

THE 2026

STATE OF THE ARTS IN EDUCATION SYMPOSIUM

ASIA SOCIETY TEXAS CENTER

April 23rd, 2026



PRESENTED BY

ARTS CONNECT
H O U S T O N

WELCOME TO

THE 2026 STATE OF THE ARTS SYMPOSIUM

On behalf of Arts Connect Houston, we are delighted to welcome you to the fifth annual State of the Arts in Education Symposium.

The State of the Arts convenes a multifaceted network of stakeholders – educators, artists and arts leaders, district administrators, policy makers, and community members – to learn, to grow our connections, and to deepen our impact. As a collective impact organization, **Arts Connect** would not exist without each and every one of you contributing your perspective, expertise, and passion toward our championing for equitable arts education for all students.

We are here to celebrate accomplishments in arts education and, at the same time, turn our attention toward the challenges and barriers we still need to address. This morning, you will hear from arts education leaders about our data-driven efforts to drive advocacy, build capacity, and deploy responsive action.

Collecting actionable data is a crucial pillar of our work, as it helps inform where the most need is and where to deploy key resources to support Houston students.

Today, we also celebrate two members of our community who have made an immeasurable difference for Houston students and their access to the arts. We are grateful to our **2026 Champion in Education, Sanja Korman, & Champion in the Arts, Christene Archie**, for their unwavering support of and advocacy for arts education.

We thank you for being here today and for sharing our collective vision that Houston will be a city where every student experiences the joy and power of a complete education rich in the arts.

Sincerely,



Jack McBride
Arts Connect Houston





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Young Women's College Preparatory Academy

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Director of the Academy at Houston Ballet

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Sanja Korman

Fine Arts Department Manager

& Dance Curriculum Specialist at Houston ISD

CHAMPION IN THE ARTS INTRODUCTION

Tarah Ude

Programming, Sunrise Centers

Community Relations, Houston ISD

CHAMPION IN THE ARTS ACCEPTANCE

Christene Archie

Diversity in the ARTS & Entertainment

ARTS CONNECT HOUSTON BOARD INTRODUCTION

Kayla George

Young Women's College Preparatory Academy

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Michael Pipkin, *Arts Connect Houston Board Chair*

Suratha Elango, *Arts Connect Houston Board Vice Chair*

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Kayla George

Young Women's College Preparatory Academy



OUR HISTORY

In the early 2010s, a group of local leaders identified a decline in arts education in Houston. As the Houston community came together, we realized that we could never address inequitable access to arts education through isolated efforts; we knew we could accomplish more as a collective force. Three years later, that idea turned into action with the establishment of a pilot program that evolved into Arts Connect Houston. Arts Connect Houston is a collective impact group, meaning we bring together a variety of stakeholders who share the common goal of ensuring access to high-quality arts education for every student, and we work together collaboratively to achieve that goal.

Arts Connect Houston operates across four areas of work. We **utilize data** to better understand the strengths and gaps of arts education in Houston. By operating as a collective, we help **build capacity** within both arts and culture in organizations and schools. We offer professional development, shared learning opportunities, community events, and more, all with the goal of strengthening our skills and building resources that aid us in achieving our mission. Together, **we advocate** for increased access to arts education for students across Houston. And finally, since 2018, we have invested over \$1.5 million in Houston area schools through our Arts Action Fund with our **responsive action** work.

We have spent more than a decade building relationships, coordinating efforts, and sharing resources. We have seen year over year that, by working together, we have amplified our voices and strengthened our power, guided by the idea that when students prosper, our community thrives.



Photo Credit: ArtReach Musical Instruments at a Family Art Night

LEADERSHIP

OUR TEAM

JACK MCBRIDE

Executive Director

NICOLE HUNT

Advocacy & Communications Manager

MANDY WHITED

Programs & Partnerships Manager

TAYLOR BUSH

Deputy Director

MONIQUE MOGILKA

Data Manager

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Rushmore Resource Partners

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Houston Ballet

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American Bank

CELESTE BARRETTO MILLIGAN

Digital Promise

MIKE ROME

Houston Christian University

SURATHA ELANGO, MD, Vice President

Texas Children's Hospital & Baylor College of Medicine

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IDEA Public Schools

CAROLINE GOESER, PHD

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

JUDY NYQUIST, Board Secretary

Community Volunteer

TODD STEIN

Mid-America Arts Alliance

OUR LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE

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IDEA Public Schools

ROBIN ANDERSON

The Hobby Center for the Performing Arts

EEPI CHAAD

Mid-America Arts Alliance

MARLANA DOYLE

Houston Contemporary Dance Company

ALISA MAGALLÓN

Community Volunteer

NATALIE SVACINA

Houston Center for Contemporary Craft

STACEY ALLEN

Nia's Daughters Movement Collective

ALBERTO CAREAGA

Art League Houston

RACHEL H. DICKSON

The Ensemble Theatre

APRIL M. FRAZIER

Community Volunteer

JACOB SHIDELER

Community Volunteer

KIANA DAY WILLIAMS

Harris County Precinct One

OUR PARTNERS

CREATIVE WRITING

Arte Publico Press
Dream Big Books

Iconoclast Artists
Rainbow Joy Books

Writers in the Schools

DANCE

Ad Deum Dance Company
Boot Dance Project
Culture Arts Initiative Inc.
Destiny Dance Production LLC
Frame Dance Productions
Hearts in Motion HOU
Hope Stone
Houston Ballet

