

January 2026

"Empowering those around you to be heard and valued makes the difference between a leader who simply instructs and one who inspires." ~Adena Friedman, NASDAQ CEO



Lifting Up...

Happy New Year! This month's focus is to **reignite**. What a better time to be renewed than to be a part of our upcoming conference and to reignite our passion and energy while networking with 400 of the most accomplished women in our state! To have our passion begin to burn again allows new life to breathe into our purpose. We are here to serve students in one capacity or another even amidst more targeted challenges blocking our efforts than ever before. Lean on, reach out to and learn from each other. What a gift we have been given in each other!

Christie Whitbeck, Executive Director

Check out this issue for: **conference details (yes, you can register onsite)**, an **article of the history and benefits of TCWSE written by Dr. Elizabeth Clark**, **future event dates in our regions**, a message from last year's keynote, **Jen Rafferty**, a new **Scripture** of the month focused on renewal and more! While we work in competitive fields, we must be women who lift each other up! Nothing can be more powerful than connecting with a colleague to help us listen, grow and be inspired! For questions about TCWSE contact Dr. Christie Whitbeck, Executive Director at TCWSEexecdir@gmail.com

President's Message

Happy New Year TCWSE Members!

As we welcome 2026, I am filled with excitement and optimism for the year ahead. A new year brings fresh opportunities, renewed energy, and continued commitment to the work that matters most—supporting and advancing women in educational leadership

across Texas.

We begin this year with much to celebrate. The Texas Council of Women School Executives now proudly includes 660 members, a powerful reflection of the strength, influence and unity of women leaders throughout out state. This milestone speaks to the impact of our organization and the collective leadership each of you brings to your schools and communities every day.

I also want to share my deep gratitude and pride in the opportunity to serve as President of this prestigious organization. It is truly an honor to lead such an inspiring network of professionals who are dedicated to excellence, advocacy, and mentorship in education.

Looking ahead, we are thrilled and are prepared for our 41st Annual Conference, where we will once again come together to celebrate and support women in leadership. This year's conference theme, "Taking Flight," captures our shared momentum--recognizing how far we have come while encouraging us to rise, stretch our wings, and soar to new heights together.

We look forward to a year filled with connection, growth and meaningful leadership opportunities. Thank you for your continued engagement, your service, and your belief in the mission of TCWSE. Here's to an exciting and impactful 2026 as we continue Taking Flight!

Sincerely,



Dr. Martha Salazar-Zamora
TCWSE President
Tomball ISD Superintendent

Save The Date



The TCWSE Conference is quickly approaching, and I am excited to remind you that we will gather in beautiful San Antonio, January 23–24, 2026. This year's theme, **Take Flight: Claim Your Power. Elevate Your Impact**, calls each of us to step fully into our leadership, our voice, and our influence.

This conference is designed to energize, inspire, and equip you for the work ahead while creating space for connection with women who understand the unique demands and rewards of school leadership. I am truly looking forward to seeing you, learning alongside you, and celebrating the collective strength of TCWSE.

And one important reminder as you prepare to attend: pack your purple. Let it be a visible symbol of confidence, unity, and the power we claim together.

See you in San Antonio as we take flight.

Sonja A. Brown

President-Elect

Texas Council of Women School Executives
Pilot, 2026 Annual Conference - *Take Flight: Claim Your Power. Elevate Your Impact.*

2026 TCWSE Annual Conference

January 23-24, 2026

(Friday-Saturday before the TASA Midwinter Conference)
Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center | San Antonio, Texas

[See Agenda](#)

Trailblazing Keynoters



Cherish Pipkins



Jill Siler

Director of Human Capital and Strategic TASA Deputy Executive Director and Author of "Thrive Through the Five"

Friday's Keynote Presentation: *"Every Day is an Interview!"*

Saturday's Keynote Presentation: *"Executive Presence"*

2026 TCWSE Annual Conference

The 2026 TCWSE Annual Conference has a new schedule and a new location for 2026! The event will be held **Friday, January 23, and Saturday, January 24, 2026**, at the **Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center in San Antonio!** (The event will be held in conjunction with the [TASA Midwinter Conference](#).)

New Agenda for 2026!

Friday, January 23, 2026

1 - 2 p.m.

Officer Meeting

2 - 4 p.m.

TCWSE Board Meeting

(Executive Board, Regional Representatives, and Past Presidents)

2 - 8 p.m.

Conference Check-in & Registration

4:30 - 5:45 p.m.

