

THE CONNECTOR

A weekly publication of Harris County Department of Education for the HCDE Board of Trustees

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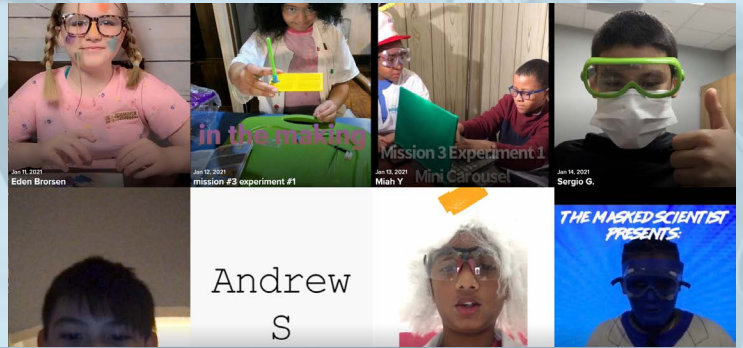
GLOBAL IMPACT

TOP STORIES

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Of Note...



HCDE's afterschool division, CASE, directly administers two programs: the All Earth Ecobot Challenge and CASE Debates. Both of these programs have quickly risen in popularity with students and teachers alike. CASE's other programs are brokered to partnering afterschool providers around the greater Houston region. Ecobot is run by CASE staff and each year, hundreds of students converge on the Berry Center to showcase their STEM skills. It is so cool to watch the kids create robots and then have them duke it out in a large tournament as they exhibit their knowledge of mechanics, chemistry, physics and engineering. The complexity, design and functionality of the robots these youngsters make is just astounding! This year the competition has moved to the virtual realm and despite the isolation of COVID and lack of in-person team collaboration, the students have created amazingly impressive robots. Be sure to check out the video of students demonstrating their robotic skills inside this issue.

I am proud that HCDE, through CASE, has a hand in helping to shape the future of thousands of students in the region by exposing them to activities and ideas while keeping them safe during afterschool hours and in the summer.

I started the week with my Executive Leadership Team on Monday and Leadership Team on Tuesday. On Wednesday, ELT reviewed the results of our recent employee survey through Energage. This survey, designed to assess the culture and climate of the organization, is administered as part of the Top Workplace activity and serves as the basis for our ranking (13 this year!). It is also the reason why HCDE was named the large organization with the most improved results, as the sentiment of the feedback given by employees was predominantly positive. However, as with all things, there is room for improvement and ELT took a deep dive into these areas on Wednesday, discussing specific topics and emerging trends. I have directed each ELT member to review the results with his/her division(s) and ensure every employee knows we take their feedback seriously and listen to the concerns and praises they voice.

On Thursday we held our agenda review in preparation for our board meeting later this month. I am looking forward to seeing you several times in the coming weeks: at the special meeting with our architects to review plans for new buildings, the board retreat on Feb. 19 (more info to come), Equine Center Work Session, regular board meeting and potential PFC meetings. February is certainly shaping up to be a very busy month for all of us!

Today I was at my NPO office and met with several staff members to discuss ongoing projects. Things are moving along at a fast clip in HCDE and it is exciting to see how our divisions continue to grow and innovate to meet the needs of public education in the county.

I hope the warm spell continues through the weekend so everyone can enjoy a quick respite from our traditionally cold February weather.

PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

35th Annual Early Childhood Winter Conference Draws Record Participants

Over 1,200 educators from around the world logged onto their computers last Saturday, anxiously awaiting the start of the 35th annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Conference – this time taking place in an all-virtual setting.



As attendees patiently waited, some participants eagerly greeted old friends in the chat window and others introduced themselves for the first time.

“Good morning from Minnesota! Temp is 27, real feel 17... hoping to get some Texas warmth today!” one participant exclaimed.

HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. got things started, injecting gravitas into the day’s events.

“I think public servants have been called to task more so this year than ever before,” said Colbert. “It’s symbolic that this is probably the largest conference we’ve had in the years that we’ve done this, and we’re doing it remotely. I’m impressed with the turnout.”

Grounding the conference in our new virtual reality, Colbert urged attendees to find new ways to meet the needs of our students, regardless of the setting.

“I want you to utilize today to find ways to continue to work towards mastery of your craft,” said Colbert. “I want you to think about how we can adapt our profession to be able



to assist students even while they sit at home and their parents are worried about their safety until we get out of these unstable times that we are in right now.”

