

the **CONNECTOR**



**EDUCATORS TO REIGNITE, RECONNECT AT 40TH ANNUAL
EARLY CHILDHOOD WINTER CONFERENCE P.3**



**HEAD START CUSTODIANS RECEIVE CROSS TRAINING
FROM IT SERVICES P.5**



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of Note

AT THE TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS annual conference in San Antonio this week, Education Commissioner Mike Morath discussed how basic mathematic skills set the foundation for student success, as the discipline is progressive in learning with each skill building upon the one before.

We saw this idea come to life at Highpoint this week as middle and high school students applied their newfound knowledge of geometric shapes to engineering bridges that were tested for structural strength. Watching the popsicle stick and glue constructions stand or fall as progressively heavier sandbags were placed upon them demonstrated real-world applications to everyday school activities. What a cool way to get students interested in math! This is just one more way that HCDE distinguishes itself in the Alternative Education area, providing students with opportunities to show their creativity while demonstrating proficiency in the application of academic knowledge. Congratulations to all the students whose creations stood strong!

Due to inclement weather, HCDE and most ISDs in the region closed on Monday. As such, planned conferences and extracurricular activities were altered and I virtually attended the Texas Academic Decathlon Committee, of which I serve as treasurer.

We returned to the office on Tuesday where I attended the Early Childhood Stakeholder Convening, hosted by County Commissioners Briones and Garcia at the United Way of Greater Houston. On Wednesday, I met with Trustee Cantu and on Thursday, I met with representatives from the American Leadership Forum (ALF) regarding use of our facilities for a two-day summit later this year. I also met with staff from Choice Partners as part of my ongoing divisional meetings. Today, I met with staff at my NPO

office where I received updates about projects and initiatives.

Tomorrow, I will welcome more than 1,000 PreK-3 teachers at the 40th Annual Early Childhood Winter Conference. This is the second largest early childhood conference in the state and draws attention from around Texas as well as neighboring Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Another storm is set to come in tonight. We will be monitoring the weather and any impact to our facilities over the weekend. Please stay safe and warm.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Early childhood educators pose on stage at the 2025 ECWC. More than 1,000 teachers and childhood advocates are expected to attend the 40th annual event, scheduled for Jan. 31 at Kingdom Builders.

FULL S.T.E.A.M. AHEAD: EDUCATORS REIGNITE PASSION FOR TEACHING AT 40TH ANNUAL EARLY CHILDHOOD WINTER CONFERENCE

ONCE A YEAR, early childhood educators from across Texas come together with a shared purpose to recharge, reconnect and reignite their passion for teaching.

This year, that purpose is especially powerful as the R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference (ECWC) celebrates its 40th year of inspiring those who shape learning for children in their earliest years.

Intentionally set at the end of January, the annual conference offers educators a much-needed boost halfway through the school year. On Saturday, Jan. 31, ECWC returns with renewed energy and enthusiasm, inviting participants to learn and engage with creativity, confidence and a commitment to early learning.

Through this year's theme, "Hands-On, Minds-On: S.T.E.A.M. in Early Learning," the conference highlights engaging, hands-on activities for young learners. Throughout the day, educators will explore activities designed to spark curiosity and discovery in students while strengthening critical thinking through science,

technology, engineering, arts and math.

ECWC also offers more than classroom activities and strategies. It offers a space for meaningful connections. Sessions are designed to foster collaboration and idea-sharing among peers who understand the challenges and joys of the profession, something reiterated by the event's keynote speaker, Gerry Brooks. The veteran educator and social media sensation uses his signature humor to discuss the importance of culture and climate on campuses.

