

Heads Up



WINTER 2026 NEWSLETTER



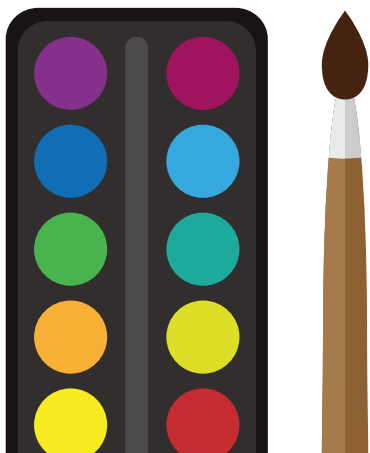
Senior Director Venetia L. Peacock (right) with Vicky Coffee of the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.



Senior Director Venetia L. Peacock with members of the Assistance League of Houston at the Head Start Awareness event.

WELCOME BACK!

A LETTER FROM
VENETIA L. PEACOCK,
SENIOR DIRECTOR



I hope you had a wonderful holiday and are ready for an exciting, fast-paced semester.

We are anticipating a Federal Review early this year. Details are still evolving, but we will keep parents and staff informed every step of the way.

I'm thrilled to share that our inaugural Rising Stars Academy is off to a fantastic start. Five staff members are on track to earn leadership certification in May, with a closing ceremony in June. This eight-month program, funded through special support, features monthly sessions with community leaders and is designed to build a strong pipeline of future campus leaders.

Looking ahead, mark your calendars for the Week of the Young Child, April 11-17. Campuses will host themed celebrations and tours for our community partners.

Finally, a huge shout-out to our Policy Council – your dedication and engagement make all the difference. We have a fantastic group of dedicated people for the 2025-26 school year, who are engaged in all aspects of our program. I'm excited to continue this great work together.

Let's keep pushing forward to ensure success for every student.

VENETIA L. PEACOCK
HCDE Head Start Senior Director

Award of vehicle a life-changer for two moms

Relying on others for transportation to get to work, to get children to school and run errands is one burden that has been lifted off two Head Start moms, thanks to the continuing generosity of Bates Collision Centers.

Fonwood mom Michaela Rojo Vasquez and John G. Jones mom Raquel Tait were named the winners of this year's Bates Responsible Parenting Award with each receiving a refurbished vehicle at two separate special events in December.

Now in its 27th year, the award was conceived to reward deserving Head Start parents who have a need for their own transportation and have shown grit and determination in supporting their families.

"Friends and family who join in with us year after year know we are really intentional about finding families who not only need transportation, but have also shown they are helping themselves and their families," said Leila Bates, owner with husband Lee of Bates Collision Centers.

Certainly Vasquez and Tait had a need for their own transportation, and both moms are trying to put their lives back together after coming out of abusive relationships. Tait works as a care-giver and is studying to be a life coach to help others who have suffered trauma like her. Vasquez is a Teacher Assistant and is aiming to go to college to provide a better future for her 3 year-old daughter.

Both moms said having their own transportation would be life-changing. Tait said it would provide security in knowing she can get to and from work and to and from her daughter's center and do fun stuff, like drive to SeaWorld.

"It will allow us to do fun activities and participate in more school activities," Vasquez said. "It would also prove as a key tool in my journey of self-betterment."

As in years past, the **Bates' employees, family, friends and community** came together to donate their time refurbishing the vehicles and provide gifts for the families.

- **AMI Insurance** and **Bayer Heritage Federal Credit Union** each donated car insurance.

Other donors included

- **Ross S Sterling High School's baseball team,**
- **Channelview High School's baseball team,**
- **Patients Emergency Room & Hospital,**
- **Enterprise Rent-A-Car,**
- **AkzoNobel,**
- **LKQ Keystone,**
- **Nissan Central,**
- **O'Reily Auto Parts,**
- **Fullers Automotive,**
- **John's Trim Shop,**
- **Empire Auto Parts,**
- **Tommie Vaughn Ford**
- **Em6 Autotech.**



Michaela Rojo Vasquez



Raquel Tait



Early interventions vital for students with learning challenges

Whether a student has a speech delay, autism spectrum disorder or emotional and behavioral differences, the Head Start program is equipped to access needed interventions and, just as importantly, provide support for the whole family.

The earlier challenges such as autism spectrum disorder and speech and language delays can be identified, the earlier families can access therapies and support before they impact a child's learning or social skills. Early interventions also build understanding of the child's needs and reduce family stress.

