



the CONNECTOR



LOOKING BACK AT 2025: HCDE CONTINUES TO PROVE ITSELF AS A
'VARSITY' WORKPLACE **P.3**



IRVINGTON STAFF GETS FESTIVE, CELEBRATES YEAR OF
ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT HOLIDAY PARTY **P.7**



HIGHPOINT STUDENTS DELIVER GIFTS, BRING TOUCHES OF
HOLIDAY SPIRIT TO TIDWELL HEAD START **P.10**

of Note

WELL, THAT'S A WRAP FOLKS! When we come back from break, 2025 will be in our rearview mirror and it will be full steam ahead in the new year. I want to take this opportunity to celebrate HCDE for the many accomplishments our employees, divisions and campuses achieved in 2025. The list of accolades is long and varied ranging from accreditation at Fortis to strong partnerships at our special schools. We hosted some great training sessions and conferences including gatherings for after school providers and preschool teachers. It was another banner year for Choice Partners in terms of revenue funneled back into public education in Harris County along with several Excellence in Finance and Purchasing awards.

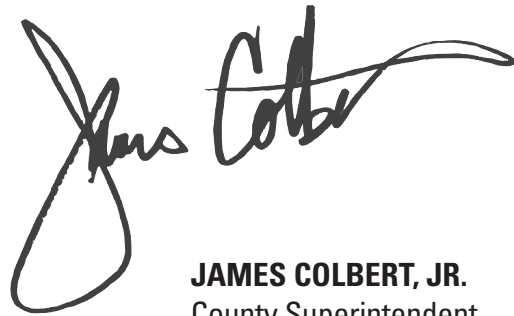
This list demonstrates why HCDE is.... "Varsity!" We are a team that others look up to. We innovate and lead the pack. We take our mission to find the gaps in public education seriously and work diligently every day to ensure we are positively impacting students, districts and the community. I am proud of HCDE and all we accomplished this year. I look forward to seeing what 2026 has in store for us and the great things we will do as we serve our community and students in years to come.

I started the week on Monday with ELT followed by a farewell lunch for Dr. Amezcua. On Tuesday, I met with President Hinojosa to discuss my evaluation. On Wednesday,

I delivered remarks at the annual holiday reception for staff followed by the Audit Committee Meeting and regular board meeting. I ended the day at dinner with other local superintendents. On Thursday, I attended the ABS East Christmas program followed by a reception to celebrate Dr. Amezcua's retirement with his family, HCDE staff and several former HCDE employees. I ended the week today meeting with ELT members at my NPO office.

HCDE will be open Monday but will then close from December 23 – January 1 for the winter break. We will reopen on Friday, January 2.

I hope you have the opportunity to celebrate and enjoy the holidays with family and friends. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



IT Services poses at Convocation 2025.

A YEAR OF SUCCESSES, CELEBRATIONS KEEP HCDE PLAYING AT THE 'VARSITY' LEVEL

AS HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION readies to turn the page on 2025, staff and stakeholders can look back and see another year in which #TeamHCDE celebrated successes and achievements from every corner of the organization, while continuing to cultivate its family-like atmosphere.

In March 2025, USA Today announced what many at HCDE have long known – the Department is regarded as one of the top places of employment across the entire country. This honor came on the heels of HCDE being recognized in the region and earning a spot on the Houston Chronicle's Top Workplaces list in 2024, its fourth nod since 2019.

Based solely by employee feedback and surveys, this national achievement highlights the sense of value HCDE staff members feel and their appreciation for the work they do every day in serving Harris County students and their families. In turn, HCDE leadership continues to support team members through various Department celebrations and appreciation events.

Let's look back on 2025 and relive the best moments this year that display what makes HCDE a top place to be:



HCDE leadership and Trustee Andrea Duhon cut the ribbon at the brand new Coolwood Head Start Center.

