



NEWS Texas Education Agency

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April 17, 2007

Communities In Schools state office presents Best of Texas awards

AUSTIN– Every year, hundreds of individuals volunteer their time and effort towards the Communities In Schools (CIS) program, an exemplary dropout prevention program administered by the Texas Education Agency.

The goal of the program is to help students stay in school and prepare for life. Volunteers contribute in various ways towards this goal.

In conjunction with National Volunteer Week, April 15-21, The CIS of Texas program will honor 11 outstanding recipients. The recipients were selected for their commitment and dedication to the CIS program, students, families, schools and the community at large, and their personal and professional enrichment from their involvement with CIS.

This year the CIS Best of Texas Awards will include a special category, the Paul Lane Award of Excellence. The award is dedicated to honor the life of Paul Lane, a beloved member of the CIS State Office team and the CIS family, who dedicated more than 40 years to working in education, including 14 years with CIS.

These awards will be presented on April 19 by the CIS State Advisory Committee and the Texas Education Agency and the recipients will be recognized in Austin at the Texas Capitol. Following the award recognition there will be an appreciation luncheon and a reception at the William B. Travis building. This year's event is made possible by a special contribution from Coca-Cola Bottling Companies of Texas.

Paul Lane Award of Excellence

Kris Downing

CIS Central Texas

Kris Downing of Austin has worked with the CIS Central Texas program for 17 years and is currently the longest tenured staff person for that program. Throughout her long professional career she has worked as a social worker, advocate, and clinician and is currently serving in the capacity of Professional Development Specialist. She has exhibited purposeful creativity by creating the CIS Ethics Committee which meets regularly to tackle ethical issues commonly faced by staff. Downing's warm and genuine nature allows her the ability to make others feel comfortable, safe and valued. She is truly passionate about the mission of CIS and challenges others to share this passion.

Board Member of the Year

Karl Schmalz

CIS Dallas Region

Karl Schmalz of Irving has served on the CIS Dallas Region Board for 16 years and has served as chairman of the Governing Board since 2001. He has served as chair of the Financial Committee assisting with financial analysis and long range financial planning. During Schmalz's leadership, he implemented Concentration Effort, a concept that provides a cost effective solution to addressing the many needs of public school campuses with large at-risk student populations. This concept allows the program to provide academic and social services to hundreds of additional students who would have otherwise remained unserved.

Executive Director of the Year

D.M. "Mike" Steele

CIS of Greater Tarrant County

Mike Steele of Fort Worth has served as the Executive Director of CIS of Greater Tarrant County for fifteen years. His vision and leadership is directly responsible for dramatic expansion efforts and goals allowing more students to be served in Greater Tarrant County. He also developed partnerships with 50 different agencies within 25 schools served. Specifically, he secured a partnership with Cook's Children's Medical Center to provide free dental care to more than 700 children in need of dental care. Steele has served on numerous additional non-profit and civic boards within the community in addition to his commitment to CIS.

Staff Member of the Year

Julie Lyon

CIS of Northeast Texas

Julie Lyon of Mt. Pleasant has served the CIS of Northeast Texas program for over 11 years and currently serves as Case Management Coordinator and Trainer. In addition to daily duties, she often spends time after hours and on weekends searching for new ideas, funding opportunities, new foundations, and community partners and brainstorming ways to implement new-found resources into innovative funding. Over the years, her efforts have resulted in securing more than \$500,000 in program funding. She also volunteers weekly at a local food pantry utilized by the program's youth service coordinators. Lyons truly cares about each student served.

Volunteer of the Year

Kenny Thompson, DDS.

CIS of Northeast Texas

Dr. Kenny Thompson of Mt. Pleasant has volunteered with the CIS of Northeast Texas program for four years by providing free dental services for deserving children in need of dental care. He first began by participating with the Give Kids a Smile Day program, extending his services to help twelve children at an estimated cost of over \$12,000. He has participated in this event every year, and for one day a year he sacrifices potential earnings to serve the children of CIS Northeast Texas that are in need. In addition to this event, Thompson regularly treats

children referred to him by CIS and does not turn them away even though they do not have the means necessary to pay for services.

