



the CONNECTOR



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of Note

HERE ARE NO GUARANTEES IN LIFE or in public education. With a changing educational landscape, HCDE is constantly evolving and adapting to meet the needs of students and staff in the region. This week, we see our Adult Education program forging new partnerships to enhance the services we provide, while finding the blind spots in education.

From launching a new medical billing and coding certification course, to expanding hybrid and bilingual learning opportunities, Adult Education continues to remove barriers and meet learners where they are. These innovative efforts not only strengthen workforce readiness but also reflect the perseverance of our programs and students. At the Adult Education Learning Center ribbon cutting in July 2023, I spoke about the grit our adult learners possess. I see that same tenacity from our program leaders and their resilience reminds us why our mission matters — to create pathways to education, stability and success for every learner dedicated to their second chance.

I started the week on Monday at the Spring Branch Education Foundation Golf Tournament. On Tuesday, I met with my Executive and Leadership Teams and held standing meetings with staff. On Wednesday, I met with staff to prepare for my presentation for the Head Start Leadership Academy and held ongoing meetings. On Thursday, I attended

the Pinnacle Award lunch hosted by ASBO to honor Dr. Jesus Amezcua as a two-time recipient of the award. Later that day I attended a superintendent dinner sponsored by Spalding Nichols Lamp Langlois Law Firm. Today, I held standing meetings with staff and attended my year-in-review meeting with President Hinojosa.

Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Adult Education is working with community partners and vendors to adapt its program and offer new classes in light of federal eligibility requirements for adult learners.

ADULT EDUCATION ADAPTS, INNOVATES AND INSPIRES NEW PATHWAYS FOR SUCCESS

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S Adult Education program is committed to providing residents with a second chance at an education. With an eye on the future, the program is expanding and enhancing its course offering. All in an effort to support its students who possess the grit and perseverance to handle any challenge.

The team has spent the last few months forming partnerships with local vendors and workforce organizations to expand certification opportunities that not only meet federal requirements but also align with the region's labor needs, ensuring adult learners can translate their skills into meaningful employment.

Integrated Health Solutions II currently sponsors several phlebotomy classes. Director Sheri Flowers is now working closely with Honold to develop a new medical billing and coding course designed to prepare students to work with insurance companies and

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Phlebotomy students gather supplies to practice collecting blood samples from their fellow classmates.

Program Connections



Adult Education offers GED prep classes where Harris County residents can learn the necessary skills to get their certificate of high school equivalency.

perform administrative tasks.

“The sky is the limit with medical billing,” Flowers said. “This certification will give individuals the opportunity to obtain an administrative position in a medical office where they will schedule room availability, verify insurance, work with patients, bill and post payments and more.”

The accelerated curriculum will teach students how to translate patient diagnoses and services into universal codes that are used to process insurance claims accurately and ensure that healthcare providers are paid correctly. Throughout the 6- to 8-week hybrid program, students can attend instructional sessions online and then participate in in-person classes, where they can work through simulations that they may encounter in the office.

When Flowers dropped out of high school due to a teen pregnancy, she described feeling hopeless. Only after she obtained her GED and coding certification did the door open to a career in the medical field. She believes this course could have the same impact on many Harris County residents.

“I think many people who have lost their way think life is over for them, but it’s not because I was once in the same situation as you and now, I have my college degree and am currently working towards my master’s,” Flowers said. “Keep working and pushing because you can do this.”

Enrollment for the medical billing and coding class will begin toward the end of the year, with the first class scheduled to begin in January 2026.

Dr. William Hill, founder and director of Uncharted Territories Solutions, is one of Adult Education’s newest vendors who launched the division’s first hybrid phlebotomy class. Students



Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) students learn how various food choices impact the nutritional health of their future patients.

meet twice weekly to learn the proper collection of blood and other specimens with their online instructor. On specific days throughout the semester, students will report for in-person classes, where they will apply their newfound skills to work with volunteers and practice on dummies.

As a product of a single-parent household, Hill understands the necessity for certification courses that offer learners flexibility.

“These hybrid courses are really decreasing the barriers as far as transportation, child care and accessibility for some students,” Hill described. “Using the available research and technology will help us get a few more people who actually need help to get across the finish line.”

