

# PARENTS GET FIRST LOOK AT PROPOSED BOUNDARIES FOR NEW HISD SCHOOL

By Rick Janacek

December 12, 2012

Humble Independent School District officials released proposed boundaries for the yet-to-be-named Elementary School #27 at a public input meeting last week. The first of two public input meetings was held at Park Lakes Elementary School, with more than 50 people attending.

The district is seeking public input before making a final recommendation to the Humble Board of Trustees early next year. The new school, on Woodland Hills near Beltway 8, is set to open in the fall of 2013.

Questions from the parents in attendance ranged from what neighborhoods would be impacted to transportation. Parents also wanted to know about enrollment and the impact on the two schools where students will be moved from, Park Lakes Elementary and Fall Creek Elementary.

The Citizens Boundary Advisory Committee, made up of representatives from each elementary school in the district, recommended the proposed boundaries. The committee is charged with providing input to Humble Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo about the new school.

The committee used information and suggestions from Population and Survey Analysts, or PASA, to make their decision. PASA is hired by the district to project attendance figures and future growth in the district.

The boundaries proposed by the committee will affect students that live in three subdivisions in the area and one apartment complex. According to the proposed boundaries, students that currently attend Park Lakes Elementary and live in the Alta Pine Forest Apartments, Sunset Ridge West subdivision, and the Timber Hills subdivision will be attending the new school. Students that attend Fall Creek Elementary School and live in the Sunset Ridge East subdivision will also attend Elementary School #27 in the fall of 2013.

The proposed boundary came as a welcome relief to some parents that live in the Fall Creek subdivision. There were fears that the district would split up the subdivision and send some students to the new school. In fact, one recommendation from PASA suggested such a move. However, the committee did not select that proposal because the district did not want to split up the neighborhood.

“When the committee looked at the suggestion, it didn’t make sense to use PASA’s suggestion, mainly because part of Fall Creek that is on one side of Wilson Road was going to go Elementary School #27,” said Deborah Yoakum, HISD assistant superintendent for elementary schools. “That would split up Fall Creek and therefore not make it a neighborhood school.”

Yoakum told the Tribune after the meeting that keeping neighborhood schools together is one of the district’s top priorities.

“People want to make sure that they receive that continuity in the schools,” Yoakum said. “When they talk about not only neighborhood schools but moving them to another school, they get concerned and I believe we’ve addressed those concerns.”

Parents who attended the meeting were relieved that the proposed boundaries do not include the split of their subdivision.

“The option presented tonight clearly satisfies all of us here and all the surrounding community,” said Jeff, a concerned parent. “I think that the district did an outstanding job of coming together and giving such a great option and actually making an official proposal. To move children from school to school, that creates a great impact on children and their families.”

Overall, district officials say they were pleased with the turnout and the questions asked at the meeting.

“I think it went really well,” Yoakum said. “I say that because there were lots of questions that were asked. People were

interested in not only where there kids were going to go, but talked about the middle schools and as we look forward they are not only thinking about tomorrow but the future. I think the one option made a difference to most of the people and they are interested in the neighborhood schools.”

There will be another public input meeting on Thursday, Dec.14 at Fall Creek Elementary School. The input received from these meetings will be used as the committee meets again to make a final recommendation in January.

The superintendent is expected to take that recommendation to the Board of Trustees in February with a vote expected in March.

## **HUMBLE ISD APPROVES SALARY INCREASES**

By Rick Janacek

November 28, 2012

In an effort to retain teachers and recruit new ones, the Humble ISD Board of Trustees passed a salary increase for all teachers and staff at its November meeting. The salary increase was just one of several items passed at the meeting, which included an independent audit of the 2011-2012 school year.

The salary increase was passed unanimously by the board and includes a 3.5 percent increase for all teachers, librarians, nurses and speech therapists. All teachers will receive at least a \$1,650 increase or larger, depending on experience. The initial salary for a first-year teacher was raised from \$42,500 to \$45,000 with additional adjustments for teachers with one to 13 years of experience. All other staff received a 2 percent increase.

The changes were made based upon a salary study conducted by the Texas Association of School Boards last year.

The salary increase helps improve HISD, which had ranked near the bottom in salary rankings among local school districts. While the increase does not place HISD among the top-paying school districts in the area, it does place it more in the middle of the pack. School board members said the pay increase is about supporting its teachers, and helping the district stay competitive.

“If you look now, when you compare us to 13 or 14 other districts, this really is helping us move up that ladder,” said Trustee Robert Scarfo. “Even before I sat on this board, I heard board members’ concerns of where we stood relative to other districts that we compete with for talent to hire. That is very crucial to us because we are out there competing. It’s a tough environment.”

However, while Scarfo said this is a solid start, he added more must be done to keep the district competitive.

“I am really happy that we are at this point where we can look at doing this, and that this is not just a one-time stipend,” he said. “It’s going to be incumbent upon all of us, from the board down, that we continue to do the things that we can do to stay competitive with other districts.”

Trustee Robert Sitton called the increase a big improvement not just for teachers, but the entire school district.

“For a long time we have been at the bottom, and it has been pretty embarrassing,” Sitton said. “To live and grow up in this community and knowing what type of schools we have, to not compensate teachers in a fair manner has been embarrassing. This will move our teachers into the dead center of the pay range. This will go a long way toward retaining those teachers.”

The increase is expected to cost the district approximately \$6.7 million. However, the district says it will not require any amendments to the budget, which was passed last June. The school board did not pass the pay increase at that time, because it did not know district property values, student enrollment, or the amount of money the district would receive from the state.

With that information now in hand, the board said it felt it could approve the salary increase without affecting the district's finances.

"I am confident that thanks to our board's commitment and diligence, the salaries of all of our employee groups are more comparable with many of our neighboring school districts," said Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo. "It is clearly an important step in the right direction."

Also at the meeting, the school board discussed an external audit that showed how Humble ISD finished the 2011-2012 fiscal year. The district ended the year with \$16.9 million more than budgeted for the year. The surplus was due to additional state revenue, better than anticipated property tax collection, and a decrease in spending through staffing controls.

"I'm very proud that our external audit was a completely clean and unqualified report," Sconzo said. "No areas for improvement were cited. Clearly, the district managed a difficult financial year exceedingly well and I attribute all of that to our dedicated finance staff and our board's governance."

Humble ISD's student enrollment has grown by 40 percent in the last 10 years. During that same time, the district has made budget reductions in excess of \$55 million due to state budget cuts and other cutbacks.

"Our board's planning and actions put us in a place where the district is fiscally stable and able to award much-needed employee salary increases," Sconzo said.

## **HUMBLE ISD CLARIFIES BULLYING**

By Rick Janacek  
August 22, 2012

The Humble School Board has approved new rules regarding bullying in the school district. The new rules go into effect immediately and will be in place by the time school opens later this month. The new rules are an update to the school district's current policy and help the district align with new state laws regarding bullying.

The updated policy clarifies the definition of bullying and allows the district to transfer a student who is found to have bullied to another classroom on campus or even another school. However, district officials say parents of the alleged bully will be consulted before any action is taken. The hope is that the new rules will help deter bullying, which has become a growing problem in schools over the last few years.