Opening General Session

Sponsor Recognition

President's Welcome

Recognition of Past Presidents & Dignitaries

Introduction of Executive Committee

Introduction of Conference Committee
Keynote Speaker



Cherish Pipkins

Director of Human Capital and Strategic Initiatives, Lancaster ISD

Friday's Keynote Speaker: "Every Day is an Interview!"

6 - 8 p.m.

Welcome Reception

Saturday, January 24, 2026

7 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Conference Check-in & Registration

7 - 7:30 a.m.

Sunrise Service

7:30 - 8:30 a.m.

Breakfast

7:30 a.m. - 3:10 p.m.

Silent Auction

7:45 - 8:30 a.m.

Newcomers Session

8:30 - 9:45 a.m.

Second General Session

Bravo Awards

Margret Montgomery Leadership Award

Ann Halstead Scholarship

Pat Shell Scholarship

Women in Leadership Panel

10 - 10:45 a.m.

Focus Sessions

Superintendent-Communications Partnerships: Strategies that Work

From Runway to Rotation: The Ascent of a Woman Superintendent

Lead from Within: Own Your Story, Thrive in Work & Life, and Lead with Purpose
Turbulence Ahead? How to Keep Your Leadership Duo Flying High
Wings of Efficiency: How AI Elevates Leadership at Every Level
Charting the Course: Building Your Leadership Capacity

11 - 11:45 a.m.
Focus Sessions

High-Flying Leadership: Creating a Culture of Compassion & Collaboration
Building a Strategic Plan for Success
Navigate Turbulence: “Well, We’ve Never Hired a Lady Before” & Other Flight Risks
Unlock Your Leadership Potential and Shine from Curriculum to Cabinet
Tower Talk: Navigating Governance and Management with Clarity and Cohesion

11 - 11:45 a.m.
Mentor/Mentee Session
11:45 a.m. - 1:15 p.m.
Lunch & Vendor Visits
12:30 - 3 p.m.
Female Superintendents’ Summit
1:15 - 2 p.m.
Focus Sessions

Balancing Instructional Leadership While Managing a Campus
Flight Plan for Your Life
From Data to Action: Leveraging Dashboards for School Leadership
Calm in the Cockpit: Steering Through Emotional HR Conversations
Your Leadership Altitude: Navigating Leadership, Politics, and Personal Brand
Changing Flight Plans: Using Your Expertise to Positively Affect Policy

2:15 - 3 p.m.
Focus Sessions

Take Flight with AI: Empowering Leaders to Elevate Impact
The Happiness Advantage: Leading with Positivity and Purpose
Flight Path to Impact: Strategic Leadership for Schools
Navigating Turbulence: Building Resilient Teams in Uncertain Times
Leading When You’d Rather Be Leaving
Clear Skies Ahead: Charting a Bold Course for Women Leaders

3:15 - 4:30 p.m.
Closing General Session

Sponsor Recognition & Door Prizes
President’s Message
Introduction of Regional Representatives
Keynote Speaker
Business Meeting/Passing of the Gavel
2027 Conference Unveiling



Jill Siler

TASA Deputy Executive Director and Author of "Thrive Through the Five"

Saturday's Keynote Speaker: "*Executive Presence*"

Registration & Housing

On-site Registration

Online registration for the 2026 TCWSE Annual Conference has closed, but you may register on-site at the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center (Level 3) in San Antonio 2-8 p.m., Friday, January 23, or 7 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday, January 24.

Find Housing Options on the TASA Midwinter Conference Housing Webpage

The TCWSE Annual Conference is held in conjunction with the [TASA Midwinter Conference](#). [Get the details on housing.](#)

[HOUSING INFO & LINK](#)

TCWSE Member

(All categories except Honorary Life)
\$350/On-site Rate

- **Includes All TCWSE Conference Sessions**
- **Friday Night Welcome Reception; Saturday Breakfast and Luncheon**
- **Want to join TCWSE before registering?** [Learn more.](#)

TCWSE Honorary Life Member

\$0/On-site Rate

- **Includes All TCWSE Conference Sessions**
- **Friday Night Welcome Reception; Saturday Breakfast and Luncheon**

Non-Member Educational Entity

\$400/On-site Rate

- Non-member affiliated with an educational entity (school district, college or university, education association, TEA, ESC, or private or charter school)
- **Includes All TCWSE Conference Sessions**
- **Friday Night Welcome Reception; Saturday Breakfast and Luncheon**

Non-Member Company or Organization

\$475/On-site Rate

- Non-member representative of a company, nonprofit organization, law firm, consultant, or individual
- **Includes All TCWSE Conference Sessions**
- **Friday Night Welcome Reception; Saturday Breakfast and Luncheon**

In addition to three general sessions that will leave you soaring, you will ...

