

# the **CONNECTOR**



**HEATHER FAUNCE-ESTAY'S LIFELONG PASSION TO SERVE SETS HER APART AS FEBRUARY EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH P.3**



**TEACHERS GET MOVING FOR EDUCATION AT 40TH ANNUAL EARLY CHILDHOOD WINTER CONFERENCE P.5**



**TEAMS PREPARE FOR 2026 ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE P.8**

# of Note

**THERE IS NO GREATER FEELING** as an educator than watching a student achieve and surpass goals they never thought they could. When working with students with special needs that triumph and celebration often includes the entire family.

We see this type of elation through the eyes of one of our physical therapists this week as we get to know our February Employee of the Month. I enjoyed reading about how Heather Faunce-Estay works with students and their families in Cy-Fair ISD to make what they thought was impossible a reality. I loved seeing how she took the time to understand that graduation for a student with special needs can sometimes be a missed opportunity for that student to experience something he or she otherwise could not. What an amazing example of setting the standard for care in alternative education! I look forward to hearing about how employees across all HCDE divisions are doing this type of out-of-the-box thinking to help our students and educators succeed beyond their expectations.

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by meetings about ongoing projects and initiatives. On Tuesday, I hosted our monthly Leadership Team meeting with directors and principals

and then interviewed the two finalists for the vacant HR Director position. On Wednesday, I met virtually with the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) regarding our salary schedule and met with staff from the Schools Division. On Thursday, I participated in agenda review in anticipation of the February board meeting followed by a meeting with staff regarding a potential new initiative. Today, I met with members of ELT at my NPO office for regular updates.

Have a relaxing weekend.



**JAMES COLBERT, JR.**  
County Superintendent



# Employee Spotlight



Heather Faunce-Estay, a long-term physical therapist serving in Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District, was selected as the February Employee of the Month. Her career spans 30 years, including 16 in Harris County Department of Education's School-Based Therapy division.

## FEBRUARY EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH FOUND CALLING EARLY, EXCELS IN HER ROLE OF SERVING OTHERS THROUGH THERAPY

**H**EATHER FAUNCE-ESTAY loves physical therapy and serving others. And while she has put this to good use in the last 30 years in education, 16 with Harris County Department of Education, it's a gift her grandmother told her came naturally, even as a child.

"She used to say I gave great back massages," Faunce-Estay said with a small chuckle.

"If you look at my high school yearbook, it says I wanted to be a PT," Faunce-Estay added.

"Everything I've always done and everything I did led me to becoming a PT. I've never had a different job than being a physical therapist."

Faunce-Estay, who works with special education students at several Cypress-Fairbanks ISD schools, is HCDE's February Employee of the Month. She was nominated after Kathleen Vecchio, the special education supervisor at Cypress Ranch High School, wrote a letter acknowledging Faunce-Estay's service to students. The letter showcased Faunce-Estay's dedication to students every single day and her willingness to meet them where they are – no matter the circumstances.

"I love to see her passion," said Vy Dang, an occupational therapist who works at many of the same schools as Faunce-Estay. "Being new to school-based therapy, I've learned a lot through seeing how she interacts with the children and how

she works with all the staff members. She has this wealth of knowledge but never showcases it in any way that makes people feel like she's telling them what to do. It's always a collaborative effort when you work with Heather."

Last May, Vecchio received a request from Deanna Szot, whose daughter, Breanna, has Rett syndrome, a rare neurodevelopment disorder that can impair language, coordination and movement.

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Heather Faunce-Estay, left, and Occupational Therapist Vy Dang help a student walk through the hallways at Warner Elementary School.

# Employee Spotlight

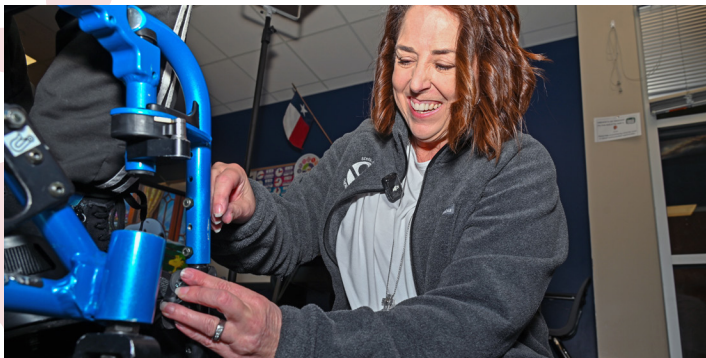
Deanna asked if there was a way for Breanna, a graduating senior, to walk across the stage like her fellow 900-plus classmates.

