

HUMBLE ISD STRUGGLES TO GET PASSING GRADE ON DEBT LOAD, FINANCIALS

By Jacqueline Havelka

May 3, 2017

With the school board election quickly coming May 6, many voters are trying to sort out the true financial state of the district. There are three main factors that determine a district's financial health: bond history and ratings (outstanding debt), operational efficiency and unfunded future liabilities.

Texas leads the nation in school debt; South Carolina is second. While certainly not the only debt that Texas has, public school bonds account for the largest debt in the state by far. From 2007-2013, Texans incurred a staggering \$65 billion in principal bond debt. The Texas Public Policy Foundation says that known interest adds \$42 billion to that amount, for a total amassed debt of \$108 billion. Then, in 2014, Texans heaped \$10 billion to that amount for a total of \$75 billion in bond principal – before interest. Nearby Katy ISD voters approved the state's largest 2014 bond at the mind-numbing amount of nearly \$750 million. Districts around the state say the bonds are needed to replace aging facilities and for school security, but some are building more elaborate structures like fine arts centers, natatoriums and career tech centers.

So how does Humble ISD fare?

Bond history and ratings (outstanding debt)

Humble ISD voters approved

bonds in 2002, 2005 and 2008. The 2005 bond provided the \$71.7 million needed for the purchase of 67 acres and construction of Summer Creek High School.

In 2008, voters approved a \$245 million bond that included money for new campuses, funds for technology, campus improvements and administrative facilities. \$4 million was also included for land purchase for a new middle school.

Funds for all 2002-2008 bonds have been allocated. \$155 million of the 2008 bond fund has been used or earmarked for purchase of seven campus sites and construction of three new schools. Humble ISD Chief Financial Officer Mike Seale estimates that \$5-\$10 million will be available after all 2008 bond projects are completed, and any leftover money will be allocated to other projects, thereby reducing the amount needed in any future bond referendum.

Bond ratings are provided by three independent agencies as an indication of ability to pay principal and interest in a timely fashion. According to Seale, Humble ISD's 2016 bond sale had a AAA rating; he says that only about five percent of Texas districts have ratings that high, and feels sure that the rating won't be affected even if new bonds are issued.

The district also took advantage of historically low interest rates in selling and refinancing bonds from 2002-2008, saving taxpayers more than \$100 million in future interest payments.

Current trustees report that these savings will allow the district to keep the current property tax rate, which has remained at \$1.52 per \$100 valuation since the last bond measure in 2008.

Other factors also help the tax rate, like home appraised values and new home construction. Appraised values have risen significantly in the last few years, and the area has experienced a sharp rise in new home construction. Both result in significantly more total tax dollars available to fund district operations and capital expenditures, and that bigger tax pool has also contributed to keeping the rate flat. If a recession were to occur, the opposite would happen, resulting in upward pressure on the tax rate.

Operational efficiency

There are two pools of money that comprise the \$1.52 rate: M&O, operating costs for the district (\$1.17) and I&S, capital expenditures (\$0.35).

As a district grows, the M&O rate should drop because the school district should become more efficient in its operations. Indeed, Humble ISD has gone from \$1.50 in 2005 to today's current rate of \$1.17. Texas law ensures the I&S tax rate does not exceed \$0.50.

Seale said, "The state will not approve bond sales that would result in a debt service tax rate exceeding \$0.50. The district's current debt service tax rate is \$0.35. Combine that with the fact that we are so aggressive in retiring outstanding debt, and I am comfortable with projecting that this district will not have any trouble staying below the \$0.50 cap in the foreseeable future."

Trustee Robert Sitton has stated the debt principal is \$606 million, and said that while it looks like a large number, taxpayers "shouldn't worry because 87 percent of the debt will be paid off after 15 years."

Sitton has spoken on several occasions and on social media comparing Humble ISD to a peer group of other fast-growth districts in the area.

"We are THE best," said Sitton, who stated that Humble ISD has the lowest debt to taxable assessed value at 4.06 percent. Actually, Humble ISD ranks sixth out of 12 in that list, behind Aldine, Conroe, Katy, Fort Bend and Spring Branch.

Districts can be at or under the \$0.50 cap and still have crushing debt. Keller ISD was at or below \$0.50, but bonds passed in 2014 increased total taxpayer liability to over \$1.4 billion in principal and interest – a debt of \$42,000 per student, nearly three times the state average.

The Fast Growth School Coalition (FGSC) is a name synonymous with school district bonds. Humble ISD is a FGSC member; former superintendent Guy Sconzo is executive director and Keller ISD Superintendent Randy Reid is president. In Texas, FGSC opponents describe the organization as one to "raise your property taxes and eliminate existing borrowing limits." Some Texas ISDs and FGSC members like Hutto, Leander and Liberty Hill have amassed massive debt.

Another way to look at operational efficiency is cost per student. Humble ISD is about 5 percent higher than the state average. From 2010 to 2016, the cost per student in Humble ISD has increased from \$7,854 to \$8,851 at an annual growth rate of 2.1 percent. The state average for 2016 is around \$8,500. Seale stated that in 2011, the state cut funding to all districts, so a large part of the subsequent increase since then was needed to recover from those cuts. However, the \$8,851 cost per student reflects only operating cost. Annual debt service per student must be added to get a complete cost per student; for Humble ISD, that means adding approximately \$1,309, for a total cost per student of \$10,160.

District debt as of June 2016 is published in the Humble ISD Debt Transparency Report. Total district debt is nearly \$900 million. Campaign literature of candidates like Robert Sitton shows a newer, lower 2017 number of \$846 million, which reflects recent cost-saving measures, but the figures are not yet officially published on the district site. District rules cap debt level at seven percent of taxable assessed value (TAV). Using Sitton's number for 2016 TAV of nearly \$15 billion, the district's debt cap is a little over \$1 billion. Voter approval would be needed to change the district debt cap from seven to 10 percent, the amount of debt cap allowed by state law. If approved, using 2016 TAV numbers, Humble ISD's debt cap would be nearly \$1.5 billion.