In addition to the push for hybrid classes, many workforce certification instructors are also adjusting their

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Program Connections

curriculum to be Spanish-speaker-friendly. A new initiative will place ESL teachers in certification classes to ensure students can participate and understand the material.

“Essentially, those ESL teachers will be in the classroom supporting students in learning the language while they become certified in a vocation,” Honold said. “Those students will also have a specialized class where they can review vocabulary, the material and prepare for qualification exams.”

Honold believes the initiative will be a breakthrough for the division, enabling an increased number of bilingual students to be certified for entry-level employment in the medical field.

“There’s a lot of demand for bilingual individuals in the healthcare sector,” Honold said. “Many of the English language learners who recently completed our CNA program were hired immediately by nursing homes. In some cases, they got paid a premium for being bilingual.”

Through every change, Adult Education remains steadfast in its mission to provide residents with a second chance that leads to education and sustainable employment. By adapting programs, expanding partnerships and removing barriers to access, the team continues to empower learners to rewrite their stories and build brighter futures.

“WE HAVE EXCITING CONNECTIONS WITH EMPLOYERS, AND THEY KNOW THAT WE OFFER QUALITY TRAINING. OUR STUDENTS ARE PREPARED AND READY TO SEIZE THEIR NEXT OPPORTUNITY.”

“We have exciting connections with employers, and they know that we offer quality training,” Honold said. “Our students are prepared and ready to seize their next opportunity.” ✨



Integrated Health Solutions II Director Sheri Flowers (brown top) speaks with phlebotomy students about building their resumes and exploring potential employment opportunities while they practice collecting samples.

NUESTRA PALABRA PARTNERSHIP CONNECTS AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR WITH FORTIS ACADEMY STUDENTS



FORTIS ACADEMY STUDENTS were treated to a visit from award-winning author Jessica Hoppe, continuing the investment in the campus, its young learners and their creative spirits by Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say.

The Houston-based organization is dedicated to promoting Latino literature and supporting Latino writers through its initiatives and community engagement. Founder Tony Diaz connected with Harris County Department of Education through Director of Construction Joe Carreon at a League of United Latin American Citizens event earlier this year. In investing in Fortis students, who are gaining and maintaining sobriety, Diaz and Carreon connected them with community partners and opportunities to showcase their creativity.

Monday's latest effort featured Hoppe, a New York City-based author whose book, "First in the Family: A Story of Survival, Recovery, and the American Dream," was regarded by multiple publications as one of 2024's best books. The memoir chronicles her journey to sobriety and attempts to deconstruct long-standing narratives about people of color and substance abuse.

The writing workshop featured Hoppe sharing her non-

traditional path into writing and tips and strategies for students.

"To tell your story, you don't have to tell us everything that happened to you," she said. "Tell us what happened that changed you."

Hoppe answered questions throughout the presentation and signed copies of her books to each participant. She also plans to continue working with the students and their writing. A podcast is in the works where they will be able to share their works.

"Writing with specificity is important because the more specific we are about our stories, the more it connects those feelings with others," she said. "They're not going to be able to identify specifically with what you went through, but they can identify with how you feel."

This is just the latest step in the blossoming relationship between Fortis and Nuestra Palabra. Fortis student Jerry Garza recently shared a poem in front of a live audience. The piece, which explored emotions and Garza's struggle with addiction, was well received and encompasses how Carreon and Diaz hope the initiative will build confidence while breaking down stigmas surrounding teen addiction and recovery. ✨

Board Briefs

CASE WORKSHOPS GIVE COMMUNITY PARTNERS TIPS FOR KINDNESS, SMOOTH TRANSITIONS



AFTERSCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME program staff received best practices and strategies to positively impact Harris County students this week at two Fall Professional Workshops hosted by the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids.

On Nov. 3, they prepped their programs for World Kindness Day (Nov. 13), exploring youth-centered activities that promote empathy, compassion and the connection of highlighting the power of kindness as a key to social emotional learning. Workshop attendees

not only left with a “kindness” journal but other meaningful activities to celebrate kindness that resonate with youth.

