

Silky Joshi-Malik

Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Silky Joshi-Malik, who is a HCDE, Harris County Department of Education trustee at large, position seven. Silky, thank you very much for speaking with me today. You were appointed to this position in January of last year to replace a departing member.

Please tell me, how did that come about? And what would you say have been the most interesting best things you've done as a trustee since?

Silky Joshi-Malik

Yes, definitely. I was appointed in April of last year. It was, I guess, a little rather unexpected. I was invited to sort of throw my hat into the ring by a fellow trustee. I just, you know, I think a lot of us were feeling kind of bummed about what was going on in the country. It was not too long after the presidential inauguration and this opportunity coming up gave me this feeling like, okay, I want to be part of something that's helping people and that makes a difference in people's lives.

And I was very excited to sort of see if I could get an opportunity to serve on the board. And we had, I showed up the day of where you come to the board meeting and you sort of make a case for why you would be a good member, a good trustee. And it was me and about 20 other people.

And we just did our best to pitch ourselves. And I was very surprisingly voted in unanimously by the board because there were some very incredible people who were vying for this position. So it was a very humbling and amazing, shocking thing that I got selected.

Charles Kuffner

All right, and how has the experience been so far? Was it what you expected?

Silky Joshi-Malik

It is so much more than I expected it to be. HCDE does really, really impactful, incredible work. And as a board member, we get to see firsthand, not only like the numbers on the backend, but our meetings, if you've ever gotten a chance to see it on YouTube, really highlight and showcase the different departments and what we are doing to like improve the lives of these different populations, right?

We'll have a meeting that focuses on case for kids and we get an update on how many students are enrolled and what does the outcome look like for them? And you do this across every program we have. And I just, every month sort of have like this feel good four hours of hearing all the great stuff we're doing and getting to see students and employees and just people who believe very strongly in the work that we do and who are really benefiting from the work that we do. So it's just really so fulfilling and I love it.

Charles Kuffner

Are there any particular things you'd like to single out over the last year and a half that you would say are examples of big accomplishments?

Silky Joshi-Malik

I think, I don't know if this is a big accomplishment, but I think it is for the students who are part of it. Last Thanksgiving, there were students who are studying culinary arts. I kind of, some of these schools offer programs for the kids to participate in, these high school kids. And a few of them were part of the culinary arts sort of program. And they cooked and served a bunch of HCDE employees, including the trustees, like a fabulous Thanksgiving meal. And it was super adorable.

They came out and they talked about like the menu and the different items that they made and what went into it. And it was just really, it was very special to see these high school students doing something that they probably had never done before coming to one of our high schools and getting to sort of put on a show for us and put on display this really cool skill and talent that they've been working on. And the food was fantastic.

And they were all like little chefs in training. It was really, really sweet. And I don't know, it was just a firsthand look at how a student can really benefit from one of our schools and kind of come out on the other side of whatever situation brought them to one of our schools. They can overcome their circumstances and do something really amazing and maybe become a chef someday. It was really sweet. I love that.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, I tend to think of HCDE as providing services to mostly the smaller school districts in Harris County, but it does run its own schools. Talk a little bit more about what those schools do, what role they fill and what the current challenges and plans are for them.

Silky Joshi-Malik

Yes, definitely. We have schools, we have a school that helps, two of them that help students who their home district cannot really handle or is not fully equipped to deal with a certain student's behavioral issues. And so we have two campuses that are really tailored to those types of students, alternate behavior schools, we call them.

And these kids, they come in and in any other circumstance, they might just not be in school anymore because if your home district cannot figure out a way or just does not have the resources or facilities or whatever's necessary to help this student, they might just end up staying at home. But because our schools exist, they can come to one of our schools and we have staff that is incredible. The work they do is really, really hard, but they're so locked in and so well-suited to helping these students get through high school so they can at least have a high school diploma and then go on and maybe do other things with their lives.

So we have schools for kids with behavior situations and differences. And then we have a school that's focused on kids who are going through, what's the best way to phrase this? It's like a rehabilitative sort of facility to help them get through their substance abuse issues.

So again, that's not something most schools, high schools are equipped to deal with in any long-term meaningful way. And so those kids without one of our schools might fall through the cracks, but they can go through recovery and find a path to recovery and be in an environment that helps them stay focused on this path so that they can graduate and again, find opportunity and things outside of after graduating high school. So it's really, I mean, it makes a big difference to these people's lives. So it's really amazing to get to see that firsthand.