January – New Coolwood Head Start Officially Opens

HCDE staff opened the calendar year with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and community grand opening for the new Coolwood Early Head Start and Head Start facility. The nearly 14,000-square-foot facility features six classrooms and a state-of-the-art kitchen that can provide nutritious breakfasts and lunches for up to 120 students daily. It replaced portable buildings at a site rendered unsafe in 2017 due to flooding from Hurricane Harvey. Other delays followed, including high winds from Hurricane Beryl that ripped the roof off part of the building in August 2024.

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Program Connections

Coolwood has since become a beacon in the North Shore community and a shining example of what early childhood education can look like. Representatives from the Head Start national office have toured the facility and shared the same praise.

"This campus is a flagship for what the Office of Head Start desires for our children," Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock said. "Creating a building like this means something different to everyone, but for HCDE, it's the standard."

February – More than 4,800 Regional Scholastic Award Winners Announced

HCDE continues to serve as the second-largest regional sponsor of the prestigious Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, and volunteer adjudication judges – many who were Department staff members – reviewed more than 15,800 art and writing submissions from students across greater Houston.

From these submissions, more than 4,800 creative teens from Harris County received regional honors, including Gold Key, Silver Key and Honorable Mention. Additionally, 10 students were nominated for the American Voices and American Vision Awards.

The young artists and writers were honored with exhibits and two receptions at the Wortham Center. More than 25 would later step onto the stage of Carnegie Hall in New York City for the national ceremony in June, joining nearly 2,800 national medalists from a field of over 310,000 submissions.

March – USA Today Names HCDE 2025 Top Workplace

Adding to an already-crowded trophy case, HCDE received a new milestone – USA Today, a co-sponsor of the fifth annual national workplace survey with Energage, announced the Department as one of the top workplaces in America.



HCDE was named a top workplace in the nation and the only government organization with 500-999 employees in Texas to receive the honor.



NPO employees play basketball at the first of two Picnic in the Parking Lot events in April 2025.

Among more than 2,200 companies evaluated through employee surveys and feedback in 2024, HCDE was recognized as one of four local government organizations with 500-999 employees to receive the national honor and the only awardee in the state of Texas within the category.

"Being recognized as a national Top Workplace is a testament to HCDE's exceptional culture – one defined by the strong, family-like atmosphere at every level of this organization," Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said. "This award also reflects our employees' dedication to innovation, collaboration and excellence in the programs we offer and resources we provide to Harris County students and families."

April – Picnic in the Parking Lot Events

Three "F's" describe what HCDE's annual Picnic in the Parking Lot is – fun, fellowship and food. The two employee appreciation events transform the Irvington and North Post Oak parking lots into lively spaces with music, games, food trucks and photo backdrops.

The picnics give Department leadership an opportunity to thank employees for their hard work and dedication to serving Harris County students and families every day. A number of employees even walked away with raffle gifts. Colbert also took the time to visit with as many staff members as possible before expressing his gratitude at the culmination of each picnic.

May – Third Annual Celebration of Excellence

With HCDE's Celebration of Excellence, staff have fewer ways to better conclude a successful school year. On May 21, honored guests and families came together for the third annual celebration, HCDE's end-of-year recognition event that highlights staff achievements.

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Program Connections



Adult Education students sign letters of intent for job opportunities at the 2025 Adult Ed Signing Day event.

In all, 40 employees from the five instructional divisions and the 2024-25 Employees of the Month were recognized in front of colleagues, co-workers and loved ones.

"It's important to know that when we're coming to work, we're working with people we love, we respect and we have good relationships with," said Jasmine Castleberry, a federal programs and compliance manager for CASE for Kids and the April Employee of the Month. "And relationships matter when you're trying to do work of the heart. We're trying to impact students, their families and their communities, and in return, we are also feeling that same impact too."

June – Adult Education Signing Day and Graduation

In June, the spotlight shined on HCDE's Adult Education division.

