

the CONNECTOR



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of Note

It was a week of appreciation in HCDE, as we recognized the service of our Board of Trustees and thanked Choice Partners members and vendors with individual celebrations.

January is School Board Recognition month and at HCDE we like to show you how much we appreciate your hard work and support throughout the year. This year we built upon our Varsity theme from Convocation, showing how your contributions make you stand out individually and as a board. I hope you will enjoy the customized letterman jackets and other swag you received and know you are critical to making HCDE a winning team!

This month we also celebrated Choice members and vendors at our annual appreciation luncheon, showing them how their participation impacts students throughout the region. It is always cool to see the look on the faces of district and business representatives as they see how their dollars do more than line our coffers. They transform lives.

I am proud to be part of an organization that actively celebrates our leadership and the people who make our programs successful.

I started the week with the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. On Tuesday, I met with ELT before meeting with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. On Wednesday, I participated in the Board Appreciation reception where I presented each of you with your customized award plaque and letterman jacket before attending the January Board Meeting. I started Thursday at the Spring ISD State of the District breakfast followed by participating as a panelist for a webinar through the American Society for Public Administration. This webinar, hosted by Dr. Peter Koelling from the University of Houston, was called "Sailing Through the Doldrums: How Nonprofits are Coping with Funding Cuts," and was an opportunity to discuss how HCDE weathered the storm of recent federal funding cuts.

I ended the day meeting with members of the Records Management Division as part of my discussions with staff.

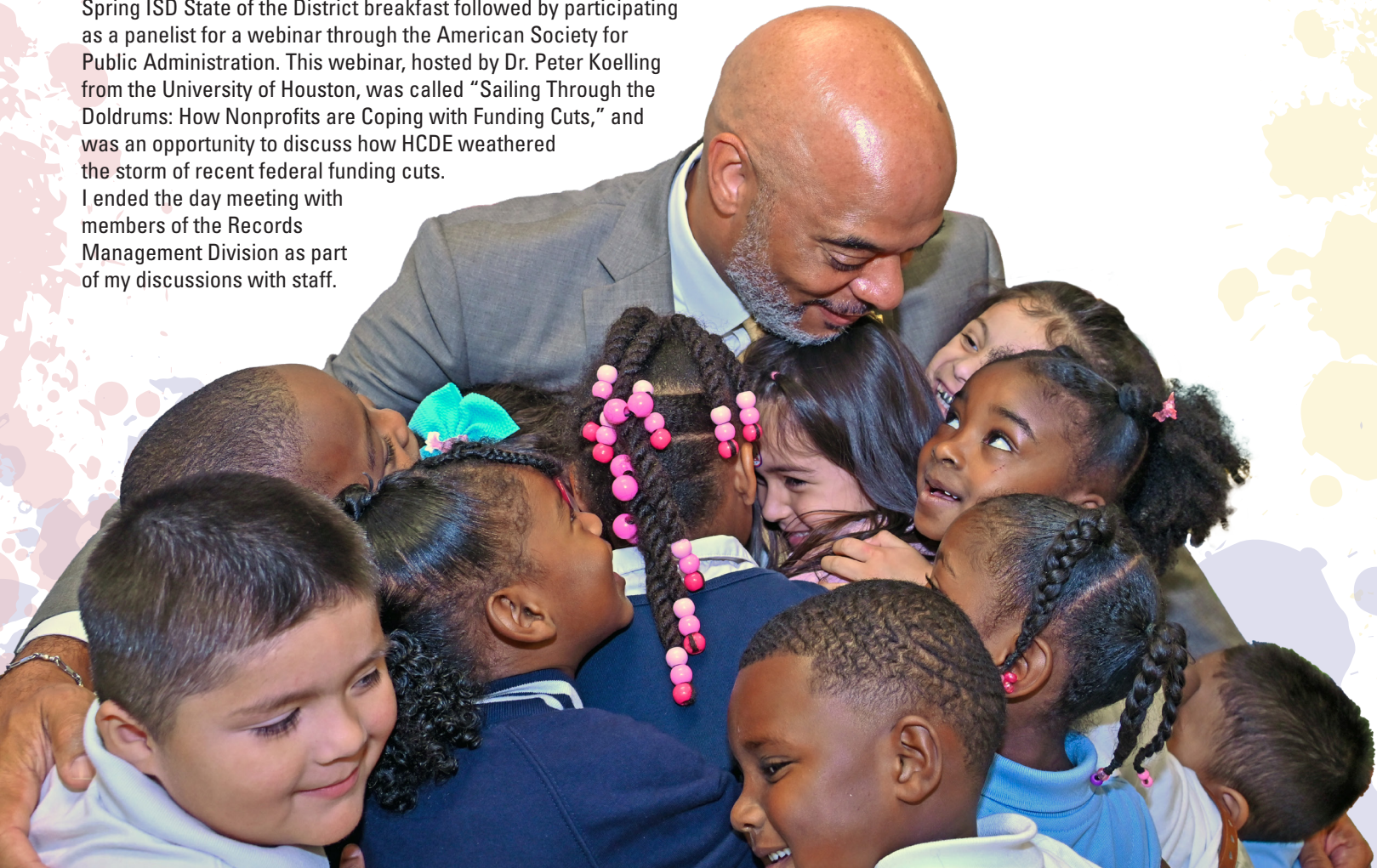
This morning I participated in a call about incoming inclement weather with other superintendents in the region before providing the welcome at the Choice Partners Member and Vendor Appreciation Luncheon. Here I not only told them how much we appreciate their support, I showed a video that demonstrates how our cooperative is about more than contracts; it's about how their support transforms lives.