As part of the Department’s commitment to providing a quality professional development opportunity to educators, the event kicked off with morning keynote speakers Eric Litwin and Dr. Gina Pepin. They spoke about immersive, joyful reading techniques that can be applied in the classroom.

Throughout their keynote address, Pepin and Litwin encouraged discussion among participants in the Zoom “conference room,” a unique advantage of hosting a conference virtually.

Afternoon keynote speaker Dr. Kenneth Wesson, a consultant and child neuroscience expert, provided insights into how young brains work.

By the end of the day, 1,213 participants from as close as Houston and far away as Bangladesh had the opportunity to attend 62 different sessions throughout the day.

As the conference came to a close on Saturday afternoon, HCDE director of special projects for the Teaching and Learning Center Andrea Segraves, who oversees this annual event, addressed participants of the well-attended event on the future of the conference and reassured them that a virtual component.

“We will always keep a virtual component,” she said. “We want to make the resources offered in this annual conference as widely available as possible to all educators, no matter where they reside. We are excited to see what next year’s conference will look like.”

PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

Elementary Students Create Unique Science Videos for 2021 Ecobot Challenge

Eighty elementary students from across Harris county are participating in this year's Ecobot Challenge, called "All Earth Anywhere," which has been adapted for an all-virtual environment.

This year's challenge provides students with inclusive, online project-based "missions" in eco-friendly STEM, chemistry, physics, and robotics. Students engage in a virtual training session, two virtual meet-up sessions, and a virtual wrap-up session, all on Zoom during each mission. Students compete for points and prizes.

"Because of Covid-19, we had to find a way to keep the Ecobot Challenge going," said Tracie Scales, CASE for Kids coordinator for the event. "It was important for us to continue challenging our students in a way that would keep them engaged virtually.

After completing the experiments from each mission, students submit videos documenting their progress to Flipgrid, a video response platform where educators and

students can have online discussions.

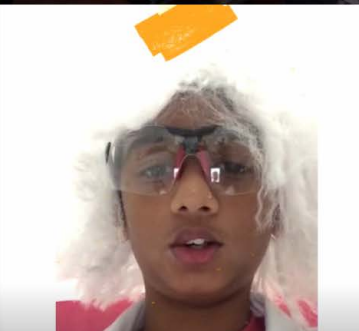
"This year, it was also about getting their families involved so you'll see many of the videos include students' parents or siblings," said Scales.

To date, the videos submitted to Flipgrid have yielded 13,655 views, 908 comments, and over 180 hours of science-based student engagement.

To view some of the 110 videos that have been submitted, visit flipgrid.com/+paneitz0089.

Students are currently working on the fourth mission of the challenge, ChemSTEM, which challenges students to use chemistry to filter dirty water.

The challenge began on November 6, 2020, and will culminate on February 20, 2021, with a virtual awards ceremony.



EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

Veteran Teacher Delights in Students' Success

"Oh, I love to swim!" exclaimed Fortis Academy science teacher Lopamudra Gupta. "I think I used to be pretty good. I was on the cover of sports magazines."

A Harris County Department of Education employee for nearly 18 years, Gupta first started working for the Department as a teacher at the former High Point School North before it was reimaged into what is now Fortis Academy.

"I was a competitive swimmer and I represented my state, [West Bengal, India], in the national games," said Gupta. "I do have a competitive nature. Not in the sense that I would compete with somebody in a negative way, but for myself. I want to always do better than what I did before, and I think I bring that to teaching. I always want to do more for the kids."

Her supervisor, Fortis Academy Principal Anthony Moten couldn't agree more.

"She's an exceptional teacher," he said. "She has an uncanny ability to connect with our kids and get them engaged in science. That's a yeoman's task, even with exceptional young students. For her to be able to have our kids gravitate towards that content and excel in it says a lot about her."

Gupta emphasizes that her love of teaching isn't so much about the subject matter as it is about how much she loves her students.

"It's not just about teaching science, it's about opening their minds," she said. "It's not that they cannot, it's that no one has taken the time to show them the possibilities. Sometimes their family settings are not conducive to learning. Sometimes things happen at home, and I have to understand that biology is not the priority for them in that moment."

Moten describes Gupta as the "quintessential mother on campus" who shies away from attention.

"She could be our teacher of the year, but she doesn't want it. She doesn't want the attention," said Moten. "She's not in it for that. She's very unselfish. She's truly here for the kids."