Position 5 candidate Cliff Crossett strongly disagrees with those who say the district is in good financial shape.

In a March 26 candidate forum, Crossett said, "We are \$900 million in debt, and for a district our size, that is excessive. Even worse, the board is talking about putting a bond out next year. Refinancing of the debt has been a stroke of luck because of the low interest rates. To burden the taxpayers of our district with excessive debt is inexcusable to me."

Board members like Charles Cunningham told voters in the same March 26 candidate forum not to worry: "Who in here has no debt? How do we handle the debt? We've saved taxpayers over \$100 million. This board has been able to manage the debt."

Unfunded Liabilities

The district will likely need to call a new bond election in the next year. Outgoing Superintendent Guy Sconzo said in a May 2016 article, “Definitively, a 2018 bond referendum will be needed to open the doors of Elementary No. 30 and High School No. 7,” yet some current trustees say the bond might slip to 2019, if it’s even needed at all. In a bond election, a school district seeks voter permission to sell bonds. The bonds are sold to investors, paid for by tax revenues, and at maturity pay interest to the bond holders. In Texas, bonds can only be used to finance capital projects like land purchase, new school construction, and existing facility renovation. When a new school is built, many districts roll operating costs like buses and computer technology into the capital expenditures in order to keep M&O costs down; this is a tactic used by many Texas districts, and one that has contributed to the large debt numbers many ISDs are experiencing. It’s a financial problem because these assets are financed over 30 years, yet the lifespan of a bus or computer doesn’t last that long.

How much does the district need for a future bond call? The district says they don’t yet have the answer, despite some district statements that a bond could be needed as early as fall 2017. To determine the answer, the district commissioned a study; Sitton said in May 2016 that PBK Architects was hired to do a \$300,000 “rooftop to flowerbeds” comprehensive facilities assessment to review every Humble ISD building. A similar study was done in 2012 at a cost of \$155,660, but according to district spokesperson Jamie Mount, was a very limited study to identify ways in which older elementary schools could provide comparable learning environments to newer elementary campuses.

“It’s important that all students learn in outstanding facilities,” Mount said. The study also allowed the district to quickly build security vestibules at older schools after the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in Connecticut. The current study assesses the physical condition of each building, including mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, doors and windows, and all equipment. Most school districts do these assessments when anticipating a sizable future bond.

District patrons like Ted Mandel and Position 1 candidate Bob Rehak have complained at several school board meetings about the months of delay in producing the plan, originally due in November. At the time, Assistant Superintendent of Support Services Roger Brown said PBK Architects “has viewed, studied and assessed every facility in our district. We already know what new facilities we’ll need.” Yet the report’s release was delayed until January 2017, and is now delayed until this summer. The district says that the scope of information is massive since 52 facilities are being assessed, and that principals or responsible departments are taking the spring semester to review draft reports they’ve received and add crucial items; Mount cites an example of the police department’s need for additional parking as an example of an added item. Brown says that study findings and community feedback will be thoroughly assessed before calling for the bond election. Older schools might receive makeovers while others may be demolished and entirely rebuilt. Additionally, the report will prioritize buildings that need immediate attention versus buildings that can be addressed later. Out of the 52 facilities assessed, 23 of them are more than 30 years old. School districts typically demolish and replace structures at age 50; Humble ISD has seven. Rehak stated at the last meeting that he believes the board is ducking the bond issue discussion until after the upcoming school board election when they should be honestly discussing it now.

Both Cunningham and Seale have estimated the next bond referendum to be for \$600 million, but the report is not complete and there are many variables like interest rates, construction costs and land prices, so the amount could be much higher than \$600 million. Some have heard the next bond will go as high as \$1 billion. Time will tell when the report is finally finished and released to the community, and discussions about an impending bond begin.

SEVERAL CANDIDATES VIE FOR TRUSTEE POSITION 5

By Jacqueline Havelka

May 3, 2017

A deputy sheriff. A CEO. A Ph.D. ocean engineer. A former educator. An emergency room doctor. A civil engineer. Meet the candidates for the Humble ISD Board of Trustees Position 5, who cite a wide variety of topics like debt, school safety and Title

I schools as issues important to this upcoming election. Visit ourtribune.com for their answers to The Tribune's candidate questions.

Biazar

Shawn Biazar has been in law enforcement for over a decade. Most of his career has been with Humble ISD Police, and he currently serves as a Harris County deputy sheriff. Biazar said he is personally vested in the district and community and wants to serve on the board to deal with upcoming challenges like explosive growth, funding issues in recent years, and school safety.

Crossett

Cliff Crossett has worked in the medical industry for over 20 years, and is the president and CEO for US Cardio Partners. He believes the biggest issue for Humble ISD is better financial transparency and reining in the out-of-control debt. He says that his experience of running a business on a daily basis is sorely needed on the school board.

Datta-Barua

Lohit Datta-Barua was born in India to an impoverished family. Datta-Barua arrived in America with \$7 cash in his pocket, with his parents determined he would get the opportunity for higher education. He now has a Ph.D. in ocean engineering and is a retired project director in the oil and gas industry. He is running on a campaign of embracing change and competitiveness in education, and is a former University of Houston instructor and Houston ISD guest lecturer.

Dixon

Former teacher Martina Lemond Dixon says her Galena Park ISD teaching experience and board service to the American Community School in Abu Dhabi will serve Humble ISD well. She has a passion for public school education and is particularly proud of her role on the Humble ISD council of PTAs and Humble ISD Education Foundation Board.

Panzarella

Robert Panzarella is particularly interested in making sure all the children in the district get the best education possible and making sure that Humble High School lives up to its potential in the community. Now that he is semi-retired, he states he has the time to devote to civic projects and the Humble ISD board. He is a physician, double-boarded in family medicine and emergency medicine, and has practiced in the ER at San Jacinto Methodist Hospital in Baytown for the last 26 years.

Prevot

Jonathan Prevot cites a City of Houston career as a civil engineer and his land sales business in Huffman as good experience for serving on the board. He is not running because of any particular problem, and says that Humble ISD is a great school district, which is why he chose to live in Atascocita. Prevot notes that he is concerned about the debt and feels the district should be less reliant on bonds.