Houston Contemporary
Dance Company
Houston Healthy Hip-Hop
Houston Metropolitan Dance Center, Inc.
Mad About Hula Hoops
MECKKA Dance Project
Mezclada Dance Company
Nia's Daughter

Movement Collective
Open Dance Project
Rising Stars Academy of
Dance & Performing Arts
Silambam Houston
Social Movement
Contemporary Dance
Urban Souls Dance Company

MULTIDISCIPLINARY

A.I.R. Project
ARTreach
Bay Area Houston Ballet & Theatre
Be Peace - Be Hope
Broad Ambitions
Diversity in the
ARTS and Entertainment
Edison Arts Foundation

Friends of Africa
Garza Studios
Harris County Cultural Arts Council
The Healing Arts Program
at The Health Museum
The Hobby Center
for the Performing Arts

Multicultural Education
and Counseling through the Arts (MECA)
Partnerschools
Performing Arts Houston
Preservation Houston
Treasured Diamonds Fine Art School
Southwest Alternate Media Project
Workshop Houston

MUSIC

AFA
Aperio, Music of the Americas
Apollo Chamber Orchestra
Ars Lyrica
Campbell Learning Center
Carya String Quartet
Community Music Center
of Houston
The Cynthia Woods
Mitchell Pavilion
DACAMERA

Dinkins Music and Arts Foundation
Foundation for Modern Music
Houston Boychoir
Houston Chamber Choir
Houston Children's Chorus
Houston Grand Opera
Houston Masterworks Chorus
Houston Symphony
Houston Viola Society
Houston Youth Symphony
Jazz Houston

Kinetic Ensemble
Loop38
Mercury Chamber Orchestra
Musiq
Nameless Sound
Opera in the Heights
Prelude Music Foundation
Segundo Barrio Children's Chorus
WindSync

THEATER

4th Wall Theatre
A.D. Players
Alley Theatre
Bravissimo's OTMB.A.B.E.S
DeLUXE Theater
EnActe Arts Inc.

Ensemble Theatre
Express Children's Theatre
Gordon Education Initiatives
for the Performing Arts
HITS Theatre

Houston Cinema Arts Society
Main Street Theater
Stages
Theatre Under the Stars

VISUAL ARTS

Alta Arts
Align Mind for Kids
ALMAAHH
Art Education Program
at the University of Houston
Art League Houston
Asia Society Texas Center
Aurora Picture Show
Blaffer Art Museum
Community Artists' Collective

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston
The Heritage Society
Houston School of Art & Design
Contemporary Handweavers
of Houston
Eternal Gandhi Museum Houston
Fashion Museum of Texas
FotoFest Inc.
Holocaust Museum Houston

Houston Center for
Contemporary Craft
Houston Center for Photography
Meow Wolf
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Orange Show Center for Visionary Art
Public Art of the University
of Houston System
Rothko Chapel

OUR PARTNERS

DISTRICT PARTNERS



STATE & NATIONAL PARTNERS

Arts Education Partnership

Arts, Humanities, & Civic
Engagement Lab

The Any Given Child Program
of The John F. Kennedy Center
for The Performing Arts

HouArts

Ingenuity, Inc.

MINDPOP

Parliament

Texas Cultural Trust

Texans for The Arts

SUPPORTED ORGANIZATION



MID-AMERICA ARTS ALLIANCE

OUR SPEAKERS

WELCOME TO ASIA SOCIETY TEXAS CENTER



Phuong Ha

Associate Director of Education
Asia Society Texas Center

Phuong Ha is the Associate Director of Education at Asia Society Texas Center, where she leads cultural and educational initiatives that connect students, educators, and communities through storytelling, creativity, and global learning. With a background in literature, journalism, and community programming, Phuong brings almost a decade of experience in developing arts-integrated learning experiences that celebrate diverse voices and foster cross-cultural understanding. Her work spans educational programs

& events, digital learning platforms, author events, and youth publishing programs—all designed to inspire curiosity and expand access to the arts and humanities.

A passionate advocate for literacy and representation, Phuong has helped over 20,000 students find their voice through writing and publishing opportunities. Whether creating arts-based education resources or collaborating with school districts and cultural partners, Phuong remains deeply committed to expanding the role of the arts in K–12 education and ensuring all students see themselves reflected in the stories and creative expressions they engage with.