As a testimony to her efforts, Gupta saw six of her students graduate in the midst of the pandemic last year.

"I was so ecstatic!" she exclaimed. "If they were at a traditional school, they might have dropped out. We drove all over the city to all of their homes to do drive-by graduations. Watching them celebrate made my heart sing."

Moten, to whom Gupta credits much of her success, is determined to recognize her contributions at the school.

"When she leaves, I'm going to name a hallway after her," Moten jokes. "She's not only a one-of-a-kind person, she's the hallmark of what an exceptional teacher looks like."



IN THE NEWS

HCDE Recognizes Achievements of Prominent Houstonians During Black History Month

This February marks the 95th year of the official celebration of Black History Month.

Every day throughout this month, HCDE will pay tribute to African Americans from Harris County by recognizing their achievements on our Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts.

During the first week of February, we highlighted the accomplishments of dancer and actress Debbie Allen, music teacher Conrad Johnson, former NFL player Moran Norris and Prairie View A&M University President Ruth Simmons. On Monday, we will recognize gospel legend Yolanda Adams.

Follow our social media feeds and be a part of the conversation using the hashtag #BlackHistoryMonth.

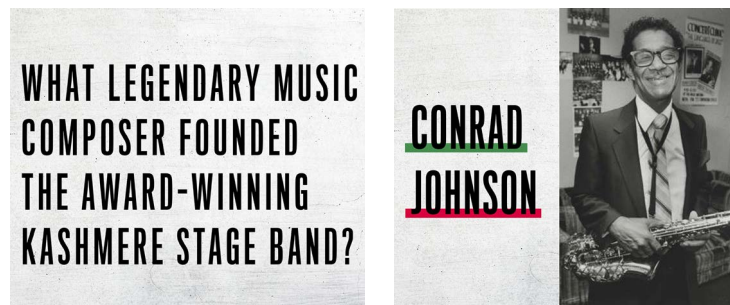


RUTH SIMMONS,
a Wheatley grad, became the
first African-American president of an
Ivy League institution (Brown University 2001-2012).

Harris County
Department of
Education

CELEBRATING
BLACK HISTORY MONTH
FEBRUARY 2021

Facebook and Twitter



WHAT LEGENDARY MUSIC
COMPOSER FOUNDED
THE AWARD-WINNING
KASHMERE STAGE BAND?

**CONRAD
JOHNSON**

Instagram Story

BOARD BRIEFS



RICHARD CANTU
HCDE BOARD TRUSTEE

Trustee Richard Cantu uses his passion for public service to revitalize communities and support education so everyone has an opportunity to reach their full potential.



DAVID W. BROWN
HCDE BOARD TRUSTEE

Trustee David W. Brown encourages the youth in his community to follow their dreams and works diligently to provide them the resources to make the world a better place

SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week, the following Board expectations were met:

**Superintendent Objective B:
Organization Morale**

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.

**Superintendent Objective D:
Community Relations**

- Establishes and maintains a program of public relations to keep the public well-informed of the activities of the Department, affecting a wholesome and cooperative working relationship between the Department and community.



This week we recognize veteran teacher Lopamudra Gupta. Gupta's dedication to her students at Fortis Academy has had a real impact on their lives. She shows them what is possible and encourages them to be the best they can be.



Finally, we are celebrating Black History Month with daily posts highlighting notable African-Americans from Harris County on our social media channels.

HCDE BOARD

Board President

Eric Dick

Vice President

Danny Norris

Board Members

David W. Brown

Richard Cantu

Erica Davis

Andrea Duhon

Amy Hinojosa

UPCOMING EVENTS:

WORKSHOPS

(Online Only)

Feb. 10

Board Workshop
Architect Plan Review
11:30 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Feb. 19

Board Retreat
9 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Feb 22

Equine Therapy Center
Development Workshop
11:30 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Feb 24

Regular Board Meeting
1 p.m.

Last Saturday it was my pleasure to virtually welcome attendees from around the world to the 35th annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference. It was heartening to see more than 1200 people from nearly 20 countries gather to learn and share ideas about strategies to teach our youngest students. Another virtual success this week was the EcoBot Challenge. More than 100 students in the afterschool program shared videos of their latest module that you can see in a mash-up put together by one of our partners. There is no doubt that the virtual world is here to stay and we are excited by all the possibilities.