Vecchio and Faunce-Estay met and put together a plan, factoring safety, surroundings and other logistics, so Breanna could experience her few seconds on stage the same as everyone else, but not take away from the graduation. Faunce-Estay volunteered her time at the evening graduation, donning matching regalia alongside district administration and assisting Breanna while she stood in her gait trainer.

When Breanna's name was announced, Faunce-Estay guided her across the stage, allowing her to stop and receive her diploma and take a photo with the principal. Breanna even paused to receive congratulations from the superintendent.



Heather Faunce-Estay, left, helped Breanna Szot cross the stage for her graduation from Cypress Ranch High School last May.



It's normal for Heather Faunce-Estay to go above and beyond for her students, which can mean fixing equipment on the fly.



Heather Faunce-Estay, left, talks with Kathleen Vecchio, special education supervisor at Cypress Ranch High School.



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

It was a moment Deanna never thought was possible.

"As a special needs parent, it means everything," she said. "For most people graduation is a steppingstone to the next chapter in life. But for a lot of our kids, this is a culmination of everything. This was a huge deal for her."

Admittedly, Faunce-Estay isn't one for recognition or the spotlight. She started her career in healthcare, specializing in spinal cord and amputee patients. A friend suggested a career move into school-based therapy where her day varies from making an accommodation in the classroom or gymnasium to training staff to better understand a student's needs. It can even mean jumping in to fix wheelchairs or join

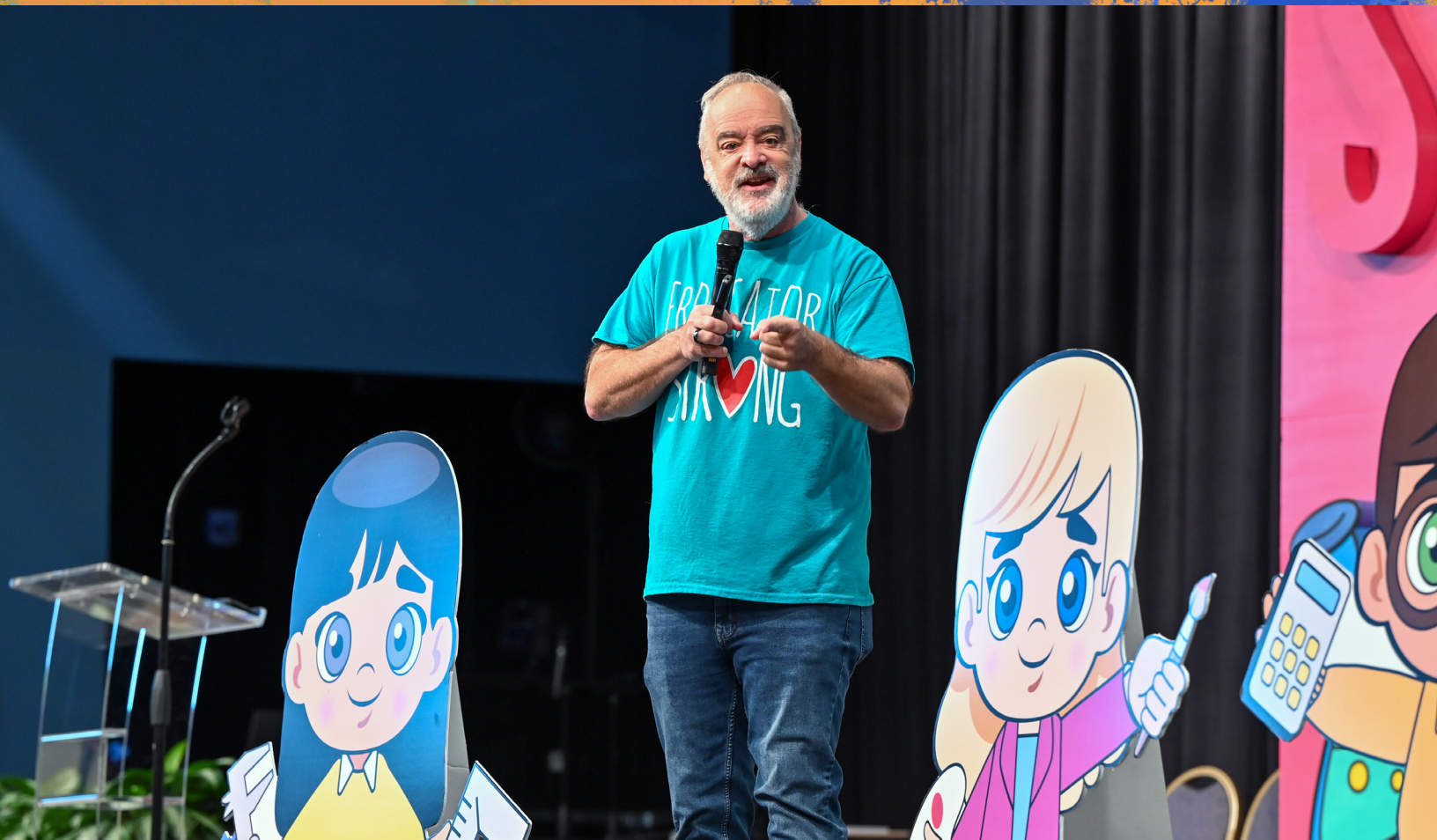
students in a bounce house on field day.