- Chart a course for success in the Newcomers Session
- Sit in the pilot's seat of your own learning in 25 Focus Sessions
- Connect with your crew in the Mentor/Mentee Session
- Enjoy jet-fueled conversations in the Female Superintendents' Summit
- Much more! [See the agenda](#) (and check back for updates)

New this Year! Flight Paths

This year, we have designated leadership pipelines that will help move you from runway to cruising altitude with clarity and purpose:

- Classroom to Campus Leadership: Pre-flight for aspiring teacher leaders. Build your checklist for department and grade-level leadership, AP roles, and deanships.
- Campus to Central Office: Navigate systems, budgets, and cross-functional work. Discover the tools that guide district-level impact.

- Curriculum to Cabinet: Translate instructional expertise into strategy. Align academics, operations, and data to drive districtwide improvement.
- Superintendent-Ready: Prepare for the captain's seat. Contracts, board relations, media readiness, and crisis response that hold at high altitudes.
- Policy, Advocacy & Beyond: Read the airspace. Influence legislation, engage stakeholders, and establish yourself as a trusted voice beyond your district.

TCWSE presenters are high-flying women leaders in a variety of roles: professors, superintendents, central office administrators, principals, attorneys and more!



Ground School for Great Leadership

In addition to three general sessions that will leave you soaring, you will ...

- Chart a course for success in the Newcomers Session
- Sit in the pilot's seat of your own learning in 25 Focus Sessions
- Connect with your crew in the Mentor/Mentee Session
- Enjoy jet-fueled conversations in the Female Superintendents' Summit

TCWSE presenters are high-flying women leaders in a variety of roles: professors, superintendents, central office administrators, principals, attorneys and more!

Check out the Exciting Regional Events Across our State



TCWSE
Region 4 Chapter

THE POWER OF WE!



R4TCWSE Spring Conference

March 28, 2026

8:00am-1:00pm

Null Middle School

SHELDON ISD 
Where Vision Becomes Legacy

*Region 12 Begins Podcast,
"Her Side of the Desk"*






***Region 13 October Meeting @ ESC 13 Austin
Spring Conference Tues. March 24, 2026
11:00-2:00 p.m.***

Speaker: Veronica Sopher
Topic: "Imposter Syndrome-Erasing the Myths"
contact: Alicia Maphies at alicia.maphies@dsisdtx.us


Region 13 and 17 Combined Mixer at the Conference!



TCWSE Region 13 & Region 20 Mixer

 5:00-7:00 PM

 JANUARY 24, 2026

 CASA RIO
430 E COMMERCE ST,
SAN ANTONIO, TX 78205

SAVE THE DATE

*Join us for appetizers
and networking
sponsored by
Classlink!*

Celebrating Our Own Writers

In an effort to create more exposure for our talented writers we will now offer an opportunity for members to submit writings, research, poetry, articles, etc. for inclusion in this monthly publication. The TCWSE Officers opted for this change in lieu of continuing the Journal located on our website. The past research of members will remain on the website for reference as their contributions remain respected and appreciated.

If you are interested in submitting a writing for consideration, you may do so by sending it to Dr. Jennifer Jones at jsjones@esc7.net and/or Dr. Christie Whitbeck at TCWSEexecdir@gmail.com.

We hope you enjoy reading this month's talented author among us: Dr. Elizabeth Clark

Dr. Clark is currently Associate Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability in Birdville ISD and is past president of TCWSE.

Gold, there is, and rubies in abundance, but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel." —Proverbs 20:15

As I reflect on the early days of Texas Council of Women School Executive (TCWSE), I am reminded of the women leaders who stood at its beginning—women who chose to join a women’s organization at a time when doing so was far from popular. Some even feared that aligning themselves with such an organization might jeopardize their opportunities for advancement. Yet the pioneers of TCWSE moved forward anyway. They were courageous, bold, and relentless, pressing on despite whispered doubts and snide remarks from male counterparts. In those early days, we could all fit into a single hotel conference room. Though our membership was faithful, our numbers were small. Still, the vision for a women’s organization committed to developing and producing leaders was never abandoned and never wavered. Many of these women were hidden gems at the time, quietly carrying untapped potential. As they discovered their voices, sharpened their skills, and engaged in meaningful networking, mentoring, and coaching, they emerged not only as knowledgeable leaders, but as wise ones—refined through perseverance and strengthened by community.

Today, many of our current members have experienced TCWSE as it has evolved into a thriving and significant organization. As one scrolls through the list of past presidents or reflects on those who have received the Margaret Montgomery Leadership Award, it is understandable that their stories may not be fully known.