Nearly 60 adult learners put pen to paper on June 4 at the Career Pathways Signing Day. Those who completed workforce training, High School Equivalency or English as a Second Language course were honored, signing letters of intent and committing to employment offers from top Harris County companies. Renowned Houstonian and philanthropist Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale offered words of encouragement.

"Work is life's greatest therapy," McIngvale said to a crowded room. "Work changed my life, and when you find that job you love to do, you'll never have to work a day in your life."

Two weeks later, HCDE celebrated more than 120 adults who courageously chose to return to the classroom and completed their HSE (formerly GED). The Irvington Conference Center was filled with cheering family members and supporters. Attendees heard motivational words from graduate Emilio Lopez Jr., while commencement speaker Isaac Eguia spoke of his personal journey from academic

suspension to earning undergraduate and graduate degrees.

"As you move forward, take pride in what you achieved," said Dr. Eduardo Honold, Adult Education senior director. "This is just the beginning."

July – Chief Communication Officer Danielle Clark earns NSPRA Mentor Legacy Award

Well respected by her peers and widely regarded as an accomplished leader, passionate advocate and innovative communicator, HCDE Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark was honored twice in 2025 for her decorated career in school communications and dedication to pave the way for others in the field.

Her work with the state's association (TSPRA) and implementation of its first-ever academy for early-career professionals earned her the prestigious title of the TSPRA's 2025 Most Valuable Member in February.

In July, Clark was named the recipient of the 2025 Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA).

"Everyone in this room can be a mentor, you don't need 26 years to do it," said an emotional Clark to a packed room during NSPRA's annual conference. "Take the time to answer questions from those new to the profession. That is a magical moment and could forever change the trajectory of their career."

August – HCDE Launches into its 'Varsity' Campaign at Convocation

Following a one-year hiatus, Superintendent James Colbert Jr. brought back HCDE's annual Convocation, the Department-wide gathering that marks the start of the school year and gives all employees a chance to fellowship under the same roof. Team members are honored for their years of service, while Colbert gives a

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HCDE staff hear an impassioned speech at Convocation 2025.

Program Connections

message that carries HCDE into the upcoming school year.

Held on Aug. 8, this year's event theme, "HCDE is Varsity," celebrated a championship-level team that provides outstanding services and advocacy for a special population of students.

Staff showcased their basketball, baseball and football skills at engaging photo backdrops, while many stopped by the sneaker stadium to shine a light on their hottest kicks.

"HCDE is a unicorn," Colbert said with a nod to the Department's mascot. "I've been to schools all over the country, and I've never seen a place with so many diverse programs. We save lives, we change lives and we are champions of children. We have a righteous mission as we advocate for kids who often get no advocacy."

September – Adult Education Learning Center Earns TASA/TASB Stars of Distinction

Opened in 2023, HCDE's Adult Education Learning Center has quickly become an industry standard for innovative learning environments. Harris County adult learners are benefitting from the facility, and now the center can add "award-winning" to its resume.

The Texas Association of School Administrators and Texas Association of School Boards awarded HCDE two Stars of Distinction as part of the 2025-2026 Exhibit of School Architecture. The collection features more than 40 projects that showcase new and renovated Texas schools and celebrated excellence in planning and designing learning environments. HCDE's \$19 million facility was designed to mirror a community college atmosphere with 17 classrooms, five laboratories, administrative offices, student lounge and multipurpose community room.

TASA/TASB leaders recognized HCDE and the fellow honorees at txEDCON 2025, while the projects were also featured in an online exhibit.

October – Choice Partners Celebrates '20 Years of Sweet Success' at Food Show

Choice Partners marked two decades of collaboration and community with a candy-coated celebration at its Nutrition and Product Expo. The "sweet success" theme set the stage for a day of sampling, connecting and exploring the more than 140 vendors and their latest products and services.

