

## Area educators, organizations honored by H-E-B

By Silvia Foster-Frau, Staff Writer

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Photos by Edward A. Ornelas, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

*Former United States Secretary of Defense Robert Gates speaks during the 2017 HEB Excellence in Education Awards gala held Sunday May 7, 2017 at the Hilton Austin Hotel in Austin, Tx.*

San Antonio's Pre-K 4 SA, Alamo Heights Independent School District and two local school teachers picked up top honors Sunday, being named winners in H-E-B's prestigious statewide education awards.

"Texas educates over 5 million students" said Robert Gates, the former U.S. Secretary of Defense and keynote speaker for the award ceremony, which was held Sunday at a glamorous gala in downtown Austin's Hilton Hotel. "You will determine how many of those 5 million will be prepared and motivated to meet the challenges facing this state and our country in the future."

In March, H-E-B's Excellence in Education awards selected 58 finalists across Texas, with categories ranging from best teacher to best school board.

By Sunday, the panel of judges had whittled them down to the best in the state for each of the eight categories. Dozens of school officials and educators from across Texas attended the gala on Sunday in hopes of winning a top award.

Of the six winning teachers statewide, two of them were from San Antonio in categories for the least experience and the most experience in teaching. Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City ISD's Ricky Davis won the Rising Star Award, giving \$5,000 to Davis and another \$5,000 toward Schertz Elementary School. Michael Bailey won \$25,000 each for himself and for Bradley Middle School at North East ISD for the Lifetime Achievement category, which is for teachers with more than 25 years experience.

The eight San Antonio educators (two principals and six teachers) who were selected as finalists earlier this year were surprised by H-E-B officials with large checks of \$1,000 for themselves and up to \$2,500 for their schools.

In total, the H-E-B program selected 40 educators as finalists, though only eight get to win.

The \$25,000 win for Pre-K 4 SA will go toward continuing its work in social-emotional development curricula in the North and South centers.

After Gates speech on the need to reform and change, the kind of leadership — “more about the heart than the head” —needed to inspire that change, the awards ceremony began to highlight the large and small in public education, from the school districts to the teachers, that are emulating that leadership today.

Davis, who calls his students “kiddos,” was the first awardee of the night, winning in the Rising Star category for elementary schools. He thanked his Principal for “always listening to my crazy ideas,” and his wife, whom he met at H-E-B (he was a bagger, she, a cashier).

Bailey, who was received with loud hoots and hollers when his name was announced, is a history teacher who runs a 197-year-old Mill Springs Cabin on his campus. It has a museum and a Texas dinosaur exhibit and his students gives tours of it to others.

“You and I have that privilege, that responsibility, to help shape the future,” Bailey said to the room full of educators. “It is a challenge, but it is truly a responsibility.”

“We accept this award on behalf of San Antonio’s four-year-olds, who inspire us to do our best every single day,” said Belinda Gonzalez, director of the South education center of the program. “This honor also belongs to our incredible ISD partners, because together we’re making a difference.”

“Pre-K 4 SA was designed to create a change, the kind of change with seismic impact to change the education and workforce trajectory in San Antonio in one generation,” said Sandy Weser, director of the North education center.

Alamo Heights won the small district award for its “innovation, reflection and continuous improvement,” said Suzanne Wade, president of H-E-B’s San Antonio Food and Drug Division and master of ceremonies.

The district was also lauded for its engaged classrooms initiative, which customizes learning specific to its students, and started this past year in 17 classrooms and will be in every district classroom in four years.

“There’s a lot of love in our school district,” Alamo Heights Superintendent Kevin Brown said, getting choked up.



*Pre-K 4 SA education center Directors Sandy Weser (left) and Belinda Gonzalez accept the \$25,000 award that will benefit the social-emotional development curricula.*

He said the district's teachers wrote the application for the award. He said the military, as Gates spoke of in his speech, and businesses, like H-E-B, are pillars of society just as important as public education.

"Public schools are a cornerstone of our democracy. A cornerstone," Brown said. "As much as we support and celebrate our defense and external borders, and as much as we celebrate our free enterprise system, we must celebrate our internal defense — and that's our public schools."

By the time the ceremony ended, the H-E-B program had handed out \$430,000 in cash prizes to 11 award winners. Since its inception in 2002, H-E-B's Excellence in Education program has doled out more than \$8.5 million to Texas public education.

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