where Dunn and other early leaders of the Texas public charter school movement stepped in.

Recognizing the need for collective strength, Dunn founded the Texas Charter Schools Association, or TCSA, with a clear mission: to unite charter schools, advocate for fair policies and ensure their long-term success. From day one, he saw Harmony as a crucial pillar of that mission.

"I very much wanted Harmony as a member of the association," Dunn said. "They were already the largest and one of the most effective networks in the state."

Though Harmony was initially cautious due to past experiences with other charter organizations, Dunn's leadership and vision convinced them to join forces. This partnership would prove transformative, not just for Harmony, but for the entire Texas charter school movement.

At the time, Texas faced a critical education crisis in

which dropout rates had remained unacceptably high for decades. State leaders began to look to charter schools as a potential solution; however, without strong advocacy, those schools risked being overlooked or undermined.

Dunn's relationships with policymakers and his expertise in education policy gave charter schools, including Harmony, a seat at the table. Through his efforts.

Charter schools gained expanded access to funding tools, such as the Permanent School Fund Bond Guarantee Program, enabling networks like Harmony to grow responsibly.

Also, the passage of Senate Bill 2 in 2013 raised the cap on charter schools and increased accountability, creating space for high-performing networks like Harmony to thrive.

Finally, the creation of the Quality Framework helped ensure that growth didn't come at the expense of educational excellence.

These policy wins directly empowered Harmony to expand its footprint, refine its STEM-focused model and serve tens of thousands more students across Texas.

Harmony's success had stemmed from its commitment to excellence, perseverance and a clear understanding of Texas' need for STEM-based education. Harmony anticipated demand and delivered, ensuring students — especially from underserved backgrounds — were better prepared for college and careers.

"Harmony perceived the need and filled it," Dunn said. "They've always been one of the most respected and effective charter networks in Texas."

With the TCSA clearing political hurdles and building a supportive environment, Harmony was free to focus on innovation and growth. Between 2008 and 2016, public charter school enrollment in Texas nearly tripled and Harmony was at the forefront of that surge.

Dunn's advocacy laid the groundwork for charter schools to flourish, but it was networks like Harmony that turned opportunity into lasting change. Together, they demonstrated how leadership and educational innovation could transform lives.

One of Dunn's greatest achievements was fostering collaboration among charter schools that once viewed each other as rivals. Harmony emerged as a leader within this united front, earning respect across the state.

For Harmony, being part of this collective voice amplified its impact and safeguarded its mission.

Even after stepping down as TCSA's executive director, Dunn remains an ally of Harmony through his consulting firm, D2 Strategies LLC, continuing to champion policies that enable schools like Harmony to grow.

Reflecting on his journey, Dunn recalls moments that capture Harmony's spirit — like flying a hovercraft with journalist Lesley Stahl or driving a solar-powered car in El Paso. These experiences showcased Harmony's commitment to hands-on, forward-thinking education.

The story of Harmony Public Schools is intertwined with Dunn's advocacy. Together, they transformed a fragmented charter landscape into a thriving movement that delivers high-quality education to those who need it most.

Thanks to Dunn's leadership and Harmony's pursuit of excellence, Texas students today have access to opportunities that once seemed out of reach — and the story is still being written.

As the charter school movement grows, Dunn believes Harmony will remain a leader — refining proven methods and providing more opportunities for Texas children.

"Harmony will continue to lead by example," Dunn said. "They've set the standard for what charter schools can achieve."



THE PRESENT



“The spirit of our organization is that we have a growth mindset. Good enough is never good enough for us.”

Harmony Public Schools
CEO Fatih Ay



TAKING OFF

by Lisa Proffit



Since its founding, Harmony's goal has been to create a pathway for students to live inspiring futures. Meet one HPS alumna who leveraged her STEM learning from Harmony into her dream career with NASA.

When 11-year-old Elisa Rivera set her sights on NASA, her parents set out to find a high school that would fuel her dreams. After researching schools with rigorous academics and a strong STEM focus, the Rivera family found the perfect fit in Harmony Science Academy–El Paso.

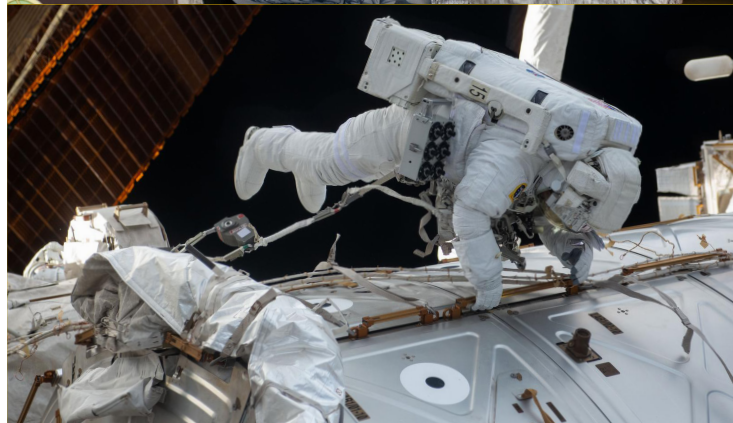
With a vision of becoming an aerospace engineer, Elisa threw herself into every opportunity Harmony had to offer — from STEM clubs and leadership roles to project-based learning experiences. It helped that she attended a school where students had similar interests and aspirations and teachers who helped them discover and embrace them. Students built relationships that lasted beyond graduation. They were “family,” and became an effective cohort to support each other every step of the way.