Yet each name represents a journey that helped shape who we are today. If all could hear the stories behind those titles and honors, we would be amazed—and we would agree that their lips speak knowledge and wisdom. Like rare gems, their value, contributions, and courage have been instrumental in refining TCWSE into the organization it is today. The purpose of this article is to shed light on who we are, what we have become, and to draw attention to the rare gems that comprise TCWSE.

Deep within every thriving organization lies a vision that gives it purpose and a mission that shapes its work. Since its inception in 1995, the Texas Council of School Women Executives (TCWSE) has been grounded in the belief of its founder, Margaret Montgomery. She recognized that across Texas there were countless women who were true gems—talented, capable, and full of promise—yet largely undiscovered and too often denied opportunities to grow their leadership skills. Like natural gems formed beneath the surface, their potential was present but unseen, waiting for the right conditions to be revealed. Dr. Montgomery envisioned an organization where women could receive intentional coaching, meaningful mentoring, and high-quality leadership learning experiences that would refine their potential and allow them to shine. That founding vision continues to sustain TCWSE’s growth and relevancy today.

Over time, TCWSE has experienced exponential growth in membership and has earned a reputation as a premier organization uniquely suited to meeting the needs of professional women. TCWSE fosters an inclusive environment where the talents and contributions of women in every conceivable professional role are recognized and celebrated. From a highly committed Board of Directors to active regional affiliates and the leadership of Executive Director Dr. Christie Whitbeck, the organization remains faithful to its mission of building and sustaining a diverse community of women educational leaders dedicated to promoting equity and excellence through renewal, mentoring, and career advancement. While many organizations struggle to maintain membership, TCWSE thrives because of a strong support system committed to cultivating brilliance that is formed, refined, and revealed over time.

A defining attribute of any gem is its brilliance—the way it captures and reflects light once it has been uncovered and polished. This makes the gem metaphor especially fitting for the women of TCWSE, whose brilliance reflects knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom developed through experience and continuous learning. Yet brilliance alone does not create a gem. A gem must be carefully cut, polished, and refined to reveal its full radiance—just as leadership requires intentional growth and development. In nature, this refinement brings clarity and balance; in leadership, it represents growth shaped through coaching, mentoring, and purposeful practice.

The women of TCWSE embody this precision as servant leaders who mentor, support, and uplift others. Through intentional actions and thoughtful guidance, they cultivate insight, discernment, and confidence, enabling them to guide others, influence decisions, and lead with integrity. Their leadership shines through thoughtful decision-making, a deep understanding of people and systems, and an unwavering commitment to educational excellence. Like light refracted through a finely crafted stone, their insight does not seek attention but instead illuminates pathways for others.

Authenticity ultimately determines a gem’s true value. A genuine gem is prized not for imitation or surface appeal, but for its inherent qualities and uniqueness. This truth is reflected in the women of TCWSE, each of whom brings her own story, strengths, and perspective. Their authenticity builds trust, strengthens relationships, and transforms leadership into service—proving that true value lies not in position, but in purpose and presence.

When brilliance, precision, and authenticity converge, a gem becomes highly sought after—not simply for its beauty, but for the radiance it emits and the endurance it represents. So it is with the women of TCWSE. This organization uncovers hidden gems and provides a network where women are supported, mentored, and empowered to shine. Through TCWSE, servant leaders find their voice, refine their gifts, and extend their influence—refined by experience, revealed through service, and valued for the enduring impact they have on others.

As TCWSE stands on the threshold of national expansion, the call before us is both clear and compelling. The responsibility now rests with each member to protect the vision, amplify the mission, and invest in the next generation of hidden gems waiting to be discovered. Under the steady leadership of a committed Board of Directors and the strategic guidance of an Executive Director, TCWSE is uniquely positioned to extend its influence beyond Texas and shine a light on women leaders across the nation. This moment calls for courage—to lead, to mentor, to serve, and to advocate with intention. By engaging fully, contributing boldly, and remaining faithful to our purpose, we ensure that the brilliance cultivated within TCWSE does not remain confined, but radiates outward, shaping schools, communities, and systems nationwide. *The gem is refined; now it is time to let it shine.*

Let's Celebrate Each Other

Do you know of a female colleague who has been recognized or recently promoted? Send their name and recognition or new position information to Dr. Christie Whitbeck at TCWSEexecdir@gmail.com for possible inclusion in the next newsletter.

Congratulations to Cherish Pipkins, one of our conference keynote speakers!

Congrats on your recent promotion!