"My motto is 'Treat everyone right to the best of my abilities,'" Faunce-Estay said. "So even if I run into a mom at the grocery store, she's going to know that I went above and beyond for her kid at school."

That dedication extends to her fellow therapists. Faunce-Estay leans in as a mentor through encouraging words or action to make everyone else better. But at the end of the day, the students are what count for Faunce-Estay.

"I find joy in the progress but it's not about me – it's about that child," she said. "I find more joy if they're happy they got to participate or they have a smile on their face." ★

# Program Connections



Veteran educator and social media sensation Gerry Brooks served as keynote speaker for the 40th Annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference. More than 1,000 educators attended the event at Kingdom Builders' Center on Jan. 31.

## EDUCATORS CELEBRATE 40 YEARS OF ADVOCATING FOR YOUNG LEARNERS AT EARLY CHILDHOOD WINTER CONFERENCE



**F**or Tamika Bartley and her sizable contingent from Sheldon Independent School District, Saturday's matching shirts and crescendo cheers when pointed out from the crowd was fitting.

The 40th Annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference (ECWC) was made for them.

Bartley, a registered apprenticeship coordinator at Sheldon, leads the district's program supporting paraprofessionals working toward their teaching credential. A group of 25 teacher hopefuls joined her and more than 1,000 early childhood educators for the full day of professional development, hosted by Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Center for Educator Success (CES).

Held Jan. 31 at Kingdom Builders' Center, this year's attendance more than doubled the 2025 conference. Bartley said the conference is a good way for the teacher candidates to gain valuable professional development.

"This is a good foundation for them and to get their feet wet,"

she said. "They can figure out what they want to do, where do they want to do it and with the early childhood component, it's more than just content. This is great preparation for our group."

ECWC is among the many trainings the Sheldon teacher candidates attend, but it stands out due to everything offered under one roof. The event has grown into the state's second-largest early childhood conference and drew attendees from across Texas and neighboring states.

"For me, this is about getting the experience because most of my colleagues are already in the classroom," said Maegan Holt, currently a Sheldon ISD human resources paraprofessional who hopes to become a kindergarten teacher.

The theme, "Hands-One, Minds-On: S.T.E.A.M. in Early Learning," was evident throughout the hallways and classrooms across two floors at the day-long conference. Things got started with musician SaulPaul, who served as emcee and got the crowd moving and shouting through his music and a freestyle rap later in the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

# Program Connections

afternoon. Conference namesake Raymond T. Garcia and HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. followed with testimonials and words of affirmation to educators.

Veteran educator and social media sensation Gerry Brooks provided the keynote address, combining his witty storytelling with phrases of encouragement.

Conference sessions touched on sparking discovery in students through science, technology, engineering, arts and math, as well as hands-on activities, collaboration or other creative techniques to bring learning to life.

New this year was an exclusive Leadership Track, designed for aspiring administrators and center managers. This group attended specific sessions and participated in a leadership panel that featured five industry experts who shared strategies and best practices. Also new was the Creation Station Challenge, where educators submitted learning units that were voted on by conference attendees. Winners earned a \$500 classroom scholarship and mini robot, courtesy of sponsor Sphero.