Election Day is May 6, 2017.

RUSHING RESIGNS, LEAVING FIVE SEATS UNDECIDED

By Jacqueline Havelka

April 19, 2017

Heath Rushing was absent from the regular Humble ISD Board of Trustees meeting held on April 11 due to a death in his family, but Board President Keith Lapeze read Rushing's letter of resignation that stated, "It is with mixed emotions that I resign from the board of trustees."

In the letter, Rushing explained that his career took an unexpected turn this February when he was asked to serve as CEO of the Memorial Hermann Cypress and Katy hospitals.

Rushing continued, “While I didn’t fully understand at the time what this change meant for me and my family, it has become clear to me now that in order to meet my own professional expectations, relocation is required.”

In the statement, Rushing said that he had hoped to remain a trustee until the board meeting June 13 to help present a full budget and to complete his duties as finance committee chair. His relocation is preventing him from staying until June.

“My wife and I are closing on our home in Kingwood as well as on our new house in Fulshear, Texas on Thursday, April 13,” Rushing noted in the statement.

The Tribune previously reported that the Rushings received an offer on their Kingwood home on Feb. 21, the same day it was listed, with a final offer accepted on March 3. As expected, the Rushings have negotiated a deal with their buyer and will remain in their Kingwood home until June 9 to allow their children to finish the school year in Humble ISD. Since a board member must reside in the district in which they serve, Rushing cannot remain as a trustee for the June 13 meeting, and instead will have an effective resignation date of May 9, three days after the trustee election on May 6.

After the announcement, many reacted to the news on social media by stating that Rushing had waited too long to resign, and that the timing seemed meticulously planned rather than coincidental. Some admonished the current board for not forcing the issue sooner.

During the portion of the meeting reserved for public comment, Bob Rehak, who is running for a board position, addressed the board regarding issues of financial transparency. Rehak very clearly stated that he was not accusing anyone of financial impropriety, but expressed his concerns after reviewing some fairly cryptic agenda items: multi-million dollar contract awards without competitive bid information, hiring of expensive outside consultants, and huge annual spending increases that Rehak said could be redirected to instruction.

Rehak asked the board several probing questions regarding these expenditures, and asked them to postpone voting for the spending until more information could be provided to the public. While the board attempted to address some issues, many of Rehak’s questions remained unanswered, and in the end, the board unanimously approved spending on all of the items. The board has often cited the Texas Public Meetings Act restrictions as the reason they don’t comment in open board meetings, but The Tribune learned that the board is not always restricted in every circumstance.

Later, Rehak expressed his disappointment with the board’s actions: “I went into this meeting seeking simple explanations about how my taxes were spent, but came away deeply suspicious with more questions than ever. It makes you wonder whether they’re hiding something. The more they resist simple explanations, the more excuses they make, the more evasive their responses become, the more they fight full disclosure, the more convinced I become that we need radical change on the board.”

MEET THE HUMBLE ISD POSITION 4 CANDIDATES

By Jacqueline Havelka

April 19, 2017

Longtime Humble ISD board member Charles Cunningham currently holds Position 4 on the board and is being challenged by newcomer Abby Whitmire in the election on May 6.

Cunningham grew up in a small town filled with community pride, and is indebted to the talented teachers who inspired his passion for history and geography, which led to Army service and a degree from Our Lady of the Lake University. Cunningham has lived in Humble for 23 years where he is a key accounts consultant for CenterPoint Energy. To this day, Cunningham continues to value education, the area of volunteerism that he’s most passionate about. “When education is a priority, our children, teachers and community win,” Cunningham said.

What is the greatest challenge that Humble ISD will face in the next four years, during your term, and what remedies do you offer to address it?

One of the greatest challenges Humble ISD will face will be management of our growth. When enrollment grows, needs grow. The district needs more space, more technology and more teachers, and I advocate elimination of temporary fixes and instead want to achieve long-term solutions.

Name one or two things you've done to help youth in our community or in other communities in which you've lived.

My youth community service includes working with the Boys Scouts of America and serving as a youth Sunday school teacher at my church.

Are there educational innovations that you've seen other places that you would bring to our district?

I would like to see our district fully implement a virtual school campus that allows our students flexibility in accommodating their different learning styles, engages them in team collaboration, and incorporates technology that is part of today's world and workplace.

Do you have any comments regarding board priorities for the 85th Texas Legislative session?

I am in favor of sustaining the HB4 grant funding. HB4 is a tremendous first step. The pipeline to building a skilled workforce begins with high quality pre-kindergarten. I will continue to advocate and invest in tomorrow's workforce by supporting high quality pre-K education because it can reduce the achievement gaps.

Position 4 candidate Abby Whitmire is proud to be a product of Texas public schools, first as a student in New Braunfels ISD and then as a Longhorn at The University of Texas at Austin, where she earned a B.A. in government in 2006. She credits her amazing, committed and creative teachers who cared so deeply about their students. Whitmire is a firm believer that regardless of family income or living situation, all Texas children deserve great, well-resourced schools where teachers are both empowered and respected. "Creating a better community for children is a lifelong passion, and I relish the opportunity to have an even bigger impact on children's lives as a school board member," Whitmire said.

Do you feel that there is a communication divide between the community and the board? If so, how do you plan to bridge that divide to restore confidence in the board?

I do. A sizable portion of the community feels ignored or dismissed by the current board. If elected, I plan to set aside time weekly to meet with community members, parents and anyone who would like to talk to a board member, in addition to an open-door policy. I will take their perspectives to the full board and push for a respectful and thoughtful response.

Name one or two things you've done to help youth in our community or in other communities in which you've lived.

I was the development officer for the New Orleans office of The Posse Foundation, one of the most comprehensive and renowned college access and youth leadership development programs in the United States. Posse identifies public high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential who may be overlooked by traditional colleges, and offers these students opportunities to pursue education via colleges and universities that partner with Posse to award four-year, full-tuition scholarships. It was an honor to advance such a mission.