Three days later, program leaders convened to plan and better manage smooth transitions between activities in afterschool programming. Arguably the most chaotic moments within a program, participants explored the role that well-structured transitions

play in reducing behavioral issues and walked away with fun, youth-centered moments to ensure a productive environment. ✨

BUSINESS SERVICES AWARDED FOR BUDGET EXCELLENCE FOR 18TH CONSECUTIVE YEAR



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) was awarded the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO) Meritorious Budget Award (MBA) for excellence in the preparation and issuance of its budget for the 2025-2026 fiscal year. This honor reflects HCDE’s commitment to clear, transparent and high-quality budget presentation, reflecting the Budget Services division’s sound fiscal management and budgetary policies.

HCDE earned the award for an 18th consecutive year. The MBA program sets the standard for excellence in school budget development and communication, and is designed to help school business professionals enhance their financial planning skills and ensure district budgets are not only comprehensive but also accessible and informative for stakeholders.

“An effective school budget is more than just numbers. It’s a vital tool for building trust and engaging the community,” ASBO International Executive Director Jim Rowan said. “The Meritorious Budget Award recognizes districts like Harris County Department of Education that prioritize financial clarity and accountability. We commend their dedication to upholding nationally recognized budget presentation standards.” ✨

Board Briefs

#TEAMHCDE HONORS DR. AMEZCUA FOR INNOVATIVE FINANCIAL LEADERSHIP



PINNACLE
AWARDS

#TEAMHCDE GATHERED on Nov. 6 to celebrate Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Dr. Jesus Amezcua, who was honored with the 2025 Pinnacle of Achievement Award from the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO) in October. The luncheon recognized his leadership and the Business Services division's innovative work on the Coolwood Head Start Project, which transformed an underserved Houston community with a new \$9.5 million facility. Amezcua was applauded for his dedication to fiscal excellence and for setting an example of how creativity and collaboration can have a lasting impact on students and families. He is the only individual in the award's history to win twice, winning in 2021 for the construction of the ABS West campus. 🌟

TIDWELL HEAD START STUDENTS BRING BOOKS TO LIFE FOR RED RIBBON WEEK



STUDENTS FROM TIDWELL HEAD START wrapped up Red Ribbon Week (Oct. 20-23) with a burst of creativity and color during Character Book Costume Day! Little learners brought their favorite stories to life by dressing up as beloved characters, such as Mickey Mouse, the Cat in the Hat, and

even colorful crayons. The day was filled with laughter, reading and fun as teachers and students celebrated the joy of books and the importance of making healthy, positive choices. It was the perfect way to end a week dedicated to learning, imagination and school spirit. 🌟

SPECIAL SCHOOLS STAFF COMMITTED TO PROFESSIONAL GROWTH, STUDENT WELLNESS

THE SPECIAL SCHOOLS DIVISION is committed to professional growth and student success. Several team members recently attended two conferences focused on health, wellness and special education resources.

Shawniqua Matthews, Scharlde Franklin and Faith Adewale, nurses from Academic and Behavior Schools East and West, attended the Texas School Nurse Organization (TSNO) Conference on Nov. 1-2 at The Woodlands Resort. Sessions discussed how to enhance student wellness and strengthen the power of advocacy and available resources for nurses. Keynote speaker Dr. Stephen Sroka reminded school nurses and students with a key message – “Work on replacing the ‘I’ in illness with ‘we’ to get to wellness.” Director of Curriculum and Special Services Dr. Margaret Patton and Compliance and Technical Support Officer Michelle Rayson also attended.

Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker and Highpoint Assistant Principal Lenora Lewis traveled to Oklahoma for the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) Conference on Nov. 4-7. The pair attended small-group sessions that discussed how to advance equity for students with disabilities, promote conflict resolution among students, and build a strong school culture.

Together, these experiences reflect the division’s dedication to continuous learning and collaboration, ensuring that staff are equipped with the knowledge and tools to create a supportive, inclusive environment where every student can thrive. ★



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM DIGS INTO DATA MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES AT GENHTX MEETING



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION’S Civic Engagement Coordinator Avery Spranger and Specialist Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero recently attended their monthly GenHTX cohort meeting. In addition to networking and continuing their collaborative work with voter initiatives, attendees heard a presentation on data management techniques.