"With timely intervention, children have a better chance of learning coping skills and strategies that they can use throughout their lives," Head Start Counselor Cameron Lewis said.

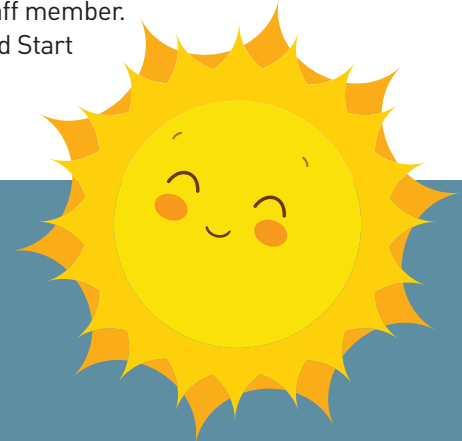
All students entering Head Start and Early Head Start are required to undergo developmental and behavioral screenings within 45 days as a matter of course. Should the screenings indicate any concerns, additional screenings may be necessary. Parents, teachers or staff can also request additional screenings.

Once a diagnosis is confirmed, a student is eligible for individualized services. Head Start staff meet with parents to navigate the referral process and access specialists. Early Head Start Students receive an Individualized Family Service Plan, while students age three to five get an Individualized Education Program through their school district. In the meantime a classroom plan, which may require adaptations, special education support and inclusion, will be put in place.

"Regular communication between families, teachers and service providers is vital to ensure there are consistent strategies at home and school, and families get the support they need," Lewis said.

Lewis had this advice for parents who have concerns about their child's development:

- Trust your instincts — you know your child best.
- Talk to your child's teacher or family advocate.
- Ask for a developmental screening or evaluation.
- Keep a record of observations and questions to discuss with a pediatrician or staff member.
- Stay engaged in the Head Start program.



Self-care crucial for wellness and healthy relationships

For parents constantly on the go and always giving to others, self-care is not a luxury, but a necessary part of maintaining overall wellness. It's about small, consistent actions that help reduce stress, improve patience and strengthen parent-child relationships.

"When parents take time to care for themselves, they are better equipped to care for their children," Head Start Counselor Cameron Lewis said. "Children pick up on that emotional stability, and it helps them feel more secure and loved."

So what is meant by self-care? It means taking time to care for one's physical, emotional and mental well-being. It's about doing activities to help feel balanced, healthy and refreshed in order to better handle daily responsibilities. Taking time to recharge doesn't have to cost money or take hours out of the day. It could be 10 minutes of quiet time after the kids go to bed, listening to music on the drive to and from work or reaching out to a friend for support.

"We encourage parents to set boundaries when possible, like saying, 'no' when their plate is full or asking for help from family, the community or Head Start staff," Lewis said.

Lewis had these tips for parents to help recharge, refresh and rebalance:

- Take a walk.
- Prepare a favorite meal
- Enjoy a quiet cup of coffee.
- Reach out to other parents.
- Practice mindfulness or deep breathing.
- Listen to music or a podcast in the car.
- Write down things to be grateful for.
- Tap into community resources for support.



Alferma Giles, Texas Head Start Collaboration Office, & Denisha Prim, Primway Consulting



James Colbert, Jr., HCDE County Superintendent



Tina James, Bay Area Rehabilitation Center



Partners honored at Head Start Awareness event

Head Start staff and administrators, community partners and volunteers were instrumental in making this year's Head Start Awareness Event on Oct. 29 a great success.

With the theme "Partnership in Action: Champion for Children and Families," the event provided an opportunity to honor the valuable contributions of the many community partners that make Head Start a leader in early childhood education and to celebrate the collective spirit in championing children and families.

Representatives from more than 30 partner agencies attended the event, held at the Administration Building, 6300 Irvington Blvd.

"I was very excited about the great turnout," Senior Executive Director Venetia L. Peacock said. "I feel like our partners walked away feeling appreciated, and that was our goal. Community partners amplify the services and support we provide to students and families, and their engagement makes all the difference."

Superintendent James Colbert, Jr., in his keynote address, highlighted Harris County Department of Education's dedication to supporting children and families through a team effort and shared vision with community partners.

Assistant Superintendent Jonathan Parker recognized every partner that attended the event. Armando Rodriguez, Community Partnerships Manager, emphasized how teamwork and collaboration empower Head Start's mission.