Additionally, I have chosen volunteer projects that directly impact children in the community, such as training middle school students in the Safe Sitter program, participating in the Houston Holocaust Museum's robust education and outreach program, and working with new teen moms at Ben Taub Hospital.

How do you define student success?

It's more than the basic measurements of graduation rates and grades. I advocate a holistic approach to evaluating student success and want to see students develop critical thinking and reasoning skills, cooperate with others in a variety of settings, take responsibility for their actions, and learn how to be active and informed citizens in society. I would also love to see them

enjoy learning and continue it beyond the classroom and for the rest of their lives.

Do you think school board elections should be partisan and do you think candidates should be backed by a party? Would you accept an invitation to speak to a group that is clearly partisan and if so, why?

Educating our kids to reach their full potential is a value we all share, regardless of political affiliation. This is why school board elections should remain non-partisan. Political parties may decide to support particular candidates, and as a candidate or future school board member, I would not decline invitations to speak to any group. This district belongs to all of us, and everyone deserves to be addressed with dignity and respect.

THREE VIE FOR POSITION 1

By Jacqueline Havelka

March 22, 2017

Robert Sitton

Robert Sitton was originally elected to the board of trustees in 2011 to fill the unexpired term of newly elected State Representative for District 127, Dan Huberty. Sitton was re-elected for a full, four-year term in 2013. Sitton is a financial advisor for Edward Jones Investments, a lifelong Humble resident and former teacher and coach in Aldine ISD.

What is the greatest challenge Humble ISD will face in the next four years, during your term, and what remedies do you offer to address it?

The greatest challenge for Humble ISD is growth. We are currently serving over 41,000 students. That number is expected to top 52,000 over the next eight years. We must handle that growth with appropriate facilities and staffing needs. We will need to address a bond referendum, probably in 2018, in order to continue keeping up with the anticipated growth.

Name one or two things you've done to help youth in our community or in other communities in which you've lived.

I taught personal finance, business law and general business for eight years in Aldine ISD. I also coached football and baseball. I spent several years involved with the Humble Baseball Association and the Humble Area Football League. I have served as a coach, mentor and board member for HBA and coached for several years in HAFL.

I volunteered with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, whose primary purpose is to raise scholarship money for area students. I [now] enjoy reading to elementary students all around the district.

What is one program or service in the school budget that you would cut and why? One that you would add and why?

We established the Program Evaluation Committee to ensure that all programs and services remain relevant and efficient. I currently chair this committee and have served on it for the past five years. At this time, we do not need to cut any programs or services.

How do you define student success?

Student success cannot be measured by a single test. We must teach the whole child and it is our responsibility to teach all students. It is not our job to determine which students will attend a four-year institution, a two-year college, a tech school or go directly into the work force. Regardless which path the students choose, it is our responsibility to give them every opportunity to succeed. In doing so, we must offer pathways for college AND career readiness. At the end of the day, we must produce young adults that can be productive in our society regardless of the path they choose.

Bob Rehak

Rehak has been a Kingwood resident for 33 years and had two children who attended Bear Branch Elementary, Kingwood Middle and Kingwood High schools. He owned a local business, Rehak Creative Services, for 22 years and retired from that business last year.

Do you feel that there is a communication divide between the community and the board? If so, how do you plan to bridge that divide to restore confidence in the board?

Communication between the board and the community needs to be improved. I've talked to dozens of parents who felt their voices were not heard in the selection of the new superintendent. Listening and talking openly goes a long way toward creating trust.

Also, the Humble ISD website and the information on it could stand a good scrubbing. Many of the documents are filled with jargon and acronyms that make them difficult to comprehend. Also, the navigation is non-intuitive.

Also, why has there been so little talk about the need for an upcoming bond election before the board election? The 'official' answer is that they don't yet know how the bonds will be structured or how much they will need. But average school costs can give us the rough magnitude. If you assume an average cost of \$45K per student, and that we are expected to add 11,500 students in the next five years, the financial need would total more than a half billion dollars just for new schools. Then add to that the cost of renovating, repairing and replacing several older schools. Where will the priorities be? How much can we afford? These are major issues that our current school board should be discussing right now, during the election, not after.

What are you hoping to get out of your board experience?

The district expects to grow approximately 20 percent in the next five years. In the rush to build new schools, I want to make sure the needs of students and teachers in existing schools, especially our 11 Title One schools, are not overlooked. I want to make sure that teachers have the tools, training, time and support to inspire every student to be the best she or he can be.

Name one or two things you've done to help youth in our community or in other communities in which you've lived.

I worked with the Children's Defense Fund and American Leadership Forum to raise awareness of ways to disrupt the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. The overriding characteristic of those caught in the Cradle to Prison Pipeline crisis is poverty. CityData.com estimates that almost one in four Humble children lives in poverty. To help break the cycle of poverty, the district needs to build more community partnerships with businesses, parent groups, volunteers, nonprofits, other branches of government, and community organizations.

I was a founding sponsor of the Ecobot Challenge – a free, statewide robotics contest designed to interest middle school students in math, science and technology. In the nine years since its inception, more than 3,000 Humble ISD students have participated in the Ecobot Challenge.

Name one thing the district is doing well, and one thing you would change.

The Humble Gifted/Talented and Advanced Placement programs are among the best in any school system anywhere. However, we also have a growing number of Title One Schools that have high percentages of people living below the poverty line. We now have 11 of those schools south of the river. For years, the academic performance of these schools has suffered compared to the rest of the district. Families in this area represent the working poor. The school district can't solve all [of their problems] alone, but it can address many issues and work with community partners to address the rest.

Regarding one thing I would change: some board members have [lobbied] to change the way our schools are graded in order to make them look better. I believe the question is not, 'Can we change the way schools are graded,' but 'What can we do to improve the grades?'

