

the **CONNECTOR**



HEAD START, BATES COLLISION CENTER HELPS CHANGE LIVES WITH RESPONSIBLE PARENTING AWARD CAR GIVEAWAY P.3



NPO STAFF MEMBERS FELLOWSHIP, GET INTO THE SPIRIT AT ANNUAL HOLIDAY PARTY P.6



CES, SPECIAL SCHOOLS DIVISIONS PRESENT AT NATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE P.8

of Note

DECEMBER is such a fun time in education. Our days are filled with celebrations of the holiday season as well as demonstrations of the giving nature of our community and staff.

This generous spirit can be seen this week with the annual Bates Collision Center car giveaways. These are two amazing events every year at which two Head Start parents receive rehabbed cars as a reward for being responsible parents and exhibiting positive parenting skills.

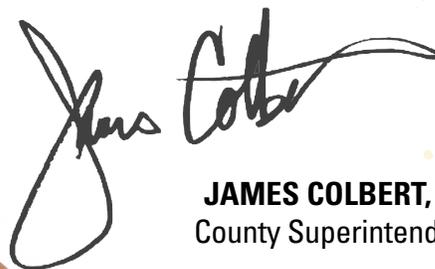
It is exciting to watch the pure joy on the faces of the recipients when they unwrap that new car. Their wonder and appreciation is evident in every part of their smiles as they realize they now have independence and freedom through reliable transportation. It is always fun to see the excitement of the children when they are presented with a car full of gifts, which usually includes a bicycle or tricycle the child can then ride around the parking lot. I love that HCDE's Head Start division has collaborated with Bates to support the Baytown and Channelview communities through this generous giveaway for more than 20 years. Knowing that we have a hand in helping a whole family transform the trajectory of its future through a new car is a truly gratifying feeling.

I started the week on Monday with ELT followed by meeting with the Moak Casey consultants where we discussed the financial impact of HCDE's programs and services. This is an annual meeting where Moak Casey staff, who are considered the premier school finance experts, scrutinize the work of our divisions and the financial impact those programs and services have on the residents of the

greater Houston region. Here is where we talk about how HCDE leverages the tax rate to save hundreds of millions of dollars for school districts while also turning every dollar of property taxes into seven dollars of services.

Tuesday began with my monthly SuperMENTor reading followed by interviews with finalists for the CFO position. As you know, Dr. Amezcua is retiring this month after more than 35 years in public education. He will be a hard act to follow and we wish him well in the next chapter of his life.

On Wednesday, I attended the Bates car giveaway in Baytown and then attended the Holiday lunch at NPO along with Trustees Duhon and Dick. I started the day Thursday at the Bates event in Channelview followed by meetings with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. Today, I am meeting with former LaPorte ISD Superintendent Lloyd Graham. Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



The Responsible Parenting Award, now in its 27th year, marked a milestone Dec. 11 as the Channelview location awarded Bates Collision Center's 50th vehicle to Michaela Rojo, a mom at HCDE's Fonwood Early Head Start center.

TWO HEAD START MOMS, TWO STORIES OF SURVIVAL AND A NEW ROAD AHEAD

IT TAKES REMARKABLE STRENGTH to survive hardship and even more to rise above it with purpose. Trauma can pull a person into silence, or shadow hope with doubt and pain. However, there are some who refuse to let those memories define their futures. They push forward, fueled by perseverance and love for their families.

Raquel Tait and Micaela Rojo embody that resilience as survivors of physical and psychological abuse, respectively. This week, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Head Start division and its community partner, Bates Collision Center, honored their unwavering determination to provide for the daughters of these two mothers.

With tear-filled eyes and smiles to signal the space station, Tait and Rojo were each gifted keys to rehabbed vehicles as the 2025 recipients of the Responsible Parenting Award, which honors Head Start parents actively participating in their children's lives and education. Both were nominated by Head Start staff and selected by a committee of Bates employees at the Baytown and Channelview locations.

"Parenting is the most important job we have in this life and we recognize that these moms are tackling a lot and providing for their kids without transportation, so with these vehicles, we hope to give them a little helping hand, a little boost in life, and we can't wait to see how far they will go," said Bates Collision Center co-owner Leila Bates.



Raquel Tait, right, received keys to a 2015 Nissan Altima after demonstrating her commitment her 2-year-old daughter, Zen's, education.

Throughout the year, Bates Collision staff search for salvaged or donated vehicles that can be repaired and gifted to deserving parents during the holiday season.

"Winning this car feels like God is telling me, 'It's your time, and it's going to be okay. I got you,'" an emotional Tait said while receiving keys to a 2015 Nissan Altima on Dec. 10 at Bates Collision Center in Baytown.