STEM education was foundational at Harmony from the very start. Ensuring that students had the background needed for STEM career paths was an early priority at all Harmony High School campuses. Now, STEM education starts as early as PreK and Kindergarten with a STEM curriculum that scaffolds and builds from grade to grade.

“I still remember the first time I walked into a Harmony school. After all these years, it still feels like home.”

Harmony founders recognized that there would be a serious gap in people ready for emerging STEM careers if education didn’t take drastic measures in preparing students for STEM degrees. They offered “STEM for All,” making sure that all students had equal access and exposure to STEM classes and clubs. Harmony leaders fortified STEM education with partners such as PLTW (Project Lead The Way), the U.S. Army, Certiport, NASA, and others. These partners support teachers and offer students opportunities in STEM beyond the classroom. Harmony designed a proprietary curriculum based on project-based learning, which is a proven method to engage students in their learning through cross-curricular projects.

Throughout the years, Harmony students have been encouraged to think critically and be innovative. This has resulted in early interests in science, math, robotics, drone navigation, engineering, design, technology, and bio-medical. Harmony students have won state and national awards in STEM competitions such as Cyber Patriots, Technology Student Association (TSA), Vex Robotics, Rec Foundation (Drone), American Rocketry Challenge, Math Counts and so many countless others.





“The journey to my dream job has been overwhelmingly joyful and also has presented great challenge. Both the joyous experiences and challenging opportunities have formed me into the individual I am today. The people that I have met along the way, alongside those who have always been there, have been a constant reminder of my purpose and consistently realign me with myself.”



“At Harmony, we don’t just teach science and math. We teach curiosity, creativity, and the courage to innovate.”

- Levent Sakar, STEM and PBL Director, Harmony Public Schools

All through high school, Elisa connected with professionals in the field and followed their advice to explore, stay curious and stay involved. After graduating, Elisa pursued a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Texas at El Paso. Many of her classmates went on to be mechanical and electrical engineers working at corporations such as General Motors and Exxon.

Elisa didn’t stop there. While in college, she built an impressive résumé through internships, including placements at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center and, ultimately, NASA itself. While at UTEP, Elisa got wind of the Aeronautics and Astronautics program at the University of Purdue. There, she pursued a Master’s degree in aerospace engineering at the renowned institute

Her big break came through the prestigious NASA Pathways Internship Program, which offered her a multi-semester, hands-on experience at Goddard. The program prepared her for a seamless transition into full-time work at NASA, where she continued to contribute while earning both her undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Today, Elisa is living her childhood dream. As an aerospace engineer working on NASA’s Artemis program, she plays a key role in efforts to establish a permanent lunar base and prepare for the first human mission to Mars.

“I still remember the first time I walked into a Harmony school,” Elisa said recently. “Even after all these years, it still feels like coming home.”

Elisa’s inspiring journey has made her a sought-after speaker at Harmony Public Schools events across Texas. Most recently, she delivered a keynote address at Harmony School of Innovation–Katy’s Hard Hat Ceremony, where more than 30 aspiring engineers gathered to hear her story. She also visited Harmony’s teacher training last summer and shared her inspiring message.

Her message to students was clear: “Love what you do and never lose sight of your goals.”

Elisa Rivera’s journey from a curious middle schooler to a pioneering aerospace engineer is a powerful example of Harmony Public Schools’ mission in action — preparing students for college, career and beyond through a caring, collaborative and STEM-focused education.

Creative Curriculum

by Zina Hemingway
Curriculum Director
Fine Arts



Harmony's award-winning STEM curriculum permeates virtually every part of the school's learning experience, from extracurricular activities to its fine arts program and more.

What does it sound like to find your voice for the first time? What does it feel like when you discover a skill that lights up your world — when your heart whispers, “This is what I’m meant to do”?

That moment — when something clicks, when a brush, a melody, a gesture sparks curiosity and confidence — has been the essence of Harmony Public Schools’ Fine Arts program since the beginning. It’s also the cornerstone of emotional well-being and meaningful, cross-disciplinary learning.

Art, music, and theatre are not ancillary to academic success — they’re central to it. Harmony educators often observe that students better retain lessons through sensory experiences. Whether recalling a lesson through a favorite classroom song or visualizing a historical event from a dramatic reenactment, students lean on the arts to process and express what they’ve learned.

Whether through storytelling, movement, or music, human beings first learn by experiencing the world creatively. Before humans learn to read or write, they sing their ABCs. Before they solve for x , they build, draw and imagine.