"It's not unusual for students to sometimes have disagreements, but bullying is especially serious," said Humble School District Public Information Director Jamie Mount. "Behavior is considered bullying if it exploits an imbalance of power between the students involved and interferes with a student's education or substantially disrupts the operation of school. Whenever someone reports suspected bullying, school officials investigate and determine whether bullying occurred and appropriate action is taken."

Mount said all Humble ISD principals received training over the summer on what steps to take if an alleged bullying incident occurs.

"Principals are providing this training to teachers prior to the first day of school. Students will be learning from their teachers, principals or counselors about reporting bullying. Humble ISD also will be posting the procedure for reporting bullying on the district website."

The new bullying rules also come after reports of an alleged bullying incident involving two Indian middle-school students at the end of the last school year. Members of the Indian and Hindu community were present at the school board meeting and

expressed concern over the district's bullying policy.

"Beyond the news media stories that I believe we are all familiar with, there has been quite an exodus of Indian families from Humble ISD in the past few months," said Devinder Mahajan with the Hindus of Greater Houston. "We know of multiple Indian families that have moved from the school district into other areas of Houston this summer, and we know that many Indian families in the district believe there is no point in trying to raise any issues with the administration. They believe it's better to keep their heads down and hope nothing comes their way."

The group asked for a meeting in the future to help address their concerns. Humble Superintendent Guy Sconzo turned down similar requests before the school board meeting, stating that the group's concerns would be addressed by the new rules.

While the school board unanimously passed the new bullying policy, board member Keith Lapeze did have some concerns about punishing students for bullying off campus.

"I am not saying we need to do something about this now," Lapeze said. "But I have a hard time disciplining children away from school when that should be the jobs of moms and dads. I know there has to be some overlap. But at the end of the day I think it just needs some better, in-depth look by the folks that handle our discipline."

The updated rules regarding bullying were just part of a handful of changes made to district policies by the school board. All of the policy changes are a direct result of changes in state law made during the 82nd Legislative Session. The new rules address a variety of topics including: reports of educator misconduct, partnership programs with community colleges, student early mental health intervention, suicide prevention, and student records.

Also at this month's school board meeting, the district was given a check for \$614,433 by the Humble ISD Education Foundation. The money was the result of fundraising efforts by the foundation. Former foundation chairperson Eileen Bell presented the check to the district and also reported that overall the foundation raised a total of \$1.35 million last year, a 22 percent increase. The Education Foundation raises money to help fund school projects that fall outside of the scope of the school district's normal operating budget.

## **HISD, CHARTER SCHOOL DISCUSS POSSIBLE PARTNERSHIP**

By Rick Janacek

August 8, 2012

The Humble School District and YES Prep Academy, a charter school, are discussing a potential partnership between the district and the school. Both officials with HISD and YES Prep have confirmed to The Tribune that these initial talks have taken place, with at least one meeting held in July.

"We are currently having preliminary conversations about exploring the possibility of a future YES Prep/Humble ISD partnership," said Mark Dibella, chief operating officer for YES Prep Academy. "At this point, all of the conversations are exploratory in nature and neither party has officially committed to anything."

District officials also said the talks at this stage are preliminary.

"At this point, there have been some exploratory discussions about possibilities," said HISD spokesperson Jamie Mount. "There is nothing more to report, as these discussions are in the preliminary stages."

However, in responding to The Tribune's inquiries, Dibella indicated the talks could go further.

"The superintendents are in the process of talking with their respective boards and senior leadership teams about the possibility

of signing an MOU to officially explore a partnership,” he said.

According to its website, the YES Prep Academy was started in 1995 in Houston’s East End. It became a state charter school in 1998 and currently has 5,400 students enrolled in 10 campuses around the Houston area. Its stated mission is to “increase the number of low-income Houstonians who graduate from a four-year college prepared to compete in the global marketplace and committed to improving disadvantaged communities.”

It is not known how a potential partnership will be funded.

“Again, the discussions are exploratory. It would be preliminary to discuss funding because those issues would have to be worked out through a formal, legal agreement, and we are not at that point,” Mount said.

YES Prep officials say their goal in any potential partnership is simply to grow.

“If you want YES’s purpose in the potential partnership, it’s as simple as expanding our network to serve more students in Houston and work collaboratively with an ISD that can learn from us as a smaller, growing organization and that we can learn from as we seek to grow to scale,” Dibella said.

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that, under a contract with the state, provide educational services under the accountability standards set forth in their charter. At the same time, these schools are exempt from traditional education regulations. According to the Texas Education Agency, charter schools are monitored and accredited under the statewide testing and accountability system, but are subject to fewer state laws than other public schools.

While many have praised charter schools for their work, especially with low-income students, critics say charter schools are inefficient, drain money from the public school system, and are not held accountable enough by the state. There are more than 460 charter schools throughout the state of Texas, with more than 135,000 students.

Humble School Board members are aware of the preliminary discussions. Mount said board members have expressed “interest in discussion.”

When contacted by The Tribune, Humble School Board Vice President Brent Engelage said it was too early in the process to comment.

“I’m sure there will be many more discussions about YES in the months ahead that will help each of us decide if YES is right for Humble ISD. I think it is just way too early in the process at this point to have a firm opinion,” Engelage said.

Fellow board member Robert Scarfo said while talks between the district and YES Prep Academy are still very preliminary, he was open to the idea – if it means extra revenue for the district.

“We need to look at this as a potential revenue stream, and the ability to lease and utilize unused space like we have at Humble High School,” Scarfo said.

Other school board members contacted by The Tribune did not respond to the request. Humble ISD has never had charter schools on its campuses.

## **HUMBLE ISD PASSES BLAME TO STATE OVER LOCAL DEFICITS**

By Rick Janacek

August 8, 2012

The 2012-13 budget recently passed by the Humble School Board includes a deficit of \$2.5 million – the third year in a row the district will work with a budget deficit.

“Every deficit budget has been smaller than the previous deficit budget, so we are trending very closely toward a balanced budget,” Superintendent Guy Sconzo said. “Long overdue changes in state funding would make all the difference here.”

The \$264.7 million budget includes an increase in costs due to an increase in property insurance, fuel, maintenance contracted services and new student attendance software. It did not include any staff reductions. In fact, the district chose to keep in place \$5.5 million to fund teaching jobs that were originally paid for by a one-year federal grant because they were critical to maintain basic staffing throughout the district.

“All annual budgets are estimates of revenue and expenditures that literally change with every passing day throughout the year,” Sconzo said. “This year’s budget is the smallest deficit budget we have adopted in the last four years.”

While Sconzo ultimately makes recommendations on what he believes should be in the budget, staff members and members of the school board are part of the district’s finance committee that drafts the budget on a yearly basis. Current school board members Dave Martin, Keith Lapeze, Brent Engelage, and Robert Sitton have all served on this committee. Lapeze and Martin have all chaired the committee in the last three years. Current Texas State Rep. Dan Huberty, a former school board member, was on the committee during the 2009-2010 school year.

This is the third year in a row that the district has adopted a deficit budget. Trustee Robert Scarfo, who has chaired the district’s finance committee for the last two years and has been on the committee for the last three years, said the committee and the district have had to make tough choices over the last few years.