Under the umbrella of the Houston Endowment, which provides funding for civic engagement projects and initiatives, the Collective Action for Youth leverages community power and youth voices to transform systems and create solutions. GenHTX includes more than 30 organizations working to further voter engagement efforts across greater Houston, especially for those 35 and under. The monthly meetings provide training and share opportunities. ★

ALONGSIDE HER 'BIGGEST SUPPORTER,' SILKY JOSHI IS READY TO SERVE HCDE STAKEHOLDERS



IN MARCH 2025, Silky Joshi, a passionate advocate and community leader, was unanimously appointed to Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Board of Trustees. Joshi was among 11 individuals vying for the Position 7, At-Large seat, vacated by former trustee David Brown, who stepped down after accepting a position with a local school district.

"It was very humbling, incredible and hard to believe," said Joshi, who will fulfill the remainder of the term (December 2026) with plans to run for the seat in the future. "If I was going to lose something, that was the room of people to lose to. It drives home this desire that I have to really try and do a good job in this role, because there were a lot of people who wanted this as well. To not be the best I can be here would be wrong.

"This is really important, and I need to make sure I do the best job that I can."

With Imran, her husband of 14 years and her biggest supporter by her side, Joshi was officially sworn in to the Board of Trustees on April 16.

In just a few short months, Joshi is slowly putting her fingerprints on HCDE, its services and its many beneficiaries across greater Houston. Within a week of swearing in, Joshi accompanied Superintendent James Colbert Jr. for a tour of HCDE facilities, sat in on her first board meeting and visited staff members at the Irvington building's First Floor Reveal.

In August, Joshi attended Convocation and represented HCDE at Precinct 1's County Connections Youth Summer Initiative Awardee Reception.

"I feel like I'm still on the journey to learn how far reaching and how impactful HCDE is," she said. "It's so multi-layered that every time I attend a new event or meet someone new within the organization, I'm learning more of just how far reaching and complex we are – and then explaining that to people."

As she's getting more comfortable with her role here at HCDE,

Joshi is rekindling the same servant leadership spirit she's had for most of her life. Her maternal grandmother was a pioneer for women's rights in India and advocate to seeking selfcare. Joshi only met her a handful of times but heard these stories from her mother. They became a blueprint to serving those in need, lessons that included determination to keep showing up, never backing down and always speaking your truth.

THIS IS REALLY IMPORTANT, AND I NEED TO MAKE SURE I DO THE BEST JOB THAT I CAN.

She used those lessons while working in health education at MD Anderson Cancer Center and in LBJ Hospital's community outreach programs.

She used them when she and Imran moved abroad to Singapore and Malaysia, serving as a substitute teacher and volunteer within the schools.

She used them when she became the first woman to run for the U.S. House of Representatives in Texas' Second Congressional District.

Now, she uses them for the betterment of Harris County learners and their families. Joshi sees a lot of herself in those HCDE serves, whether its young students with immigrant parents or those who grew up in working-class neighborhoods.

"I don't want to be in an ivory tower or penthouse in the sky not caring about what's happening to people," Joshi said. "When you see these things in action and you get to meet the people, you say to yourself, 'This is the mission. This is why I'm here.' And that's really fulfilling." ✨

In the Community



HCDE SUPPORTS AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT AT SPRING BRANCH EDUCATION FOUNDATION GOLF CLASSIC

SUPERINTENDENT JAMES COLBERT JR. and assistant superintendents Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers participated in the Spring Branch Education Foundation Golf Classic on Nov. 3. The Department's philanthropic arm – Education Foundation of Harris County – served as a sponsor in the tournament.

Held at Wildcat Golf Club, the outing connected HCDE leadership with Spring Branch Independent School District and numerous community and business partners. They were able to share and showcase HCDE's various initiatives to best support Harris County students and educators. 🌟



CHIEF OF STAFF REPRESENTS HCDE AT RECENT EVENTS



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CHIEF OF STAFF DANIELLE BARTZ recently attended local events and initiatives, connecting with community partners, showcasing HCDE services and building relationships to best invest in county learners and their families.

She joined some of the Houston's top women at the 2025 kickoff and reunion reception on Oct. 23 for Women on the Move, which recognizes 10 exceptional women annually by the Texas Executive Women organization and is scheduled for Dec. 3. Bartz was a 2023 Women on the Move honoree, while Education Foundation of Harris County advisory board member Courtney Taylor was recognized in 2024.

The same day, Bartz met with fellow University of Texas graduates – Houston alumni joined Dr. JR DeShazo, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs dean for a networking happy hour. 🌟

WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for October! Twenty-one new faces have joined our Adult Education, CASE for Kids, Center for Educator Success, Head Start, Records Management, School-Based Therapy Services and Special Schools divisions.