Rolando Cruz

Rolando "Roli" Cruz is a native Texan and the proud son of a U.S. Air Force member. He received his K-12 education in

Humble ISD, but the classroom is not the only place that he learned his most valuable lessons. As the eldest of four children, Cruz learned what it meant to protect the vulnerable when a family member received an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis that affected how he was taught and expected to learn. As a global tech professional for Apple, Cruz says he can identify with challenges that students will face as they matriculate into the real world to meet the rigorous demands of changing industries.

What are the kinds of circumstances in which you are most effective?

Circumstances that require equal amounts of introspection and action. It's imperative that all the moving parts of an entity like the Humble ISD educational community be examined, and from every perspective, to make sound and responsible decisions for all those that would be affected. I am an analytical thinker who believes that every decision should start with a "why" and then a "how." Decisions should be rooted in strategy and executed with compassion.

What appeals to you about board service as a volunteer activity?

What appeals to me most is the opportunity to interact with the educational community and the families that support our students from several angles. It's easy to make conclusions from a bird's eye view, but the task becomes more meaningful when it is rooted in volunteerism. Looking students, parents and teachers in the eye, hearing their concerns, and becoming exposed to their potential should embolden servant leaders to lead well with equity being top of mind.

How do you define student success?

Student success can come in many forms. I believe the measuring of success should focus on ensuring that every student gets an equal share in their development, proficiency and talents; cultivating the WHOLE student. The school system should focus on the intellectual, emotional, social, ethical and physical development of a student. When you look at my three-point-plan for driving equal, equitable education, much of what I describe as 'student success' lies in Point 1: 'Care.' Learn more at rolicruz.org.

Are there educational innovations that you've seen other places that you would bring to our district?

School systems emphasize that the sole benefit of education is securing a job, but we rarely illustrate what those options can be. Many only see a 'job' as what their parents or grandparents do, leaving more to be explored.

High School, INC. is where students get a real-world application of what 'business' means. From entrepreneurship to corporate roles, students participate in classroom learning and also internships, which provide a more precise understanding of how their hard work equates. I believe if we brought a program like this to Humble, or redefined an existing program, it will be life changing.

HUMBLE ISD CANDIDATES DRAW SPOTS

By Jacqueline Havelka

March 8, 2017

A drawing was held at the Humble ISD Administration Building Feb. 27 to determine the order in which the board of trustees candidate names will be printed on the May ballot. Candidates officially filed as of Feb. 17 for the May 6 election. Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Fagen's Executive Assistant Beverly Aden conducted the drawing. The following are the results of the drawing:

Position 1: Sitton/Rehak/Cruz

Incumbent Robert Sitton was not present, but his wife, Jen Sitton, attended and drew for him. Bob Rehak drew the second spot, and a stand-in drew ballot position 3 for Roli Cruz.

Position 3: Herron/Conrad

Christopher Herron attended and drew ballot position 1. Angela Conrad did not attend the drawing.

Position 4: Whitmire/Cunningham

Incumbent Charles Cunningham, in a gracious gesture, let his opponent draw first. Abby Whitmire was not present; a stand-in who attended drew for her.

Position 5: Dixon/Datta-Barua/Clayton/Prevot/Biazar/Crossett/Panzarella

There was a lively ballot drawing for the seven candidates for Position 5 being vacated by Brent Engelage. Panzarella was not present but the other six attended.

The race for Position 3 is down to two candidates after Deborah Yocham withdrew her candidacy Feb. 24. Remaining in the race are incumbent Angela Conrad and challenger Christopher D. Herron.

Yocham picked up a school board packet the day before they were due, on Feb. 16, and originally expressed interest in Position 5. However, when she turned her packet in on the next day, she filed to run in Position 3. One week later, she dropped out of the race. Yocham said she realized after having coffee with Conrad that they think alike and she didn't want to stay in the race. Herron said he too has been invited to coffee by Conrad but has not accepted her offer.

The election is May 6.

15 SIGN UP FOR HUMBLE ISD BOARD ELECTION

By Jacqueline Havelka

February 22, 2017

Feb. 17 was a busy day at the Humble ISD administration building as several new candidates officially declared their intentions to run for seats on the Humble ISD Board of Trustees. In all, 15 candidates have filed to run in the May 2017 election. The district's administration office had seen a flurry of activity in the last two days as seven people officially filed on the last day. Here is the list of contenders:

Position 1: Three candidates have filed to run for Position 1.

Incumbent Robert Sitton is a longtime Humble resident and former teacher and coach, and was elected to Position 1 in 2011 when the seat was vacated by Dan Huberty after his election to the Texas State House of Representatives. Sitton is a financial advisor for Edward Jones Investments and is the chairman for Kingwood Medical Center board.

Rolando Iseas Cruz originally filed to run for Position 5, but changed his candidacy Feb. 14 to instead run for Position 1. Cruz is a graduate of Humble High School and currently attends University of Houston. He has been contemplating how he can give back to the Humble community he loves, and that prompted him to run for a trustee position.

Robert Rehak is also running for Position 1. He has been a Kingwood resident for 33 years and owned Rehak Creative Services, a Houston-based marketing communications company specializing in high-technology and corporate advertising, for 22 years. He retired from that business last year and is running for trustee as a significant way to give back to the community he loves. Additionally, Rehak is a founding sponsor of the All Earth Ecobot Challenge, a free, statewide robotics competition for grades 4-8; Humble ISD sends dozens of teams each year to the competition.

Position 3: Three candidates have filed to run for Position 3.

Incumbent Angela Conrad has filed for re-election. She is currently serving her first term after being elected in 2013. She is a

former Humble ISD teacher and currently is employed by Insuperity as an instructional designer. Conrad earned the designation of “Master Trustee” upon completion of Leadership TASB, a program sponsored by the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB), and is also a 2016 graduate of Leadership Lake Houston, a program designed to grow and develop community leaders.

Christopher D. Herron has also filed for Position 3. Herron was born and raised in Huntsville, Texas, graduated from Dartmouth College and received an MBA from SMU. He lives in northeast Houston and his family members include a school superintendent, school counselor, head football coach and athletic director, and teachers. Herron has worked in the energy, telecom, and industrial manufacturing sectors in various roles, including leading major capital projects and structured financial acquisitions. Herron is currently a business development manager at NRG Energy Services and has global work experience in England, Mexico and Denmark.