Arts education is not extracurricular. It is fundamental. Creative learning encourages not only knowledge retention, but also emotional and social growth. These experiences become building blocks for lifelong communication, collaboration, and problem-solving.

Fine Arts, the Harmony Way

Fine Arts courses at Harmony Public Schools are designed with intention and inclusivity. Students explore:

- Respect for an array of cultures and artistic traditions;
- Sophisticated verbal, visual and musical communication;
- Empathy and appreciation for collaborative work;
- Analytical and fine motor skill development;
- Opportunities for joyful, authentic self-expression.

Far from being a supporting character in STEM education, the arts at Harmony Public Schools are a living, breathing testament to the power of well-rounded learning.

Innovation at the Intersection of Art and Technology

Harmony campuses across the state feature makerspaces — dedicated innovation labs where students and teachers across disciplines, including the arts, explore design, build prototypes and create. These spaces foster the same spirit of exploration found in music studios and art rooms.

Harmony also embraces Project-Based Learning (PBL), where student-led projects blend core academic content with real-world application. This approach elevates design thinking and reinforces the idea that creativity drives quality — whether in an art portfolio or a software prototype.

Currently, Harmony’s curriculum writing team is developing new hybrid courses such as Art Onstage and Music Onstage for elementary students. At the high school level, visual arts programs will soon integrate advanced tools such as 3D printers and laser cutters. Importantly, fine arts teachers are provided with professional development in STEM and AI literacy, ensuring they can confidently guide students in producing relevant, high-impact work.

Tailored Programs Rooted in Community

Each fine arts program at Harmony Public Schools is thoughtfully designed to reflect the interests of the campus community. District and campus leaders collaborate with fine arts educators to determine the course offerings that best serve their students. This localized approach allows for a wide variety of programming, including dual credit and AP courses, general education tracks, studio classes, performance ensembles and more.

Looking Ahead: A Vision for Fine Arts

Harmony Public Schools continues to evolve its fine arts curriculum, with alignment to its Core4 practices, Harmony V emotional well-being framework, and the district’s North Star. The future of the arts at Harmony is bright — and deeply rooted in innovation and accessibility.





A Career, A Calling

by Ajdina Selimovic

A recent Harmony retiree, an alumni-turned-principal, and an early career professional share what working for Harmony means to them.

Working at Harmony Public Schools is more than just a job. It means joining a school system that values education, community and the growth of both students and staff. Whether an educator, administrator or support staff member, being part of the Harmony family is a commitment to making a lasting impact on the future of young minds.

“I’ve found nothing but an immense amount of support for my professional growth in education from the people around me — teachers, administrators, district-level personnel and even from students’ parents,” Harmony alumna and principal Elyse Pravel said. “It’s a similar feeling to when I was a student, knowing that the people around me want to see me succeed.”

At the heart of Harmony Public Schools is a dedication to excellence in education. Employees are not just teachers and administrators — they are mentors, role models and advocates for students. Harmony pairs rigorous academic standards with a focus on character development and real-world skills, creating an environment where students and staff are encouraged to excel. Staff members are offered opportunities for growth, collaboration and learning, all while contributing to a culture of mutual respect and shared purpose.

Harmony supports both creative thinking and evidence-

based practices, allowing employees to bring fresh ideas into their classrooms and roles. For staff members, this commitment to innovation offers the chance to be part of something transformative. Working at Harmony means making a difference not only in the classroom but also in shaping the innovative thinkers of tomorrow.

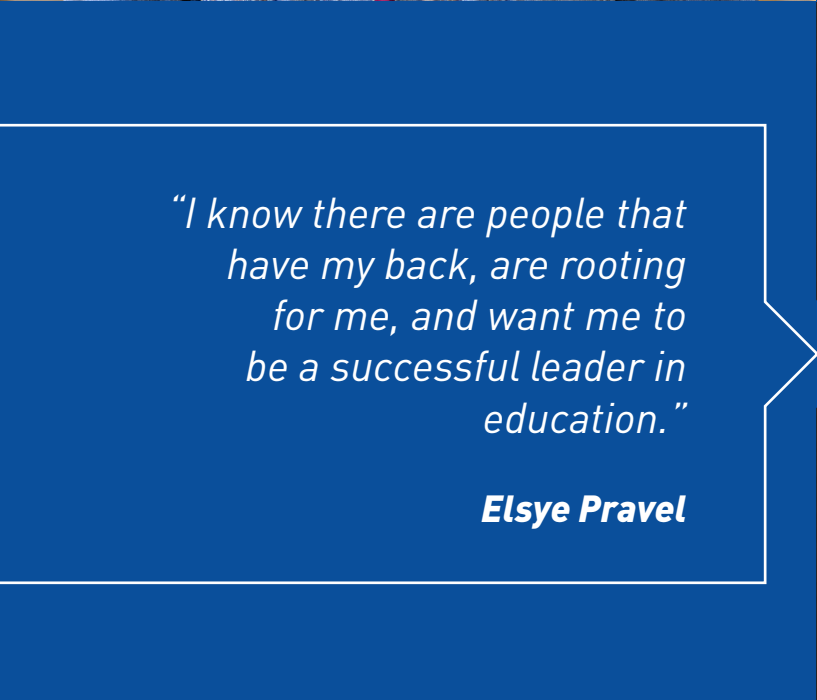
Employees often describe a strong sense of support from their colleagues. Whether it’s the administrative team helping teachers implement new programs or fellow teachers sharing resources and strategies, the Harmony work environment fosters collaboration and mutual respect. This supportive community ensures staff members never feel isolated in their roles. Help is always available — through mentorship, professional development or a friendly conversation in the staff lounge.