I travel to San Antonio tomorrow for the TASA Midwinter Conference where I will meet with other educational administrators and discuss issues and trends impacting public education in Texas.

Be safe and stay warm this weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Trustee Silky Joshi-Malik, Second Vice President Erica Davis and Trustee Andrea Duhon photographed with AI generated portraits of themselves gifted by students at HCDE's special schools.

'VARSITY' LEADERSHIP: BOARD TRUSTEES RECOGNIZED FOR COMMITMENT TO HCDE AT APPRECIATION LUNCHEON

PURPOSE – IT'S SOMETHING THAT EVERYONE ON THIS PLANET CAN SPEND A LIFETIME SEARCHING FOR. It can manifest in the form of family, music, outreach, a career and more. While purpose might be hard to find, it's also one of the most rewarding feelings when you discover what you were meant to do.

Each of Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) seven board members has found their purpose. While managing their own families and careers, they chose to answer a call to public service, representing the students and families who elected them as trustees and making decisions that will impact the communities' educational landscape for generations to come.

"I'm so proud to be part of such a diverse board that represents all the cultures and communities and neighborhoods of Harris County," said First Vice President Richard Cantu. "We are all very passionate about public service and educational opportunities for all."

#TeamHCDE filled the Irvington Conference Center with

laughter and fun stories on Jan. 21 during the School Board Recognition Reception, which honored board members for their commitment to education. This year's theme was a call-back to Superintendent James Colbert Jr.'s Convocation: "HCDE is Varsity," a message that the Department is a championship-level team that provides outstanding services and advocacy for a special population of students.

However, Varsity is more than a message; it's a belief turned into fact through trustees' continuous support.

"You are always thinking about and advocating for the children we serve," Colbert said as he addressed board members at the reception. "I'm so happy that we can all come together to do what's best for our employees and the community we serve. I love that y'all love us and know that I love and appreciate each one of you."

As trustees reflected on the meaning behind the Varsity theme and how it connects to their work as public servants, Board President Amy

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Program Connections



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

Hinojosa shared that she takes pride in the board's ability to guide HCDE through progress and challenges.

"Varsity means that in the face of adversity or challenges that you're able to sidestep and swerve and pivot and be ready for whatever is coming next, and this board knows how to do that," Hinojosa described.

The board member's leadership is demonstrated in every fiber of the Department's impact across Harris County.

Children have a safe place to continue learning or exploring new activities when the final school bell rings because trustees value the CASE for Kids afterschool program. When the Center for Safe and Secure Schools hosts summits that bring district leaders and first responders together, it's because board members ensure funding for the division whose sole purpose is to innovate ways to keep students safe in an ever-changing environment.

"I find that the impact HCDE can make on individuals is so much stronger than any other entity in our community," said Trustee Andrea Duhon. "We make a real, effective change in people's lives, and I really love being a part of that."

The Education Foundation of Harris County's Tools for Teachers program holds a special place in her heart. Duhon supported the launch of

the initiative, which has helped more than 5,000 local teachers purchase school supplies with EFHC funding, ensuring they don't have to utilize their personal funds.

"Thousands of teachers have made programs and new projects become real because of their ability to get those additional supplies," she explained. "It's beautiful because we are an organization that can look to the future and find new ways to support those people that we are serving."

As a lifelong learner, Trustee John McGee knows the power of HCDE's Adult



Trustee Andrea Duhon smiles as Supt. Colbert describes why she deserves HCDE's 2026 Reading Rockstar Award.

Education program. He described his admiration for the division that has spent half a year forming new partnerships with local vendors and workforce organizations to expand certification opportunities that not only meet federal requirements but also align with the region's labor needs.

"Our adult education program and activities are just phenomenal," McGee smiled. "Being able to provide and pour into the lives of adults and give them an opportunity to get back on track, that's what it means to be a Varsity team."