Sumaira Dharani

Director of Education
Asia Society Texas Center

Sumaira Dharani serves as the Director of Education at Asia Society Texas Center, where she leads a multidisciplinary team dedicated to designing and delivering K–12 and community programs that foster global competency, intercultural understanding, and empathy-building experiences for Houston’s diverse communities.

She oversees a dynamic portfolio that includes educator professional development, a teacher summer institute, the Global Education Symposium, Asia in the Classroom resources, Adventures of Asia, school tours and workshops, as well as family and youth programs—all centered around the permanent Explore Asia exhibition.

Her work encompasses curriculum design, TEKS-aligned program development, strategic partnerships with school districts and universities, grant writing and reporting, and data-informed evaluation. Sumaira manages and mentors a team of five, cultivating a collaborative culture grounded in impact, inclusion, and continuous improvement.

OUR SPEAKERS

STUDENT ARTISTRY SPOTLIGHT



Allen Williams (Featured Left)

Choral, Orchestral, & Guitar Director
Madison HS

Braxton Mitchell

Director of Bands & Mariachi Director
Madison HS

Madison String Quartet

Simone Smith (*Violin 1*), Axel Martinez (*Violin 2*), Juliette Sanchez (*Viola*), Christian Serrano (*Cello*), and Piano Soloist Fernando Martinez

Allen Williams is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana. The 3rd of 4 children born to Allen & Sherry Williams, he was an honors graduate of Alfred T. Bonnabel High School, where he was the first African American drum major of the award winning Bonnabel Bruin Band. He continued educational studies at the University of New Orleans and achieved the B.A. in Instrumental Music Education, Payne Theological Seminary, with a Master's of Divinity, Lamar University with a Master's of Education, and is currently an education doctoral candidate at St. Thomas University of Miami Gardens, Florida, with a focus in human development. He not only serves as a Music Educator, but he is also the Senior Pastor of St. Paul AME Church in Lake Charles, La.

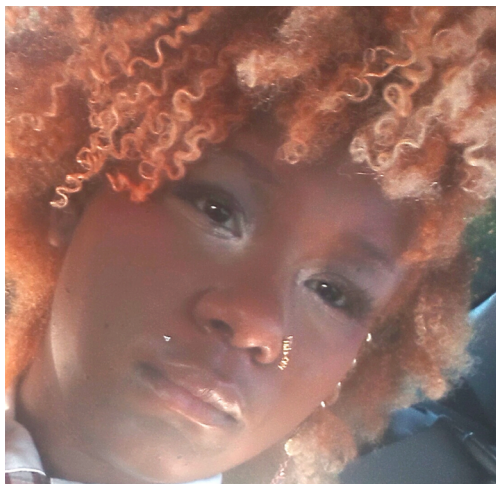
Allen relocated to Houston because of Hurricane Katrina, taught a year at Fondren Middle School, and then spent the last 19 years at Madison High School. At Madison, Allen was hired to be the Choral Director. Since his hiring, he has expanded the music department. He serves as the Director of Choirs (Mixed, Treble & Tenor/Bass Choirs), he is the Founder and Director of Orchestras (String & Full Orchestras), the Founder and Director of the Guitar ensembles. He has a wonderful 15 year partnership with Musiqqa, where the students of Madison have been able to excel musically in vocal training, string, and wind instrumental lessons, as well as music composition. Because of this unique partnership, Madison has produced more students who have achieved music performance medals, music majors, and professional musicians.

As a music educator, Allen has this process in mind for all his students:

“Ultimately, the goal is to create colleagues that can perform professionally with me when they graduate”.

OUR SPEAKERS

WELCOME TO THE STATE OF THE ARTS



Kayla George

Student Emcee
Young Women's College Preparatory Academy

Kayla George is a rising college freshman, who is a part of the 5 Strong program, with deep connections to the arts. Art has been one of her life long desires and passions, and she is making it her personal goal to connect psychology to art when she gets to college. She is aware that this field already exists however, she would like to participate and provide new contributions to the field.

She is a determined scholar who wishes to share her story with the world. She hopes that her story can be of inspiration to many across the world and more importantly,

she wishes that she can help people which is the purpose of her psychology degree. She is going to use her psychology degree to understand the ins and outs of the brain in order to connect to the deepest parts of people.

Most typically she does traditional art however, she is looking forward to diversifying herself over the summer by taking on other forms of art, like writing and digital art. Last summer she participated in an online community called ArtFight where she made it her goal to draw outside of her typical range in order to improve her art skills. For Kayla, it's really important to include everybody in her art to the best of her abilities. To her, art isn't simply visuals, art tells a story. Art tells history. Art gives us new perspectives and ways of life. She wishes to spread her energy and artistic gifts to paint a colorful world for people.