Also featured at this year's event is Kellie Karavias, better known as Culinary Kellie, a Houston-based culinary educator who blends education and food in creative, accessible ways. Her session will demonstrate how culinary arts can be integrated into early childhood instruction through hands-on, age-appropriate activities that enhance fine motor skills, encourage exploration and build healthy relationships with food. Additional featured speakers include Dr. Gilberto Soto, Kindall Tyson, Maria Mercedes Champion and

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Program Connections



40th ANNUAL R.T. GARCIA EARLY CHILDHOOD WINTER CONFERENCE

other respected voices in the early education community.

This year's event also features the new Creation Station Challenge. Educators were invited to submit a learning center or classroom station they've used to drive engagement and creativity in their own classrooms. Conference attendees will peer-review the submissions and at the end of the day, the top three stations will each earn a \$500 Classroom Scholarship along with a mini robot, courtesy of event sponsor Sphero.

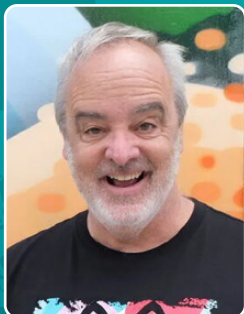
ECWC is also expanding its impact beyond the classroom with an exclusive Leadership Track designed for assistant principals, principals and childcare center managers. Attendees will

participate in the inaugural Leadership Panel, where five industry experts will share real-world strategies, insights and stories tailored specifically to early childhood leaders. Curated sessions in the Leadership Track will help administrators strengthen their leadership skills and navigate challenges beyond daily instruction.

After 40 years, the Early Childhood Winter Conference continues to move forward with intention and a simple, yet powerful, goal of empowering educators to return to their classrooms inspired, supported and ready to help young learners during their most formative years.

[Click here](#) to learn more or register for ECWC 2026. ✨

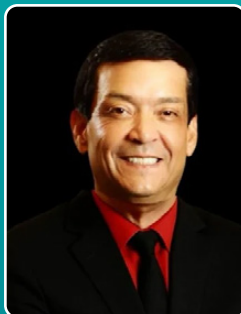
ECWC FEATURED SPEAKERS



GERRY BROOKS



KELLIE KARAVIAS
(CULINARY KELLIE)



DR. GILBERTO SOTO



MARIA MERCEDES
CHAMPION



KINDALL TYSON



SAUL PAUL

SUPT. COLBERT PARTICIPATES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVES CONVENING MEETING

Harris County Commissioners Adrian Garcia (Precinct 3) and Lesley Briones (Precinct 4) convened executives from various organizations across the region Jan. 27 to discuss the future of early childhood initiatives within the county. Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Superintendent James Colbert Jr. joined the conversation, along with executives from Greater Houston Partnership, Houston Endowment, Rice University, Houston-Galveston Area Council, Children at Risk, United Way of Greater Houston and Baker Ripley, to strategically plan for how to continue programs when American Rescue Plan Act funds run out this year. Colbert will also participate in monthly sub-committee meetings regarding this issue. ✨



Board Briefs

HCDE MEETS EMPLOYEE NEEDS, PROVIDES COMPUTER SKILLS TRAINING TO HEAD START CUSTODIANS

RECOGNIZED AS A TOP WORKPLACE IN AMERICA by USA Today, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) continues to address the needs and concerns of staff, demonstrating how it values employees.

Raechel Mozer, HCDE's technology trainer, recently led a Basic Computer Skills Training session for a dozen Head Start custodians on Jan. 30, answering the call after the employees requested more professional development and technology training. Translations Coordinator Wendy Utterback also attended, assisting with Spanish speakers.

The idea stemmed developed after Head Start operations leaders polled the custodians to determine their training needs. All requested computer training after addressing concerns with basic operations to navigating Microsoft Teams for meetings.