Students from 12 greater Houston school districts attended and tested food items at the expo. They placed gold star stickers next to their top five vendors, and nutrition directors then used feedback to evaluate food and beverage products for their school cafeteria menus. Choice Partners also uses feedback to plan future food contracts, enabling the co-op to maintain its standard of service.

"Our vendors and students are helping us celebrate big this year," Choice Partners Assistant Director Trisha Prestigiacomo said. "This is our highest participation in years, and we are grateful. We've had a lot of fun with our theme; we went all out, and it's been great watching all the vendors and students enjoy themselves."

November – Community Partners 'Tee It Up' at Inaugural EFHC Topgolf Tournament

More than 125 community partners and influential education professionals attended the Education Foundation of Harris County Topgolf Tournament to raise money for programs and initiatives that empower educators and students across 25 school districts. The event also honored Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca, an education advocate who taught bilingual and dual-language early childhood classes, consulted on urban school district evaluation systems and has been an overall advocate for improved education systems.

Students from Stafford MSD's welding program created the tournament trophies using equipment funded by EFHC grants.

In all, 18 teams competed while spending the afternoon networking and reinforcing EFHC's mission to ensure Harris County students have access to quality education and opportunities to succeed.

December – Head Start Moms Gifted Cars from Bates Collision Center Giveaway

Long-time community partner Bates Collision Center continued blessing two Head Start families through the 27th Annual Responsible Parenting Awards, gifting two refurbished vehicles to deserving mothers. The special giveaway marks the 49th and 50th cars gifted through the initiative, where Bates employees donate their time to work on the cars and a committee selects two recipients, chosen based on need, involvement in their children's lives and responsible parenting.

Raquel Tait, whose daughter attends John G. Jones Learning Center, and Michaela Rojo, whose daughter attends Fonwood Head Start, were the two deserving recipients. On Dec. 10, Tait and her daughter, Zen, were honored at the Baytown location. The next day, Rojo and her daughter, Kailey, unwrapped their vehicle at the Channelview location.

The car giveaway has grown into a community effort led by collision center owners Lee and Leila Bates. Other business partners donated gas, car insurance, materials needed to rehab the vehicles and gift cards. 🌟



Superintendent Colbert and the Rojo family at the 2025 Bates Collision Center Responsible Parenting Award Ceremony and car giveaway.

Board Briefs



#TEAMHCDE HAS A JOLLY GOOD TIME AT HOLIDAY PARTY

THIS WEEK, employees at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Irvington location had the opportunity to step away from their day, mingle with colleagues and soak in the joy that comes with celebrating the holiday season together. Laughter, conversation and plenty of seasonal cheer filled the Conference Center as staff connected and relaxed at the Department's second employee holiday reception.

As cooler temperatures visited the area, employees warmed up with Cajun-inspired gumbo from BB's Tex-Orleans, a hearty and flavorful favorite that felt tailor-made for the season. Served on tables decorated as oversized holiday gifts, the meal delivered both comfort and creativity. The sweetness did

not stop there. A build-your-own hot chocolate station invited staff to craft a delicious blend of marshmallows, sprinkles and festive flavors. Those with a sweet tooth enjoyed a tempting spread of cakes, cookies and other treats.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr. took a moment to extend a warm and sincere thank you to all present. His words highlighted the incredible dedication and hard work of #TeamHCDE, emphasizing how the Department's collective efforts make a significant impact year-round. Echoing the message he delivered to employees at the NPO holiday party on Dec. 10, he also reminded Irvington attendees to recharge for the exciting opportunities the new year will bring. ★



Board Briefs



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

Board Briefs

ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIOR STUDENTS TAKE CENTER STAGE FOR HOLIDAY PROGRAMS



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW ABS EAST GALLERY](#)



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW ABS WEST GALLERY](#)

WITH THE WINTER BREAK right around the corner, Academic and Behavior Schools East and West were filled with holiday joy as students participated in their annual Christmas programs on Dec. 18. The grand finale included Santa helping

students receive presents from the Be An Angel Christmas Gift program. Educators utilized grant funding from the Be An Angel nonprofit organization to purchase gifts like new shoes, reading materials, toys and sports equipment. ★

