The right name

For the sake of students, Houston ISD trustees need to accept a generous donation.

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Take a tour of any Texas college campus, and you'll see buildings named after donors. On the University of Houston campus, the imposing E. Cullen Building, known for the Cullen Performance Hall, overlooks the Cullen Family Plaza Fountain and its beloved reflecting pool. Around the corner on Cullen Boulevard, you'll find the Moores School of Music, which produces over 300 concerts and events annually, including many on campus in the Moores Opera House.

The Houston Independent School District board of trustees has the opportunity to follow in the long-standing tradition of granting naming rights to a public building in recognition of private philanthropy by voting "yes" today to accept a donation of $7.5 million from the Kinder Foundation to complete the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts.

The vote should be first and foremost about the students, who come from all parts of the city and all socioeconomic groups to this celebrated high school to obtain the finest education in the arts that our city has to offer. These students will not be well-served by a fine arts building without robust technology.

Yet the caliber of the theater, performance hall, recital hall, music rooms and dance rooms spaces, as originally designed, will be less than optimal if trustees turn down the generous donation and are unable to find another funding source.

Why the bond funding came up short on a building with an already hefty price tag is a different question, and accountability should be demanded. But

students should not suffer, and they will not just at HSPVA but districtwide if the board turns down the gift.

Houston philanthropies do not have a practice of awarding grants directly to HISD due to long-standing concerns about the district's ability to be a reliable partner. The Kinder Foundation is known to have exacting standards for its donations, and a donation of this size could open the door for other philanthropies to follow suit.

It's important to also recognize that philanthropic gifts are needed in an environment where the state Legislature is abdicating its constitutional responsibility to properly fund public education. Nowhere is that failure more stark than in what's commonly known as "recapture," in which HISD, now considered "property-rich," may be forced to pay $162 million (and $1 billion over the next four years) to the state for redistribution to low-property-wealth school districts. The Nov. 8 ballot includes an item asking voters to approve the payment. Without a fix to the state's public education funding formula, HISD may not have a choice but to rely on generous benefactors, of which our community fortunately has many.

Recognizing this truth, last year the board of trustees adopted a policy that stated, "The Board may agree to name a District facility for a...group when a major capital donation has been made to the district." A major capital donation is defined as either a monetary gift of, or land with a fair market value of, at least $7.5 million toward construction, renovation or acquisition of a district facility.

HSPVA has a well-regarded brand name. That brand will continue under the name of the Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts.

Trustee Jolanda Jones, who expressed her opposition to the gift at a Monday board meeting, is correct that HSPVA's building budget was enormous at

nearly $90 million and that other area high schools desperately need more financial support. But Friends of HSPVA, a private group that supports the school, approached the Kinder Foundation and secured the grant. Not only will HSPVA students likely suffer if HISD turns it down, the signal that the refusal will send to other donors will hurt students districtwide.

A vote to accept this grant doesn't set a precedent for a commercial entity such as a beverage company to buy naming rights to a school. But if there are any concerns, these could be forestalled by sturdy policy.

If the board decides that it doesn't want to accept gifts to secure naming rights, it should vote to change its policy so that well-meaning groups at the various schools don't solicit them. It's not smart process to turn down a committed gift on the grounds that the policy adopted by the board just last year no longer reflects the board's sentiments about naming opportunities. Even though some trustees were recently elected, philanthropies value institutional consistency.

The board has just hired a new superintendent, Richard Carranza, from San Francisco. Carranza secured a dramatic increase in philanthropic funding to San Francisco schools. In his final year, he raised almost $32 million from private donors.

A "no" vote would hamper Carranza's ability to increase the involvement of the philanthropic community in our schools. Simultaneously, such a short-sighted vote would have long-standing consequences for HISD students and our city.