Returning for a second year were conference awards. Dr. Axinia Zepeda of the Tejano Center for Community Schools was named Early Childhood Leader of the Year, while Spring ISD's Cynthia Bustamante Ramirez was named the Early Childhood Teacher of the Year. ★



HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. welcomes conference attendees. After sharing his personal journey through education, he acknowledged the hard work educators do to pour into their students and thanked them for their dedication.



Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock talks during a panel discussion for the inaugural Leadership Track. Panelists shared strategies for early childhood education.



Kellie Karavias, better known as Culinary Kellie, led a presentation titled, "Tiny Hands, Tasty Plans: Serving Up Learning in the Classroom." She showcased how to integrate culinary arts with early childhood instruction.



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



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

# Board Briefs

## HCDE ANNOUNCES REGIONAL SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDEES

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) announced on Jan. 29 the regional winners of the 2026 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Serving as the second-largest regional affiliate of the program, HCDE received more than 13,900 submissions from students in Harris, Galveston and Fort Bend counties this year. The number is almost 2,000 more than last year.

Presented by the nonprofit organization The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, the awards program has fostered creativity and talent within millions of students in grades 7-12 for more than 100 years. The prestigious scholarship recognition program features many renowned alumnae, such as Andy Warhol, Steven King and Amanda Gorman, who have gone on to become leaders in their fields.

Students submit their best artwork and writing each fall to compete at the regional level. HCDE recruits a panel of local professionals who judge entries using the national rubric and select regional winners, including Gold Key, Silver Key and Honorable Mention recipients. Additionally, 10 students were nominated for the American Voices and American Visions Awards as standout regional competitors in their respective categories.

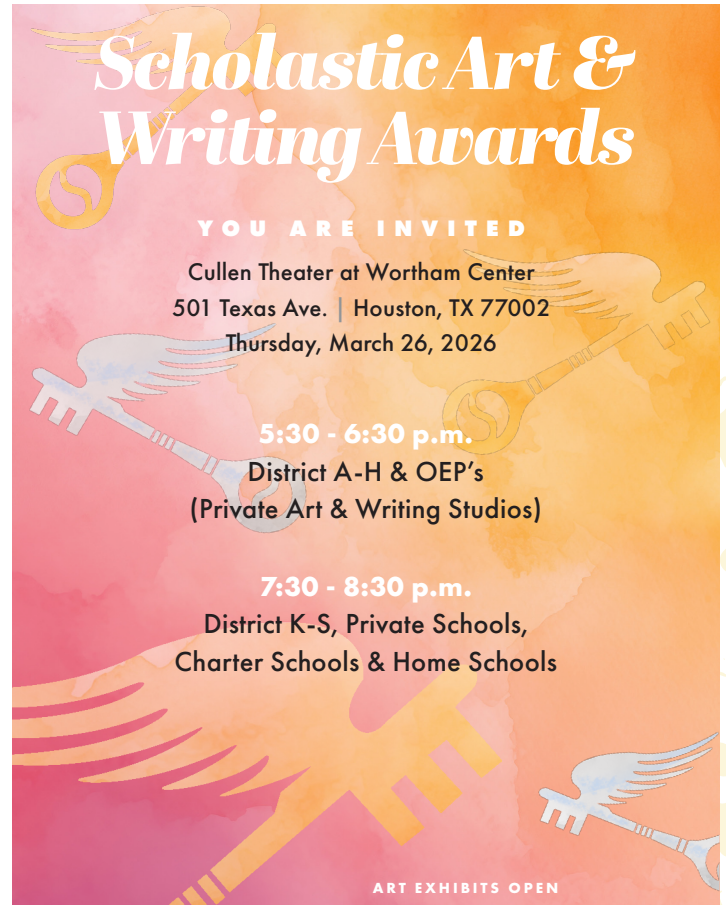
Gold Key award recipients advance to compete at the national level.

Of the more than 13,900 submissions from Harris, Galveston and Fort Bend counties, HCDE awarded

- 575 Gold Keys in Art;
- 661 Silver Keys in Art;
- 645 Gold Keys in Writing; and
- 1,010 Silver Keys in Writing

These students, who brought a distinct and authentic voice, perspective and technical skill to their work, will be showcased during HCDE's Scholastic Art & Writing Awards Exhibit and Celebration on Mar. 26 at the Wortham Center.