The moment was more than keys for Tait. It was the first time she could picture a future for herself and her 2-year-old daughter, Zen, that didn't require asking someone else for permission to get there. Tait moved

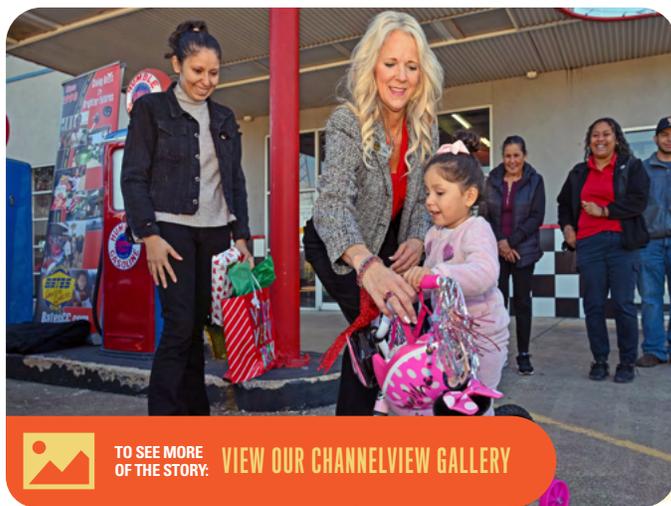
CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Program Connections



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR BAYTOWN GALLERY](#)



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR CHANNELVIEW GALLERY](#)

to Houston with the hope of a fresh start but didn't have family to fall back on or a familiar safety net. What she found was a community that refused to let her struggle alone.

Staff at HCDE's John G. Jones Early Head Start partner became her support system, while her neighbor has consistently offered his car when Tait needs to get Zen to school, volunteer or pick up a shift as a part-time caregiver at Heavenly Touch Caregiving Services.

"It's been a blessing, but it's hard because I'm one of those people who try to do everything for themselves and often times, my pride didn't want to accept the help," she described. "This car means I don't have to feel like I'm a burden. I can take my baby to the park when she gets out of school or go to McDonald's to let her play in the jungle gym. We are going to have so much freedom and won't be forced to stay in the house all the time, because I know that's not healthy for kids."

Tait recently passed qualification exams to become a certified trauma life coach to help adults, like her, who are survivors of childhood sexual assault. After being abused by a family member from the ages of 2-7, Tait began therapy at 9 to evaluate her emotions and heal from the experience. Those sessions shaped her desire to help others work through similar trauma. With the keys to her Altima, she plans to start traveling the county to meet with clients and work on the next steps to start her own business.

"Even if I just help guide one person to be successful, I feel like that's what my destiny is," Tait said. "I feel like that's what God wants me to do. That's what's going to continue to change me because I can say the journey from my healing and growth has helped another woman or child see that we are not victims. We are survivors who are able to conquer all the things that we go through in life."

Micaela Rojo's life changed when her partner, who once created a safe and loving home, became verbally and psychologically abusive. She was prepared to endure the situation but made a different choice when her in-laws sought custody of her 3-year-old daughter, Kailey. The stay-at-home mother was forced to leave the home she helped build and moved in with her sister to keep her daughter safe.

"I try to be strong for my daughter, but it's not easy," an emotional Rojo said. "I try to fight and work hard for my daughter because I don't want what happened to me to happen to my daughter."

For the past eight months, Rojo has relied on her family for support and borrowed her sister's car when she needs to take Kailey to school or attend parent-teacher meetings at Fonwood Early Head Start. However, even that has become uncertain as the vehicle fell into disrepair, limiting her ability to stay active in her daughter's education.

"I told the HCDE family services provider a little bit about my story, and she said, 'Oh, we can help you,'" Rojo recalled about being nominated for the parenting award. "I've relied on my siblings, but I don't like to bother them because I know they have their own families. I want to be able to take my daughter to school and the doctor without having to worry."

The giveaways, now in their 27th year, marked a milestone Dec. 11 as the Channelview location awarded Bates Collision Center's 50th vehicle to a Head Start parent working to create stability for his or her children. Superintendent James Colbert Jr. emphasized that each car represents a family with a unique story and a shared determination to move forward.

"This program is more than a car giveaway. Think about the people who are receiving this gift," he said, addressing the nearly 75 attendees on Dec. 10. "That's 50 families who are riding the bus or getting a ride, asking someone to take them grocery shopping. We have over 1,000 parents in our Head Start program, but these families were hand-picked and this will be a critical turning point in your lives."

Leila Bates described how her family has also experienced personal challenges this year but remained steadfast in its mission to continue the annual tradition, choosing not to scale it back or place the program on hold.

"Everyone experiences hard times, but just because we are also going through a tough season, we did not want to short anybody their opportunity to be blessed this year," she said.