Deborah Yocham has also filed for Position 3. Now retired, she has served in various roles in Humble ISD, including assistant superintendent of elementary schools, director of construction and facilities planning, and is a past elementary school principal for Willow Creek Elementary.

Position 4: Two candidates will vie for Position 4.

Incumbent Charles Cunningham has filed for re-election. A longtime employee of CenterPoint Energy, Cunningham has served on the board since 2007. He also has a board of director position on the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB).

Abigail Davison Whitmire is also a candidate for Position 4. She grew up in New Braunfels and is a self-described product of Texas public schools. She graduated from The University of Texas at Austin with a B.A. in government. Whitmire is currently a stay-at-home mom, but had a previous career in nonprofit fundraising. She also worked for the New Orleans-based Posse Foundation, a college access and youth leadership development program.

Position 5: Nine-year board member Brent Engelage will not seek re-election. Several candidates have filed for the open Position 5.

Martina Lemond Dixon filed for Position 5 Jan. 18. Another longtime Humble area resident, Dixon, is a former teacher and currently serves on the board of directors for the Humble ISD Education Foundation. She has served in several capacities there, including treasurer, chair of the finance committee, and member of the grant committee. Dixon also currently serves on the district Dream Team, a group of community leaders convened to recommend core competencies that any Humble ISD graduate should have (Portrait of an Humble ISD Graduate).

Dr. Lohit Datta-Barua filed Feb. 9. Datta-Barua has a Ph.D. in engineering and is a former project director in the oil and gas industry, where he was responsible for managing multimillion dollar projects. He is also a past University of Houston instructor, guest lecturer in Houston ISD and superintendent of United Gas Pipeline’s Technical Training Center. Additionally, he is currently volunteering at Fall Creek Elementary where he started a running club to promote healthy habits.

Shawn Biazar filed Feb. 15. Biazar is a deputy sheriff with the Harris County Sheriff’s Office, but the majority of his career has been with the Humble ISD Police Department. He holds a Texas Master Peace Officer license and is a member of the North Harris County Criminal Justice Association. Biazar was honored by the Lake Houston Area Chamber of Commerce as the 2011 Peace Officer of the Year for dedication and service to the community; Biazar received similar honors in 2011 from Congressman Ted Poe and Huberty. Biazar is running to be of greater service to the community.

Atascocita resident Jonathan Prevot is also a candidate. He graduated from University of Houston and was a civil engineer with the City of Houston for eight years. He is now a small business owner in Atascocita.

Robert Panzarella has lived in the Humble area his entire life. Panzarella attended Humble ISD schools and graduated with a biology degree from The University of Texas at Austin. He went to medical school at Texas Tech University School of Medicine, and did his internship and residency at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. He has practiced in the ER at San Jacinto Methodist Hospital in Baytown for the last 26 years, and is double-boarded in family medicine and emergency medicine. He has been on the board of directors of the Northeast Hospital Authority for over 10 years.

Edgar Clayton and Clifford Crossett have also decided to run. Information on them was unavailable.

HUMBLE ISD BOARD APPROVES LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

By Jacqueline Havelka

February 22, 2017

The Humble ISD board approved its priorities for the 85th Texas Legislative session during its recent monthly meeting. After convening a Legislative Committee some weeks ago, the list was developed, which includes support for full funding of Pre-K for all students who meet the state eligibility requirements.

The district opposes additional funding for charter schools unless adequate funding is also provided to traditional public schools, and also opposes any state voucher plan that diverts public tax dollars to private entities or home school students with little or no academic or financial accountability to the state, taxpayers or local communities.

Board member Robert Sitton aired his grievances about what he said are unfounded rumors.

“Just so there’s no confusion in the media or in the public; we oppose any voucher program, taxpayer savings grants, or virtual vouchers that divert public funds to these private entities. To reiterate, we oppose any vouchers that divert public money ... that’s all I’ve got to say.”

Keith Lapeze, another member, also chastised the public. “Apparently, people like to invent things that this board is for or against, so I believe he (Sitton) is just making that very clear.”

“This is not a political issue; we support what is best for Humble ISD,” Lapeze added while announcing that Rep. Dan Huberty has been appointed chair of the House Public Education Committee, a position Lapeze described as “a very powerful position” and reminded everyone that it helps Humble ISD “to have a friend (in Huberty)” in what is shaping up to be a very tough legislative session.

Some Humble parents were quick to jump on these sentiments, expressing disbelief or pointing out that what the Humble board thinks is meaningless if the state passes state-wide laws.

“It doesn’t matter what the board says if the laws are changed in the entire state of Texas. That being said, I hope they are making it abundantly clear to their friend Dan Huberty their feelings on the subject seeing he will be driving the School Choice train in the Ed Committee. I’d like to see a public statement to Huberty from our board saying this,” wrote one parent on the Humble ISD Parents Facebook page.

The proposed 2017-2018 school calendar also proved to be a controversial agenda item. Courtney Ieva addressed the board, urging them to take a closer look and propose a better calendar for next school year. Ieva cited the late Aug. 28 start date, the imbalance of days in each semester, and issues with staff days as items that need to be addressed. The board voted to approve the 2017-18 calendar as is because of timeliness, but board member Angela Conrad stated that the district will look at more innovative options for the 2018-19 calendar, with particular emphasis that the calendar be reviewed to ensure alignment with the Portrait of an Humble ISD Graduate initiative.

This initiative is the result of a committee Humble ISD assembled and named the “Dream Team.” Several meetings, comprised of students, parents, and business and community leaders, spent several months to come up with a list of recommended desirable traits for a Portrait of an Humble ISD Graduate. The Dream Team’s official recommendations will be presented at the March board meeting.

Humble Middle School Principal Henry Phipps was joined by several of his students to announce that the school has been

named an AVID national demonstration school. AVID, which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination, is an elective course that prepares 6th-8th grade students for high school and college.