“It becomes a balancing act between what level of services the community desires for its students and how we deploy our financial resources,” Scarfo said. “Fortunately we have reserve balances that have allowed us to fund the relatively small deficit budgets of the last fiscal year and the current fiscal year. They represented 1.8 percent and less than 1 percent respectively, of total operating expenses for 2011-12 and 2012-13. Reserve fund balance is still at 23 percent which is at the high-end of our 17-25 percent target.”

Humble ISD had to cut operating budget expenditures by more than \$24 million for the 2011-12 school year and still operated under a budget deficit of \$4.8 million; 237 jobs had to be cut just to meet that goal. In addition to reducing positions in 2011, Humble ISD negotiated a new electricity contract to save about \$2.4 million annually. The massive cuts in expenditures were due to a reduction in public school funding in Texas that totaled \$5.4 billion statewide. According to district officials, Humble ISD lost about \$31.5 million in state funding over the last two years.

“Last year, we eliminated 237 positions in the district from teachers to campus and central administrators. We believe we will not have to do any more of that kind of cutting for the foreseeable future,” Sconzo said.

For 2012-2013, Humble ISD’s central administration has been reorganized and 11 positions have been cut to 10, saving on central administration salary costs.

“While criticism is leveled about ‘top-heavy’ administrative costs, our central office and campus administrative costs have run at or below state averages,” Scarfo said.

In the years leading up to 2011-12, Humble ISD made more than \$31 million in cuts. The last time Humble ISD worked with a surplus was 2009-10 when the budget \$253.7 million. The budget surplus that year was \$126,489.

Humble ISD is among dozens of school districts across the state suing the State of Texas, challenging the constitutionality of the State school finance system.

One dispute the district has had with the state over the last few years has been resolved. Prior to the 2011 Texas Legislative Session, Humble ISD faced an \$18 million loss to the Texas Education Agency in a dispute over state revenue for districts that participate in tax reinvestment zones. Humble ISD received money from the Lake Houston TIRZ, sparking the dispute and a

lawsuit involving several school districts. State lawmakers changed state law and the district lost \$9 million instead of \$18 million to TEA.

“That dispute and outcome had nothing to do with budget cuts last year,” Sconzo insisted. “Those budget cuts were solely due to the cuts in state funding to public schools for this state biennium.”

## **HUMBLE ISD ADOPTS NEW BOOK SELECTION, GUEST SPEAKER RULES**

By Rick Janacek

July 25, 2012

The Humble ISD Board of Trustees adopted new rules regarding the selection of guest speakers on campus and revisions to its book selection and appeal policy. The changes in policy come after parent complaints earlier this year and a controversial author's appearance on several campuses.

The book, “Stuck In Neutral,” by Terry Trueman, is told in the first person by a teen with cerebral palsy. The book deals with such subjects as disabilities, quality of life and euthanasia. Many parents believed the book was an inappropriate reading assignment for middle-school children. At the May board meeting, several parents raised concerns that no parents were allowed on a committee that looks into the appeals of books by parents. In addition, several parents also complained about Trueman's appearance at Creekwood Middle School and other Humble ISD schools.

Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo presented the new policies to the board, including a new policy on the expectations of how guest speakers are chosen to speak on campus.

“That (policy) has never existed before,” Sconzo told the board. “Along with the policy language, we've also included information on a checklist that campus administrators will be responsible for following, and screening potential candidates to speak on campus. The other major change has to do with the review procedures as that relates to any challenge made of any reading materials, be it curriculum based, library based or classroom assignment based.”

These changes include the makeup of the review committee that will review book challenges. Before these committees consisted of teachers, librarians and even students. Now parents will also be involved in this process. Another change to the policy includes that no one on the review panel can have direct involvement in the book appeal.

“We are trying to make the process more objective than it has in the past,” Sconzo said.

The new policy also includes language and guidelines for the new review committees that they will need to consider when reaching decisions.

No changes were made to the materials selection process, but Sconzo told the board that the district intends to give staff more direct guidance on criteria that need to be considered before acquiring and assigning materials.

“We have every intent of working with campus staff to make sure parents know well in advance what the reading materials are going to be for the upcoming school year in regards to what is going to be required and assigned,” Sconzo said. “We plan on being much more overt and more communicative about parent awareness and their right to opt out of any reading materials that they find questionable.”

The board unanimously approved the new policy and several spoke out in support of the new policy.

“We have to have a balance here,” said board member Keith Lapeze. “What we can’t have is 22 parents dictate curriculum. That is impossible to achieve. What we can achieve is that if I disagree and don’t think that a book is appropriate for my son, I can opt out. This makes sure that I am involved in the process. The new policies do a good job of providing for that. The appeals process is now rigorous and resolves the concerns we had after the May meeting. I also think the new policies will take time for everyone to get used to. There will be some bugs that have to be worked out, but at the end of the day I think Dr. Sconzo and the team have resolved the concerns and I am pleased to support this.”

One parent who was at the meeting said that while she does support the new policy, she is not sure it goes far enough.

“I wish they had included more specific standards of what criteria has to be looked at for books to be reviewed,” said Dottie O’Farrell, who also spoke at the May meeting. “That way it closes that gap between what parents want and what librarians and teachers want.”

In addition to the policy change, board members also got into a heated exchange over the cost of building a new Emergency Operations Center. Construction costs that originally were estimated at \$2.7 million are now expected to cost \$3.3 million. That new cost drew the criticism from board members Dave Martin and Robert Scarfo.

“The police station, as it now exists today, is a dump. There is no doubt about it,” said Martin. “But as I look at the funding we have and the budget situation we are in, we have to spend our money wisely. So, when I saw 2.7 go to 3.3 million, a 27 percent increase, I had a little bit of heartburn. When I look at the police station as it relates to education, I look at it as a nice to have and not a need to have. It’s not the best in the world, but it’s a facility we have dealt with for many years, and I would argue it is not a need to have.”

Sconzo told the board the reasons for the increase were issues that he believed were beyond their control.

“The difference is attributed to two major pieces of related work that must be accomplished in this project that were not known at the time of design development presented to board,” he said. “Those factors are tying into the water and sewer lines and the need for a lift station, which is over \$200,000. And the other having to do with borings that will have to be constructed underground to meet code because of the land involved.”

Sconzo told the board the reason this wasn’t known originally was because the project is on a fast-track and must be completed by October to use bond money approved for the project in 2008 without paying extra IRS penalties. He also told the board that while this is above what was originally estimated, it still comes in below the \$3.5 million in the budget allocated for the project.

The board approved the new cost by a vote of 4-2 with Martin and Scarfo voting against the increase.

## **HUMBLE ISD PASSES DEFICIT BUDGET**

By Rick Janacek

July 11, 2012

The Humble School Board, after several months of meetings, passed a \$264.7 million budget for the 2012-2013 school year that includes a budget deficit of \$2.5 million.

After making expenditure cuts totaling \$24 million last year, the district was able to avoid having to make such drastic cuts this year, and, in fact, increased the general fund by \$5.5 million. This increase in the general fund was in order to retain 110 teaching positions in the district. Funding for these positions had been available through a federal grant, but that grant expired at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. The district decided that these positions were needed and included the salaries in the 2012-13 budget.

“Although we again have passed a deficit budget, if it is put in perspective, it is not the end of the world,” said Humble Board Secretary Robert Scarfo, who chaired the district’s Finance Committee.