EDUCATION AND ENRICHMENT DELIVERS HOLIDAY CHEER TO CHANNELVIEW HEAD START



BAGS OF TOYS, jingling bells and giggling preschoolers set the scene at Channelview Head Start on Dec. 18 as Assistant Superintendent Dr. CJ Rodgers and his Education and Enrichment divisions delivered holiday cheer. For weeks, staff from the Center for Educator Success, the Center for Grants Development, the Research and Evaluation Institute, the Center for Safe and Secure Schools and more rallied together to purchase and collect donated toys for families who might not have the means for a big Christmas. Their sleigh-sized haul ensured every student would head into winter break with two gifts to unwrap. In a heartwarming twist, students surprised #TeamHCDE by performing festive classics like “Jingle Bells” and the “Reindeer Hokey Pokey.” The laughter, music and wide-eyed excitement made it clear that the holiday spirit is alive and well at Channelview Head Start! ★

Board Briefs

HIGHPOINT SCHOOL DELIVERS HOLIDAY JOY TO TIDWELL HEAD START STUDENTS



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

WITH SANTA IN TOW and enough gifts to fill two vehicles to the brim, Highpoint School students and staff delivered plenty of festive cheer to all the young learners at Tidwell Head Start just before the winter break. The initiative came from the school's boys group, called The Shop, which is led by teachers Enri Harrell and Kadrien Mosley. They organized a toy drive and Highpoint staff answered the call by donating 70 brand-new toys – more than enough for each Tidwell student.

Students wrapped the gifts and five members of The Shop visited Tidwell on Dec. 17. First, they read to each classroom, an initiative the group started a year ago to the Head Start center less than four miles from Highpoint. Then – with one Highpoint student dressed as Santa – the group passed out presents to every Tidwell student. ★

PJS, PANCAKES AND SANTA BRING HOLIDAY CHEER TO FORTIS ACADEMY

FORTIS ACADEMY STUDENTS rolled into winter break in the coziest way possible, trading backpacks for pajamas on Dec. 19. The morning started on a sweet note with a gingerbread house making competition, followed by stacks of warm pancakes prepared by campus staff and culinary students, filling the halls with the smell of maple syrup, fresh fruit and lots of holiday cheer. However, the fun didn't stop there. A surprise visit from Santa added an extra dose of excitement as students shared their holiday wishes, making the last day before break one to remember. ★



FORTIS ACADEMY



Board Briefs

BRIGHT FUTURES BEGIN **HERE**

Harris County
Department of
Education

SEE THE IMPACT ON HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOLS

HCDE-TEXAS.ORG

OCTOBER, NOVEMBER AWARENESS CAMPAIGN UPDATE

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S EFFORTS to inform the community about our programs and impact garnered more than 12 million impressions as we enter the final stretch of 2025, emphasizing the strategic adjustments made throughout the year.

Television promotions remain a positive branding tool that yields millions of impressions as viewers tune in for their daily news. Five-second ads on FOX 26 television aired nearly 150 times, garnering 3.8 million impressions over the two-month period. The campaign was expanded to ABC 13 in November and gained more than 4.6 million impressions, airing nearly 70 times.

The general campaign achieved significant wins on social media, including a 55% increase in total page engagement and a 10% increase in total video views. Efforts maintained reach across October and November,

reaching more than 220,000 users; however, the number of impressions peaked in October at 516,000. The highest-performing Facebook ad, which offered insight into our Adult Education program, garnered 157,192 impressions and over 2,900 clicks at an average cost of \$0.40 per click.

Two physical billboards, displayed from mid-October to mid-December, yielded more than 2.5 million impressions, each strategically placed in high-traffic areas. The campaign's "Bright Futures Begin Here" signage was placed along FM 1960 West, as well as Perry Road and Highway 225 East along Richey Road in Pasadena.