OPENING REMARKS



Jack McBride

Executive Director
Arts Connect Houston

Jack McBride is a nonprofit professional and arts education advocate from Houston, Texas. With over 20 years of experience in the nonprofit community, including at the AmeriCorps, the University of Texas, and Writers in the Schools, Jack's work has focused on equity of arts access for children, strategic planning, LGBTQ+ equality, and advocacy for artists, writers, and teachers.

Growing up in San Angelo, Texas, Jack spent summers at the local library and played trombone in the high school band, experiences that demonstrated first-hand the value

and impact of an arts-rich education for young people. He serves on the emeritus board of Equality Texas and is a Senior Fellow (Class 64) of the American Leadership Forum. Jack has a B.A. in Art History and Spanish from Trinity University and a Masters in Nonprofit Administration from the University of Notre Dame. In their spare time, Jack and his husband Thain, really enjoy drinking margaritas.

OUR SPEAKERS

STATE OF THE ARTS IN HISD DATA REPORT



Monique Mogilka

Data Manager
Arts Connect Houston

Monique is the Data Manager for Arts Connect Houston. She manages arts education data for 274 campuses across the entire data lifecycle: *collection, storage, audit, analysis, and final reporting*. She has led the organization in data practices, and produced the first State of the Arts in HISD report in the organization's history.

Monique is from Edmond, Oklahoma and is a digital nomad currently living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Oklahoma, and most recently

graduated Summa Cum Laude with a B.S. in Environmental Sciences from Oregon State University with a minor in Conservation Sciences. She has worked at the municipal, state, and federal levels using a data-informed approach. From Statistical Research Specialist at the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation to Community Liaison at the City of Houston Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, and Student Trainee at the Environmental Protection Agency, she is passionate about using data to inform policy and create actionable, systems-wide change. She is particularly passionate about visual storytelling through mapping and holds a GIS certificate.

OUR SPEAKERS

A WORD FROM H-E-B



Lisa Helfman

Managing Director of Public Affairs, H-E-B
Founder and Board Chair, *Brighter Bites*

Lisa Helfman is the Managing Director of Public Affairs – Greater Houston Region for H-E-B Grocery Company. Prior to joining H-E-B in 2014, Lisa served as Director of Real Estate Services at Texas Children’s Hospital and as an Attorney at Vinson & Elkins.

In the fall of 2011, Lisa and her family took part in a weekly fruit and vegetable co-op, and she watched her children’s eating habits transform. So much so that Drew rejected a piece of cake at a birthday party for being too sweet, asking instead for fresh fruit.

She was inspired to replicate this type of positive change in underserved communities where obesity was high and access to fresh produce was low. Lisa’s vision was to bring a produce co-op to schools in these neighborhoods that included an educational component while also making it fun. In partnership with Dr. Shreela Sharma at the University of Texas School of Public Health, they launched *Brighter Bites* in 2012. Thirteen years later, *Brighter Bites* has delivered over 85,000,000 pounds of fresh produce and 100,000s of education materials to more than 1M individuals (including teachers!) in thirteen cities across the nation.

Lisa has received many awards for her work with *Brighter Bites*, among them: *the Humanitarian of the Year from the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship, Newcomb College at Tulane Community Service Alumni of the Year, Kinkaid Alumna of the Year* and *Business Insider* named her to their list of *top 100 Coolest People in Food and Drink*. In addition to chairing the Board of *Brighter Bites*, Lisa also serves as Vice Chair of the Houston Food Bank and on the Boards of The Kinkaid School, City of Houston Civic Events and Buffalo Bayou Partnership. Lisa received her JD Magna Cum Laude from the University of Houston Law Center and her BA Cum Laude from Tulane University.

OUR SPEAKERS

INTRODUCTION TO MID-AMERICA ARTS ALLIANCE



Todd Stein

President & CEO

Mid-America Arts Alliance Director

Todd Stein has served since 2016 as the President & CEO of Mid-America Arts Alliance (M-AAA), a US regional arts organization headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri, and in service to the states of Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Mid-America Arts Alliance partners with and supports artists, organizations and communities to grow access to the arts, culture, and creativity. M-AAA believes that arts and creativity encourage empathy, improve health and well-being, and further the understanding of ourselves

and each other. Under Stein's tenure, the programming and services for artists and arts and cultural organizations have expanded regionally, nationally, and internationally through collaboration with sibling regional arts organizations and replication of existing programs in new geographies.

Stein served as co-chair of the US regional arts organizations from May 2022 through September 2024. With nearly 30 years in arts administration, Stein previously served M-AAA in the roles of chief operating officer and director of finance and administration. Prior to M-AAA, Stein was the deputy director and COO of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

ARTS EDUCATION PANEL



Cathy Bencivenga, Moderator

Chief Administrative Officer of Education & Community Engagement
Alley Theatre

Cathy Bencivenga serves as Chief Administrative Officer of Education and Community Engagement for Alley Theatre, where she leads a team of 10 full-time staff members and 35 part-time teaching artists providing top-tier programming across Greater Houston. Cathy joined the Alley in 2015 after completing a joint MA/MBA from SMU.

