

THE CONNECTOR

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

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VOLUME 6 ISSUE 5

SOLID FOUNDATIONS

TOP STORIES

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Of Note...



This week was one for the books in HCDE: we received an exemplary AAA rating from Moody's Investors for our bonds. Triple A is the highest rating an organization can achieve. It is like having an 850 credit score.

This is an amazing achievement when you factor in that we are in the middle of a pandemic and corporations are posting massive revenue losses and laying off employees. But HCDE's projections are strong for the future.

As part of the rating process, Dr. Amezcua and I spoke with Moody's representatives at length in an "interview-style" discussion. We explained HCDE's primary business model and our projected revenue. When the investors heard that contracts with our primary revenue divisions, Therapy Services and Schools, held steady this year, they were very impressed. They discussed that this feat was even more astonishing as districts were renewing contracts in the middle of a pandemic without knowing if schools would open in August.

The PFC rating also increased one level to Aa1 for our maintenance bonds. These ratings are a testament to the high-quality services HCDE provides and showcases our strong business model truly is. Dr. Amezcua and his team are huge assets to HCDE and continue to showcase HCDE as the financial standard to which other organizations aspire.

This week we continued with our employee celebration of Breast Cancer Awareness month. It was fun to see employees dress up in camouflage to "fight cancer" last week, with many showing off the camo masks HCDE provided to employees. Those are my personal favorites! Today we "socked it to cancer" with crazy socks, which was cool to see too.

I started the week with my ELT on Monday, followed by standing meetings. On Tuesday I met with the entire Leadership Team and met with several staff for more internal meetings. On Thursday we held agenda review in preparation for the October 21 board meeting and I also welcomed our new teachers virtually via a ZOOM celebration. Today, I finished the week at my NPO office with various internal meetings.

Have a great weekend. I am hopeful the weather will remain clear, as the National Hurricane Center is predicting Delta will skirt the East Texas coast.

PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS

Katy Teen Wang Makes Regional History as Harris County Department of Education's First 'National Student Poet'

Poetry and prose are interwoven throughout National Student Poet Ethan Wang's life.

The Katy ISD teen who learned Chinese as his first language remembers memorizing Tang poetry as a toddler, an ancient poetry revered by his scholarly grandparents.



By age 6, Wang won a school award for an essay he wrote about a book. Later that year, his mother Hong Qin recounted her son's first beach trip that prompted an in-the-moment poem which demonstrated rare sensitivity and insightfulness:

"I really like the sea; it can bring something," he said. "It also takes something."

At 9, Wang crafted a short novel as a gift to a friend. As an 11th grader, he credits his debate coach and creative writing mentor Mary Sarver for introducing him to contemporary poets and encouraging him to continue his writing.

"I can say with confidence I would not be here without her help," Wang said of his new status as one of the top young poets in the nation.

Sarver, who claims poetry as her wheelhouse, points to Wang's remarkable use of imagery, metaphors and experimental language, calling the young writer "one of the most outstanding poets she has ever worked with."

The 16-year old gained three Gold Keys from regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards sponsored by Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) last year. His work went on to be judged nationally in New York City and he earned a Gold Medal for his poem called "Cloth Ballad, Leather Trails."

This September, he was home eating lunch and got the call from the Awards which informed him of his new notoriety. Five National Student Poets were selected across the nation from various regions.

He garnered the award making him the top young poet from the Southwest.

The National Student Poets Program is a partnership between the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the nonprofit Alliance for Young Artists & Writers which presents the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Scholastic is the longest-running and most prestigious scholarship and recognition program for the country's young artist and writers.

The poets were selected from students in grades 10-11 who submitted more than 20,000 works. Only 35 semi-finalists were chosen by poet jurors. Finalists were asked to submit additional poetry from which the five were named. Wang gained \$5,000 and the responsibility of representing the program through numerous literary events.

"This is an incredible honor for Ethan Wang and his sponsoring teachers Karen Thompson and Mary Sarver from Cinco Ranch High School," HCDE Scholastic Art & Writing coordinator Andrea Segraves said. "Since 1993 when we began regional sponsorship of Scholastic Art & Writing, we have never had a National Student Poet named from our region."

"Harris County Department of Education celebrates this accomplishment and wishes Ethan the best in his future creative endeavors."

As Wang reflects on the memorized words and their cadences he gleaned while learning to talk as a toddler, he feels the imprint of the experience.

"Poetry is about feeling and it's important because it's one of the few art forms left to effectively communicate feelings and stories," he said.

Wang encourages his peers to enter Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, even if it's just to write for fun.

"It helps young writers achieve recognition, and more importantly, it lets them be proud of their work," he said.

(HCDE is a regional affiliate of Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Writing and art submissions are currently being accepted through Dec. 4, 2020. For details, go to <https://tinyurl.com/HCDEartandwriting> or email asegraves@hcde-texas.org)



**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**

FACILITIES UPDATE

Capital Improvement Program

With the 2020 budget, the board approved a large capital improvement program that will renovate several buildings and construct a new Adult Education facility. Each month, I will update the board on new activities pertaining to the Capital Improvement Program (CIP).

Since approval, staff has been busy getting ready for the sale of the bonds to help finance the renovations. In the last few weeks, the following activities occurred:

- Interviews with potential Project Management Firms (recommendation on October agenda)
- HCDE received a AAA rating from Moody's Investor's Service
- PFC was upgraded to an Aa1 rating from Moody's
- Completed RFQ for Architecture Firms from which final pool will be selected



ABS West is a model facility for planned new construction.