What it means to be Varsity looks different for everyone, but Second Vice President Erica Davis says one thing is for certain – a championship-level squad wouldn't be possible without everyone on #TeamHCDE. From those in Special Schools classrooms or on the ground at campuses across the county

to those collaborating in the offices, everyone is working together to make an impact on thousands of residents each year.

"Our employees always put people first," she described. "They consistently set aside their differences or personal priorities and keep the community at the forefront of decision-making. I think that's what makes HCDE Varsity."

Added Trustee Eric Dick: "HCDE is Varsity and I feel like we do a great job. We are looking for more ways to positively



Supt. Colbert helps Trustee Eric Dick put on his new Varsity letterman jacket.

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Trustee John McGee demonstrates the handheld heart that inspired Superintendent Colbert to present him with the Heartfelt Hero Award.

Program Connections



#TeamHCDE's Executive Leadership Team and Trustee Silky Joshi-Malik mingle before the School Board Recognition Reception.



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



Trustee Silky Joshi-Malik shows off a customized t-shirt she received as a token of appreciation from students at HCDE's Special Schools.

impact the community and just keep killing it.”

During the reception, attendees watched a video expressing the Department's gratitude to the board, and trustees received plaques of appreciation featuring personalized superlatives for their contributions, as well as customized "HCDE is Varsity" letterman jackets. Students from our four special schools also showed their gratitude with homemade lemonade, artwork and swag bags.

“Being on this board fills my cup every day and has brought meaning and purpose to my life,” said Trustee Silky Joshi-Malik. “HCDE has the power to have a multi-generational impact on families, and knowing I get to be a small part of that is just beyond anything I could have ever imagined.” 🌟

Program Connections

CASE FOR KIDS PREPARES TO WELCOME STUDENTS TO THE “KINGDOM OF ECOBOT”



THIS WEEK, out-of-school time robotics coaches from school districts across Harris County attended the CASE for Kids virtual 2025-2026 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Reveal Day. The meeting guided STEM-focused educators through strategies that will help students throughout the project and previewed the rules and theme of this year’s challenge – “Kingdom of Ecobot.” The game is designed around the imaginary kingdom where students will determine how to build homes, harvest energy and manage trash in eco-friendly ways. During the reveal, coaches focused on game-specific learning, including the overall game and mission-specific rules, game table set-up and scoring criteria. CASE

for Kids will host hundreds of students from afterschool programs within the greater Houston area to compete in this year’s competition. Participating students and coaches will start preparing at practice days on Jan. 31 and Feb. 21 which will culminate on Challenge Day on April 25. 🌟

IN THE NEWS

HCDE’S SCHOOLS DIVISION FEATURED IN POWERSCHOOL BLOG ON CONNECTED DATA

Harris County Department of Education Director of Curriculum and Special Programs Dr. Margaret Patton, Compliance Officer Michelle Rayson and other Schools division staff were recently featured in an article on PowerSchool’s blog and resource library as a case study. The article discusses how HCDE’s Schools division uses the student information system to connect student behavior, instruction and assessments to get a full picture of the whole child. Using the PowerSchool system to its fullest, the Schools’ team is able to have collaborative conversations about student data in relationship to growth, as well as create actionable needs assessments for each student. 🌟

FORTIS ACADEMY CONTINUES TO GAIN POSITIVE PRESS FROM HOUSTON CHRONICLE ARTICLE

As you may be aware, Fortis Academy was featured in a recent article published in the online edition of the Houston Chronicle. After positive attention, the Chronicle printed the article on the front page of the Sunday, Jan. 11 edition of the paper. The article continues to gain positive press for the school as volunteers, community members and organizations read the story and reach out to the school for more information. 🌟

ONLINE NEWS OUTLET HIGHLIGHTS HCDE BOARD OF TRUSTEES FOR SCHOOL BOARD RECOGNITION MONTH

January is School Board Recognition Month and Harris County Department of Education is spending the month highlighting its trustees and their commitment to improving local schools and education. Prism News, an online media company powered by artificial intelligence, published an article on Jan. 12 highlighting HCDE’s board recognition throughout the month. 🌟

 TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW THE ARTICLE](#)

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 TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW THE ARTICLE](#)

Prism Local News

 **PowerSchool**
Powering Brighter Futures



Board Briefs

CHOICE PARTNERS HONORS MEMBERS, VENDORS AT ANNUAL APPRECIATION LUNCHEON



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S (HCDE) NATIONAL PURCHASING COOPERATIVE, CHOICE PARTNERS, recognized nearly 70 members and vendors on Jan. 23 at the organization's annual appreciation luncheon. The event allows Choice Partners members and vendor representatives to network with each other and receive appreciation from HCDE leadership for helping serve Harris County residents.

HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. thanked guests and lunch attendees for their support of public education through providing and utilizing competitively bid contracts with Choice Partners. Colbert also reiterated that he feels CP is truly unique in the public education space and allows Harris County learners and families to thrive while being fiscally responsible.

Choice Partners has secured record revenue over the last few fiscal years, an achievement made possible through securing new vendors and members and drafting competitive contracts that benefit area students and educators.


Colbert's address also included a video highlighting how funds are leveraged to improve facilities and campuses that

serve area students and their communities, including the newer Coolwood Head Start center and Adult Education Learning Center.

"That's our business model – we're going to take the money we get from Choice Partners and we're going to try and make our community better," Colbert said. "We're trying to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars and we do that through people. The fact that you are working with Choice Partners makes you a public servant because your money is going back to kids."

Houston and Humble independent school districts and the University of Florida were recognized as CP's top three members. The organizations use more than a dozen contracts to procure goods and services that range from student meals and supplies to employee software.

The Brandt Companies was recognized as the top vendor, while Labatt Food Service was recognized as the top food vendor.

To learn more about Choice Partners, visit choicepartners.org. 

In the Community

SUPT. COLBERT JOINS NATIONAL PANEL ON NAVIGATING FEDERAL FUNDING LOSS

SUPERINTENDENT JAMES COLBERT JR. WAS INVITED TO SERVE AS A PANELIST for the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) on Jan. 22, joining leaders from other educational and nonprofit organizations to discuss how agencies can continue critical operations amid the loss of federal funding. The panel explored strategies such as diversifying revenue streams, strengthening community partnerships and prioritizing essential services. ASPA is a national professional association dedicated to advancing excellence in public service by supporting administrators through education, research and forums that encourage an exchange of ideas and best practices across the public and nonprofit sectors. ★



HCDE SUPPORTS SPRING ISD AT ANNUAL STATE OF THE DISTRICT



MEMBERS OF #TEAMHCDE recently attended Spring ISD's State of the District, an annual event where Superintendent Gregg Cuellar shared key updates, priorities and progress from across the district. The event offered a valuable opportunity to hear directly from Spring leadership while connecting with partners and community members. Spring ISD partners with HCDE through the Center for Educator Success alternative teacher certification program, which sends students

to our Special Schools for personalized instruction and more. Representing the Department were Superintendent James Colbert Jr.; Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz; Community Engagement and Partnerships Director Trina Silva; Center for Educator Success Director Andrea Segraves and Elementary Education Officer Johanna Sanchez; Center for Safe and Secure Schools Climate and Culture Specialist Tiffany Chaney and Civic Engagement Specialist Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero. ★

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE H: BOARD RELATIONS

- Maintains a positive and professional working relationship with the board.



Second Vice President Erica Davis shows off her new “HCDE is Varsity” letterman jacket at the 2026 School Board Recognition Reception on Jan. 21.

AS PART OF SCHOOL BOARD RECOGNITION MONTH, #TeamHCDE took the time to honor the leadership and dedication of the Department’s Board of Trustees on Jan. 21. This year’s theme “HCDE is Varsity,” underscores the strength of teamwork, resilience and a shared purpose to improve educational opportunities for all that defines our organization. Varsity is more than a slogan; it’s a belief turned into fact through trustees’ continuous support. I was proud to present our board members with plaques of appreciation featuring personalized superlatives for their contributions, as well as customized “HCDE is Varsity” letterman jackets. Their commitment to Harris County Learners is appreciated and I know their impact on education will be felt for generations to come.

On Friday, Choice Partners held its annual member and vendor appreciation luncheon. Funds from the national cooperative are leveraged to supply services to area school districts and support HCDE facilities like our Special Schools and Adult Education Learning Center. We have an incredible staff who pour endless love and

attention to our students and families, which is why they all deserve a positive-safe space to grow. I appreciated the opportunity to honor members and vendors who make efforts to support education possible in Harris County.

Finally, out-of-school time robotics coaches from districts across Harris County came together for the CASE for Kids virtual 2025–2026 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Reveal Day, marking the start of another exciting STEM-focused season. This year’s theme, “Kingdom of Ecobot,” will help students think critically about sustainability, problem-solving and teamwork. They have months of work ahead to prepare for Challenge Day in April, but I’m confident these afterschool students will rise to the occasion. Don’t forget, STEM will also be the focus of the 40th Annual Early Childhood Winter Conference on Jan. 31. I will be delivering the opening address ahead of some informative breakout sessions about cooking in the classroom, engaging students invested in screentime and more. I hope to see you at Kingdom Builders Center next Saturday! ★



HCDE BOARD

Board President
Amy Hinojosa

1st Vice President
Richard Cantu

2nd Vice President
Dr. Erica Davis

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

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](#)

February 18
Board Meeting