This training is just the latest example of HCDE leadership seeing and addressing the needs of its staff members, thus building a family-like atmosphere and culture where team members are truly invested in serving Harris County students and families. 🌟



DEPARTMENT LEADERS NETWORK WITH COLLEAGUES, HIGHLIGHT HCDE SERVICES AT TASA MIDWINTER CONFERENCE



EDUCATION LEADERS from across the state traveled to San Antonio on Jan. 25-28 for fellowship, legal updates and to acquire new skills at the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) Midwinter Conference. Members of the Executive Leadership Team were among those representing HCDE at the conference, which has become the most popular event of the year for school leaders. Administrators gain valuable face-to-face time to discuss and share innovative practices and address

similar challenges they encounter daily.

Representatives from the Marketing & Client Engagement and Choice Partners teams also attended the event to provide informative resources on HCDE to conference attendees at the vendor showcase. The group shed light on the Choice Partners National Purchasing Cooperative and how the Department's divisions serve students and educators in diverse ways. 🌟

HIGHPOINT STUDENTS PUT GEOMETRY SKILLS TO THE TEST AT ANNUAL BRIDGE BUILDING CONTEST

HIGHPOINT SCHOOL STUDENTS combined creativity with craftsmanship on Jan. 29 during the third annual Bridge Building Contest. At the culmination of a three-week mathematics lesson centered on creating equations and examining the strength of geometric shapes, middle and high schoolers buzzed with excitement about their chance to test the creations.

Students studied four types of bridges before choosing one design to recreate using glue and popsicle sticks. Campus leaders made slight adjustments to the judging process to more accurately assess each student's bridge, while engineering professionals from the community served as guest judges. Nearly 50 bridges were evaluated for efficiency using a student-created formula that calculated the bridge's weight, the weight it could withstand before collapsing and its creative design.

Many of the creations refused to collapse, with some withstanding up to 50 pounds of sand. Others faced structural challenges, however, the project was an opportunity for each student to learn life skills such as perseverance, time management and teamwork.

Gift cards ranging from \$25-\$75 were awarded to the first-, second- and third-place finishers of the competition. ★

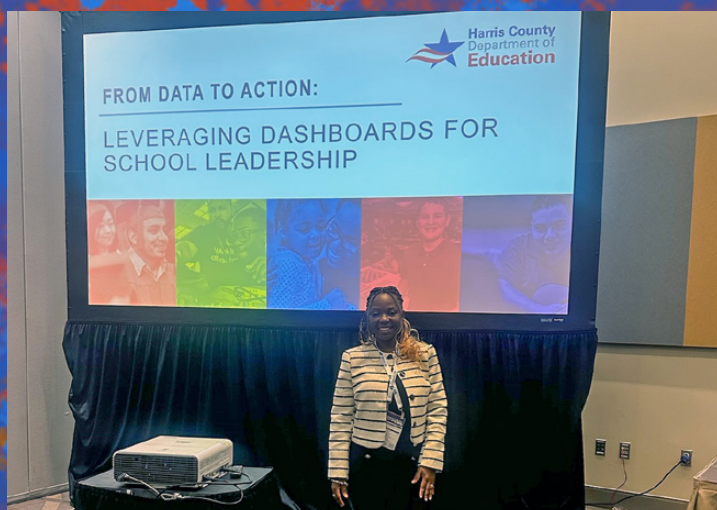


▶ TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)



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

REI TEAM PRESENTS ON USING DASHBOARDS, DATA DECISION MAKING AT SCHOOL EXECUTIVES CONFERENCE



RESEARCH & EVALUATION INSTITUTE Director Yolanda Pyrtle and Dr. Akua Obeng, division research manager and data analyst, presented recently at the Texas Council of Women School Executives Annual Conference. Held Jan. 23-24 in San Antonio, the TCWSE conference is held in conjunction with TASA Midwinter Conference and brings school leaders together to network and discuss issues and challenges women administrators face in the education landscape.