Attendance does matter



When students are frequently absent from Head Start, it's not necessarily academic growth they're missing out on, it's social-emotional growth. Health and Family Services Manager Jasmine Imo said consistent daily attendance helps children build strong learning habits and stay connected with their teachers and their classmates.

"When children attend school consistently, they are more likely to keep up with lessons, develop social skills and gain confidence in their abilities," Imo said.

Barring illness or emergencies, parents are urged to bring their child to school every day to demonstrate their commitment not only to Head Start but also to their child's education.

"Parents are their child's first teacher and demonstrating a positive behavior towards school is part of that," Imo said.

Overall attendance also impacts the Head Start centers. Staffing, student-teacher relationships and even meal services are affected when students don't show up.

Data from October 2025 showed almost a third of students were absent more than 20 percent of the time. Imo encouraged parents to strive for perfect attendance and to carry that through the rest of their child's educational journey.

For parents with challenges getting their children to school, Imo said center staff will work with parents to create an attendance improvement plan. The idea is to identify the reason for frequent absences, access resources and set goals to improve attendance. Imo said it may be that a parent lacks transportation, in which case they might need ride services, Metro cards or help finding employment for extra income.

Creating healthy, adventurous eaters



There's a reason young children pull a face when trying new foods. They have two to three times as many taste buds as adults, making them sensitive to strong flavors. Introducing new foods, especially fruits and vegetables, can be fraught with negativity. It can take up to eight attempts before young children accept a new food, but with imagination and patience, parents can coax their youngsters to appreciate a wide range of healthy foods.

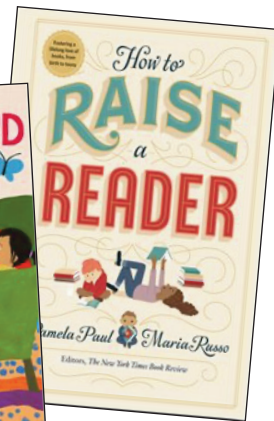
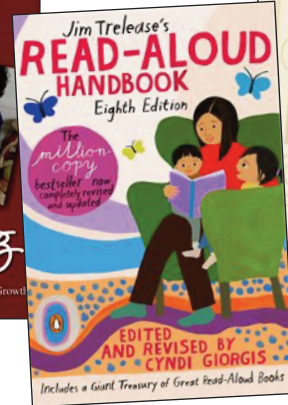
Nutrition Services Manager Taylor Hagness said the payoff for cultivating healthy eating habits early on is proven. Studies show that young children who regularly eat fruit and vegetables have lower obesity rates and demonstrate less aggressive behaviors. Adolescents with healthy eating patterns tend to do better in school and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. And parents are less likely to report symptoms of stress or depression.

Hagness said the best way to foster healthy eating habits is to involve children in meal planning and preparation and to make it a fun and educational experience. She advised starting with simple tasks like handwashing and rinsing vegetables and progressing to skills like mixing and measuring. Hagness advised parents to offer a couple of choices for meals and snacks and not to wait until children are hungry before preparing a meal. She also urged families to eat together.

"Eating family style encourages social skills like sharing and taking turns; it promotes language development and provides adults an opportunity to model healthy eating behaviors," Hagness said.

Hagness had these ideas for healthy meals that parents and children can prepare together, providing opportunities to chop, slice and cook.

- Breakfast: Banana pancakes using bananas, eggs, oatmeal, milk.
- Lunch: Tuna salad sandwich comprising tuna, mayonnaise and lettuce on whole wheat toast.
- Dinner: Black beans, chopped broccoli, grated cheese and salsa.
- Dessert: Chopped fruit with yoghurt.



Every day activities boost learning skills

The first five years are when children's brains grow the fastest, and as their child's first teacher, parents have the greatest impact on how and what their children learn. By making learning a fun, natural, every-day occurrence, parents are able to build a strong emotional bond with their children and help them develop confidence, curiosity and school readiness.

Whether it's reading together, counting steps, pointing out letters or singing nursery rhymes, there are an infinite number of activities parents can do with their children at home and when they're out and about. Education Special Services Manager Courtney Johnson had some suggestions for parents to boost learning skills.

For children under 3

- Count everyday items, such as shoes, steps and fingers.
- Sort laundry by colors or sizes.
- Play with blocks to explore size, shape and balance.
- Talk to your child and describe what you see, hear and do.
- Read together every day.
- Sing nursery rhymes and songs.