Dysha Collins
Afterschool Program Specialist
CASE for Kids



Jackeily Contreras
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Javion Cox
Site Coordinator
CASE for Kids



Kajor Cress
Afterschool Program Specialist
CASE for Kids



Crytal Davila
General Office Clerk
Adult Education



Lairaly Denton
Non-Instructional Aide
Head Start



Kenneth Dotson
Educational Aide I
ABS West



Regina Gee
Officer of Partners & Certifications
Center for Educator Success



Felicia Green
Teacher
Head Start



Kimberly Hines
Customer Support & Imaging Clerk
Records Management



Monica Ibanez
Manager of Teacher
Advancement
Center for Educator Success



Kasey Khama
Educational Aide III
ABS West

— WELCOME TO HCDE —



Silvio Leivas
Teacher
Adult Education



Melissa Lopez
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Claudia Marquinas Paco
Non-Instructional Aide
Head Start



Karen Step McIntyre
Substitute Teacher
Special Schools



Marisol Palacios
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Nolesha Simpson
Educational Aide III
ABS East



Kimberly Stanley
Recruitment Manager
Center for Educator Success



Georgia Thomas
Occupational Therapist Assistant
School-Based Therapy Services



Jaelyn Williams
Campus Clerk
Head Start

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE E: INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

- Ensures that appropriate data are used in developing recommendations and making decisions regarding the instructional program and resources.



Students in HCDE's Adult Education program can choose from GED, English as a Second Language and various workforce certification classes to gain skills that translate to employment.

FOR YEARS NOW, public education has been asked to adjust and change seemingly on the fly. From our youngest learners in the Head Start division to those in Adult Education, students, educators, administrators and community partners have all been asked to show patience amid changes. Adult Education has formed new partnerships with local vendors and workforce organizations to expand certifications to meet new federal requirements and align with local labor needs. A new medical billing and coding course is in the development stages and set to begin in January. Workforce certification instructors are also adjusting curriculum for Spanish speakers, ensuring more students can participate and thrive. I applaud division leadership for maintaining its mission and introducing these new initiatives to still serve adult learners.

It speaks volumes when a community partner steps in to support our Special Schools division and students. Growing our village to support Harris County learners demonstrates the importance of public education. We saw that this week at Fortis Academy where award-winning author Jessica Hoppe visited with students, sharing her personal journey to sobriety as well as giving writing tips and strategies. Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say is a Houston organization dedicated to promoting Latino literature and

founder Tony Diaz has collaborated with HCDE Director of Construction Joe Carreon to provide a platform for Fortis students to using writing as a tool on their journey to gaining and maintaining sobriety. Hoppe signed copies of her book for each student and said she plans to stay connected with them through this partnership with Nuestra Palabra. Thank you for investing in these young learners and showing them how creativity and storytelling can be an avenue to break down stigmas.

Finally, the CASE for Kids team remains busy this fall with training sessions for community partners seemingly every week to help improve afterschool programs across greater Houston. Identifying small areas to improve can result in monumental changes for the student experience in out-of-school-time programs. This week, CASE training focused on kindness in preparation for World Kindness Day on Nov. 13 and managing and executing smooth transitions between activities. While small and innocent by themselves, these two topics can have huge results. Kindness is key for social emotional learning, while smooth transitions turn potential chaos into well-structured, fun experiences for all participants.

By investigating best practices for student achievement and utilizing effective practices that maximize achievement of student potential within HCDE, I am ensuring each student's learning goals are met or exceeded. ★



HCDE BOARD

Board President
Amy Hinojosa

1st Vice President
Richard Cantu

2nd Vice President
Dr. Erica Davis

Board Members
Eric Dick
Andrea Duhon
Silky Joshi
Dr. John McGee

UPCOMING EVENTS

November 14
[EFHC Topgolf Tournament](#)

November 19
Board Meeting

November 27-28
Thanksgiving Break
(HCDE Closed)

December 10
Holiday Reception – NPO

December 17
Holiday Reception –
Irvington
Board Meeting

December 23-January 1
Winter Break (HCDE Closed)

January 19
Martin Luther King Jr. Day
(HCDE Closed)

January 21
School Board Recognition
Reception Board Meeting