Prior to grad school, she was the General Manager of TACT/The Actors Company Theatre off-Broadway for eight highly successful seasons. While in New York, Cathy was a member of the Board of Directors for The Gallery Players

and co-founded The Internationalists, a collective of directors representing 11 countries around the world. Cathy holds a BA in Performing Arts Management from Southwestern University, and has done projects and internships with Berkeley Rep, the American Theatre Wing, the National Center for Arts Research, Dallas Theater Center, and TCG. In Houston, she leads efforts with Arts Connect and the Houston Theatre Training Coalition and is a member of Women on the Rise with the Greater Houston Partnership. Cathy lives in Spring Branch with her husband Blake, their English Bulldog Chunky, and their kitten Ladybug.

OUR SPEAKERS

ARTS EDUCATION PANEL (CONTINUED)



Michelle Cruz Arnold, Panelist

Board of Managers
Houston ISD

Michelle Cruz Arnold is a dynamic policy and education advocate with more than 25 years of results-driven experience spanning government, philanthropy, and both public and higher education. Her most recent work centers on expanding college and career readiness and building systems that create opportunities for all students.

As a trusted consultant and collaborative leader, Michelle helps organizations strengthen strategy, partnerships, and impact. She is known for her

ability to scale initiatives, align teams around shared goals, and translate complex policy and program objectives into sustainable, measurable outcomes. Her skills and experience are both scalable and transferable—equipping her to lead across sectors and drive mission-centered growth in complex environments.

Appointed by Texas Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, Michelle serves on the Board of Managers for Houston ISD, the seventh-largest school district in the United States. Having served in this volunteer role since June 2023, she is committed to advancing systemic reform and improving outcomes for students across one of the nation's most diverse urban districts.

At her core, Michelle believes in the power of collaborative advocacy and inclusive leadership to create lasting social change.

Born and raised in Baytown, Texas, Michelle has been a proud Houstonian since 2006. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Communication Studies, a Ph.D. in Education Policy and Planning, a Graduate Portfolio in Nonprofit and Philanthropic Studies from the University of Texas at Austin, and a Master of Public Administration from Texas State University. Michelle is married to John Arnold, a native New Mexican, and together they are the proud parents of a middle-school aged son who attends public school in the Houston ISD. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling, reading, running, cooking, visiting museums volunteering, and attending any event that showcases the spirit of Houston.

OUR SPEAKERS

ARTS EDUCATION PANEL (CONTINUED)



Charity Carter

Founder & Executive Director
Edison Arts Foundation

Charity Carter is a native of Houston, Texas and has been dancing and teaching for over 30 years. She is a graduate of Sam Houston State University where she studied dance under the direction of Dana Nicolay. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance, with a teaching certification in dance, and a minor in business and education. In 2007, she established FBAAD, Fort Bend Academy of Arts and Dance to provide traditional dance classes, Summer Dance Camp, and After School Dance Conservatory where she pioneered after school dance in Fort Bend Houston.

Throughout her career, Mrs. Charity Carter has cultivated arts education programs and fostered community outreach through contract partnerships with many local schools, school districts, organizations and more.

In 2013, Mrs. Charity Carter's commitment to family, community outreach, education and empowerment through the arts inspired her to create the Edison Arts Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit fine arts organization established for the educational and charitable purpose of producing and developing cultural and performing arts programs for children, adults, and families throughout the community.

The Edison Arts Foundation's arts education and community outreach programs include: the ANDdance Jr. Company, a pre-professional dance company cultivating and preparing young dancers for career paths in dance; S.T.A.R. Summer Theatre Arts Repertory, Afterschool Arts Academy, Black History Month: Uncovering The Legacy, and the Lauren Anderson Ballet Masterclass, a 9-month artistic and educational series taught by ballet legend Lauren Anderson, the *first* African-American prima ballerina of a major ballet company, Houston Ballet. Some of Mrs. Carter's young ANDance Jr. Company members have been seen alongside Misty Copeland in the Cinderella production.

The Edison Arts Foundation proudly sponsors many cultural and performing arts collaborations with some of the most world-renowned dance companies like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and Dance Theatre of Harlem. After nearly a decade of providing arts and cultural programming and after-school academic enrichment for Fort Bend Houston families, The Edison Arts Foundation expanded its mission for large scale community impact. Inspired by her father's hard work and family commitment, Charity Edison Carter now commits herself to her most recent project, The Edison Center: a 12.5-acre mixed used, creative place making development that blends arts and culture, entrepreneurship, job creation, affordable housing, healthcare, quality early education, outdoor green space, and public art uses to advance community well-being in Fort Bend Houston.