Charles Kuffner

Now, school districts all across the state have been dealing with financial issues mostly because of, well, one part the legislature and one part just costs, expenses, inflation rising. How has that affected the schools and school districts that HCDE works with and how has that affected HCDE's operations?

Silky Joshi-Malik

So for us at HCDE, I know last year was, we were very worried about not getting certain federal funding because a few of our programs, the Head Start program is primarily federally funded and that money was being threatened to not be given out. I don't know a better way to word it. The Trump administration was holding a lot of federal funds kind of hostage and we didn't know if that would affect us.

So we were scrambling and trying to figure out how do we not lay off staff because that's when, if you have to lay off staff, then the students can no longer be served as effectively. So for those few weeks, we were having conversations with the superintendent and just as a board and just the organization, the people who sort of make the decisions on this coming together and talking about how do we retain staff, make sure that we can keep functioning as we need to without this federal money. And that resulted in not being able to give pay raises like we would have preferred to, how we do ordinarily, but giving a little financial incentive, not as high as we would have liked, but enough to retain staff and not fire anyone or lay anyone off, which allowed us to keep functioning normally.

But fortunately at the end, we were given those federal funds, but it was a few, that summer was very touch and go. We weren't sure how we were going to start the new school year. But yeah, the financial implication of this for schools across Texas and even our district, it's very far reaching. And it's something I think all schools are, districts are struggling with right now. I'm not really sure of the numbers with the districts that we serve though.

Charles Kuffner

All right, I mean, that was about federal funding. Has there been any implications from state funding?

Silky Joshi-Malik

Not that I know of. I can get back to you on that, but I don't know off the top of my head.

Charles Kuffner

Well, no, I mean, I know that HCDE does mostly deal in federal grants. It's just, like I said, I was wondering if the issues that the school districts themselves have faced with state funding have intersected with what your programs do with them in any way.

Silky Joshi-Malik

It doesn't seem to have trickled down so far based on the last set of numbers I looked at when we were going over the new budget. We haven't lost number of students enrolling in our schools. We haven't really seen any shrinkage in that regard.

So it seems like we're functioning as we have, which I think indicates that the school districts surrounding our, while they might be facing some sort of financial crunch, it is not impacting sending their students to our schools.

Charles Kuffner

And of course there are, okay. And there are other policies from both the Trump administration and from the state legislature regarding things like DEI and gender equality and so on and so forth that have, the 10 Commandments law, all these things that have had effects on school districts, in some cases, forcing the dismantling of various programs. Has that affected HCDE in any way?

Silky Joshi-Malik

Thus far, not really. We managed to fly under the radar. And while the board is not really responsible for the day-to-day operations and the curriculum and stuff, the conversations we've had in our meetings does not, this is not a thing we're currently worried about. But that's not to say that won't change in the future because the state politics of everything is sort of a continuing thing we have to keep an eye on, but we've been able to function normally, very as usual.

Charles Kuffner

And we have to talk, I mean, I feel like I have to talk about HISD and the takeover and all the turmoil over there. Again, I know that HCDE doesn't interact with HISD as much. It's really more geared towards the smaller districts, combining it, using it for purchasing power and things like that. But you do interact with HISD in some ways. Has it been any different? What effect has the takeover and the Mike Miles situation had, if any, that you've noticed?

Silky Joshi-Malik

I feel like I haven't noticed much. I think maybe because the student population we serve is just so different and kind of out of the norm compared to other districts. I feel like we've been operating as usual and not really dealing with any of the effects that might be effect, like HISD might be going through and whatnot.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. Even with that, there's obviously been a lot of chaos, turmoil, financial issues, so on and so forth. How is that affecting HCDE's plans for the future? What are you advocating for and what is HCDE doing to continue its programming and do more with what it can going forward?

Silky Joshi-Malik

One of the things I love about HCDE is just how financially and fiscally prudent it runs as an organization. We run very lean. We often every year spend under budget. We don't raise tax dollars and we do a lot with what we have. And that seems to be our, we function in these five-year plans and looking forward five years, that's exactly, you just keep going as planned. There hasn't been much of a worry in that regard because we do just run a very tight lean ship and it's really nice to be part of that sort of organization that understands you can't just, if you run out of money, you really shouldn't be raising tax dollars.

And we try very hard to every year lower what we, lower our tax rate and do more with what we have. So it's, yes. I was like, so it's great in that regard if you're looking at it from a financial perspective, how lean it manages to run.

