

the **CONNECTOR**



CASE FOR KIDS, UNITED WAY OF GREATER HOUSTON COLLABORATE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME NETWORK CONVENING INITIATIVE P.3



HCDE CELEBRATES AB STUDENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS WITH VIDEO GAME TRUCK VISIT P.5



COLBERT PRESENTS ON 'SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP' TO CES LEAD STRONG ACADEMY P.6

of Note

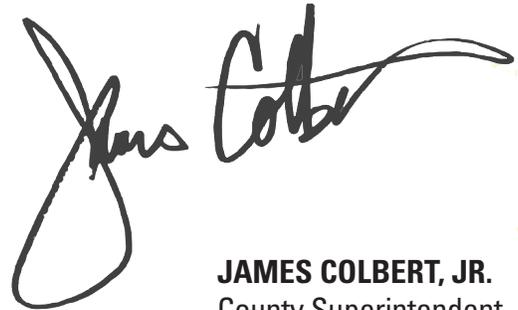
Sometimes being a standard bearer means being a good team player and acting in a support role for a partner organization so a shared mission can be fulfilled.

This week we see CASE demonstrate their leadership in the afterschool industry by doing just that. Recent federal program funding cuts put a popular United Way of Greater Houston afterschool provider training program at risk of elimination. CASE, understanding that this program provides valuable professional development and networking opportunities for afterschool organizations, stepped in to fill the void and support the afterschool community. By combining CASE's training and United Way contacts and resources, the two organizations are able to continue the program and benefit the entire afterschool community. This is a prime example of HCDE filling the gaps of public education in the region. I am proud of CASE for seeing an area that needed support and finding a way to provide it. This selfless act not only supports the afterschool community, but demonstrates CASE's dedication to the work while further cementing their reputation as an industry leader.

I started the week on Monday meeting with the Center for Safe and Secure Schools division as part of my new effort to talk with division staff about HCDE and our future. On Tuesday, I met with staff and prepared for my presentation at the Center for Educator Success principal academy. On Wednesday, I presented "Situational Leadership: Crafting your Leadership Set" to the CES Lead Strong Academy. As

part of this presentation, I guided the participating principals in how to determine and implement a leadership style based on situations and circumstances. On Thursday, I met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives and prepared for my role as a panelist in an American Society for Public Administration webinar next week. This webinar, in which I will be a panelist along with the Vice President of Research for the University of Houston and the President/CEO of Catholic Charities, will focus on how organizations have fulfilled their mission while coping with current and future funding cuts. I ended the week on Friday at my NPO office meeting with ELT members for regular updates.

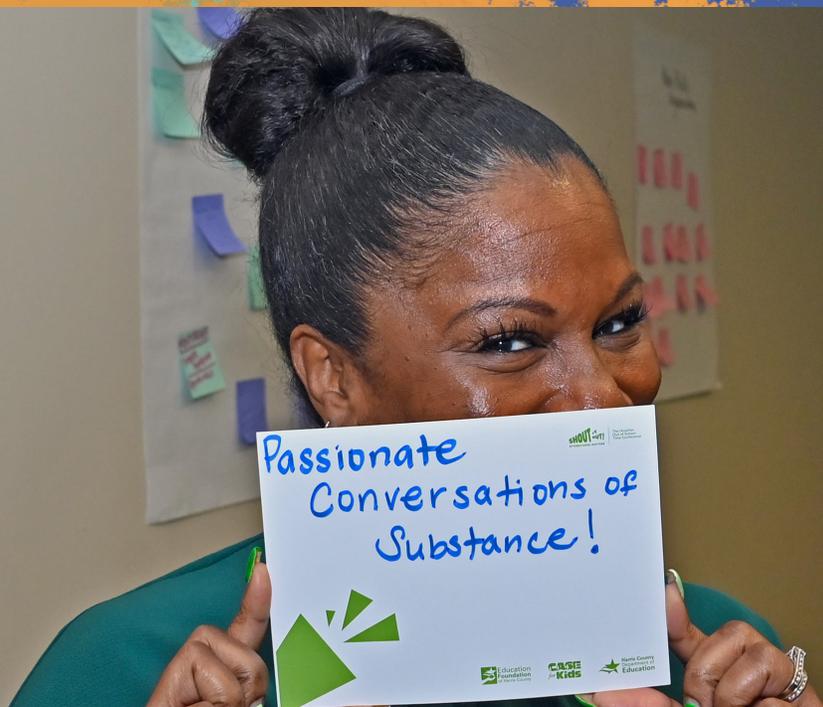
All HCDE facilities will be closed Monday for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Have a great three-day weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Brandi Nichols, a program coordinator with the Center for Summer, Afterschool and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids, shows her out-of-school (OST) time New Year's resolution following the OST Network Convening meeting, a partnership between CASE for Kids and the United Way of Greater Houston to bring together afterschool providers and community partners to best serve Harris County students and families.