“First, the 2012-2013 total of \$2.5 million dollar deficit is half the size of the prior year’s deficit. Second, there was an increase in unavoidable costs of over \$3.5 million due to new staff needed for enrollment growth, a 45 percent premium increase in property and casualty insurance, and increased fuel costs. We also chose to maintain 110 staff positions that were funded by \$5.5 million of stimulus money last year, in order to not have class sizes increase. And finally, it is important to note that more than \$24 million in operating expenses were eliminated from last year’s budget, which was in addition to the \$31 million in expense reductions in the seven years prior to the 2011/2012 budget year.”

New Humble School Board President Charles Cunningham echoed Scarfo’s comments.

“For the third consecutive year, the Board has passed a deficit budget,” Cunningham said. “Every deficit budget has been smaller than the previous deficit budget, so we are trending very closely toward a balanced budget.”

Cunningham also says the 110 teaching positions the board was able to retain was essential to keep staffing levels the same and not increase class sizes.

“The Federal EduJobs grant was for one-year only, 2011-12,” he said. “Those teaching positions were essential to our basic staffing in classrooms throughout the district. It was essential to maintain them on a going forward basis and I’m glad that we (The board and superintendent) were able to make this happen.”

While the budget does include keeping those 110 teaching positions, it also includes a pay freeze until later in the year when, according to HISD Superintendent Guy Sconzo, “the appropriate information is available to reassess our fiscal condition based upon updated property values, student enrollment, and state aid to determine if any compensation increases can be awarded to employees.”

The district enacted a similar pay freeze last year, but later in the school year approved a pay increase for all teachers and employees throughout the district after those updated numbers were processed. Cunningham is hopeful that will happen again.

“Though this is the second consecutive year that the board could not award salary increases in June, we were able to give salary increases last fall. The board will again assess where actual enrollment is this fall in regards to any salary increases,” he said.

And he notes that the district was able to pass the budget without having to enact a hiring freeze.

“While we have enacted hiring freezes a few times over the past decade, typically, those freezes occur in the winter of the year and they have affected all but classroom teacher positions. The Board is not anticipating a hiring freeze next year.”

The budget also includes an increase in unavoidable costs of approximately \$2.5 million, due to an increase in property insurance, fuel, maintenance contracted services and new software related to student attendance. Overall, the percentage of the total budget for instruction increased from 65 percent to 72 percent and district spending for central administration dropped from 2.62 percent to 2.53 percent.

Sconzo, who recommended this budget to the board after months of work, said he is pleased with the budget given the circumstances.

“We continue to function under a state school finance system that freezes our operating revenue at the 2005-06 level of per WADA (weighted average daily attendance) support,” Sconzo said. “The current funding system offsets state funding for any increases in local property taxes as a result of increased appraisals and new properties on the tax roll. Given the significant increase in state standards and concurrent significant decrease in state funding, we have joined a plaintiff group of school districts across the state challenging the constitutionality of the state school funding system.”

That lawsuit involves dozens of other school districts and is ongoing in the court system. The district needed to pass the budget to beat a June 30 deadline.

To view the budget, go to [www.humbleisd.net/cms/lib2/TX01001414/Centricity/Domain/20/Summary%20of%20Proposed%20Budget-June%2013-%202012.pdf](http://www.humbleisd.net/cms/lib2/TX01001414/Centricity/Domain/20/Summary%20of%20Proposed%20Budget-June%2013-%202012.pdf)

## **HUMBLE SCHOOL BOARD SHUFFLES POSITIONS FOR UPCOMING YEAR, DEBATES SCHOOL VOUCHERS**

By Rick Janacek

June 27, 2012

The Humble ISD School Board has undergone its annual reorganization as it prepares for the upcoming school year. Charles Cunningham, formerly vice president of the board, was named Humble School Board president for the 2012-13 school year, taking over for Dr. Bonnie Longnion who served this past school year.

This is the first time Cunningham has served as board president. The school board reorganizes at the end of every school year. Longnion had served several times before as school board president before this most recent turn.

Several board members recognized the work Longnion has done over the last year and all said they looked forward to working with Cunningham. Cunningham himself said he is looking forward to the challenge.

“This is a process and I won’t take this lightly,” Cunningham said. “This is a great team, and it’s an honor to serve. I’m excited about the new change.”

Cunningham also thanked his wife and children for their support and continuing support in his new role. Humble Superintendent Guy Sconzo also thanked Longnion for her work and said he is looking forward to working with Cunningham.

“Thank you Bonnie for your guidance over this last year,” Sconzo said. “Charles, this is a dream come true. I am really looking forward to working with you as president.”

In the newly reorganized board, Brent Engelage will serve as Vice President, Robert Scarfo will be the new Secretary and Robert Sitton is the new board Parliamentarian.

The board also passed several items at its June meeting and held a heated discussion regarding school vouchers. The voucher issue was part of a series of proposed resolutions the board was sending to the Texas Association of School Boards for their 2012-14 Advocacy Agenda. The resolution stated the district’s opposition to “private school vouchers, tuition tax credits, and other such programs funded with public tax dollars that take funds from public school districts, and public school funding has already been reduced.”

Scarfo told board members he believed they should reconsider opposition to this resolution. While he does oppose most vouchers, he believes there could be some instances in the future where it could benefit the school district.

“Just so the public understands, this isn’t just something that is out of hand,” Scarfo said. “There is a lot of thought that goes into why we take the positions we do in terms of not being advocates for vouchers in general. There are times that they might make sense. I just wanted to state for the record that lets not dismiss this out of hand. This is not just a totally black and white issue.”

Other board members, however, believed this resolution was correct in its wording and that the district should oppose private school vouchers.

“The problem I have with vouchers is that once it gets into the State Legislature, they take a uniform approach to everything,”

said board member Keith Lapeze. “They treat all school districts the same and every school district is in a different situation. If you are applying a general voucher rule, it would be unfair to school districts like ours that are doing a great job educating our kids. I understand that vouchers may work in certain situations and certain school districts that are failing. But it doesn’t work when applied uniformly, and that is what would happen if the Legislature gets a hold of it.”

Lapeze did admit that the resolution is broad, but that he believed the school district should support the resolution.

“I believe vouchers may have their place in some large metropolitan school district,” said Longnion. “But I believe that we want to keep the public school funds in the public school pot. There is not enough to go around right now as it is, and to take away from the public school system at this time or anytime is a mistake.”

The board passed the resolution and all others being sent to the TASB Advocacy Agenda meeting. The board also passed several other items including: selected vendors for Educational Consulting Services, the selection of TASB SMART Medicaid Services to provide billing services for reimbursement of School Health and Related Services, and the Selection of Marsh USA Inc. to provide Property and Casualty Consulting Services for the district.

In addition, the board, without comment, passed changes to end-of-course exams and grading periods for the upcoming school year. The changes are based on the continuing changes in the new STAAR testing program. The new change required by the state, says that the STAAR test will account for 15 percent of a high school student’s final grade. Grading periods in the upcoming school year will be nine-weeks instead of six for all grade levels. These changes were determined by the Texas Education Agency as part of the new testing program started in the last school year.

Next month, the board is expected to take up new rules regarding book selection and guest speakers. This was a controversial subject at the May board meeting and Sconzo promised the board they would have new rules to vote on before the beginning of the next school year.

