



Thomas C. Cario Middle School
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Media Release

Cario Student Wins Essay Contest

Thomas C. Cario Middle School is proud to celebrate a standout achievement: one of its own won the Fleet Reserve Association Branch 269 Essay Contest. Adrian Phan earned first place in his grade (eighth grade) and was recognized at a dinner on February 19, 2026, where he received a \$200 prize.

Fleet Reserve Association Branch 269 is a non-profit community of military sea services located in Goose Creek, SC. The branch is open to active-duty, retired, and honorably discharged members of the US Navy, US Marine Corps & US Coast Guard. Auxiliary Unit 269 is open to families of the branch members. The essay contest is an annual effort honoring patriotism. This year's essay theme was "America at 250 Years: What Does It Mean to Me?"

"America's history isn't done; it's still being written," Phan writes in his essay. "That inspires me to think about my role in our country's history. I may be just one person, but my actions, such as how I treat others and how I use my voice, are part of what will shape the next 250 years."

Phan not only won the local contest but also first place at the regionals, which included all the essays submitted from five different states. His essay is included below.

Phan's Essay

America at 250 years: What Does it mean to Me?

Being a citizen in America after 250 years of freedom means everything to me. This milestone is especially important because I would not be alive without this freedom. My father is South Vietnamese, and his family sailed across the ocean to be free in America after enduring many hardships and challenges.

With the Vietnam War at its peak, Vietnam was not going to be a free country like us and was close to being overtaken by communist North Vietnam and China. My father's family did not want their rights and freedom taken away. All 50 of them, including his parents, seven siblings, and extended family, packed their belongings. In the middle of the night, they secretly left Vietnam on my grandfather's fishing boat and sailed away from their home.

They got caught in storms, treacherous waters, and their boat only had a little amount of gas. They were tired, hungry, scared, and were losing hope. Fortunately, the American Navy spotted their run-down fishing boat and took them to safety. The Navy ship initially landed in Hawaii, and then they were taken to a refugee camp in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. They were finally free, but they continued to face obstacles as they had to learn a new language, lifestyle, and work towards becoming American citizens. With the help of churches and refugee organizations, my family was able to adapt and embrace American culture. My father is the youngest child and the only one who was born in America. He got married, had kids, including me, and lived a normal American life where he did not have to worry about his freedom being taken away.

As you can tell, this is why being a free American citizen is so important to me. My family is forever grateful for our opportunities and freedom. Sharing this eventful story with future generations gives me motivation to continue working hard and celebrate this country's freedom.

About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves approximately 51,000 students in 90 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse portfolio of educational options and specialized programs delivered to the students of CCSD through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools and programs. Rich educational opportunities for students include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; military; dual credit; and many more.