NEW YEAR, NEW INITIATIVE: CASE FOR KIDS LEADS NEW PARTNERSHIP TO BRING TOGETHER OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PARTNERS

THE CENTER FOR AFTERSCHOOL, SUMMER AND ENRICHMENT (CASE) FOR KIDS staff and division leadership never let an opportunity pass them by.

In the last few years, United Way of Greater Houston's afterschool division – Out 2 Learn – has held quarterly meetings for out-of-school time (OST) professionals and agencies, bringing those representatives together for networking and sharing strategies and insights. But those meetings were set for elimination, a reflection of hardships organizations presently face with reductions in funding, staffing and events.

So CASE for Kids stepped in. The division, which serves many of the same community partners, offers numerous training and networking opportunities throughout the year. Leadership didn't want to see this one go.

"It's important for us to continue to provide these services to the community so they can network and share resources," said Dr. Lisa Caruthers, CASE for Kids senior director. "So instead of reducing the community meetings, we decided to collaborate to keep them going at the same level and share the costs."

The first meeting under the new partnership – "OST Network Convening" – was held Jan. 13 at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) North Post Oak location.

The start of the year made for the meeting's appropriate title: "Shout It Out: Your OST New Year Resolution."

More than 60 professionals attended the inaugural meeting, representing numerous non-profit organizations, service providers, direct service staff, various business and community partners. The benefit of bridging CASE for Kids and the United Way's Out 2 Learn is merging audiences and exposing individuals who only supported one entity to the resources and programs run by each organization.

For-profit OST providers for example, may not have traditionally ventured toward Out 2 Learn or the United Way's focus on nonprofit agencies. Or the other way around with organizations seeing the scope of CASE for Kids and its reach to students across Harris County.

"By combining our numbers, we're opening people's eyes to both sides," Caruthers said. "We have to share resources. When times are tight, we have to come together and have resources so the services don't drop and the support to the community doesn't drop."

"I hope we can create a more tight-knit community that is working together hand in hand to help leverage new resources and funding and make sure that our families are being served during what's a difficult time."

Following a welcome from CASE for

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Program Connections

Kids Federal Programs and Compliance Manager Jasmine Castleberry and Out 2 Learn Coordinator Krystal Perez, Caruthers spoke on the state of afterschool and challenges. OST programming remains in high demand but not always available – parents of more than 3.3 million children want afterschool programs but only just over 580,000 are currently enrolled according to a survey from America After 3PM on behalf of the Afterschool Alliance.

Parents say top benefits in afterschool programming to children include boosting critical thinking and leadership skills and decreasing screen time, according to the survey. Benefits to parents include less stress knowing their children are safe and boosting productivity at work.

The conversation transitioned to a table talk exercise, where groups discussed the needs of OST programs from the viewpoint of families, non-profits, schools and service providers and how each entity is being affected with fewer options. The ideas and discussion points will be collected – in addition to a future survey – to identify potential solutions.



HCDE Civic Engagement Specialist Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero led a presentation on advocacy in the out-of-school time space.



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

CASE also invited Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero, HCDE’s civic engagement specialist, to present to the group on advocacy in various forms. In his role, he works with HCDE divisions like CASE for Kids and Head Start to connect with students and families on civics, voting and using their voices.

“People tend to believe advocacy to be marching on the Capitol or testifying to elected officials,” Sandoval-Guerrero said. “My goal was to help out-of-school time professionals

recognize that they’re already doing advocacy work. Bringing advocacy into afterschool programs is essential because these professionals have unique, on-the-ground insights into what communities actually need and serve as critical touchpoints for families who face the most barriers to having their voices heard.”

The meeting closed with attendees writing out their OST New Year’s Resolutions and setting the stage for a productive 2026 in afterschool and out-of-school time programming. ✨

AB STUDENTS REWARDED WITH GAMING TRUCK FOR I-READY CHALLENGE EXCELLENCE

WORKING HARD can lead to rewards, a life lesson several Academic and Behavior School students found out this week when they played a few hours of video games after completing the i-Ready Challenge. i-Ready is a web-based learning platform that delivers online lessons in reading and mathematics.

To earn the reward, students spent hours engaged with the personalized instructional program, which tailors lessons for each student's needs. Lessons also compliment teacher resources to allow educators to target specific areas needing additional support.

The i-Ready Challenge for students at ABS East and ABS West ran from Oct. 1-Dec. 1 and pushed them to not only meet monthly goals, but show consistent progress and be among the top finishers on their respective campuses.

The challenge featured a gaming truck with all the bells and whistles for video game play. The truck started the day at ABS West before making its way across town for three more hours of fun at ABS East.