Cherish G. Pipkins is a solution seeker, former principal, motivational speaker, educational consultant, and Executive Director Human Resources at Lancaster ISD. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business/Corporate Communications from Southern Methodist University and a Master of Education in Higher Education/Higher Education Administration from the University of North Texas. A long-time educator, Cherish was named Teacher of the Year: 2007-2008, and nominated for Teacher of the Year: 2006 – 2007 at Lancaster Elementary School. She Nominated for Teacher of the Year: 2009-2010, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 at Plummer Elementary School. A member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Cherish is an impressive and endearing leader.

Were you at last year's conference? Here is a follow up tip for leadership in January from Keynote Speaker Jen Rafferty:

EMPOWERED *educator*

January always tells the truth.

When you run a school, you're not just leading instruction: you're running a complex organization made up of people, schedules, resources, emotions, and constant tradeoffs. **A school is a community *and* a business**, whether we like that language or not.

And January is when the strain shows.

I notice this every year working with leaders: what looked fine on paper in August starts to feel heavy in practice. Not because anyone did anything wrong, but because systems behave differently under sustained pressure.

One way I encourage leaders to read January is through what I think of as a **load lens**.

In particular:

1. Where is **decision load** increasing like things taking more time or coordination than they should?
2. Where is the **people load** concentrating? Are a few strong individuals absorbing strain so the system can function?
3. Where is **friction load** showing up? Is it in processes that technically work but quietly drain energy every day?

January isn't the month to fix everything.

It's the month that shows you where attention matters most.

Using this lens now can help you understand how your system is carrying load, which is often what makes the difference between a reactive spring and one with enough steadiness to plan well for the year ahead.

Minutes can make the difference between overload and clarity. Noticing now matters.

Dr. Jen Rafferty

Empowered Educator · www.empowerededucator.com

Empowered Educator partners with schools nationwide to strengthen teacher well-being, leadership, and retention through research-based professional development.

Scriptures of the Month

The scriptures below represent a feeling of renewal and new beginnings as we enter 2026!

Jeremiah 29:11 - For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Proverbs 3:5-6 - Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Revelation 21:5 - And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Ephesians 4:22-24 - To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

2025-26 TCWSE Regional Representative List!

**Reach out to your TCWSE Regional Representative to get involved
in your regional TCWSE Chapter**

To find a list of TCWSE Regional Reps <https://tcwse.org/> or see below:

**Reach out to your TCWSE Regional Representative to get involved
in your regional TCWSE Chapter**

- Region 1 [Michelle DeWitt](#) - Superintendent - Lyford CISD
- Region 2 [Dela Castillo](#) - Chief Financial Officer- Beeville ISD
- Region 3 [Melissa Gonzales](#) - Superintendent Refugio ISD
- Region 4 [Paula Patterson](#) - Superintendent - Crosby ISD
- Region 5 [Bridget Kirby](#) - Assistant Superintendent- Silsbee ISD
- Region 6 [Amy Busby](#) - Asst. Superintendent of Student Serv.- Montgomery ISD
- Region 7 [Misti Smith](#) -Director of Federal and State Programs - West Sabine ISD
- Region 8 [Melissa Reid](#) - TSL Coach - Region 8 ESC
- Region 9 [Carla Hennessey](#) - Superintendent- Montague ISD
- Region 10 [April Estrada](#) - Deputy Executive Director- ECS Region 10
- Region 11 [Cathy Sewell](#) - Deputy Executive Director- ESC Region 11
- Region 12 [Tiffany Spicer](#) - Superintendent - Waco ISD
- Region 13 [Alicia Maphies](#) - Director of Curriculum and Instr. - Dripping Springs ISD
- Region 14 [Chanda Bloch](#) - Superintendent- Hamlin Collegiate ISD
- Region 15 [Mandy Traylor](#) - Superintendent- Veribest ISD
- Region 16 [Kelly Legg](#) - Assistant Superintendent- Dumas ISD
- Region 17 [Cicely Alexander](#) - Director of Counseling- Lubbock ISD
- Region 18 [Michelle Rinehart](#) - Superintendent- Alpine ISD
- Region 19 [Blanca Cruz](#) - Human Resources Director- San Elizario ISD
- Region 20 [Stacia Snyder](#) - Principal- Smithson Valley High School- Comal ISD

TCWSE Membership is open! Go through the TASA portal and be sure your TCWSE membership is current! Remember to keep your contact information current so we can stay in touch! Questions about joining or renewing? Please contact Debbie Craig, TASA Coordinator, Membership & Registration Services 512.477.6361 or 800.725.8272.

[Click here](#) to **submit your Regional News and Photos.**

"I'd rather regret the risks that didn't work out than the chances I didn't take at all."
~Simone Biles



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