Pyrtle and Obeng's session was titled, "From Data to Action: Leveraging Dashboards for School Leadership," and helped train campus leaders on how to use dashboards to enhance data-driven decision making. Dashboards provide data in real time, and the duo highlighted best practices based on trends and strategies to promote improvement through timely data. ★

In the Community

ELEMENTARY STUDENTS GET A TASTE OF THEIR HARD WORK

THERE IS NOTHING BETTER THAN seeing the fruits of your labor – except for maybe tasting them. Elementary students at Academic and Behavioral School East recently harvested a batch of mustard greens planted earlier in the school year. The group has developed a green thumb, planting, caring for and nurturing its greens while learning firsthand the importance

of responsibility, patience and teamwork. With the help of ABS East teachers and culinary experts, students had the opportunity to sample their mustard greens, enhanced with a couple of slices of bacon. The quick meal connected classroom learning to real-world skills while also giving students a sense of pride in seeing their work come full circle. 🌟



ABS WEST STAFF SPARK STUDENT CURIOSITY ABOUT SPACE EXPLORATION

STUDENTS AT Academic and Behavioral School West recently learned about what makes the Milky Way special in a lesson that was simply out of this world. As part of a hands-on learning experience, middle schoolers researched the planets in our solar system before creating detailed 3D replicas of their favorite planets. The activity bridged research, creativity and collaboration as scholars demonstrated their understanding of the planetary characteristics, placement and unique features of the solar system. Engaging lesson plans like this help students with learning and behavioral challenges bring science to life while strengthening research skills and deepening their curiosity about space exploration. 🌟



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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE G: PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENTS

- Ensures that appropriate staff development is available and monitors staff development for effectiveness.



Technology Trainer Raechel Mozer leads a dozen Head Start custodians through a computer skills training session on Jan. 20. The division organized the training after staff members requested the professional development.


The annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference (ECWC) is one of the state's largest

events for early childhood educators and through four decades, continues to provide educators with new ideas and insights to help our young learners in the classroom. I'm excited to welcome the more than 1,000 registrants to the full day of networking and hands-on learning sessions. Kudos to the Center for Educator Success for bringing in another slate of top-notch speakers, including keynote speaker and education advocate Gerry Brooks. The conference's 40th edition continues to evolve with trends in education, including a new leadership track where early childhood administrators and aspiring future leaders will hear from five industry experts. No matter the session, speaker or activity, ECWC has something for everyone and it speaks volumes that our registered numbers are more than 1,000. I hope educators will use this day to reengage and reignite their passion for teaching.

At HCDE, we pride ourselves in valuing our employees and continually finding solutions to make their experience while working here as positive as can be. The latest example is providing professional development to a dozen Head Start custodians this week. Technology Trainer Raechel Mozer led the group through an afternoon session of computer skills to help the custodians address concerns with basic operations. Translations Coordinator Wendy

Utterback was also on hand to assist with Spanish-language speakers. Kudos to these employees for speaking up and taking on this challenge to better serve HCDE, and thank you to Head Start leaders for seeing the needs of their team and providing opportunities for staff to improve. This results in building a family atmosphere at HCDE and better serving Harris County learners and families.

Finally, students at our Special Schools are busy with hands-on learning and seeing the fruits of their labor – literally. Highpoint School held its third annual Bridge Building Contest this week, where teams showcased their structures and students mastered math equations and geometry to hold the weights. For multi-year participants, it was fulfilling to see them learn from experience and improve their techniques. At ABS West, middle school students recently studied the galaxy and created 3D models of their favorite planets. And over at ABS East, students harvested a batch of mustard greens planted earlier in the school year from their on-campus garden. With the help of staff – and a few slices of bacon – they cooked and sampled the greens. All these lessons are not only informative but experiences these students will remember well beyond the time in the classroom.

By communicating and making staff training opportunities available to employees, I am meeting the expectation to stay abreast of development for employee effectiveness. 



HCDE BOARD

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Silky Joshi-Malik
Dr. John McGee

UPCOMING EVENTS

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

February 27
Chili Cook-Off

March 9-13
Spring Break (HCDE
Closed)

March 18
Board Meeting