

OCA student recognized at board meeting

Odessa American oanews@oaoa.com | Posted: Wednesday, August 21, 2019 3:30 am

An Odessa Collegiate Academy senior was among those recognized during the Ector County ISD board meeting for her selection to speak at the International Space Station Research and Development Summit in Atlanta earlier this month.



Deidre Morales and her team from OCA, formerly called Falcon Early College High School, were selected last year as the flight experiment finalist for ECISD via the Mission 12 Student Spaceflight Experiments Program. The experiment they designed was flown to the International Space Station and conducted there last summer.

ECISD logo wide

Morales was the only SSEP student on the international panel and represented not only ECISD and Texas, but also three countries that participated in the SSEP, a news release stated.

Elizabeth Gray, an Advancement Via Individual Determination teacher at Odessa Collegiate Academy, said words couldn't describe the pride she felt for Morales.

"The doors that are open for her are something I could have never imagined for her. Just being able to know her and to experience this with her is something phenomenal and I'm so excited for her," Gray said.

She added that she can use Morales as an example for other students to think outside the box. It also helped her realize — again — why she became a teacher.

"There were no boundaries on what her experiment could be ... so it's something we can reference again and build ideas upon and use it as an example of (how) thinking outside of the box can open doors for their future," Gray said.

Although Odessa is far away from larger cities, Gray said it's amazing that students here get to have these opportunities.

"... This is just world changing for these students," Gray said.

For her part, Morales said her experiences have been an honor.

"I'm really grateful that I got an opportunity to do these things," she said. "When I first started, I never imagined that I would get to this point. I never imagined that I would attend all these conferences and be recognized, so I'm really happy that I got that opportunity."

Asked if it had sunk in yet, Morales said she was starting to process it but she was still a little "mind boggled."

She said she was interested in science before the space experiments, but this has intensified and reinvigorated it.

“I think it’s pushed me more and more into science, especially into engineering and research,” Morales said.

Getting to meet real-life engineers and NASA personnel has been amazing, she said.

“Everyone I’ve met has been incredibly nice and helpful and they offer to help me push my experiment forward and take it to new places,” Morales said.

On the business side, trustees heard a report Tuesday that Ector County Independent School District currently has 349 teacher vacancies so Superintendent Scott Muri and Deputy Superintendent Stephanie Howard told board members how the shortage is being handled currently.

Howard said it’s not so much that a lot of teachers leave every year, but that the numbers compound.

Muri said it is unacceptable for students to arrive on the first day of school to an empty classroom.

He said Howard and top district officials began working on plans last year to handle the anticipated openings.

Howard said the district began working on a secondary staffing plan in June so principals could have a menu of options and pick what would work best for their campuses.

Using more of the available state teacher permits and recruiting from Jamaica, the Philippines and Canada have been used to help the teacher shortage, Howard said.

The district is also using a variety of programs to grow its own teachers.

Some of the options included adding more students to classes, offering enhanced conference periods, zero period, long-term substitutes, Odysseyware online learning and Proximity Learning, which offers virtual teachers and online learning.

It was used at Permian and Odessa high schools last year and is being used at the middle schools this year, Howard said.

Howard said there is a qualified adult in every classroom with the online options.

Board member Delma Abalos said she would like a report on whether students are passing the online courses.

Howard said the district has tried to avoid using online options in tested areas where possible. She said there is Proximity for AVID as well.

On the accountability ratings, Muri said for every elementary and middle school the only measurement was the STAAR test.

This is the first year districts and campuses have been given letter grades by the Texas Education Agency. Last year, districts received letter grades and a “what if” list was sent out for campuses, but it wasn’t official.

This year, it was official.

ECISD had 16 failing schools out of 43 campuses. The district overall got a C grade. ECISD got a D last year.

Muri said elementary and middle schools were graded on STAAR scores while high schools had college, career and military readiness added.

In conversations with TEA Commissioner Mike Morath, Muri said the ratings are a work in progress. Muri said he thinks Morath wants the ratings to be more than the STAAR test for elementary and middle schools.

Muri said at next month's board meeting, officials will take a deeper dive into the data for each campus.

Abalos said Bonham Middle School being in its fourth year of low performance is a concern. As with Ector College Prep Success Academy before it became an in-district charter school), the school needs to be asked what it needs.

Supplemental agenda material said state law mandates that if one school within a district makes a failing grade for five consecutive years, mandatory state sanctions are triggered which includes that the TEA replace the district's locally elected school board with state appointees or close the struggling school.

Howard outlined a variety of training and foci for leaders and principals. ECISD is also working on a middle school redesign.

Muri said there are pockets of good things happening all over the district and the items Howard reviewed are all investments in the district's personnel.

Following a question from a board member, Muri said Ector College Prep Success Academy would be included in future reports. It is an in-district charter school and received an F in accountability ratings.

Muri said although there is a contract that defines the relationship between ECISD and Ector, Muri said he will stay involved.

In other business:

All State Middle School Choir selections Matthew Rojo and Victoria Carrillo from Crocket Middle School, Kendra Burton from Nimitz Middle School, and Erica Jeanne Morales from Wilson & Young Medal of Honor Middle School were introduced.

George H.W. Bush New Tech Odessa's Bernadette Barragan was recognized as the West Texas Geology Foundation's Most Outstanding Science Teacher.

ECISD being named one of the Best Communities for Music Education was recognized.

Trustees voted 6-0 to approve boundary modifications for Buice Elementary and Jordan Elementary. This slight adjustment is being made to a developing neighborhood and affects no students at this time. Trustee Carol Gregg was not present.

Trustees voted 6-0 to endorse board member Steve Brown for a spot on the Texas Association School Board (TASB) Board of Directors.

Approved the consent agenda, which is a group of routine or previously reviewed items that are approved all together. This month's consent agenda included minutes of previous meetings, bills for payment, the list of courses eligible for UIL Exemption, additional T-TESS appraisers, the annual investment report, out-of-state travel for the Permian High School men's choir, and out-of-state travel for the Odessa High School Bronchettes.