For the challenge, students who reached smaller goals earned monthly goodie grab bags and 'Lunch with a Leader' before the winter break.

Every student who passed 20 lessons in the challenge was given access to the truck, but those finishing in the top 10 at each campus were afforded special VIP status.



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

The i-Ready Challenge highlights academic success at the AB schools, which is essential as students often work through unique challenges that impact their studies. This type of activity continues to shift the narrative from behavior-focused education to strength-based instructional achievement, reminding students they are capable scholars despite any challenges they may face. ★

KNOWLEDGE MEETS PURPOSE AT HIGHPOINT SCHOOL'S INAUGURAL SENIOR SEMINAR



HIGHPOINT SCHOOL recently hosted its inaugural Senior Seminar, a half-day event designed to equip students with practical skills and renewed confidence as they prepare for life after graduation. Staying true to the school's mission of ensuring every student has a second chance at success, campus leaders organized sessions focused on resume building, interview techniques and professional dress to help students enter the workforce prepared. Those interested in continuing their education received guidance on completing college applications and financial aid forms and searching for scholarships. Other students explored a more structured career path connected with representatives from the armed forces, who shared insights into military services. By the end of the day, students walked away feeling informed, empowered and hopeful about the opportunities ahead. ★

Board Briefs

COLBERT SHARES HOW TO CRAFT A LEADERSHIP SET WITH CES LEAD STRONG ACADEMY COHORT



THERE IS NO SINGULAR WAY to lead a team. When faced with different circumstances, personalities and environments, a leader must adjust his or her attitude and strategy to find the best path forward and lead teams to success. Superintendent James Colbert Jr. met with members of the Center for Educator Success's Lead Strong Academy at the Adult Education Learning Center on Jan. 14 to discuss how to adapt as principals. His presentation, entitled "Situational Leadership: Crafting Your Leadership Set," explored how professionals should lead their teams, develop their own skill set as their campuses evolve, and tailor their skills to specific challenges. Group members were encouraged to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as campus leaders and then brainstorm ways to enhance their performance. Colbert asked cohort members to share their goals for their campuses and then helped craft three primary leadership traits to help guide each professional toward his or her objective. The Lead Strong Academy has welcomed several guest speakers since its launch in October 2025, all of whom aim to strengthen school leadership across the Greater Houston area and empower educators to reach new heights in their careers. ★



CSSS HOSTS HARRIS COUNTY SAFE SCHOOLS COMMISSION MEETING

THE CENTER FOR SAFE AND SECURE SCHOOLS welcomed area leaders and representatives to the Harris County Safe Schools Commission general meeting, where attendees heard updates on the commission's 2022-2023 report implementation, worked toward finalizing a strategic plan and heard from Texas Appleseed, which promotes social, economic and racial equity.

Held on Jan. 13 at Harris County Department of Education's North Post Oak location, commission officers Sammi Baig, Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca and Calandrian Simpson Kemp joined CSSS Director Leslie Etheridge, Harris County Fire Marshals Office Inspector Michael Howell, Nick Radack with Commissioner Tom Ramsey's office and Texas Appleseed Education Justice Project Director Andrew Hairston for the bimonthly meeting.

Created in 2022, the commission compiles recommendations on how Harris County organizations can best support the safety of all 25 independent school districts, charter schools and private schools with strategies during the school year. Past proposals include replacing and renewing outdated or malfunctioning infrastructure, improving emergency response systems and unifying school safety protocols for parents and faculty.



The commission allows leaders to be proactive, rather than reactive, to safety concerns. Each of the county's four precincts also appoints students to the board to better gain insight into their experiences and abilities when making safety and security procedures. ★

Board Briefs

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS VOLUNTEER TO HELP PREPARE FOR ECWC



IT TAKES A LOT OF WORK to pull off a large-scale event like the 40th annual Early Childhood Winter Conference, and sometimes you must call in reinforcements. This week, more than a dozen Incarnate Word Academy high school students visited HCDE's Irvington location to help assemble welcome bags for the more than 700 early childhood educators expected to attend the conference on Jan. 31. Dr. Chandel Hancock, the Center for Educator Success' officer of professional learning and student recognition, provided background information about the professional development event before she and the students spent the remainder of the day packing nearly 1,000 bags with promotional materials, snacks, activities and conference swag. Students at the college preparatory school are required to complete 75 service hours to graduate, and each received 8 hours of service credit for their work. An additional 3-8 hours are available for those who volunteer at the ECWC event. This unique opportunity allowed students to learn about HCDE's services, assist early childhood educators and serve their community all in one day. ✨

HCDE CLOSURES TO HONOR THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF DR. KING