## **DEFICIT INCREASE EXPECTED FOR HISD 2012-13 BUDGET**

By Rick Janacek

June 13, 2012

Humble ISD trustees are expected to approve a budget in deficit by the end of the month.

As the deadline for a 2012-13 budget approaches at the end of this month, Humble ISD school board members approved changes to the district’s casualty insurance coverage that will increase next year’s expected budget deficit to \$2.25 million. The changes include using multiple vendors for insurance coverage instead of just one. Superintendent Guy Sconzo recommended the changes, calling them the most cost effective method to maintain the same coverage.

Coverage rates for the district are rising because, according to the district, the implementation of new Risk Management Services modeling across the property insurance industry that is causing increases in premium rates for those with a potential exposure to hurricanes. Other districts around the area are expected to see increases as well. Humble ISD’s premiums rose more than \$774,000, a 45 percent increase over last year.

“This does maintain current levels of coverage,” said Sconzo. “Due to a change in the industry modeling of where Humble ISD sits in the event of a major hurricane, we have been assigned to a much riskier tier.

“But we are not comfortable with cutting back on our coverage because of the potential exposure in the event of a hurricane,” said Sconzo.

The news of the insurance increase comes as the board tries to hammer out a new budget for the upcoming school year. Board

members were once again briefed on the progress of the budget at a workshop following the special board meeting. The only real change to the budget was the increase in casualty insurance. That increased the budget deficit from a projected \$1.6 million for the upcoming school year to more than \$2.25 million.

“I believe we are close,” said board member Robert Scarfo, who leads the district’s budget committee. “The insurance increase was one of the nasty hits as we are working through this budget.”

Another expected hit to the budget was increases in maintenance agreements and tree removal. The expected cost of tree removal alone increased from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

The board must have a budget for the upcoming school year approved by June 30. The board plans to meet again for its final budget workshop June 26.

Also at the special board meeting, board members approved a contract with Trillium Development Company to complete the construction of a new road at Summer Creek High School. The road will link the school to the service road of Beltway 8 and allow students and faculty easier access to the school. The road was part of an agreement with the original construction company of the school, but that company went out of business before construction of the road was completed.

## **CHANGES EXPECTED AFTER OUTCRY OVER BOOK SELECTION**

By Rick Janacek

May 16, 2012

Fireworks erupted at the latest Humble ISD School Board meeting regarding the selection of books in Humble schools.

The controversy began last month when Ron Abbott, the parent of a seventh-grade student at Creekwood Middle School, addressed the board regarding the book “Stuck in Neutral” by Terry Trueman. The fictional book is told in the first person by a teen with cerebral palsy. The book deals with such subjects as disabilities, quality of life and euthanasia. Abbott believed the book was an inappropriate reading assignment for a child his son’s age. Abbott also raised concerns regarding a speaking appearance by Trueman at Creekwood Middle School (CMS).

Abbott once again addressed the board at this month’s meeting, along with several other parents upset with the selection process.

“The question boils down to age appropriateness,” said Abbott. “Is a seventh-grader capable of reading a book like this and not being disturbed? Furthermore, if you assign a book like this, the next question is that should there be a classroom discussion? And what concerned me the most is that the book was given to the students; the students read the book; upon finishing the book there was a content test and that was it. No discussion, no debate over euthanasia.”

Other parents also came forward to talk about the controversial book and others in school libraries.

“As parents, we want our kids to be reading good materials of good quality,” said parent Dottie O’Farrell. “That’s what concerns us the most. For all of us, when it comes to our children, nothing else matters.”

O’Farrell mentioned concerns regarding the way parents can challenge books they find inappropriate. This challenge includes a review committee, but O’Farrell said in her case, the committee consisted of the librarian and the teacher that assigned the book “Scary Stories” to her fourth-grader. She felt the process was not fair and equitable.

“My goal originally was to get this book out of the library,” O’Farrell said. “But I changed my goal because I felt parents didn’t really get a say-so in what our children read.”

While many of the speakers at the meeting were in support of change, others came to the defense of both Trueman's book and the selection process. One of those was the grandmother of a boy with cerebral palsy.

"The book "Stuck in Neutral" has somehow offended some of the parents of children assigned to read it," said Stacy Williams. "This book was educational and courageous. The newspaper article I read said the book was inappropriate for the age group. Is Harry Potter appropriate for seventh-grade students whose mind is so influential? We also sign permission slips to have our children educated about sex, childbirth and diseases because those are facts of life. Cerebral palsy is also a fact of life."

Atascocita Middle School (AMS) librarian Rita Kneisley also defended of the current system and her fellow librarians.

"All librarians in the district have masters degrees in library science and have taken several classes about materials selection and we do so with credibility," said Kneisley. "This book is a work of fiction. If you watch the news lately, there is much more to be concerned about."

Another controversy involving Trueman's appearance at CMS is that Abbott and others complained Trueman used inappropriate language with students. That drew the ire of board member David Martin.

"If that happened there should be some accountability because we would hold our kids accountable if they did that," Martin said. "There is no way on God's green Earth that the phrase 'F-off' was meant to be interpreted 'go fart off.' You don't have an adult tell a 12-year old kid that, and I will be darned if they will do that while I am sitting on this board. Totally, totally inappropriate."

Board President Dr. Bonnie Longnion recognized the sensitivity of the emotional issue.

"I do think there is merit in appropriate books at an appropriate level and language to discuss tolerance, acceptance and values for people that are different," she said. "I think sometimes if a book is controversial because of its language, that should be the parents' only option to opt out. I think there may be other books possibly that address the same kind of issue."

Humble Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo promised the board that he would bring forward a new policy that the board will be able to consider at its June meeting.

"In my opinion, we have not been as overt as we could have been or should have been in terms of enforcing what is a part of our policies and procedures and that is the parent opt-out provision," Sconzo said. "That is an area that we have to be much more, and our expectations have to be more, proactive about."

He said the changes to be considered would be in three areas: refining the review committee, opt-out procedures for parents, and the external speaker review process.

After the meeting Kneisley gave a statement to The Tribune, defending her views and the current process.

"All parent requests are honored at AMS and other schools. If parents don't want children reading something, I don't allow them to check it out," she said. "Terry Trueman visited AMS, CMS and three other schools and the only complaints were here from parents at CMS. There were no other complaints anywhere else."

## **HUMBLE ISD CLOSER TO 2012-13 BUDGET RECOMMENDATION**

By Rick Janacek

May 2, 2012

The Humble ISD School Board is one step closer to approving a new budget for the next school year after its April budget

workshop. While Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo isn't expected to make his formal recommendation to the board until at least next month, board members got another closer look at budget proposals so far and received some good news.

After hearing at its last workshop that the district would only retain 90 of 110 teaching positions being funded by a federal grant that ends at the close of this school year, officials told the board at the April meeting there will not be a need to cut any of the positions originally funded by that grant. The decision to fund these positions came after district officials met with administrators at every HISD campus and determined that the positions needed to be retained in order to maintain current class sizes. Since the grant is ending at the end of this school year, district officials will include the salaries for those positions in the upcoming budget.

"It's necessary to be able to maintain and not have an increase in any class size or any teacher-student ratios," Sconzo said. "We need these 110 teachers."