In honor of her parents, Robert and Bertha Edison, The Edison Center, anchored by a 400-seat performing arts center, will be a catalyst for equity with arts at its core.

Mrs. Charity Edison Carter credits much of her success to *family*—one of the three core values of the Edison Arts Foundation (*Family, Community, and Arts*). Charity is the wife of Mr. Troy Carter and the mother to a blended family of 5 children: Cassidy, Mikial, Markus, Mathew, and Addison.

OUR SPEAKERS

ARTS EDUCATION PANEL (CONTINUED)



Devondria Douglas

Director of Fine Arts
Houston ISD

With a passion for arts education and a proven track record of leadership, Devondria Douglas steps into the role of Director of Fine Arts for Houston ISD, bringing a wealth of experience in instructional leadership, program development, and strategic planning. A dedicated advocate for fine arts, she has spent her career shaping equitable, high-quality arts programs that provide students with meaningful creative experiences.

Prior to joining Houston ISD's Fine Arts Department, Ms. Douglas served in the district's Leadership & Strategic Initiatives division, where she co-directed leadership development programs impacting over 500 educators and aspiring leaders. Before her transition to Houston, she made a significant impact as the Manager of Dance for Visual & Performing Arts in Dallas, overseeing 56 campuses and nearly 10,000 dance students. Under her leadership, dance education flourished through innovative initiatives, including the creation of new dance pathways, professional development programs for educators, and district-wide adjudication systems promoting equity in dance evaluation. Beyond district operations, she has been instrumental in curriculum development at both the district and state level, writing and implementing dance curricula that integrate cultural relevance, interdisciplinary connections, and technological advancements. Her expertise in curriculum design has extended into the community through her work with nonprofit organizations, helping to develop arts education programs that provide structured learning opportunities for underserved students.

Ms. Douglas holds a Master of Education in Educational Administration from Prairie View A&M University and a Bachelor of Arts in Dance Studies from Texas Woman's University. She is an active leader in fine arts education, having presented at state and national conferences, contributed to curriculum development, and worked on initiatives that integrate equity in the arts. As she takes on this new role, Ms. Douglas is committed to ensuring that every Houston ISD student has access to high-quality fine arts programming that fosters creativity, discipline, and lifelong appreciation for the arts.

OUR SPEAKERS

ARTS EDUCATION PANEL (CONTINUED)



Michele Leal

Director, Mayor's Office of the Arts
City of Houston

Michele is the Director of the Mayor's Office of the Arts, where she provides strategic guidance on the city of Houston's arts investments, including administering and advocating for projects that strengthen Houston's creative ecosystem and drive cultural tourism. The Mayor's Office of the Arts, in partnership with Houston Arts Alliance, distributes nearly \$20 million annually in grant funding to the local arts community and manages the City of Houston's Civic Art Program.

The office also manages projects such as Houston's Poet Laureate and Mini Mural programs and works closely with partners across the city and state to strengthen Houston's arts economy.



Kaileigh Newman

Director of Visual Arts
Aldine ISD

Kaileigh Newman is in her 16th year in public education and her sixth year as Director of Visual Arts for Aldine Independent School District. Before leading the Visual Arts Department, Kaileigh served as a campus administrator and visual arts educator. During her time on campus, she was named Teacher of the Year, and her dedication was further recognized during her tenure as Director of Visual Arts when she was named TAEA Administrator of the Year. She is currently serving

as TAEA President Elect. She is a passionate advocate for amplifying the stories of fine arts students and educators.

Kaileigh holds a BFA from Bowling Green State University and a Master's in Administration from the University of Houston. While serving as Director of Visual Arts, she earned the Excellence in Education award from the East Aldine Management District, which recognized her dedicated work in fostering a vibrant and inclusive arts community.

Kaileigh lives in Humble with her partner, Gary, their two children, Collette and Penelope, and their dog Griffey. A photographer at heart, Kaileigh enjoys connecting with others through the arts and crafting with her children.

OUR SPEAKERS

ARTS EDUCATION PANEL (CONTINUED)



JP Ramirez

SVP | Client & Community Relations Director
PNC Bank

JP Ramirez is a Senior Vice President and Client & Community Relations director for PNC Bank in Greater Houston. In this role, Ramirez leads market-level initiatives across brand, sponsorships, and charitable giving, aligning the bank's strategy with community engagement, employee engagement and stakeholder impact.

Ramirez joined PNC in March 2023, with a background in strategic partnerships, event management, and marketing, with experience spanning corporate, nonprofit, and wealth management. Prior to joining PNC, He was Texas Marketing director for Northern Trust. Ramirez held several roles during his 16 years at Northern Trust in San Diego, Los Angeles, and Houston. Ramirez serves on the boards of Discovery Green Conservancy, Fit Houston, and Children's Museum Houston, where he champions cultural and bilingual programs. He is a member of multiple Employee Business Resource Groups within PNC. He also chairs the Houston Region Council, which is responsible for leading the local inclusion efforts for PNC in Houston. He holds a Bachelor of Science in management from National University (San Diego) and is currently pursuing his executive MBA at Texas A&M University.