Find the full list of winners [here](#). 🌟



**Scholastic Art & Writing Awards**

**YOU ARE INVITED**

Cullen Theater at Wortham Center  
501 Texas Ave. | Houston, TX 77002  
Thursday, March 26, 2026

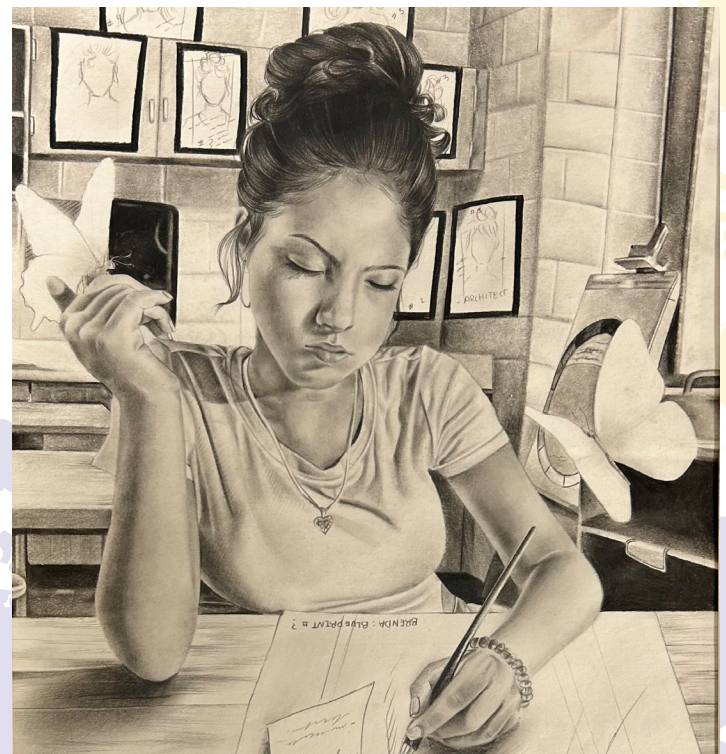
**5:30 - 6:30 p.m.**  
District A-H & OEP's  
(Private Art & Writing Studios)

**7:30 - 8:30 p.m.**  
District K-S, Private Schools,  
Charter Schools & Home Schools

ART EXHIBITS OPEN



"Waiting While City Moves" (Photography)



"Blueprints of Life" (Drawing)

# Board Briefs

## STUDENTS EXPLORE REUSABLE MATERIALS FOR 2026 ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE

**LIFE COMES WITH MANY TWISTS AND TURNS**, much like a jungle. And you must be able to quickly adapt, learn to innovate and create to survive. On Jan. 31, robotics students from school districts across Harris County attended CASE for Kids 2025-2026 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Reveal and Practice Day to learn about this year's challenge – "Kingdom of Ecobot: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink."

The prompt encourages students in fourth through eighth grades to design, build and program autonomous robots using LEGO MINDSTORMS EV3 Core robotics kits. Each team will then use its robots to complete a series of missions that educate the next generation on the various methods and purposes of recycling, such as composting, alternative energy sources and building homes from upcycled materials.

During the practice day, students were guided through point-scoring strategies, mission-specific rules, game table set-up and game piece placement. Out-of-school time coaches will work with students over the coming months to perfect their robot-building skills and teach them to navigate and complete challenges within the four quadrants of the game table.

CASE for Kids facilitates the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge as a hands-on, project-based learning model that uses robotics to help students navigate real-world environmental challenges. The division is expected to host hundreds of students from afterschool programs within the greater Houston area to compete in this year's competition. Participating students and coaches will attend the next official practice day on Feb. 21, which will culminate in Challenge Day on April 25. ★



TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

## HIGHPOINT SCHOOL LAUNCHES HOPE PROGRAM TO HELP SENIORS TURN CAREER GOALS INTO REALITY

**SOMETIMES THE HARDEST PART** about pursuing a dream is finding the right road to success. When seniors at Highpoint School began inquiring about how to make their career aspirations a reality, campus leaders launched the Honoring Our Purpose Everyday (HOPE) Program. The initiative, developed by Educational Aide Shone Richard, is designed to support students with an established vision for their future by connecting them with professionals and resources that bring those goals to life.

Campus leaders partnered with San Jacinto Community College to provide students with an in-depth overview of the college's trade programs, including welding and non-destructive testing (NDT). San Jacinto Program Director Steven Rawlins met with eight students during the inaugural session, which explored instructional offerings, certification requirements and available funding for students from low-income families.