Working at Harmony Public Schools is more than joining an educational institution. It’s contributing to a movement that prioritizes excellence, community, diversity and innovation. Being a Harmony employee means committing to student growth and success while having the opportunity to make a lasting impact. The impact staff members make on students — whether through an inspiring lesson, meaningful guidance or a listening ear — is one of the most rewarding aspects of working at Harmony.



"It is easy for me to build relationships with the students as well as other teachers at Harmony."

Yuvia Lopez



"I know there are people that have my back, are rooting for me, and want me to be a successful leader in education."

Elsye Pravel



"I love the ambiance, it's very harmonious and friendly. I would encourage any younger teacher to apply to Harmony."

Marta Ruiz



houston foodbank

CERTIFICATE
Awarded to
George Hardin

32

Houston Foodbank Celebrates 25th Anniversary

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

A Parent and Business Leader's Commitment to Harmony by Susan Campbell

For 25 years, Harmony Public Schools has thrived thanks to the generous support of donors, corporate partners, and community advocates who have invested in its mission to provide high-quality education to students across Texas. From scholarships and mentorship programs to STEM competitions and technology grants, these contributions continue to play a crucial role in shaping the opportunities available to Harmony students.

Business leaders, educators and philanthropic organizations not only provide financial support but also share their time, expertise, and resources — opening doors for students to gain real-world experience, develop career skills, and envision brighter futures. Their involvement helps expand everything from robotics teams to dual-credit college courses, creating a dynamic learning environment that goes beyond the classroom.

These partnerships also empower students to participate in national science fairs, attend leadership conferences, and access state-of-the-art learning tools. At the same time, they are enriching Harmony campuses with internship programs, guest speakers and industry-based learning that bring the curriculum to life.

One such supporter has personal ties to Harmony. Melissa Amoros is not only an esteemed North Texas businesswoman — CEO and founder of Krasamo Inc., advisory board member, and Business Women's Council board member — she is also a Harmony parent. It has become her mission to inspire and equip students with the tools they need to succeed in an ever-evolving world.

"My involvement with Harmony Public Schools began as a parent looking for the best educational opportunities for my daughter," Amoros said. "A friend introduced me to Harmony, and I was immediately drawn to its strong emphasis on STEM education. As an engineer, I know firsthand how critical a solid foundation in science and technology is for the future."

What started as a search for quality education soon became a deep connection with Harmony's mission. She was inspired by other businesswomen supporting students — particularly through sponsorships that allowed young girls to attend the Go for the Greens Conference, which connects women in businesses with corporations, government agencies and nonprofits to encourage them to do business together in a safe and comfortable annual conference setting. There, she saw firsthand the impact of early exposure to professional opportunities.

"Witnessing these initiatives reinforced my belief in the importance of connecting students with real-world experiences," she said.

Making an Impact: The Importance of Representation and Mentorship

Amoros firmly believes that a school's success depends on active parent and community involvement.

"You cannot be what you cannot see," she emphasized. "Students need real-world examples of what they can achieve. By sharing my journey as an engineer and business owner, I hope to inspire them to see the endless possibilities for their futures."

For Amoros, the most rewarding part is seeing the spark of curiosity ignite in students when they ask about careers in engineering and business.

"It's about planting seeds of possibility," she said. "Encouraging students to explore their unique interests and hone specialized skills will prepare them for careers in a world that is becoming increasingly specialized. As the saying goes, 'There are riches in niches.'"

Why Hands-On Learning and Exposure Matter

Among the many initiatives she has supported, Amoros finds the most meaning in exposing students to hands-on learning experiences.

"Many professionals can trace their careers back to an early defining moment — a doctor who remembers dissecting a frog in biology class or a pilot whose passion for aviation was sparked by flying drones in fifth grade," she said. "These moments matter. They shape career aspirations and open doors students may not have considered otherwise."

She added that, by fostering mentorship opportunities, industry exposure, and hands-on education, Harmony equips students to dream, explore and innovate.

"Education is a collective responsibility, and we all have a role to play," she said. "Through time, mentorship or financial support, investing in students today means shaping the leaders, innovators, and problem-solvers of tomorrow."