Finally, the hotly contested ASE/ESE rezoning issue was voted on by the board, with approval of two flex zone attendance boundaries that provide students in those zones the option of attending their current school or the new Elementary School #28 being built in The Groves.

FILING OPEN FOR HUMBLE ISD SCHOOL BOARD

By John A. Crone

February 8, 2017

The filing period for the four open positions for the Humble ISD Board of Trustees ends on Feb. 17. Four of the seven school board positions – positions 1, 3, 4 and 5 – are up for re-election in May.

As of Jan. 31, four people have formally filed to run. Martina Dixon and Rolando Iseas Cruz have formally filed to run for Position 5, which will be vacated by Brent Engelage in May. Another contender is Lohit Datta-Barua, who has an intent to file for Position 5 when he returns from a trip out of the country. Incumbents Robert Sitton (Position 1) and Angela Conrad (Position 3) have also filed for their re-election bids.

Applications may be placed in person or mailed to the Humble Independent School District Administration Building, Beverly Aden, 20200 Eastway Village Drive, Humble 77338.

There are a few important election dates to remember: election day is May 6; the last day to register to vote is April 6; and the early voting period is April 24-May 2. Mail-in ballots are allowed, but an application for a mail ballot must be received by April 25, with the actual ballot postmarked on or before May 6.

HUFFMAN BOARD RESPONDS TO NEW STATE RATINGS

By Jacqueline Havelka

February 22, 2017

The Huffman school board passed a resolution of concern at the January meeting regarding the requirement by the Texas Legislature for the Commission of Education to implement a public-school rating system that would assign A through F grades to schools and school districts. This rating system is to begin with the 2017-2018 school year. A preliminary rating for each campus and district was released in January.

“Fifty-five percent of the rating system is tied to the STAAR assessment and testing done each year for all students,” Superintendent Dr. Benny Soileau said. “Over 500 districts in the state have passed similar resolutions of concern that the state doesn’t recognize individual student achievement. Public education is under attack and some want to take dollars and transfer them to charter and home school education programs.”

A response to the grading system is posted on the district’s website. The district’s preliminary grades were reported as one C and three Ds. The website posting states that “the system does not accurately represent the quality of schools, staff and students in Huffman ISD. The reduction of our schools to a single letter grade dismisses the unique qualities and gifts of our students ...

Such systems are not supported by definitive research to show that any rating system by itself improves school performance.”

The board’s resolution “requests a new system to rate campuses and districts that provides a more accurate and valid reflection of how public schools are performing in the state of Texas.”

The board also honored several students.

Being named Academic All State team members by the Texas High School Coaches Association were the following Hargrave High School boys football team members: Austin Gee, Austin Greer, David Holley, Mason Murray, Dylan Wilson and Trainer Kayla Lee.

Retired Capt. David Brown III awarded University of Houston scholarships to JROTC members Michael Kettle, Alex Robles and Carey Warren. Melissa Galar, Laycie Edwards and Tara Floch were also presented as the current Falcon Battalion leadership team.

The school board thanked art teachers Nani Heaslep, Donna Hardin, Bernadette Vital and Bonnie Jackson for their contributions to the development of the district’s fine arts program. The board cited the Houston Livestock and Rodeo Art program, where students can exercise and display their talents. The following students were recognized: The best of show winners were Kelsee Carlile, Kristin Kruger, Reagan Currie and Zachary Schwartz. The gold medal winners were Mario Lopez, Anna Hayden, Katie Ervin, Savannah Dietert and McKenzie Laird.

The board received an update on the completion of the agricultural building and the status of the construction of the new elementary and middle schools, and improvements to the high school. The projects will have construction bids going out this spring.

TEA SCORES FOR HUMBLE ISD DRAW PUSHBACK FROM DISTRICT

By Jacqueline Havelka

January 25, 2017

Humble ISD scores on the recently released, and brand new, Texas Education Agency (TEA) accountability system were not particularly good ones. The TEA school accountability system gives a letter grade (A-F) to campuses and districts in five categories (domains): (I) student achievement, (II) student progress, (III) closing achievement gaps, (IV) postsecondary readiness, and (V) community and student engagement. An overall “GPA” of the five combined scores is also computed.

When the 84th Texas Legislature passed HB 2804, it changed the Texas school accountability system so that every campus and district receives one of five ratings from A-F. According to the TEA, campuses receive grades “much like students receive grades in individual subjects and those are combined for a GPA. The law requires schools and districts to be issued grades based on five different areas of performance or “domains,” and those five grades must be combined into a single overall rating. The overall results for Humble ISD were B/B/D/D.

School administrators in Humble and across the state have urged their populations to withhold judgement.

HB 2804 required the TEA to provide a preliminary baseline report showing what district and campus ratings for domains I-IV would have been for the 2015-16 school year had the new rating system been in place. Domain V was not yet rated, so an overall GPA rating was not yet given to any campus or district. The TEA states that “the A-F rating for any campus is based on the best of student achievement or growth, combined with how well a school performs relative to its level of poverty, how well kids are prepared for college, career or the military, and how the local school system grades itself.”

Humble ISD received two failing grades of D in Domains III (closing achievement gaps) and IV (postsecondary readiness).

The TEA measures Domain III as an effectiveness indicator that takes into account improvement of STAAR scores for economically disadvantaged students.

Three high schools -- Atascocita, Humble and Summer Creek -- received F ratings in postsecondary readiness in the current report. Out of 41 Humble ISD schools graded, only Quest Early College High School got four straight As.

So how does Humble ISD stack up against other school districts in Texas? Out of nearly 1,200 school districts, only two districts, Klondike ISD and Malta ISD, received straight As. One-third of districts received Ds in Domain III, and only 10-13 percent of all districts received an A in any of the four categories.

More than 160 school districts across the state have taken a public stance against the TEA's new rating system. Administrators across the state want the Texas Legislature to know that the new system is seriously flawed, and urge lawmakers to listen to and work with teachers and administrators on improvements. Some districts have gone so far as to petition the Texas Legislature to repeal the new system, while other districts claim that it is a direct attempt to institute the school voucher system across the state. The Dallas Morning News recently reported that DeSoto ISD Superintendent David Harris said, "This continued attack on public schools is an attack on the foundation of our country. The government 'ranking' and comparing of schools feeds the agenda of those claiming our schools are failing and vouchers are the answer. Meanwhile, public schools tend to be underfunded and over-mandated by the state and federal governments."