**HIGHPOINT**

COURAGE • CONFIDENCE • COMMITMENT

"I am encouraged by this new program and the meaningful opportunities it will create," Highpoint School Principal Courtney Waters said. "Our students matter, and we will continue to ensure they have access to every opportunity possible."

Seniors must have completed a 45-day placement or longer at Highpoint and identified a postsecondary pathway to be eligible for the HOPE Program. Requirements set in place to ensure student success are built with trust and intention. ★

## CSSS HOSTS AREA SCHOOL DISTRICTS FOR BEHAVIORAL, DIGITAL 'THREAT ASSESSMENT' TRAINING



**THE CENTER FOR SAFE AND SECURE SCHOOLS (CSSS)** is helping districts identify students who are on a pathway toward violence.

To better prepare area ISDs and organizations in how to conduct productive threat assessments, CSSS hosted a comprehensive training on Feb. 3 that modeled how threat assessments benefit all areas of school life.

The training, which was conducted by Safer Schools Together and funded by CSSS's STOP Grant, demonstrated the essential components to building a Behavioral and Digital Threat Assessment. This model includes digital tools that help assess worrisome online behavior, practical strategies for prevention and intervention, and other assessment management tools.

Participants, which came from area school districts including Alief, Channelview, Cypress-Fairbanks, Deer Park, Fort Bend, Galena Park and Spring, also conducted table-top exercises to put these concepts into action through real-life scenarios.

Representatives from the National Center for School Safety and WestEd also attended. 🌟

## HCDE CELEBRATES 100 YEARS OF BLACK HISTORY, LOCAL IMPACT ON EDUCATION

**THIS YEAR**, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) joins the nation in celebrating 100 years of Black history and the countless leaders who have helped change the lives and opportunities available to Black people around the world. Throughout the month, the Department will highlight educators, advocates and leaders who helped shape the educational experience for millions of students across Texas.

Highpoint School students Miedas Scott and Ahmia Lott, from Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District and Humble ISD, respectively, use their voices as narrators to showcase several African Americans in a video published by HCDE's Communications and Creative Services division. The video highlights local leaders, including Jack Yates, a slave who later became a minister and created educational opportunities for Black communities. It also showcases Conrad Johnson, who made a lasting impact on music education by forming the award-winning Kashmere Stage Band. Other leaders are also featured for their contributions to fighting for federal funding, desegregating schools and ensuring every student has the opportunity to learn.

Observed annually throughout February, Black History Month is an opportunity to recognize and honor the resilience,



excellence and leadership within the Black community that have shaped education and opened doors for generations of students. By uplifting the stories of black educators, innovators and community leaders, HCDE reinforces the importance of comprehensive representation to ensure students not only learn about 100 years of Black history but see themselves as changemakers who hold the power to shape what comes next. 🌟

# In the Community

## CITY COUNCIL APPROVES INCREASE IN PROGRAM FUNDING FOR CASE FOR KIDS' CITY CONNECTIONS

**ON JAN. 28**, the Houston City Council approved increasing funding for out-of-school time program providers. This program, called City Connections, is administered by the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids, a division of the Harris County Department of Education (HCDE). The increase continues a four-year partnership between CASE and the city to fund afterschool programs throughout Houston providing more opportunities for students after the school bell rings.

CASE is proud to be the administrative partner for the program, putting funds to work for City of Houston communities, students and families. CASE for Kids will recognize organizations, staff and partners involved in City Connections during a celebration on March 6 at the Irvington Conference Center. ★



## ADULT EDUCATION RECOGNIZED BY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS TO HELP CELEBRATE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF EDUCATION



**HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE)** was front and center, demonstrating the power of education in transforming communities, as County Commissioners proclaimed Jan. 24, 2026, as International Day of Education in Harris County.

HCDE Adult Education Senior Director Dr. Eduardo Honold and Director of Career Pathways Bill Medina joined representatives from Alief Independent School District and the United Nations Association-USA at Commissions Court on Jan. 29 to speak about the positive impact of education throughout the county.

"International Education Day reminds us that while our children are our future, the adults in our classrooms today have the greatest potential impact in their communities' short run," Honold said. "By helping adult learners, we create a pathway to better jobs, accelerate economic growth and build a more equitable Harris County for all."

Honold noted the division annually serves more than 6,000 adults earning their high school equivalency diploma, learning English or working toward a workforce certification.