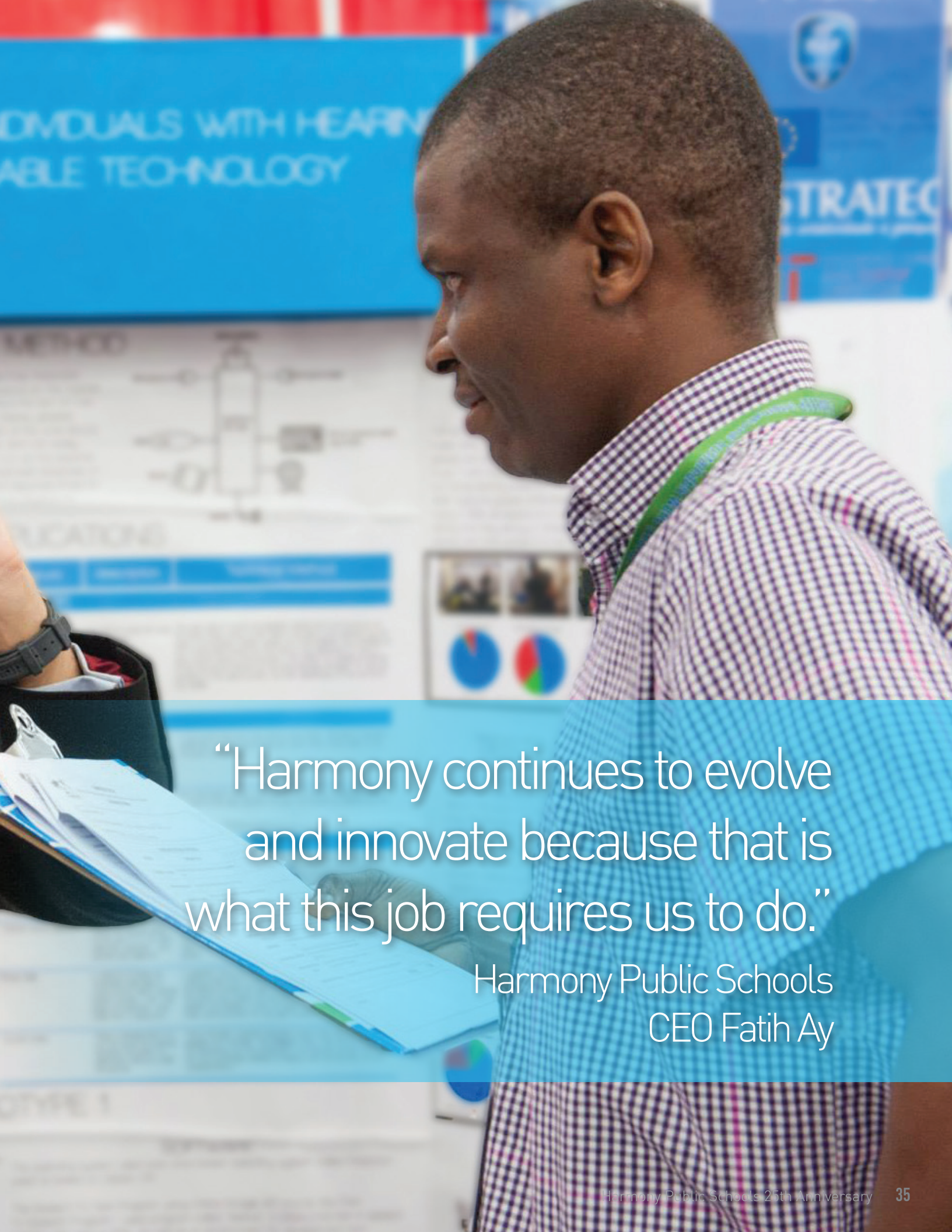
With current dialogues regarding changes in education policy and funding, she believes local communities must step up to bridge the gaps.

"The more we invest in educational initiatives, the greater the impact — not just for individual students but for society as a whole," she said. "Even small contributions matter. A single conversation, an hour of mentorship, or a sponsorship can change the trajectory of a student's life."

At Harmony Public Schools, that investment is already happening. Every mentor, donor and volunteer who contributes — like Amoros — is helping build a more equitable and empowered educational experience right now. Their support is not just shaping the future; it's actively transforming lives today.

THE FUTURE





“Harmony continues to evolve and innovate because that is what this job requires us to do.”

Harmony Public Schools
CEO Fatih Ay

THREE SIBLINGS, ONE MISSION

Sibling Trio Makes Harmony Their Life's Work by Ajdina Selimovic

For Amra, Mehmed and Amer, education wasn't just a stepping stone — coming to America from Bosnia at a young age together, it became their shared passion. As former students of Harmony Public Schools, the three siblings now walk the halls not as students but as educators and leaders, shaping Harmony and the next generation of learners.

Mehmed, a 2008 graduate of Harmony Science Academy-Braeswood, now serves as the director of construction at Harmony Central Office. Amra, who graduated from HSA-Braeswood in 2010, teaches kindergarten at Harmony School of Excellence-Elementary. Amer, who graduated from HSA-Houston in 2011, works as an IT specialist and technology teacher at Harmony School of Excellence-Houston Middle.