These efforts underscore the importance of sustained awareness campaigns in amplifying HCDE's mission, ensuring our programs remain visible, accessible and top of mind for the community we serve. ★

SUPERMENTORS FINISH SEMESTER SPREADING HOLIDAY JOY AT HEAD START CENTERS



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) Executive Leadership Team members Jonathan Parker, Dr. CJ Rodgers and Dr. Tyrone Sylvester were among those SuperMENTors who visited their respective Head Start Centers this week to read to students in addition to spreading holiday joy and cheer before the winter break.

SuperMENTors read "Maisy Makes Gingerbread" by Lucy Cousins this month as part of the Head Start Significant Male Initiative. The program connects male role models with Head Start students, with community volunteers joining HCDE leaders in serving the 12 campuses.

Many mentors go above and beyond simply reading. In December, a number have gifts in tow for the young students, teachers and paraprofessionals in the classrooms. These small acts of servitude and appreciation help connect students positively to male role models. ★

Board Briefs

IN THE NEWS

LOCAL OUTLETS SHOWCASE HEAD START RESPONSIBLE PARENTING AWARD RECIPIENTS

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION and one of its Head Start division's long-time partnerships recently garnered media attention from broadcast and print media outlets. Reporters and photographers from the Houston Chronicle and Baytown Sun, as well as a Univision 45 photojournalist serving as a pool correspondent for local television stations, attended the Responsible Parenting Award ceremonies hosted by Head Start and Bates Collision Center.

Houston Chronicle Staff Photographer Kirk Sides showcased Micaela Rojo, a single mother of Fonwood Early Head Start student Kailey who received a refurbished Ford Escape at the collision center's Channelview location. His photos were featured on the front page of the Houston Chronicle's Dec. 13 edition, while a story and more photos were featured at the newspaper's website.

Baytown Sun News Editor Matt Hollis highlighted Raquel Tait, whose 2-year-old daughter Zen attends John G. Jones Early Head Start and who received a Nissan Altima at the Baytown location. The story and photos ran on the front page of the Baytown Sun's Dec. 10 edition and on its website.

Univision 45's Manuel Dominguez served as the pool reporter for the area television stations and he gathered video and interviews from Tait's ceremony. KTMD (Telemundo Houston 47) and KHOU (CBS 11) both ran stories highlighting the initiative and its recipients during Dec. 10 broadcasts.



HOLIDAY HONORS

Head Start mother Michaela Rojo, right of center, and daughter Kailey, 3, receive a gift-filled car from Bates Collision Center's Leila and Lee Bates on Thursday in Channelview. Rojo also was honored with a Responsible Parenting Award. Also honored this week was Raquel Tait, mother of Zen, 2, at Bates' Baytown location.

KIRK SIDES/HOUSTON CHRONICLE

HOUSTON★**CHRONICLE**

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The Baytown Sun

[CLICK TO READ THE ARTICLE](#)



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

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KHOU-11



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

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TELEUNIVISION

In the Community



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM HELPS PREPARE ADULT LEARNERS

ON DEC. 5, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Civic Engagement Coordinators Avery Spranger and Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero joined one Adult Education Spanish-speaking High School Equivalency (HSE, formerly GED) class for a civics presentation and to offer interactive help for the social studies portion of the HSE exam. Spranger and Sandoval-Guerrero led games that demonstrated direct and representative democracy – selected students spoke to their classmates as candidates on behalf of chocolate or chips – and another that helped participants practice sequencing with the legislative process. Students were also able to ask questions and learn more about the nation's governmental functions.