These are like credit scores: the higher rating you get, the lower interest you pay. Triple A (AAA) is the highest rating available, which will translate into less interest paid on the bonds.

In the coming weeks, we will begin the following:

- Bonds will be issued on Oct. 15
- Interviews with final pool of potential architecture firms (recommendations to come to the board by December)
- Creation of internal committees to facilitate employee input on building function and layout

HCDE Receives Exemplary Bond Ratings from Moody's Investor Service

Harris County Department of Education has received exemplary bond ratings from Moody's Investor Service. The October 2020 announcement provides commendations for HCDE's large and diverse property tax base and its property tax rate flexibility. The reports also commend the department's conservative budgetary practices and stable financial performance.

MOODY'S INVESTORS SERVICE

Moody upgraded the HCDE general obligation rating to Aaa from Aa1, affecting \$5.75 in outstanding rated debt. It also upgraded outstanding lease revenue bonds issued by HCDE's Public Facility Corporation from Aa2 to an upgraded Aa3.

Last month HCDE lowered the tax rate for a sixth consecutive year, adopting the recommended rate of \$0.004993, a slight decrease from last year's \$0.0050. The Moody report commended HCDE's additional unused property taxing margin as a strength in the rating.

Moody's Corporation rankings are expressed in alphabetical rankings, with Aaa, Aa1, Aa2 and Aa3 being in the top tier of rankings in the system.

HCDE's Business Services Division continuously reviews revenues and expenditures through the budget year and provides our HCDE trustees with monthly reports of finances.

HCDE delivers services through a small tax base—meaning the average homeowner pays \$9 with the adopted rate of \$0.004993 for a home valued at \$200,000. The Harris County homeowner County pays an average \$9 per year in property taxes for education services. The department uses that tax base to leverage the remainder of its budget through grants and fees-for-service.

EMPLOYEES



Choice Partners staff support Breast Cancer Awareness Month with camo gear to fight cancer.



ABS West



Technology Services



Early Head Start

BOARD BRIEFS

Head Start Returns to In-Person Instruction Oct. 19

Eighty-three HCDE employees took advantage of onsite flu shots made available through HEB Pharmacy this week at both Irvington and NPO locations. The event sponsored by Human Resources provided free shots for employees with insurance. Requiring appointments allowed for social distancing.



HCDE Purchasing Receives Excellence in Procurement Award for 4th Consecutive Year

For a fourth consecutive year, the HCDE's Purchasing Division has been awarded the 2020 Achievement of Excellence in Procurement Award (AEP) from the National Procurement Institute, Inc. (NPI). The award recognizes procurement organizations that embrace innovation, professionalism, productivity, leadership and e-procurement.



The AEP award is earned by public agencies and nonprofits which demonstrate a commitment to procurement excellence.

In 2020, only 188 awards were given throughout the nation. Nonprofit NPI was founded in 1968 and serves public procurement professionals internationally.

HCDE Receives Silver Excalibur Award for Brand Management Campaign 'See the Impact'



Harris County Department of Education has been honored with the Silver Excalibur Award for its public awareness campaign "See the Impact" from the Houston Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). The award was given for the "Reputation/Brand Management" category as the 70-year-old organization honored public relations professionals, programs and PR tactics.

The virtual celebration of the many faces of public relations by PRSA was held Oct. 1. Categories of entries included Gold, Silver and Bronze Excalibur Awards.

HCDE competed among companies and institutions such as NASA, MD Anderson, University of Houston, Buckner International, the American Red Cross and numerous PR and advertising agencies.



SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week, the following Board expectations were met:

**Superintendent Objective A:
Management of Administrative,
Fiscal and Facilities Function**

- Ensures the department investment strategies, risk management activities and purchasing practices are sound, cost-efficient and consistent with policy and law.
- Implements and oversees a planning process that results in goals, targets or priorities for major areas of operations.

**Superintendent Objective B:
Organization Morale**

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.

**Superintendent Objective C:
Personnel Management**

- Encourages, oversees and participates in staff recognition activities.

**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.

Within our organization, we have many things to be grateful for and to celebrate this week. Our National Student Poet Ethan Wang is the first student to gain this national honor since our regional



Ethan Wang

sponsorship of Scholastic Art & Writing began in 1993. What an honor for this young man and a testament to the integrity of the Awards and the Harris County teachers who shape these student artists and writers.

I am also updating you on our facilities improvements, which I plan to do each month. Our excellent bond ratings and fiscal accountability give us the opportunity to improve our Adult Education facilities, along with other buildings.



The Purchasing Division brings us an award which showcases our procurement operations and further strengthens our accountability processes.

Finally, we celebrate the employees--the people who shape our programs and services--through health initiatives such as Breast Cancer Awareness month. I believe it's so very important for staff to have a work-life balance to take care of their health and their families.

HCDE BOARD

Board President

Eric Dick

Vice President

Danny Norris

Board Members

Richard Cantu

Andrea Duhon

Amy Hinojosa

Don Sumners

Michael Wolfe

UPCOMING EVENTS:

WORKSHOPS

(Online only)

Oct. 13

Master It! Improving Problem Solving Skills
4 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.

Oct. 15

Examining Craft Moves Grades 9-12
9 a.m. - 11 a.m.

Oct. 21

Board Meeting (Irvington Bldg.)
1 p.m.