The work by district staff to determine that these positions should not be cut was commended by Sconzo and several board members, and ended speculation that the teachers would be laid off.

"There has been a rumor out there that we are going to be running around like a prize patrol with a 110 pink slips, but that is not going to happen," said board member Brent Engelage.

The preliminary budget calls for projected revenues of \$262.2 million with expenditures of \$263.8 million. That comes out to an approximately \$1.5 million deficit budget, but Sconzo says that could change by the fall when other factors are accounted for.

"I'm not sure I remember the last year that I was able to recommend a balanced budget," Sconzo said. "I have every intent that, come the fall, we will be in a position to review three key variables that will no longer be variables but actuals. First, we will know precisely how we finished this current fiscal year. So, if we don't spend all the salary dollars that we were budgeted for this year, then there is an opportunity to use those dollars for next year's budget for salaries. Second, we will know what our actual enrollment is. Right now we are running off of projections. Lastly, we will have, at that point, our certified property value from the Harris County Appraisal District."

The budget also does not include salary increases for teachers or any employees at this time, but Sconzo is hopeful they will be able to give some sort of pay raise to teachers in the fall.

"I know that you and I are very committed and interested in giving salary increases," Sconzo said. "But, like in the past couple of years, that really needs to be a fall review and determination and not the spring."

The board will meet again at the end of May for another workshop and a final recommendation could come from Sconzo at that time.

"This budget for all practical purposes really is as close to what is going to be my final recommendation as possible," Sconzo said.

The board needs to approve a budget for the next school year by June 30, but could do so sooner if a budget is finalized before the deadline.

## **ASSIGNED BOOK DRAWS PARENT COMPLAINTS**

By Rick Janacek  
April 18, 2012

The Humble School Board plans to take a closer look at the selection, screening and challenge process of reading assignments across the school district at its May meeting. The review is in response to the pleas from a Creekwood Middle School parent upset with a book his son recently was assigned to read.

The controversial book, "Stuck in Neutral" by Terry Trueman, focuses on the disabilities of a young boy and euthanasia. The book has drawn complaints from parents at least one other school in the country, and has been strongly defended by its author. Ron Abbott, the parent of a Creekwood Middle School seventh grade student, addressed the board at its April meeting about his concerns over the book. He told the board that while he believes the literature was well intended, the book was inappropriate for that age group.

"Initially my objections stemmed from negative reactions from a number of students," Abbott told The Tribune. "As I got further into discussions with other parents, I found there was also objectionable language. But more objectionable in my mind, was the nature of the book. How the entire book centers around a child being totally disabled, unable to speak or move, that ultimately has to deal with his father attempting to euthanize him for the duration of the book. At the end of this book, the child is ultimately faced with his father preparing to euthanize him. The students were left to their imagination whether or not the father succeeds or not."

Abbott said he went up the chain of command at the school before addressing his concerns to the school board.

"The teacher was perfectly fine with the book. The librarian thought that it was a book that was appropriate for seventh graders and felt that euthanasia was a matter of question and opinion rather than a concern that I share that it is against the law," he said.

Abbott has also filed a citizens request for reconsideration with the school. That request is currently under review. District officials said the book in question was "vetted appropriately by our librarians."

When he addressed the school board, Abbott requested that board members take up the current selection process at its next board meeting. He is also concerned that the author was allowed to speak on campus and would like the board to look further into that issue as well. Board members and Humble Superintendent Guy Sconzo were receptive to Abbott's request and plan to look further into the issues in May.

"What I am envisioning is an item that will not only go over the language but a discussion of the selection process, challenge process, and screening process," Sconzo said. "Because we have to have some communication on this specific concern and are initiating change in some of our procedures and how they apply to campuses."

"I am totally against banning books, but I want to make sure the books we are exposing them to are age appropriate," said board member Keith Lapeze.

Abbott said he is pleased with the school board's response and that he hopes this issue can be resolved at the next meeting.

"A number of board members have come up to me and expressed support for addressing this concern, support for looking at the screening process for books, and hopefully also we'll get into how we determine who comes on campus to speak to the students," he said. "What their demeanor is, what their philosophies are, and are those values consistent with the values we have in our community."

Currently books selected at Humble school libraries are done by the school librarian at each campus with the approval of the school principal. Teachers, students and even parents are encouraged to suggest books and other materials. Some of the changes being considered include providing an alternate reading assignment if a parent objects to a book selected by the teacher. The board meets again the second Tuesday of May.

# **BOARD AGREES PARENTS NEED BETTER FEEDBACK**

By Rick Janacek

April 18, 2012

Students and their parents were the focus of the April Humble ISD School Board meeting, as students and parents made compelling presentations and board members focused on an issue allowing more parent feedback.

The most debated agenda item at the meeting involved recommendations for district and campus improvement plan goals and objectives for the next school year. Several board members wanted to change some of the language of the recommendation from Superintendent Guy Sconzo to allow for more parent feedback.

“I think it should become a part of this process that when you do have surveys, meaningful surveys, people can leave their comments,” said board member Robert Scarfo. “I think this is something we should really look to as a district to become part of our goal, to solicit that input, that good feedback, on a regular basis. Something where stakeholders can give their unbiased feedback about what is going on at our campuses. People have to feel that their opinions are not only welcomed but encouraged.”

Scarfo recommended an amendment to change the wording of the campus and district goals to include the phrase “provide meaningful avenues to solicit stakeholder feedback.”

Other board members, such as Robert Sitton and Keith Lapeze, agreed with Scarfo’s recommendation and believed the amendment should be included.

“The issue is accountability and how we measure that accountability,” said Sitton.

While she agreed with Scarfo’s recommendation, board president Dr. Bonnie Longnion believed the implementation of the goals could be handled at another meeting. That incited this response from Lapeze.

“Something that I have seen is that someone makes a point like Mr. Scarfo did, then the item is rubber stamped and we move on down the road and nothing gets done,” Lapeze said.

Lapeze later said that “now is the time” to get something done on this recommendation. After listening to the board members, Sconzo agreed that more feedback should be encouraged from parents and said the amendment was a good one to add. The language was added to the recommendation, which was unanimously passed. The third goal for all campuses and the district now reads: “Create a welcoming culture and climate for all stakeholders and provide meaningful avenues to solicit stakeholders’ feedback.”

Board members did not talk about how schools or the district will get that feedback, either in the form of a survey or another format. That will be determined at a later date.

The debate over parent feedback came on the heels of a presentation from Michael Harris, the father of a student at Willow Creek Elementary. Harris was one of approximately 100 parents who had attended a meeting with the school’s principal earlier in the day regarding teaching changes at the school next year. Harris felt that their concerns were not properly addressed.

“The problem that we’re having is that there is an intense amount of tension being created from the lack of the ability to communicate with the decision-making process associated at the school,” Harris told the board. “We have a very involved school. We have parents that are heavily involved in fundraising, the classroom and festivals. We expect that to continue. The only thing we expect in return is that when decisions are made that affect our children on a day-to-day basis and affect the atmosphere associated with the school that we can get some realistic answers as to why those decisions were made. That is something that we are not finding right now.”