Lee Bates added: "We faced this

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 5](#)

Program Connections



In addition to the rehabbed vehicles, Baytown and Channelview community partners stepped up to provide gifts for the award recipients. That included a bicycle for 2-year-old Zen.



The highlight to the car giveaways is watching families unwrap the vehicles. Family and loved ones help 3-year-old Kailey.



▶ TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

decision during the COVID-19 pandemic as well, but I feel like as long as we're in business, we're going to continue this initiative."

Rojo became emotional as she received the keys to her refurbished 2017 Ford Escape, which Bates employees volunteered their time and skills to fix before filling it with presents. The award is also an opportunity for the Baytown and Channelview communities to give back as residents and businesses donate gas, insurance and materials needed to restore the cars.

"I'm so grateful because with my own car, I can be more independent and put more effort into being with my daughter," Rojo smiled. "That's all I want, is to be happy with Kailey."

For Tait and Rojo, the vehicles are more than just a means of transportation. The Responsible Parenting Award represents an opportunity to reclaim control of their stories and demonstrate to their daughters that survival is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a new one, where strength and resilience lead the way.

"You don't understand how much y'all are changing people's lives," Tait said to HCDE leaders and the Bates Collision Center co-owners. "That's what I want to do someday – help change lives and be a part of something bigger than myself because that's what life should be all about. Thank you for giving me a head start." ★

HOLIDAY PARTY TRANSFORMS NPO INTO WONDERLAND FILLED WITH FESTIVE SPIRIT

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) kicked off the holiday season with festive spirits as leadership hosted the first of two holiday parties. North Post Oak employees walked into a transformed conference space Dec. 10, taking each to a place filled with holiday music and buzzing with joy and spirit.

Staff were treated to a full meal from BB's Tex-Orleans, served on tables decorated as large gifts – the details adding those whimsical touches to the afternoon's magic. A hot chocolate-making station stocked with sprinkles, marshmallows and an array of festive flavors created the perfect cup of warmth, while dessert lovers then indulged in cakes, cookies and other sweet treats.

Board trustees Andrea Duhon and Eric Dick attended the party to show their support for #TeamHCDE and the work staff do every day to positively impact Harris County students and families through its various programs and initiatives. Superintendent James Colbert Jr. reiterated that message when he addressed the room, reflecting on another successful year. He also encouraged everyone to use the winter break to rest, enjoy time with loved ones and recharge for the next year.

The fun, festivities and memories don't stop – HCDE will celebrate the holidays with Irvington employees on Dec. 17 in the Conference Center. 🌟

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7



Board Briefs



 TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



HCDE SUPERMENTORS DELIVER FESTIVE CHEER AT HEAD START CENTERS



MANY OF HARRIS COUNTY'S YOUNGEST LEARNERS were treated to more than just a story this month from their SuperMENTors, as a number of Harris County Department of Education leaders donned their Santa hats and holiday threads, and visited Head Start centers with gifts in tow this week.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and Choice Partners Senior Director Jeff Drury were among the SuperMENTors to read "Maisy Makes Gingerbread" by Lucy Cousins. They then went a step further, delivering gifts and trinkets to the young students.

As part of the Head Start Significant Male Initiative, SuperMENTors connects male role models with students at HCDE Head Start centers. Community volunteers and business partners join Colbert, all four Executive Leadership Team male staff members and various division directors in serving the 12 campuses. 🌟

HCDE LEADERS ATTEND NATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE

HCDE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENTS

Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers joined other Department leaders in attending the National Alliance of Black School Educators national conference.

Held Dec. 10-14 in Chicago, this year's conference focused on transformative practices in education driving student achievement, including top insights and breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, literacy and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and music) fields. The Center for Educator Success team presented on building cultures of excellence in challenging school environments. Special Schools led a session putting professional development into high-performance and data-driven people and programs. 🌟



In the Community



EDUCATION FOUNDATION DIRECTOR ATTENDS COMMUNITY EVENTS, CONTINUES SUPPORTING LOCAL INITIATIVES

EDUCATION FOUNDATION AND PARTNERSHIPS DIRECTOR

TRINA SILVA represented Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) and its philanthropic arm at a number of recent community events, supporting local initiatives and continuing to build relationships to best serve county learners and their families.

On Dec. 3, Silva and HCDE Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz attended the Texas Executive Women's annual Women on the Move luncheon. A network of professional women from different professions and industries since 1985, Texas Executive Women also supports programs to recognize and develop future generations through mentorship and scholarship programs. The luncheon recognizes 10 women – Bartz is a 2023 honoree, while Leisa Holland-Nelson, who will join Shavannah Roberts-Scheiber as emcees for the 2026 EFHC Heart of Education Luncheon in May,

is among the 2025 honorees.

The Rice University Kinder Institute's Houston Education Research Consortium hosted a community event ("Working Collaboratively to Understand Student and Family Needs") at HCDE on Dec. 4, with select divisions hosting tables to share resources to attendees.