Their journey started years ago as young students navigating their way through classrooms filled with curiosity and ambition. Each of them carried a unique experience that now influences how they serve their students today.

"I make sure to do things in my classroom that weren't done when I was a student," Amra said, now an educator at her alma mater. She remembers the value of home visits and the push to finish school but also recognizes that today's students have even more resources than she did. As Harmony grew over the years, so did the resources — and Amra's ability to give more to the next generation of scholars and citizens.

For Mehmed, it was about creating a safe environment — one where students feel they had everything they needed in the building where they received their education. His time at Harmony helped him find his place and a sense of

belonging is what he now strives to provide for others.

Amer, on the other hand, has always been drawn to STEM. He sees how Harmony has evolved, offering more STEM opportunities than ever before, which he wants to continue to be a part of in the future.

As the years passed, Harmony Public Schools grew — not just in size but in opportunity. Classrooms expanded, extracurricular activities flourished and the buildings themselves transformed.

"The structure of the schools has changed so much," Mehmed said. When asked why he chose to pursue his architecture career at Harmony, he confidently shares, "I had a great mentor in the construction department, and they saw value in me."

Amra echoes a similar sentiment. "I completed student teaching at many different schools and districts, but I never felt at home. During my final year of student teaching at Harmony, I felt like I belonged — like I was back at home."

But beyond their individual roles, one thing remains constant — the bond they share as siblings working toward the same mission.

"They help me with input," Amra said.

Added Amer: "I love surprising them if I'm near their campus."

For students considering a professional future at Harmony, their message is clear.

"Go for it," Amra said.

"You have nothing to lose," Amer said.

Each day, as they step into their roles — as teacher, mentor and innovator — the siblings prove that Harmony isn't just where they learned. It's where they belong.



Above, L to R: Amer, Amra and Mehmed as children

Left, L to R: Mehmed, Amra and Amer today



Mehmed is at the forefront of determining what the Harmony learning spaces of tomorrow will look like and how they will adapt to meet students' needs.

Amra spends her days cultivating the next generation of young learners in her kindergarten classroom.



Amer is leading Harmony into the next wave of STEM each day in his information technology courses.



The New Class

by Ajdina Selimovic

Meet one of Harmony's many past graduates who are now helping lead the organization into its future as the new class of today's leaders.

Nihad Alibegovic's Harmony story is one of full-circle success, dedication and a deep commitment to the educational community that helped shape him.

A proud graduate of Harmony Public Schools in 2008, Alibegovic has returned as a key player in Harmony's financial operations as the Central Office director of financial reporting. This key role manages accounts payable and prepares Harmony for future audits, ensuring that all financial operations are conducted ethically, effectively and efficiently.

Alibegovic's path with Harmony began more than 15 years ago. After graduating in 2008, he pursued a degree in finance at the University of Houston, where he earned his degree in 2012. His first step into the professional world with Harmony came in 2010 as an intern. He also went on to receive his master's degree in finance in 2016. Over the years, Alibegovic's career blossomed, and he now serves as the director of financial reporting at Harmony Public Schools.

"I started as an intern, and now I'm overseeing the financial operations for the entire network," Alibegovic said. "It's been an incredible journey. I've seen how much the organization has grown, and I'm proud to be part of that growth."

Alibegovic is just one of more than 350 former Harmony students who are currently helping to pave the path forward for the school system as HPS employees. Emre Altun, Harmony's chief human resources officer, said that former students make ideal Harmony employees because they have an innate understanding of Harmony's mission and culture.

"We take great pride in seeing our alumni return as employees, and bringing their journeys full circle," Altun said. "Alumni employees bring a unique perspective to Harmony, having once walked the same hallways as their students. Their deep understanding of our culture, values and mission makes them powerful role models and advocates for our community."

To tap into the power of its alumni base, Harmony has implemented a number of programs to attract and retain alumni employees, such as Grow Your Own Teacher which provides HPS alumni with up to \$20,000 in college tuition

reimbursement if they return to Harmony to teach after finishing college.

"By investing in the next generation of scholars, our alumni employees embody the spirit of service and excellence that defines Harmony Public Schools," Altun said.

Alibegovic's decision to come back was initiated by a simple phone call.

"I received a call asking if I would be interested in taking on a finance internship at Harmony," he said. "I thought, why not? It's an opportunity to give back and continue contributing to an institution that played such an important role in my life."

Since returning, Alibegovic has found his work incredibly fulfilling. He credits much of his success and satisfaction to the behind-the-scenes role he plays.

One of the most fulfilling parts of working at Harmony, according to Alibegovic, is the impact of the work that happens out of sight.

"A lot of students don't realize how much work goes on behind the scenes to keep things running," he said. "From managing finances to ensuring compliance with regulations, a lot of effort is required to provide the quality education they receive."

For Alibegovic, his experience as an alumnus deeply shapes his approach to his role.

"Harmony gave me so much, and now I'm in a position to give back. Seeing how much the schools have grown and continue to grow is incredibly rewarding," he says. "It's about making a positive impact on the next generation, just as I was impacted."