OUR SPEAKERS

STUDENT ARTISTRY SPOTLIGHT



Denisea Woodard Patterson

Executive Director

Rising Stars Academy of Dance & Performing Arts

Denisea Woodard Patterson has over 15 years experience as a Master Teacher, Choreographer and Professional Dancer. “Ms. D” loves pouring into the youth and partnering with many organizations to create the full art experience.

Denisea started her dance journey at the age of 8 at Ms. Graham’s Dance Academy where she studied Jazz, Modern, and Tap until becoming a Dance Captain for the Thurgood Marshall Mystics. She graduated from Prairie View A&M University with a Bachelors of

Science in Interdisciplinary Studies and a Minor in Dance. While there, she enjoyed being a part of both the Classic Dance Ensemble and Prairie View’s own Marching Storm Black Foxes.

Denisea’s award-winning choreography has led her to create masterpieces for numerous stage productions, competition routines, weddings, workshops and more. She has also danced with recording artists such as Hezekiah Walker, Beverly Crawford, Jekalyn Carr, Cindy Trim, and many more. In 2019, she had the privilege to become lead choreographer for Houston recording artist, Inayah Lamis. She then went on tour as a backup dancer where she received the opportunity to Dance alongside DJ Chose and DJ Luke N. Denisea can also be seen in Inayah’s music video entitled, N.A.S.

Denisea is the Artistic Director for Rising Stars Academy of Dance & Performing Arts, where she mentors and train dancers ages 3-18 years of age. When Denisea is not teaching she is traveling with the “*Purpose with Passion International Dance Company*” as a dancer and lead choreographer, teaching workshops and dancing on various platforms.

OUR SPEAKERS

CHAMPION IN EDUCATION INTRODUCTION



Jennifer Sommers

*Director of the Academy
Houston Ballet*

Jennifer Sommers is the Director of the Houston Ballet Academy where she oversees all educational programming. She holds an MFA in Dance, Performance, and Choreography from Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. She presents on pedagogy and curriculum at local, national, and international conferences, including the National Dance Education Organization and the International Association of Dance Medicine and Science. She has performed with Laura

Dean Musicians and Dancers and the Albany Berkshire Ballet, where she also served as Ballet Mistress.

Her dance honors include a scholarship to Jacob's Pillow Choreography Workshop, a Durham Arts Council Emerging Artist Grant, and a Lake Region Arts Council grant in support of new work. Prior to joining Houston Ballet, she was the Associate Director of Raleigh Dance Theater and Founding Dance Educator at KIPP Sharpstown College Prep. She has also served on the faculty of and choreographed for the University of Houston, Meredith College and the University of Minnesota, Morris.

OUR SPEAKERS

CHAMPION IN EDUCATION ACCEPTANCE



Sanja Korman

Fine Arts Department Manager & Dance Curriculum Specialist
Houston ISD

Sanja (*Sanya*) Korman is a passionate advocate for the transformative power of the arts, a nationally recognized dance educator, and a leader dedicated to expanding access, excellence, and opportunity for every student.

As the Fine Arts Dance Coordinator for Houston ISD, Sanya leads PK–12 dance education through comprehensive curriculum development, instructional coaching, professional learning design, and districtwide program implementation. She oversees major initiatives, including festivals, showcases, film projects, mentorship programs, and special events, ensuring that students across Houston

have meaningful opportunities to perform, choreograph, and engage deeply with the arts.

A champion for equitable access to arts education, Sanya has played a pivotal role in shaping dance standards and policy at both the district and state levels. As a Texas Education Agency appointee, she contributed to the revision of state dance standards and the development of Grades 6–8 TEKS for Dance. She currently leads the innovation of elementary dance curriculum in Houston ISD and Texas, an especially critical effort in a state without K–5 dance certification. Her service on multiple committees revising fine arts certification standards and Dance 6–12 exam frameworks reflects her commitment to ensuring rigorous, relevant preparation for future educators.

Sanya believes that the arts are essential to developing the critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication skills necessary for college, career, and lifelong success. She is a strong proponent of arts integration and cross-disciplinary learning, viewing arts fusion as a powerful vehicle for strengthening campus culture and deepening connections between schools and their communities. Through her leadership, she fosters partnerships and learning environments where the arts serve as both a catalyst for academic growth and a bridge to community engagement.