"Every adult that takes part in these programs is changing his or her own life and strengthening the fabric of Harris County," he said. ★

# WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for January! Nineteen new faces have joined our Adult Education, Business Services, Choice Partners, Facilities, Head Start, Records Management, School-Based Therapy Services and Special Schools divisions.



**Dyneisha Gilbert**  
*Substitute Teacher*  
ABS East



**Alexis Osuna**  
*Substitute Teacher*  
ABS East



**Kenneth Horowitz**  
*Teacher*  
ABS West



**Chinessa Williams**  
*Educational Aide III*  
ABS West



**Carlos De Hoyos**  
*Program Assistant*  
Adult Education



**Faustino Lopez**  
*Teacher*  
Adult Education



**Gislene Herbst**  
*Teacher*  
Adult Education



**Ann Westbrook**  
*Chief Financial Officer*  
Business Services



**Lisa Ter Morshuizen**  
*Contract Manager II*  
Choice Partners



**Doris Beltran Gonzalez**  
*Courier*  
Facilities



**Nikisha Charles**  
*Cook*  
Head Start



**Elizabeth Herrera**  
*Non-Instructional Aide*  
Head Start



**Stephanie Martinez**  
*Non-Instructional Aide*  
Head Start



**Maria Vazquez**  
*Substitute Teaching Assistant*  
Head Start



**Valerie Martinez**  
*Non-Instructional Aide*  
Head Start



**Christine Tidmore**  
*Cook*  
Head Start



**Jamar Scott**  
*Technician*  
Records Management



**Leeann Dockall**  
*Occupational Therapist*  
School-Based Therapy Services



**Katie Truong**  
*Occupational Therapist*  
School-Based Therapy Services

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

## SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE E: INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

- Ensures that goals and objectives form the basis of curricular decision-making and instruction and communicates expectations for student achievement.



HCDE and CES leadership pose with Gerry Brooks, second from left, at the 40th Annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference. The veteran educator served as keynote speaker for the event, held Jan. 31 at Kingdom Builders' Center.

**PART OF WHAT MAKES HCDE UNIQUE** in education is the wide reach we have in best serving students and their families. Some of that servitude is easy to see – just visit one of our Special Schools or Head Start campuses and you'll see Department employees going above and beyond every day. For those #TeamHCDE members who aren't housed in our facilities, such as School-Based Therapy and hundreds of therapists working with school districts across greater Houston, it may be harder to see. February's Employee of the Month, Physical Therapist Heather Faunce-Estay, has diligently served students and staff in Cy-Fair ISD for 16 years. Her decorated career is worthy enough to be recognized and acknowledged, but I was glad to read about a small gesture last spring that made one mother's dream come true. Faunce-Estay helped a student living with a rare disorder that limited her mobility cross the stage at graduation. The family will remember that moment forever. Our therapists work every day to enhance the school experience for students with disabilities and limitations. Thank you to the School-Based Therapy team and congratulations to our Employee of the Month.

There was no better feeling last weekend than standing at the Kingdom Builders' Center podium and seeing more than 1,000 educators ready to learn and network. The attendance more than doubled from last year – a big win for the 40th Annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference. Attendees were treated to a number of new items, including the inaugural Leadership Track for aspiring administrators and center managers and the Creation Station

Challenge, where educators submitted learning units voted on by their peers. Top vote getters received a classroom scholarship. HCDE prides itself as an integral partner for early childhood education in Harris County - not just with Head Start, but through professional development offerings. Through the Center for Educator Success, #TeamHCDE offers opportunities for educators to equip themselves with tools they can use to pour into young learners. Thank you to everyone who has helped make ECWC a success over the last 40 years.

Finally, students were busy inside the Irvington Conference Center last weekend getting pumped for this year's All-Earth Ecobot Challenge. Put on by CASE for Kids, the Ecobot Challenge affords hundreds of students from afterschool programs across Houston the opportunity to use robotics and hands-on learning to navigate environmental challenges. The first of two practice days this year welcomed teams to the theme, "Kingdom of Ecobot: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink." These practice days allow students to set up their game tables and start creating strategies as they earn points and accomplish missions. Missions this year feature alternative energy sources with a focus on the purpose of recycling. I'm always impressed to see these young minds find solutions for problems they could face as adults, while at the same time learning robotics and coding.

By identifying the learning needs of students and developing a process that ensures each student's learning goals are met or exceeded, I am meeting the expectation to utilize effective practices that maximize achievement of student potential. ★



## 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

**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