The same day, Silva joined representatives from the Spring Independent School District Education Foundation for its Grant Express bus to surprise teachers with news that their grant projects were funded. Since the 2020 fiscal year, EFHC has contributed nearly \$80,000 in grants to the Spring ISD Education Foundation, including a 2025 fiscal year award for Flip Form Risers at Hirsch Elementary to support safe, elevated platforms for music rehearsals and performances. 🌟



IN THE NEWS

HOUSTON CHRONICLE REPORTERS GET A TASTE OF RECOVERY PRACTICES AT FORTIS ACADEMY

FORTIS ACADEMY WELCOMED Houston Chronicle education reporters Elizabeth Sander and Ashley Soebroto, along with senior staff photographer Brett Coomer, on Dec. 9 for an immersive visit to learn what makes Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) recovery high school unique.

The Chronicle team spent half the day experiencing campus life firsthand by sitting in on classes, observing the culinary arts program and gaining insight into the specialized support Fortis provides students working to overcome substance and alcohol use challenges. Sander and Soebroto spoke with Principal Trivita Godfrey, Recovery Coach LaKeshia Hemphill, teachers and students to understand how our community empowers young people to reclaim their futures. They also met one of the newest members of #TeamHCDE, Tristan Sowders, a proud Fortis alumna whose personal journey now inspires students as she works alongside Chef Daisy Alvarez to support the culinary program.

HOUSTON  **CHRONICLE**

Sander and Soebroto plan to craft an informational feature highlighting Fortis Academy, set to publish in the Houston Chronicle later this month. Partnerships like this, with local media, help shine a light on the innovative, life-changing work happening inside HCDE's special schools and ensures more families and community members know that hope and opportunity thrive on campuses daily. 🌟

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE D: COMMUNITY RELATIONS

- Works with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way.



2025 Responsible Parenting Award recipient Micaela Rojo and her 3-year-old daughter Kailey enjoy their refurbished Ford Escape gifted to them by Bates Collision Center on Dec. 11.

ON THE SURFACE, the annual Responsible Parenting Award ceremony at Bates Collision Center is a car giveaway, where hardworking and deserving Head Start parents are gifted a rehabilitated car filled with gifts from community partners. But this tradition is more than gifting two deserving parents with a vehicle. Bates Collision Center gifted cars No. 49 and 50 this week to Head Start parents Raquel Tait and Micaela Rojo. That means the lives of 50 families have been changed. The car goes beyond getting a mother to and from her son or daughter's Head Start campus. It affords these families independence and the freedom to move around without relying on someone else's schedule. Past recipients have been able to finish school. Some were able to begin higher education. Housing and job prospects changed, as did the ability to simply dream bigger. It was an honor to watch Raquel and Micaela's faces and see their children light up as they unwrapped the vehicles and enjoyed the new toys. Our Head Start program is so much more than preparing Harris County's youngest learners. The division, like everything we do at HCDE, is changing lives and this annual giveaway emphasizes how community relationships and partnerships can make that happen every day.

Fortis Academy opened its doors to media members from the Houston Chronicle this week. I appreciate education reporters Elizabeth Sander and Ashley Soebroto, and photographer Brett Coomer for taking the time to see all the positive work being done to support students overcoming

substance and alcohol use. As the 11th school in the nation to earn the prestigious accreditation by the Association of Recovery Schools – and the only public accredited school in Texas – Fortis offers a unique environment that allows students to thrive in their journeys to sobriety. I look forward to reading the story and seeing the photos. Working with our local media partners is vital in showcasing all we do here at HCDE.

Finally, #TeamHCDE staff at our North Post Oak location gathered Wednesday to enjoy some holiday fun. The first of two holiday parties – we'll celebrate at Irvington before the board meeting on Dec. 17 – was an opportunity for everyone to fellowship and enjoy the successes we've accomplished this year throughout the entire Department. Thank you, Trustees Duhon and Dick, for attending and supporting our staff members. It's easy to get caught up with the busy work flow, so we must always remember to slow down and enjoy the benefits of simply being around our team. Hopefully, everyone enjoyed the meal and got a chance to sample the hot chocolate station. We have done phenomenal work this year, serving students of all ages and their families, along with school districts across Harris County. I hope everyone will use the winter break to rest and recharge before we push ahead to positively impact our stakeholders.

By effectively partnering with entities and community organizations, I am working to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way. 🌟



HCDE BOARD

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Amy Hinojosa

1st Vice President
Richard Cantu

2nd Vice President
Dr. Erica Davis

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

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

January 31
Early Childhood Winter
Conference (ECWC)

February 13
Presidents Day (School
Closed)

February 17
All About Grants & More
Workshop