Other districts state that their job is simply to implement the legislation, and are solely focused on how they will improve their preliminary TEA grades.

Humble ISD Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Fagen said in a prepared statement, "We embrace accountability, but it is important to remember that these ratings are one data point, largely related to the STAAR test. Our high-quality work is not easily measured by one test. All Humble ISD principals will be reviewing the provisional ratings and will dig into the underlying data in an effort to answer questions specific to their schools. Providing the educational experiences for all children that our community values and demonstrating our progress on those outcomes is what matters most."

Additionally, the district has prepared a detailed summary entitled "Five Reasons Why the A-F Ratings Are Not An Accurate Depiction Of Our Schools;" the full document can be found at humbleisd.net/Page/90705.

In summary, Humble ISD officially expressed concern that the new system utilizes a flawed methodology, inequitable comparison of wealthy and poor schools, and too much emphasis on once-per-year STAAR tests. The district states that the rules and calculations behind each letter grade are too complex, making it hard to truly understand just what a letter grade really means and thus creating false impressions. Furthermore, Humble ISD says the letter grades give no sense of what a school must do to improve.

The Tribune contacted Board President Keith Lapeze for comment on why the district had apparently rated so poorly, but Lapeze had not responded as of press time.

The new rating system will not be fully implemented until August 2018. In the interim, the current TEA rating system is still in place, whereby a Texas school receives one of four ratings -- unacceptable, acceptable, recognized and exemplary.

The Legislature approved the grading system during the 2015 session. Other states, including Oklahoma and West Virginia, have similar accountability measures. Virginia, however, killed its plan to give letter grades over concerns of fairness to schools. Time will tell what the future holds for Texas school districts.

See OurTribune.com [Jan. 9, 2017] for the complete Humble ISD school-by-school scores. The detailed TEA report can be found at tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Accountability/A-F_Accountability_Resources.

HUMBLE SCHOOL BOARD RECEIVES THANKS, SUPPORT

By John A. Crone

January 25, 2017

The January meeting of the Humble Independent School District Board was punctuated with numerous presentations thanking and supporting the school board for its service. The Texas Association of School Boards has named January as School Board Recognition Month.

The Humble School Board members were thanked by several groups, including the Future Farmers of America clubs, district drill team members, Kingwood High School student officers, Commissioner Jack Cagle's office, and the Association of Texas Professional Educators.

"The single most important component for the district is the quality of teachers and this is accomplished through the support of the school board," Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Fagen said. "The trustees put in a lot of work and study, and their involvement is from the heart. I am very grateful to have our board. They make the right decisions and support our schools."

North Belt Elementary was recognized for being named a 2017 Model School by the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE). This designation means that North Belt Elementary is considered one of the most rapidly improving schools in the nation. In June 2017, the North Belt leadership team will lead a forum where they will share their innovative practices with more than 6,000 educators.

Each month, campuses and departments select an individual to be honored as a Super Staffer for outstanding work in advancing student achievement. A drawing is held and three honorees receive additional recognition, including a \$200 gift card to Pappas Restaurants, thanks to award sponsor Gulf Coast Educators Credit Union.

Honored at the January board meeting were the following Super Staffers:

Kathy Jones, Fall Creek Elementary, Literacy Academic Lead Teacher. Those who nominated Jones said, "Kathy continuously finds new ways to support the learning of the teachers. Kathy's expert guidance leads to more rigorous, relevant and engaging lessons and increased teacher and student success."

Carla Brookshire, Community Learning Center, Mosaic Teacher. Those who nominated Brookshire said, "Carla has gone above and beyond to help a student find a job after struggling to gain employment. She worked with the student on job skills and with the transition team to find a site that would work for the student."

Traci Herrod, Transportation, Payroll Specialist. Those who nominated Herrod said, "Traci is our payroll specialist and a whole lot more. She has been with the district for 4.5 years and performed an amazing job."

Humble ISD Education Foundation Board President Jen Sitton presented a \$328,220 check payable to Humble ISD. These funds had been donated by 3,083 employees across the district. Grants will be made to support teachers and campus projects. Fagen thanked the employees who donated and said, "This shows that employees believe in their own school district. They give their own money to support the future of the school district."

Vicky Woo, a parent representing the Eagle Springs Elementary School PTO, made a presentation to the board. She asked the school board to consider several factors before implementing the proposed elementary attendance zone changes that are under consideration. The board received her comments and promised to take them into account in their deliberations.

Mike Seale, assistant superintendent and chief financial officer, reported to the board on the recent redemption of \$10 million in bonds that would have matured in 2027. The school district was able to use available funds to redeem these bonds. He estimated the district would save \$1,775,000 in interest expense as a result of the early redemption.

MAJORITY OF HUMBLE ISD BOARD POSITIONS UP FOR ELECTION

By Jacqueline Havelka

January 11, 2017

Four of the seven school board positions are up for re-election. The terms end in May for positions 1, 3, 4 and 5, held respectively by Robert Sitton, Angela Conrad, Charles Cunningham and Brent Engelage. Nine-year board member Engelage will not run for reelection. The remaining three board members — Nancy Morrison, Heath Rushing and Keith Lapeze — have terms remaining until May 2019.

On Dec.16, Humble ISD filed a public notice regarding filing of applications for a place on the regular trustee election ballot for the May election. The filing period starts Jan. 18 and ends Feb. 17, 2017. Applications may be placed in person or mailed to Humble Independent School District Administration Building, Beverly Aden, 20200 Eastway Village Drive in Humble.

Election Day is May 6; the last day to register to vote is April 6 and the early voting period is April 24-May 2. Mail-in ballots are allowed, but an application for a mail ballot must be received by April 25, with the actual ballot postmarked on or before May 6.