Students were also a huge part of the April school board meeting. Four students from Creekwood Middle School gave a

presentation to board members regarding the “No Child Left Behind” act. These students were working on a school project on persuasive skills, but told board members the project had become much more than a grade to them. The students spent several minutes explaining why they believed the act should be abolished, citing facts, figures and quoting experts.

The presentation was lauded by almost every school board member, many of whom agreed with the students.

Board members were also briefed on the recent district elementary science fair. Dr. Aaron Clevenson told board members 19 schools participated and 304 projects were submitted, the largest in the 13 years of the fair.

“Our goal is to get all elementary schools participating, so I hope we get there,” Clevenson said.

A third-grader from Greentree Elementary was the winner of the science fair, held at Humble High School.

The board passed several other measures at the meeting, including the use of a competitive sealed proposal as the award method for the building of the district Emergency Operations Center project, a resolution concerning standardized testing of Texas Public School students, proposed revisions defining prohibited relationships in areas of fiscal control and hiring and the selection of CIGNA as the employee health insurance provider.

## **CONSTRUCTION OF NEW SCHOOL CONTINUES OVER ZONING**

By Rick Janacek

April 4, 2012

Discussion at March’s Humble ISD School Board meeting regarding construction of Elementary School No. 27 may lead to a special workshop this summer to discuss school boundaries and district demographics. The issue was one of several items discussed in a meeting that at times became heated. The school board also approved a new chief academic officer, approved an architect for the district’s planned Emergency Operations Center and approved an agreement with the City of Houston regarding use of the district’s facilities.

The school board approved a general contractor for Elementary School No. 27, Gamma Construction. Construction of the school is expected to cost about \$15.5 million. Board member Robert Scarfo, an active critic of the new school, once again voiced his objections for the need for the school. Scarfo believes that the overcrowding that the school is expected to relieve for surrounding elementary schools will only be temporary.

“Looking at the numbers, what worries me is that two years after we open this building, according to our own internal projections, we will be at 98 percent capacity at Fall Creek,” Scarfo said. “It doesn’t seem like we are buying a lot of time here.”

Scarfo suggested calling a workshop over the next few months to talk about attendance zones, but other board members, like Robert Sitton, were not sure if that was necessary.

“In our last building and planning committee meeting, we have asked for a building utilization study of our elementary schools,” Sitton said. “We have elementary schools that on paper look like they could house another 100 kids. But when you go on campus, there are entire grade levels in portable buildings.”

Sitton and other board members say they hope this study along with the rezoning that will take place once the new school is built, will help deal with the overcrowding concerns. However, board members did agree to consider holding a special workshop regarding the issue in the summer. Elementary School 27 is expected to open in August 2013. The school will be similar in design to Atascocita Springs Elementary.

The board also approved the hiring of Dr. Thomas Price as the new chief academic officer for the district. Price is currently the superintendent in the Splendora school district. The board approved Price's hiring after a national search. Price's accomplishments include: the 2011 H-E-B Excellence in Education Award for Best Small District in Texas and the 2011 Region 6 Superintendent of the Year and State Finalist.

The district signed an agreement with the City of Houston for use of the district's building during a public health safety emergency. The agreement allows the City Of Houston to use district facilities as inoculation centers in the event of a pandemic or bio-terrorist threat. The district and Houston officials will coordinate efforts to ensure safety if the facilities are needed. Similar agreements led to district facilities being used during the swine flu pandemic.

The March meeting also featured a heated exchange between board critic Bobby Petty and Humble ISD Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo. Petty has criticized the board for several months for their approval of changes to the voting schedule in the district. Petty believes board elections should be held in November, not May. And he has been critical of the board's decision to increase the number of years in a board member's term from three to four years. At March's meeting, Petty spoke about that issue, but also about PBK Architects and Sconzo. Petty accused Sconzo of intimidation.

"I have noticed a fear of retaliation, an air of fear seems to exist," Petty said. "Because the superintendent has so many different positions in high level, influential boards, specifically the Chamber of Commerce and the Humble Education Foundation."

Petty also made accusations regarding the relationship between Sconzo and PBK Architects, who designed Elementary School No. 27 and other schools in the district.

"A presentation came forward in 2008 regarding ethics and conflict of interest. This is one disclosure that came from the superintendent. Oddly enough, this is a very close blood relative of the superintendent and it never came forth until a year later," Petty said. "The same person was also working at PBK at the time."

Sconzo fired back at Petty after his presentation.

"I fully accept and respect a speaker's right to berate me, question my integrity, and collide with me," Sconzo said. "But when you attempt to make an inference about a member of my family it speaks volumes to me about the person you truly are."

In other business, the board recognized Woodcreek Middle School's dance team. The team was just started this year and recently won several awards at different dance competitions around the state.

## **SCHOOL BOARD BEGINS BUDGETING PROCESS**

By Rick Janacek

April 4, 2012

The Humble ISD School Board began the long, hard process toward adopting a new budget, with its first workshop regarding the subject. The workshop included new student attendance projections, recommendations for teacher salaries, and an early look at a very preliminary budget.

The update on demographics within the district was presented by representative of PASA Demographics, the group that conducted the survey. It showed that Humble ISD had 36,020 students enrolled in October 2011. That represented a growth of 108 students, or less than 1 percent, from the previous school year. However, over the last five years, Humble schools have grown by more than 15 percent. The group also predicts that enrollment in the fall of 2012 will be at 36,649, an increase of 1.74 percent. While this is higher than the current growth in the district, it is still slower than previous years.

The group also looked into the future, predicting enrollment for the next 10 years and recommending whether more schools

needed to be built in the district. PASA Demographics recommended the district make the most use of existing facilities and believed that the additional elementary school being built now to open in 2013 and a new middle school set to open in 2016 will be the only new additions required over the next several years.

While the board praised the report given by PASA Demographics, board member Robert Sitton did have some concerns.

“Your bottom line numbers are spot on, but when we are talking about projections and building new schools, you are not taking into account where they are going, just where they live,” Sitton said. “It’s hard for me as a board member. I have to take in your numbers and actual enrollment numbers. Some numbers are way off and others are spot on. It makes it hard for me to quantify this. One thing that I do like is that our total population is awesome. What we need to figure out as a board is where we need to go.”

Representatives with the Texas Association of School Boards also presented a report regarding teacher pay at the meeting. Ann Patton with the TASB gave a detailed report comparing the salaries of teachers and other district employee with those in other districts in the Houston area. The report showed that the median salary for Humble school teachers was just under \$45,000 yearly, well below the average of other area school districts. The report also showed that 81 percent of the newly hired teachers in the district have eight years of experience or less. Patton recommended raising the starting salary of new teachers to \$45,000 to help attract more experienced teachers to the district. She also recommended adjusting the pay structure for all employees. The expected cost for the proposed pay increase would be \$6.7 million, a 3.6 percent budget impact.

“Keeping in mind that 76 percent of this increase is going to 55 percent of your employees, which is teachers and nurses” Patton said. “This plan would include a 2 percent general increase for all other employees.”

Both the demographics report and the recommendations on teacher salaries are all key components as board members decide on a budget for the 2012-13 school year. District personnel updated board members on that process, showing them a preliminary baseline budget for the upcoming year.