Her impact extends beyond the classroom through collaboration with Houston’s vibrant network of arts organizations, helping create pathways for students to encounter, experience, and develop a lifelong appreciation for dance, as well as creative writing, music, theatre, and the visual arts, embodying the spirit of the Champion in Education award. Sanya’s leadership is grounded in the belief that every individual possesses unique talents. She builds systems, opportunities, and platforms that empower students to discover their voice, think creatively, and lead with confidence in an ever-changing world.

She holds a BS in Kinesiology from the University of Sarajevo and a Master’s in Education, Curriculum & Instruction from Concordia University Texas. Her honors include recognition as a National Dance Educator by the National Dance Association and Dance Magazine, multiple state and regional awards, and a nomination for the NDEO Outstanding Leadership Award in K–12. She is also a recent honoree of She Moves, recognizing her leadership and impact. Sanya continues to serve as a presenter, advocate, and leader, championing the arts as essential to student growth, innovation, and lifelong learning.

OUR SPEAKERS

CHAMPION IN THE ARTS INTRODUCTION



Tarah Ude

Programming, *Sunrise Centers*
Community Relations, *Houston ISD*

With over a decade of experience dedicated to dismantling the opportunity gap for students of color, I am a creative architect driven by a single mission: building people and programming that actually works.

I currently serve as a Sunrise Center Program Developer for Houston ISD, where I oversee the strategic programming of eight Sunrise Centers. I have pioneered specialized programming and a robust case management model designed to help families navigate complex challenges with dignity and

clarity. As an experienced fundraiser, I have successfully established innovative initiatives that provide sustainable support for families in need.

To ensure these programs are as effective as they are impactful, I hold a CSM certification, allowing me to leverage data-driven strategies to connect community needs with measurable outcomes.

A graduate of Rockhurst University in Kansas City, MO, my commitment to development extends into the literary world. I am the author of *No Longer Overwhelmed*, a book focused on wellness and productivity that helps individuals align their professional output with their personal well-being. Whether I am designing a district-wide initiative, or mentoring an individual, my goal remains the same: creating sustainable structures that empower people to thrive.

OUR SPEAKERS

CHAMPION IN THE ARTS ACCEPTANCE



Christene Archie

Executive Director
Diversity in the ARTS & Entertainment

Christene Archie is a proud Houston native and a product of Houston ISD. She is an accomplished songwriter, playwright, certified counselor, and educator whose career in the arts and education spans over three decades. Before founding Diversity in The ARTS & Entertainment (DiTAE), Christene served in multiple leadership roles across the creative and educational landscape, including Music Director, Vocal Director, Music and Arts Director, and

Music & Technical Director for various community organizations and theater groups.

She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration from Lamar University and went on to work within several Fortune 500 companies. Yet, her passion for the arts and service ultimately called her back to her true purpose—impacting lives through creativity. As the Founder and Executive Artistic Director of DiTAE, Christene has created a platform that empowers young people to discover their artistic identity while building confidence, character, and discipline.

Through her leadership, DiTAE continues to bridge the gap between arts and academics, re-igniting community engagement across both public and private education sectors.

Christene's work is not just about programs—it's about purpose. It's about creating opportunities where young people can be seen, heard, and developed through the arts.

And her "why" is simple: She loves what she gets to do, who she gets to do it with, and who she gets to do it for.

OUR SPEAKERS

WAYS TO ENGAGE & ADVOCATE



Michael Pipkin

Board President
Arts Connect Houston

Michael Pipkin has over 20 years of experience as an investor and corporate executive. He graduated from Dartmouth College with High Honors in History and began his career in investment banking at RBC Capital Markets and Jefferies Randall & Dewey. Subsequently, Michael spent over 10 years in principal investing at The D.E. Shaw Group, Stellus Capital, and Reservoir Capital. He currently serves as CEO and Founder of Rushmore Resource Partners, a private upstream oil and gas company.

An active member of the Houston community, Michael holds a number of board positions, including serving as Treasurer of Writers in the Schools where he is also a former Board President, past President of the St. John's School Alumni Board, Advisory board Member for the University of Houston Honors College, and Board Member of West University Little League.



Suratha Elango, MD

Board Vice President
Arts Connect Houston

Suratha Elango is a primary care pediatrician and community health advocate with Texas Children's Hospital & Baylor College of Medicine. She moved to Houston in August 2017, and works clinically with an underserved Medicaid population at the Texas Children's Health Plan Center for Children and Women Southwest.

Suratha learned and performed the Indian classical dance Bharathanatyam as well as several folk dances from childhood to grad school. She appreciates art and creativity in all its forms and recognizes the important role it serves in a child's education. Suratha also enjoys hiking, wildlife photography, and traveling.

Suratha grew up in San Antonio, received her bachelor's degree in biology from Harvard University, medical degree from UT Southwestern Medical School, and then completed her residency in pediatrics at the University of California San Francisco. She earned a MS in Health Policy from the University of Pennsylvania where she did her Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Clinical Scholar fellowship.

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