He also speaks highly of Harmony's ability to adapt to an ever-changing educational landscape.

"One thing that's remained constant is the community focus. They're great at staying connected with families and maintaining that personal touch. Harmony's culture of home visits and close ties with the community has always been a core strength, and that's something that hasn't changed."

As Harmony Public Schools continue to evolve, Alibegovic remains committed to its overall mission.

"We've come a long way, but there's still so much to do," he said. "I'm excited for what the future holds — both for me personally and for Harmony as a whole."

Always Innovating

by Lisa Proffit

Harmony is using artificial intelligence and other advanced tools as a playground for new ideas to build a bright and exciting future.

In a world where technology evolves at lightning speed, education can no longer afford to follow — it must lead. The rise of artificial intelligence is transforming how schools operate, how teachers teach and how students learn.

At Harmony Public Schools, leaders understand that keeping pace with developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) isn't just about staying innovative — it's about preparing both students and employees to thrive in a future where change is constant.

"With AI, our teachers can focus more on what matters most — building relationships and guiding students — while the technology takes over repetitive tasks," said Dr. Damon Polat, Harmony's executive director of institutional research and development.

Polat was chosen to help ignite Harmony's AI journey in 2022 as the school system looked for new ways to improve student achievement following the COVID pandemic.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, teachers across the globe faced mounting pressures, battling burnout while striving to bridge learning gaps. In that critical time, AI proved itself to be more than just an industry buzzword at Harmony, but rather an opportunity to provide new, focused resources to its schools and students.

During this time, Polat and others assembled a pioneering task force to explore educational innovation, decode AI's potential and plan for a smarter, more adaptive learning ecosystem.

The team discovered that AI wasn't just a helper — it was a game-changer:

- Revolutionizing instructional practices
- Empowering teachers and students to achieve more
- Delivering hyper-personalized learning at scale
- Accelerating knowledge mastery like never before

This top-down strategy allowed Harmony's leadership to

model AI integration firsthand. C-suite executives embraced platforms such as ChatGPT, gaining experience with tools they would later scale across departments.

"This will allow our teachers to better focus on building relationships and making sure every student is able to reach their true potential," CEO Fatih Ay said.

Generative AI Unleashes Creativity Across Campuses

Now in 2025, Harmony has moved beyond simply using AI as a content delivery tool. The focus has shifted towards empowering students to become active creators and shapers of their own learning experiences through innovative applications of Generative AI. Platforms like MagicSchool have become dynamic environments where students configure AI tools to meet their specific learning needs in subjects like math and reading.

Led by Director of Educational Technology Dr. Yen Hoang Le Nguyen, 65 trailblazing Harmony teachers assembled a committee to further explore AI's potential for students. This initiative empowered students to take ownership of their learning by adjusting parameters within teacher-created AI tools — customizing prompts, selecting resources and tailoring feedback mechanisms.

This led to a groundbreaking new development: learning rooms. Within MagicSchool, students gained the ability to integrate various AI tools into personalized learning spaces centered around a customizable chatbot.

Imagine a student creating a math support room with a chatbot for problem-solving, a tool for generating visual representations of concepts, and a feedback mechanism tailored to their specific error patterns. For writing projects, students also designed chatbot-hosted creative writing rooms for brainstorming, and tools for stylistic suggestions, and an image generator for visualizing their narratives.

Left to Right:
Dr. Yen Hoang Le Nguyen
Dr. Damon Polat
Dr. Sadik Bulut



This shift towards student-driven configuration and the creation of personalized learning rooms engaged more than 2,000 students, allowing them to actively participate in designing their learning journeys. This approach fostered deeper understanding while leading to a more profound connection to the learning material.

“Our focus isn’t just on the tools themselves,” Nguyen said, “but on cultivating the skills and understanding needed to create AI-powered environments that truly serve individual learning needs, empowering students to become the architects of their own learning.”

Building on the success of student-driven learning environments, Harmony is also pioneering innovative ways to enhance parent engagement through AI. The development of “parent rooms” is currently underway. These rooms will allow teachers to seamlessly provide classroom news, upcoming learning content and curriculum resources directly relevant to specific subjects.

This will provide parents with unprecedented access to what their children are learning, empowering them to actively support their students’ engagement and understanding at home.

To accelerate Harmony’s AI initiative, Dr. Sadik Bulut joined the mission in Spring 2025. With a doctorate in educational technology and a postgraduate specialization in AI and machine learning, Bulut is leading Harmony toward a paradigm where AI redefines every aspect of K-12 education.

“AI is not just another new technology, but a truly disruptive force on par with only two other transformations in modern history: electricity and the internet,” Bulut said.

AI also is now streamlining operations, providing personalized support and allowing teachers to focus on mentorship and inspiration.

AI, advanced automations and boosted intelligence are also central to Harmony’s newest venture, Perla. Built on the Salesforce platform, the Harmony-designed Perla ecosystem will consolidate many of the disparate and disconnected software platforms previously used by Harmony and bring them into one, easy-to-use environment. This interconnected system will allow improved understanding of data from across departments to help schools and administrators better understand all that takes place within Harmony.