HCDE SCHOOLS
& OFFICES WILL
BE CLOSED ON
MONDAY, JAN. 19
FOR MLK DAY



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION campuses and offices will be closed on Monday, Jan. 19, as we honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A steadfast advocate for education, Dr. King believed knowledge was a powerful tool for empowerment and social change. His

message of unity, service and justice continues to guide the work of our divisions as we strive to create equitable opportunities for Harris County learners and strengthen the community. Offices and campuses will resume regular hours on Jan. 20. ✨

HCDE LEADERS INVEST IN LAREDO STUDENTS AT YOUNG MEN'S LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



HCDE LEADERS traveled to Laredo to participate in the annual Young Men's Leadership Conference at Texas A&M International University, an event hosted annually by former Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Dr. Jesus Amezcua. Designed to expose students to future career pathways and inspire them to dream bigger, the conference on Jan. 10-12 brought together mentors and leaders to share real-world insight and encouragement. Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz and Assistant Superintendents Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers led sessions and conversations centered on leadership, career readiness, overcoming obstacles, financial responsibilities and more. Their message underscored a shared belief that investing time, guidance and opportunity in young men today helps shape confident leaders and engaged contributors to their communities. ✨



EFHC DIRECTOR HELPS SET DIRECTION FOR EAST END CHAMBER FOUNDATION AT BOARD RETREAT



TO STRENGTHEN CONNECTIONS between Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) and with the many communities it serves, staff members are actively working to best serve county students and their families. Among them are Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva, who connects with area school districts, but also works with community and business partners.

Silva serves on the board of directors for the Houston East End Chamber of Commerce Education & Workforce Foundation, which selects initiatives, programs and partnerships to advocate for in helping chamber partners become more involved with the East End community. The board held a retreat on Thursday, setting its goals and objectives. Recent successes include awarding more than \$30,000 in scholarships to class of 2025 graduates representing 11 high schools in the East End last spring, as well as hosting the chamber's 13th Annual Education Symposium. ✨

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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



HCDE's Special Schools division rewarded students at both Academic and Behavior campuses who completed the i-Ready Challenge with a few hours of video games. The gaming truck featured numerous video games and HCDE and school staff jumped in to join the fun.

AT HCDE, one thing remains constant – our staff members, across every division and team, are ready when called upon to support Harris County students and their families. Strengthening our communities will make us better and at HCDE we make those investments every day. Recently, our CASE for Kids team saw an opportunity to continue supporting those who need out-of-school time programming. The United Way of Greater Houston's afterschool division (Out 2 Learn) was at risk of losing its quarterly networking meetings for out-of-school time organizations and professionals. It's a harsh reality many are facing with reductions in funding and staffing. Instead of seeing this vital professional development forum disappear, CASE for Kids leadership stepped up and partnered with the United Way of Greater Houston, taking on some of the costs and logistics while merging two audiences that don't always overlap. Entities who haven't worked with our CASE team now see the scope of its reach across the county and beyond to support students outside of school hours. Thank you, CASE for stepping up. I look forward to hearing more good news from the partnership.

The narrative for students at HCDE's Academic and Behavior Schools usually encompasses behavior-focused education and working through unique challenges. So, when we get a chance to highlight academic successes, that's a win for everyone. Students at both ABS East and ABS West were treated this week to a visit from a gaming truck with all the bells and whistles for video game entertainment, a

reward for those who excelled and completed the i-Ready Challenge. The web-based learning platform delivers reading and math lessons and students earn prizes by achieving targeted goals, the biggest being access to the gaming truck with 20 completed lessons. The top 10 at each campus were afforded VIP access. These milestones highlight how students are capable of reaching high academic goals no matter the adversity they may face. Congratulations to these students on their success.

Finally, I was invited to present to the CES Lead Strong Principal Academy cohort this week. Entitled, "Situational Leadership: Crafting Your Leadership Set," my presentation focused on how professionals should lead their teams while developing their individual skill sets as campus-specific challenges arise. Every school district, campus and classroom is different from the rest, so we shouldn't simply rely on one method to lead others and enhance performance. I asked the cohort members to reflect on their strength and weaknesses as campus leaders and then brainstorm ways to better their approach and positively reach those they deal with on a daily basis. Making these small adjustments can make an impact in changing the temperature of a campus or organization. I wish these leaders good luck as they continue their journey in growing and empowering their fellow educators as well.

By working with other community organizations, I am meeting the needs of students, their families and the community in a coordinated way. ★



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UPCOMING EVENTS

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

January 21
School Board Recognition
Reception
Board Meeting
[All-Earth Ecobot Reveal Day](#)

January 25-28
[TASA Midwinter Conference](#)

January 31
[Early Childhood Winter
Conference \(ECWC\)](#)

February 13-16
Presidents Day (Special
Schools Closed)

February 16-19
[Texas School Public
Relations Association
Conference](#)

February 17
[All About Grants & More
Workshop](#)