Parent of the Year

Dorothy Harris

CIS McLennan County Youth Collaboration

Dorothy Harris of Waco is the grandmother of four students who have participated in CIS for the past four years. During this time, she has been one of the most involved parents or grandparents in the school, serving as a leader in the PTA, Parents for Public Schools, and has spent countless hours volunteering at the school. As CIS has provided varying opportunities for her grandchildren and her family, Harris has provided the needed support to ensure that her grandchildren participate and benefit from any services, programs, and opportunities that CIS has to offer. She was one of only 30 parents selected across the entire district to serve on the rigorous Parent Leadership Institute. She is passionate about helping her own grandchildren as well as our entire student body, providing them with the support that they need to succeed in school.

Student of the Year

Tashia Rusnak

CIS of South Central Texas

Tashia Rusnak of Canyon Lake has been involved with CIS of South Central Texas at Smithson Valley High School for the past three years. During this time, she has grown to be an exception young woman who has overcome numerous challenges, and has made many personal and academic changes in her life. She is a leader on campus and encourages peers to pursue post-secondary opportunities and promotes positive values. Rusnak now loves school, has applied to be in the PALS program, and even volunteers in her free time with CIS. As a student who was once failing and lacked direction and motivation, she is not only on track to graduate but also looks forward to a successful and bright future.

Superintendent of the Year

Paul Vranish

CIS El Paso

Paul Vranish of Tornillo has been the Superintendent of Tornillo ISD since 2002 and has served in education for 28 years. He has worked with the CIS program for over three years, and ensures that efforts are coordinated by holding weekly meeting with CIS staff. Vranish collaborates with administrators, parents and the community to ensure school improvement and student success by promoting “Parent Chats” which are held every month to allow attendees the opportunity share ideas and new information. In addition, he has been instrumental in exposing students and the community of Tornillo to technology by providing free high speed internet services to the area surrounding the school and providing computers to the public library.

Principal of the Year

Jessica Hicks

CIS McLennan County Youth Collaboration

Jessica Hicks of Waco is currently the assistant principal of the Brooks Avenue Elementary School and has been associated with the CIS McLennan County Youth Collaboration program for four years. She is an ardent supporter of CIS, personally escorting new students and families to meet CIS staff. She believes that the school is a multi-faceted system of various disciplines. Hicks highly values a holistic approach where administrative staff, teachers, counselors, speech therapists, special education staff, CIS worker, health-care professionals, volunteers, parents, guardians and students work together as a collaborative team. Last year, her support directly resulted in a larger space for CIS to operate, allowing the program to house 20 volunteers, four tutors, one Americorps member, one intern and a full-time case manager to serve 130 students.

Teacher of the Year

Nance Talbett

CIS Bell-Coryell Counties

Nance Talbett of Copperas Cove is a teacher with the Copperas Cove Independent School District who teaches high school students with autistic tendencies. Throughout her 14 years of teaching experience she has been associated with the CIS Bell-Coryell Counties program for 10 years. In addition to academics, she teaches her students life skills like ironing as well as exposing them to job training exercises. In collaboration with CIS, she began a group to educate pregnant or parenting teens which meets twice a month. This group brings in community speakers to inform the group on available services, proper nutrition, and child safety. Talbett plays an active role assuring that young ladies on homebound status return to school after giving birth, and notifies CIS of such students. She has been an enormous asset to CIS.

Business of the Year

Bank of America

CIS of Greater Tarrant County

Bank of America of Fort Worth has consistently made financial contributions towards the CIS of Greater Tarrant County program for the past 10 years and was one of the first donors during CIS's inception in 1992. In addition to monetary contributions, the employees of Bank of America have provided more than 2,200 volunteer service hours towards program activities. Over the 15-year history of CIS of Greater Tarrant County, Bank of America has been represented on the board of directors by three different senior executives of the bank. The continued leadership and support the program has received from Bank of America has had a significant impact on their ability to expand services into new schools and neighborhoods.

For more information about the Communities In Schools program and these awards, please contact State Director Nellie Reyes at (512) 463-1218.