The budget is based on estimated revenues of \$261.6 million with initial expenditures of \$257.4 million. However, board members were warned that while it looks like a surplus now, that does not include the expected salaries of some employees that were being paid for with state grants. With those salaries, and if the board wants to raise teacher salaries, the board could likely be looking at a budget deficit once again. This comes just one year after the board cut jobs to trim \$25 million from last year’s budget, which didn’t sit well with some board members.

“I thought we were going to be in better shape than this,” commented board member Keith Lapeze.

But, Superintendent Guy Sconzo told board members the district is in a much better place than it was last year.

“Where we lost \$17 million in state funding this year, we will lose approximately \$8-\$10 million next year,” Sconzo told the board. “As you look at the projections the other thing in the expenditure category that is showing is no further budget cuts. Of the \$55 million cut over the last 10 years, half of that was this year. But that was smart on the part of the board because we don’t have to relive that this spring.”

The superintendent is expected to make his budget recommendations over the next few weeks, and the board will decide on a budget for the next school year over the next couple of months.

## **HUMBLE SCHOOL BOARD APPROVES CALENDAR FOR 2012-2013 SCHOOL YEAR**

By Rick Janacek

February 22, 2012

The Humble ISD School Board approved the calendar for the upcoming school year, but not without some questions about the number of days in each semester. The calendar was one of several items approved by the board at its monthly meeting.

The board voted unanimously to accept the proposed calendar that was recommended by Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo, but board member Dave Martin did have questions about the calendar. He wanted to know how teachers felt about the way the semesters are scheduled. The first semester consists of 78 teaching days, while the second semester has 99. The semesters are traditionally scheduled this way by the district so that the semester will end before the winter break.

“Do we have any idea how educators feel about this schedule?” Martin asked. “The effect it has on kids? You jam so much into that fall semester that it’s just mind boggling. Especially high school kids.”

Sconzo told Martin that while it does look like there are many more teaching days in the spring semester as opposed to the fall semester, there are more testing days in the spring semester. He says that balances out the schedule a little more.

“It’s not even, but it’s a lot closer than what it appears because you are counting state testing days as instructional days,” Sconzo said. “Every time we have conducted surveys, internally and externally, most do not want to return from Christmas break returning to finals.”

The 2012-2013 school years will begin Aug. 27, 2012 and end June 7, 2013. The first semester will end Dec.21, 2012. The second semester ends June 7, 2013.

The holidays for the upcoming school year include an entire week off for Thanksgiving from November 19-23 and winter break from December 24, 2012 to January 4, 2013. Holidays include Labor Day (Sept. 3), MLK Day (Jan. 21, 2013), Good Friday (March 29, 2013), and Memorial Day (May 27, 2013).

Spring Break for the 2012-2013 school year will be between March 11 and March 15, 2013. There will also be four staff workdays throughout the year. Those will be student holidays.

The school board also approved several other items at their February meeting including: the superintendent’s recommendation to approve an agreement with the Region 10 Education Service Center for the purchase of Eduphoria School Objects, adopting a new police regarding the Curriculum Management Audit, selecting vendors for purchasing large kitchen equipment, and naming the Kingwood Park Athletic Complex the “Larry Cooper Athletic Complex.” Sconzo pulled two items at the last minute from the agenda. One of the items was the selection of an architect for the district’s Emergency Operation Center. Sconzo says more work needs to be done with this item, but that he expects it to be back on the agenda next month.

The other item pulled by Sconzo was regarding proposed revisions relating to end-of-course examination requirements. Sconzo told the board that activity at the state capital that day precluded the board from being able to vote on this item.

The board also received the district’s annual performance report. Among the highlights of this report included enrollment figures and dropout rates for last year. 2011 showed an enrollment of 35,678 students, an increase from 34,689 in 2010. The report also showed that 92 percent of Humble ISD students graduated, while 0.9 percent received their GED, 4.6 continued for a 5th year, and 2.5 per cent dropped out. Those numbers represent figures from 2010 because official numbers from the past school year are a year behind.

At the beginning of the meeting, local activist Bobby Petty spoke to the board. He again asked them to reconsider their decision late last year to change the terms for board members from three years to four years. Petty also wants to see the elections changed from May to November, and told the board they work for the voters.

“Dr. Sconzo works for you and you work for the voters,” Petty said. “If you don’t like that arrangement, there’s the door. Please resign. Let someone else take it that understands that arrangement.”

Petty’s presentation brought responses from several board members, including Keith Lapeze, who again challenged Petty to a

debate.

“That invitation is open and anytime you want to do so you can hold me personally accountable at any place of your choosing,” Lapeze said. “It’s a cowardly way to develop an argument when you’re debating with someone who can’t respond.”

The Texas Open Meetings Act prohibits board members to directly respond to items that are not on the agenda.

## **HUMBLE SCHOOL BOARD FACES CRITICISM OVER ELECTION DECISION**

By Rick Janacek  
December 21, 2011

A retired Air Force pilot is leading a personal battle with the Humble ISD School Board after its decision last month to make changes to the election cycle. The board made the changes to accommodate SB 100, but Bobby Petty said the wrong decision was made and flew in the face of the spirit of the bill.

“It [the change] should have had the opportunity for public input,” Petty said. “In one night, they lost some of the credibility of this school board.”

Senate Bill 100 makes several changes to election codes to help make it easier for members of the military that want to vote. The State Legislature implemented these changes after the federal government passed the MOVE Act in 2009. One of the changes in the laws states “that the runoff primary election date is the fourth Tuesday in May, rather than the second Tuesday in April, following the general primary election.”

That created a challenge for other entities like the City of Humble, which had to make changes to its election procedures to comply with the new law.

Last month the board voted to change the election cycle in the district and to change the number of years a trustee will hold their elected position from three to four years. That meant elections that were scheduled to be held next year will be moved to 2013.

The board had other options available, including one option to move the elections to November, but decided to leave the elections in May and make changes to the length of terms after the recommendation of Humble Superintendent Dr. Guy Sconzo. That move angered Petty, who began a campaign to stop the changes.

“It’s all about accountability,” Petty said.

And he believed the way the current system is set up makes it open to corruption.

“You actually have a situation where any special interest group can control the entire system,” Petty said. “The school board should be a reflection of the community as a whole. When only two percent of the people vote, how can you say that is a reflection of the community. We have early voting and absentee voting, but it’s only limited to here in Humble.”

Petty spoke to the board about the issue at its December meeting, stating that SB 100 was meant to align elections to help military voters. He also said the board had a chance to fix things but didn’t.

Petty’s comments and emails drew heated response from several members of the Humble school board, including trustee Keith Lapeze.

“The reason why I am serving the school board is because I have a vested interest in education,” Lapeze said. “Everybody on this board tries to their very best to do the right thing. To somehow suggest that we are being driven by some self interest, or to suggest that we are driven by some phantom special interest, is simply absurd. You don’t know us, you don’t know how these meetings operate, and to make these allegations in public is irresponsible.”

Sconzo defended his recommendations to Petty.

“I accept full and complete responsibility for making the recommendation I made to the board in response to SB 100,” he said. “I do not consider the difference in cost of \$19,000 for a May election and \$87,000 for a November election to be trivial. I made that recommendation, and I am not changing that recommendation.”

No new changes are expected to take place before the end of the year. The U.S. Department of Justice must also approve the school district’s proposed changes.