



**News Release**  
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## **Edinburg High School Takes Top Honors at Regional Mock Trial Competition**

### ***Two Regional Mock Trial Teams Headed to State Competition***

Eleven regional high school Mock Trial Teams participated in this year's regional mock trial competition arguing the fictional murder case of State of Texoma vs. Sylvestris Diardi in a first-ever virtual format. The two perennial mock trial powerhouse teams traded objections and endured cross-examinations to the bitter end and this year, Edinburg High School (Edinburg CISD) emerged victorious and earned a first-place finish in the final competition held on January 30 and February 6, 2021. Lamar Academy (McAllen ISD) earned second place honors. Briana Cuellar (Robert Vela High School) won the Courtroom Artist category. The top two teams and the Courtroom Artist will advance to state competition to be held March 5-6, 2021.

Members of the first-place team, Edinburg High School (Edinburg CISD) team include A'nnika Saenz, Kaycee Maldonado, Lalita Garcia, Raul Mendoza, John Paul Cruz, Michelle Guardiola, Sean Paul Fausey, Jacqueline Guardiola, Rebecca Velazquez, and Jose Yahir De Leon. The team was coached by Sandra Cardona-Cruz. The attorney advisor for the team was Arturo R. Cantu.

Members of the second place team, Lamar Academy (McAllen ISD) include Kathryn Gurwitz, Diego Perez, Olivia Gonzalez, Sofia Cadena, Nathan Kaplan, Sohumi Jain, and Lillian Welty. The team was coached by Sandra Herrera-Walker and Hiram Alexander Orozco. The attorney advisor for the team was Jaime Gonzalez.

In the mock trial "Courtroom Sketch Artist" category, student artists are required to document the court proceedings by depicting an actual courtroom scene observed during their team's trial. As described by Texas Mock Trial Competition contest materials, the Courtroom Artist Contest aims to teach student artists about the courtroom artist profession, teach student artists about the courtroom and legal process, and help the student artist to improve their artistic talents.

Judges also selected individual honors including "Best Advocate" recognition to A'nnika Saenz, Edinburg High School, Edinburg CISD and Sierra Salais, Sharyland Pioneer High School, Sharyland ISD. "Best Witness" commendations to Olufunmilayo Ajanaku, Brownsville ECHS, Brownsville ISD and Juan Sanchez, Thomas Jefferson High School, PSJA ISD.

In addition to bragging rights, teams received scholarship checks donated by the Hidalgo County Bar Association. The Edinburg High School Mock Trial Team received a \$1,500 scholarship check; Lamar Academy was awarded a \$1,000 scholarship, 3<sup>rd</sup> place team received a \$500 scholarship check, and the 4<sup>th</sup> place team received a \$250 scholarship check. In the Courtroom Artist category, the first place

**Region One Education Service Center** ([www.esc1.net](http://www.esc1.net)) serves over 438,000 students and educators in seven counties in south Texas including Brooks, Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Starr, Webb, Willacy and Zapata counties. Region One works to assist school districts in improving student performance, assist districts to operate more efficiently and economically, and implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or the Commissioner of Education.

finisher received a \$200 scholarship check, 2<sup>nd</sup> place received a \$150 scholarship check, 3<sup>rd</sup> place and 4<sup>th</sup> place finishers received scholarship checks in the amount of \$100 and \$50, respectively.

“Students and coaches work extensive hours studying and preparing for this competition,” says Jose J. Saenz, Region One ESC Mock Trial Coordinator. “These dedicated teams work after school, weekends, and sometimes even during their school breaks to perfect their case.” In addition to working with their school Mock Trial Team Coach, students also get advice and pointers from practicing attorneys who share their expertise with students. Special thanks are extended to Hidalgo County attorneys, who donated their time to serve as “judges” throughout the varying levels of competition and to Judge Ismael Fonseca, Judge Gina Benavidez, 13<sup>th</sup> Court of Appeals and Judge Fernando Mancias, 93<sup>rd</sup> District Court, who presided over the court competitions. Recognition is also given to the Texas Bar Foundation and the Hidalgo County Bar Association.

“The Texas High School Mock Trial competition is a statewide extracurricular program whose primary purpose is to increase students’ understanding of the judicial system by providing a first-hand experience in court,” explains Saenz. “The competition requires students to address legal issues, legal procedures, reasoning skills in a “real life” setting, and productive and creative thinking,” explains Saenz. By participating in the Mock Trial competition students prepare the role of witnesses and attorneys and employ legal strategies for the hypothetical case assigned to all teams.

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