This first visit is part of an ongoing initiative between the team and Adult Education curriculum coordinators Tiana Escobar and Deena Houg, in addition to all the HSE instructors to best serve the division's adult learners. 🌟



CHIEF OF STAFF REPRESENTS HCDE AT LOCAL COMMUNITY EVENTS



HCDE'S Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz attended a number of recent events, networking with industry, business and community partners, and showcasing all the Department does to serve county learners and their families. Among them was the Cornerstone Government Relations Holiday Party, held Dec. 10 at the Briar Club. Bartz visited with representatives from the Houston City Council, Greater Houston Partnership and the private industry. 🌟

HCDE OFFICES, SCHOOLS WILL CLOSE FOR WINTER BREAK



ALL HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICES and campuses will be closed from Tuesday, Dec. 23, 2025, through Thursday, Jan. 1, 2026, for winter break.

HCDE's Head Start campuses will have early dismissal on Friday, Dec. 19, and Special School campuses will be closed starting Monday, Dec. 22.

Offices will reopen on Friday, Jan. 2, 2026, and all classes will resume on Tuesday, Jan. 6, 2026.

View the HCDE Work/Holiday Calendar and Academic Calendar for more information.

From our HCDE family to yours, have a happy holiday and a very happy New Year! 🌟

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATIONAL MORALE

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.



Records Management poses with Santa at the 2025 NPO Holiday Party.

AS WE HEAD INTO WINTER BREAK, I hope everyone here at HCDE takes the chance to relax and – even more important – make memories with family and loved ones over the holidays. The end of the calendar year is always a great opportunity to look back and reflect on HCDE's accomplishments and the achievements staff members have earned over the past 12 months. I firmly believe it speaks highly on Harris County Department of Education that one can look at each month on the calendar and find both positive news and notable wins from all of our divisions and teams that directly affect Harris County students and their families. From opening a brand-new Coolwood Head Start facility to celebrating more than 120 graduates who chose to complete their High School Equivalency diploma. From being named a 2025 USA Today Top Workplace in America to launching our "Varsity" campaign at convocation in August. We definitely do have a lot to celebrate here at HCDE. I can't thank our staff members enough for the hard work they put in every day and all they did throughout 2025.

These final weeks before the winter break are a special time as it seems everyone at HCDE is showcasing their willingness to serve others or simply showing their talent for the holiday spirit. At Academic and Behavior Schools East and West, both campuses held their annual Winter Holiday programs. Students sang, danced and performed skits inspired by popular holiday stories. Male students at Highpoint School who are part of a mentor group called The Shop visited Tidwell Head Start, delivering

gifts donated by Highpoint staff to each young child and also reading to the classes. Kudos to the young man who dressed as Santa for the occasion. Also, thank you to our SuperMENTors and HCDE divisions who visited Head Start centers this week and blessed these many young students with presents. It's always good to feel the holiday spirit, so I'm thankful it's hitting every corner of HCDE.

Finally, #TeamHCDE members at our Irvington location came together Wednesday to fellowship and enjoy some holiday fun before the break. The two holiday parties (we celebrated at the NPO office on Dec. 10) are opportunities to enjoy the hard work we've done this year and celebrate our successes as a team. HCDE earned its tangible evidence in being named a top workplace by USA Today, but being a destination is also shown when individuals and teams not only come together, but truly enjoy time spent together and working toward the goal of better serving Harris County families. It was refreshing to laugh and share stories with each table during the event. I do hope everyone enjoyed the meal and sampled the hot chocolate station. Like I said at the part, I want employees to know it's important to rest and recharge during the break. But before we turn our calendars and hit the ground running in 2026, let's again rejoice and feel proud of all the good we did in 2025 in serving others.

By promoting the great work and achievements of our staff, I am meeting the expectation to establish a culture of excellence at HCDE. ★



HCDE BOARD

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UPCOMING EVENTS

December 23 - January 1
Winter Break (HCDE Closed)

January 14
All-Earth Ecobot Reveal Day
(virtual)

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

January 21
School Board Recognition
Reception
Board Meeting

January 25-28
TASA Midwinter Conference

January 31
Early Childhood Winter
Conference (ECWC)