“We’re not just teaching with AI. We’re empowering students and staff to become designers of their own AI experiences.”

The initiative reflects Harmony’s commitment to fostering a strong partnership between school and home, recognizing that collaborative engagement is crucial for student success.

“While the current AI landscape in education can often feel like a vast, overwhelming collection of disparate tools,” Nguyen said, “at Harmony, our approach is fundamentally different. We’re not just teaching with AI. We’re empowering staff and students to become designers of their own AI experiences.”

“By putting students in the driver’s seat to configure their learning tools and personalized learning spaces, we’re unlocking a level of targeted engagement and ownership we’ve never seen before.”

In doing so, Perla will allow Harmony to streamline operations, while transforming campuses into connected, insight-driven learning ecosystems.

“AI is expanding, and AI is making our jobs easier,” Ay said. “We are looking at AI as an opportunity to boost productivity in the workplace. The goal is not to eliminate positions, but to make sure we deliver more, with more resources, thanks to what AI is able to produce.”

As Harmony Public Schools stands on the brink of a new educational era, it is not merely adapting to AI — it is shaping it.

Harmony remains committed to a world where AI enhances human connection, unlocks potential and prepares students for a future yet to be imagined.



AN INSPIRING FUTURE

HARMONY at 50

To conclude our look back at the first 25 years of Harmony Public Schools, we asked some of the people you've met throughout the pages of this publication to take a look ahead. See some of their predictions for what Harmony will look like over the course of the next 25 years.

What will the legacy of Harmony Public Schools be in another 25 years?

"Our students — and ultimately, our alumni — are our greatest end product. From day one, our goal has been clear: to prepare individuals who are ready for college, career and life. So when we see our alumni achieving that—taking on exciting roles, becoming lawyers and doctors, or even returning to Harmony as part of our workforce—it's a powerful affirmation of our mission. That, to me, is true success. Ultimately, seeing students reach their true potential is going to be Harmony's legacy."

– Fatih Ay, Harmony CEO

What will the legacy of Harmony's founding members be in another 25 years?

"In another 25 years, the legacy of Harmony's founding fathers will likely be defined by their bold vision and unwavering commitment to educational equity and innovation. They will be remembered as pioneers who reimagined public education bringing STEM-focused, college-preparatory learning to underserved communities, and creating opportunities where few existed. Their efforts to blend high academic standards with character development and community engagement will continue to shape generations of students. The schools they built will stand as a testament to how a small group of dedicated individuals can transform lives and communities through education. Ultimately, their legacy will not just be in the campuses or programs they started, but in the thousands of students who succeeded because of them — and who, in turn, will help lead the future."

– Dr. Edward Caglar, Executive Director of Expansion and Construction

How do you feel our curriculum will evolve over the next 25 years?

"I think our curriculum will continue to shift towards the student. I envision a future where students have a greater voice in how they learn and teachers are less responsible for disseminating content to students via direct instruction. Instead, I see a future where teachers support student interactions via inquiry-based learning experiences."

– Robert Thornton, Social Studies Curriculum Director

"I believe Harmony's Fine Arts curriculum will evolve as Harmony communities grow and technology continues to evolve over the next 25 years. We hope to evolve by dramatically increasing the number of Fine Arts opportunities and Fine Arts courses available for PK-12 HPS students; increasing the tech resources provided/available to Fine Arts students and teachers; designing, building, and maintaining dedicated HPS facilities for performance and visual arts; increasing funding to provide students and teachers the supplies they need; and hiring more teachers to support innovative STEM-rich art, music, and theatre programs."

– Zina Hemingway, Fine Arts Curriculum Director

What impact will attending and enrolling at Harmony have on your future career in another 25 years?

"Attending Harmony Public Schools laid the foundation for the person and professional I am today. As a student, I was surrounded by educators who genuinely cared and pushed me to aim higher. I gained not only academic skills, but also confidence, discipline and a strong sense of community. Looking ahead another 25 years, I know the experiences I've had here — as both a student and staff member — will continue to influence my path. Harmony has given me a sense of purpose, a deep appreciation for education, and the opportunity to make a lasting impact. It's more than just a workplace — it's where my story began, and where I hope to keep making a difference for years to come."

– Nihad Alibegovic, Director of Finance Reporting

What impact will the education you received at Harmony still have on you in another 25 years?

"In 25 years from now Harmony will still be a familiar home. The culture instilled in me from the close-knit educational community is one that lingers in my being. I have a deep appreciation for small group-focused learning settings because that was my experience at Harmony. It allowed me to preserve my innocence and youth while gaining the perspective of the world with the international travel that I took, all while also teaching me how many exciting STEM-based activities are available. The love of science, the love of learning and the love of being in a community will always move with me. And it all started there."

– Elisa Rivera, Harmony alum



Harmony Public Schools
1255 Enclave Pkwy., Houston, TX 77077
713-343-3333 | HarmonyTX.org