For children 3-5 years

- Cook together and have children help out.
- Play board games or go on a shape hunt.
- Have children set the table and count items.
- Read together every day and talk about the story.
- Point out letters on signs, cereal boxes, etc.
- Encourage children to draw stories.

Resources for parents include: www.pbs.org/parents; zerotothree.org; readingrockets.org. Books include: "The Read-Aloud Handbook" by Jim Trelease, "How to Raise a Reader" by Pamela Paul and Maria Russo and "Play = Learning" by Dorothy G. Singer.

Job fairs key component to fill vacancies

The Oct. 22 HCDE Job Fair connected more than two dozen candidates for key vacancies that included teachers, coordinators and support staff. Of 28 candidates, several progressed for further interviews or were considered for other roles, demonstrating strong interest and engagement. Candidates for Non-Instructional Aides, Teaching Assistants and Teachers saw significant follow-up recommendations, highlighting ongoing staffing needs. In addition, there was a healthy mix of walk-ins and scheduled interviews, with many walk-ins being recommended for additional steps.

This positive outcome underscores the importance of job fairs to cast a wider net in search of candidates with a passion for working with children to fill vital positions at HCDE Head Start.



THE NEXT JOB FAIRS ARE SCHEDULED FOR March 27, April 17 and June 6, 2026, at Harris County Department of Education Head Start, 6300 Irvington Blvd. Head Start parents are encouraged to apply or come to a job fair. To apply online, visit <https://teachharriscounty.org/head-start/>

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Check with a Campus Manager for details of these and other happenings as dates may vary according to each campus.

JANUARY

- 19 MLK holiday
- 23 Professional Development day **(No Students)**
- 27 Policy Council meeting
- 30 Fonwood & Dogan 100th Day of School

FEBRUARY

- 2-20 Student Assessments
- 5 100th Day of School (All other Campuses)
- 12-13 Professional Development day **(No Students)**
- 16-20 Food Science Fair
- 24 Policy Council meeting
- 27 Home Visits #2 **(No Students)**

MARCH

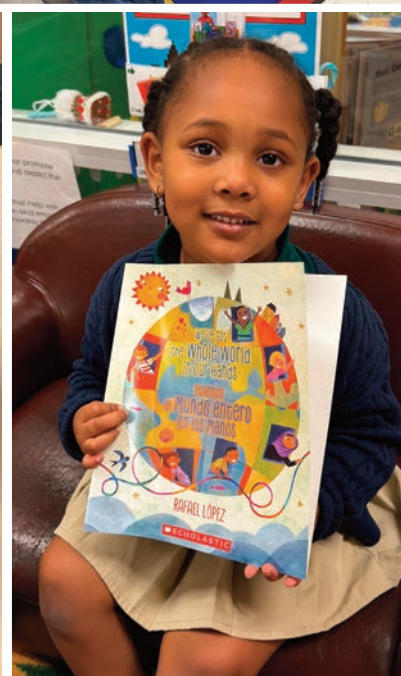
- 9-13 Spring Break holiday
- 16-20 Spring Break holiday (Humble)
- 24 Policy Council meeting
- 27 Jobs Fair

APRIL

- 2 Professional Development day **(No Students)**
- 3 Holiday
- 10 Art Show
- 11-17 Week of the Young Child
- 17 Professional Development day **(No Students)**
- 17 Jobs Fair
- 20-30 Student Assessments
- 21 Policy Council meeting

MAY

- 1-8 Student Assessments
- 4-8 Teacher Appreciation week
- 15 Parent/Teacher conferences **(No Students)**
- 18-22 Bridging ceremonies
- 21 Policy Council celebration
- 22 Students' last day
- 25 Memorial Day holiday
- 28 End of Year celebration



Gift of book builds students' home libraries

Thanks to the generosity of **Balint Charities**, every student in HCDE's Head Start program received a new book to read at home, just in time for the holidays.

Founded in 2013 by Kathleen Christesen in honor of her parents Fran and Barb Balint, the Virginia-based charity seeks to strengthen school success by enriching young lives through reading and music.



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HCDE HEAD START MISSION AND VISION

To improve school readiness for children, families and the community.

To create a learning environment of excellence dedicated to positively impacting our children, families, employees, community partners and society.

This is a product of the Head Start division of Harris County Department of Education. Interested persons can also review this report online and obtain additional information related to the Department by visiting www.hcde-texas.org. It is the policy of Harris County Department of Education not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, limited English proficiency or handicapping condition(s) in its programs.

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