Charles Kuffner

Are there any policies or programs, things that on your wishlist that you would like to advocate for, say in the next six years?

Silky Joshi-Malik

I'd love to see an expansion of our Head Start program and that takes time. And I think that is something myself and most of the other trustees probably we believe should be a goal. And that is something, I mean, getting larger and growing is not easy and it's not fast.

And when we look at our five-year plan, there is this understanding that we should be able to serve more and try and keep increasing our capacity. But for me personally, I care a lot about the Head Start program. I think it offers a lot of, offers something to a group of people who might not have access to it otherwise, and that can be very impactful to that child's life. So that's personally what I am an advocate for is expanding our Head Start program.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, HCDE is one of, I think, only two county departments of education in Texas. There's one in Dallas, I believe. And I think especially now, or I mean, it has had a target on its back in the past by some Republican legislators who would like to get rid of it. I don't recall hearing anything in the last couple of sessions. So maybe it's been a back burner issue. They've had bigger fish to fry. Is that something you're worried about going forward?

Silky Joshi-Malik

I think the work that HCDE does is there's a lot of nonpartisan or bipartisan support for it. We currently are a very functional board. We're all mostly, I think, on the same page. We care deeply about the mission of HCDE. So that's been really nice to be a part of since I've come on. And I think that it's really hard to argue against a program that runs under budget, doesn't raise your tax dollars, and is offering something very beneficial to society and to not only Houstonians, but people outside of students and children and even adults in and out of Houston.

And that's sort of what we do. We keep our head down and we just keep working. And you never know if you're gonna end up drawing a lot of attention from the Texas lege, but I think there's a lot of other stuff going on in Texas that we kind of have been under the radar recently. So that's a good place to be so we can just focus on the work that we're doing.

Charles Kuffner

Well, and I understand that position and there's a lot of merit to it, but we live in a world where if people don't know what you're doing, it's like you don't exist. Is there an argument to be made for being more vocal and visible with HCDE's mission? I mean, you see a lot of institutions, government institutions, as well as private ones, being out there on social media, communicating as best they can, what they do, why they do it, and why it's good for people. Is that something you think HCDE ought to consider? Since apparently there's much to doubt.

Silky Joshi-Malik

Well, so HCDE does have a wonderful comms department that has been, at least since I've come on doing these campaigns to raise awareness of what HCDE is, what it offers to Houstonians and people in and out of Houston. There's billboards around town. The social media has definitely picked up since I think maybe the middle of last year.

I engage with it more, I see more of it. So I think there, I know that there is an effort. I don't know how successful it is because campaigns and advertisement, all of that is sort of kind of a long game. I think getting people to know who you are, what you do, but there is definitely concerted effort to keep people aware and make them aware first of all, and then keep them aware of what HCDE does and offers to people. I know maybe we're not as flashy as we should be, and that's something to think about.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, well, your position is generally not one in which a whole lot of money is raised for campaigning and you're running county-wide. Harris County, as I understand, is a pretty big place. How do you go about campaigning on basically a zero budget?

Silky Joshi-Malik

So I fundraised about \$15,000 and I've used a decent amount of that to, before the primary, just kind of doing my best to block walk, campaign with other candidates, other groups. A big part of campaigning when you're down ballot like this is to work hard to get the endorsement of as many organizations and groups as possible because they will send out mailers on your behalf. So that's basically what it has looked like, kind of tagging along to other people's block walks, other candidates, doing what I can to throw my help behind that sort of larger effort happening at the top of the ballot and in the hopes that people will vote down ballot and include me in their vote. So it's very hard to campaign in Harris County and people not from here probably can't even fathom what it's like living in such a ginormous county.

Charles Kuffner

People like talking about the 100 plus elections, races on their ballot this year. But you are one of them and you do have to, you are running for a full term. So when people do go to vote in this election, early voting starting on October 19th, why should they vote to give you that full term for HCDE position seven and not your opponent?

Silky Joshi-Malik

I believe that a person who cares deeply about education, public education should be serving on this board. I am a product of public schooling. I am someone who benefited from programs like this growing up, going to title one schools as a child. And it's easy for me to be an advocate for things that help kids from lower socioeconomic statuses because I was one of those kids. And I will forever, ever, ever fight for those kids. And I just care very deeply and passionately about public education in this state and in this country. And that's why I hope people will vote for me.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, Silky Joshi-Malek, thank you very much for speaking with me today.