

the **CONNECTOR**



TRAIL RIDES THROUGH NEW EQUINE THERAPY PARTNER ENHANCES STUDENT EXPERIENCE FOR HCDE'S SPECIAL SCHOOLS P.3



HCDE CAMPUSES COMMEMORATE 100 DAYS OF LEARNING AND GROWTH P.5



EFHC, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INVEST IN NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS WITH NEW UH INTERNS P.5

of Note

One of the coolest things about our special schools is the opportunity we give students they would not otherwise have. From chess tournaments to an inclusive playground, college and career fairs, and facilities designed specifically for special student populations, HCDE provides students with unique learning experiences.

This week we see this type of experience in action as our students get to ride horses as part of our equine therapy support. Our schools have been visiting stables for a few years, but the learning focused on horsemanship, not riding. Horsemanship is bonding with the animal through activities like feeding, grooming and walking. But we wanted more for our students. So, we found a location that would allow students to ride the horses on trails and benefit from the physical aspects of equestrian activities. Seeing our kids on the horses and hearing about how the outing helped one student get away from the hustle and bustle of their everyday life was very rewarding. This is what equine therapy is all about and I am proud that HCDE can offer this type of learning activity to our students. I look forward to seeing our schools continue to provide unique student experiences as we change the paradigm of alternative education in the region.

I started the week fulfilling my duties as a member of the UIL State Executive Committee followed by meetings with members of ELT for my regular updates. On Tuesday, I met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and on Wednesday, I met with the Head Start Leadership Team as part of my divisional meetings this semester.

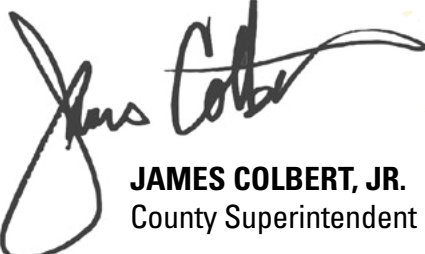
I started the day on Thursday reading to a class at Dogan Head Start as a SuperMENTor volunteer followed by lunch for the State of the City. It was awesome to see Jade Suan, administrative assistant in the Marketing & Client Engagement division, sing the national anthem and get recognized for her amazing talent. She killed it!



[VIEW JADE SUAN'S PERFORMANCE](#)

I ended the day with the Houston Area Alliance of Black School Educators (HAABSE) Teacher of the Year awards ceremony. Today I took part in the Education Foundation of Harris County virtual meeting followed by divisional meetings with staff from the Center for Educational Success and Human Resources.

Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Fortis Academy student Raul Ramirez poses before a trail ride. Students from Fortis, Highpoint East and ABS East visited Cypress Trails Ranch starting in November, riding as part of their equine therapy program.

GIDDY UP: WITH ADDED TRAIL RIDES, HCDE'S STUDENTS BUILD SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL SKILLS THROUGH EQUINE THERAPY PROGRAM

LEARNING IS BEYOND A CLASSROOM'S FOUR WALLS, especially at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) four special schools where educators offer non-traditional instruction to unique student populations including those with severe physical and emotional disabilities, students facing addiction and adjudicated youth.

At a traditional school, these students may not join certain field trips. But at HCDE, extracurricular activities are the norm.

HCDE has offered equine therapy for students for a few years, but this year three of the alternative campuses are exposing students to an enhanced equine experience that includes riding lessons and adventure trail rides.

The experience has already seen positive results. For students like Jerry Garza and his Fortis Academy classmates, riding a horse is a positive and refreshing experience on their paths to gaining and maintaining sobriety.

"Being able to get on a horse, be at peace and have that out-in-the-country feeling was soothing compared to the lifestyle and surroundings I'm used to," Garza said. "It was more than any mind-altering substances could have done. Just a pure dopamine rush and a great experience."

Equine therapy helps self-esteem and confidence through feeding, grooming and caring for horses. Through riding, students build core and muscle strength as well as communication skills to go with their increased social-emotional learning.

In 2019, former Academic and Behavior School West Principal Victor Keys and students began monthly visits to the Self-Improvement through Riding Education (SIRE) facility where students learned about various aspects of horsemanship. ABS East, Fortis Academy and Highpoint School students quickly joined in with field trips for their students.

In recent years, ABS West students have visited Reining Strength Therapeutic Horsemanship center in Richmond each month, as the facility is closer to the school.

Cypress Trails Ranch offers a unique experience for students as well as a more central location for ABS East, Fortis and Highpoint. The three campuses started visiting Cypress Trails Ranch in November.

Owner Darolyn Butler, an internationally acclaimed endurance rider, said she quickly connected with HCDE's student population.

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Program Connections

“We were asked if we were up for the challenge,” she said. “We have two developmentally-challenged young men that work for us full-time, so we are familiar with unique populations.”

Butler has also employed wranglers dealing with addiction, recently having one head back to a rehabilitation center.

“So, if we’re not qualified enough to work with these students, I don’t know who is,” she said.

In groups up to 10, ABS East, Highpoint and Fortis students and staff visit once a week in three-week stretches. The first visit is to the facility’s equine interactive experience, which includes history and physiological lessons of horses. Students also touch a horse, often for the first time, groom the horses and put saddles on and off.

The second round is called “Join Up,” where students work on the relationship between human and horse. Like a follower naturally drawn to a leader, a horse can be drawn to a human and “join up,” moving when the person decides which direction to go. This builds social and relationship skills students use in everyday life. Students ride for 30 minutes following the Join Up.

The third visit is a full hour and sees students riding the horses on nearby trails. Butler and her team tailor each trip based on how much the students have picked up in the previous weeks as well as their varied comfort levels.

Butler makes it a point to try and attend every session, but has ensured her wranglers are comfortable instructing and working with non-traditional clients.

“You have to be patient,” she said. “We have some students who are terrified and some that are not real communicative, but the horse is the common ground. When they turn that horse around the first time in a 360-degree turn all by themselves, it’s very empowering.”

The program has seen positive results, which campus staff say carries over to other aspects in life.

“It helps them stay motivated and gives them something to actually look forward to,” said Fortis Academy counselor Nakia Lee-Francis, who grew up around horses and has joined the students during visits. “It’s a change of environment, exposure to something new for many of them and it’s something positive.” 🌟



Academic and Behavior School East students and staff start their trail ride on Feb. 4 at Cypress Trails Ranch. The facility partnered with Harris County Department of Education this school year for equine therapy services to students.



Cypress Trails Ranch wranglers help instruct students, which includes posture and proper grip of the rising strap to lead the horse.



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



Before each visit, participants prep their horses by putting on the saddles, leading them for a drink of water and prepping the bridle.

STUDENTS CELEBRATE 100 DAYS OF LEARNING AND GROWTH

FROM COUNTING PENNIES TO BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN BEHAVIORAL SKILLS,

students across HCDE's Special Schools and Head Start campuses marked an academic milestone on Feb. 6 – the 100th day of school. This celebratory tradition gives students and educators an opportunity to reflect on how far they've come since the first day of instruction, highlighting growth in early literacy, math skills, social-emotional learning and classroom etiquette. Humble Head Start staff helped students show off their creativity by making or bringing collections of 100 "somethings," including pennies, buttons, beads and stickers! Students at Academic and Behavioral Schools East and West embraced their new wisdom and dressed as centenarians. The day was a joyful reminder that 100 days of curiosity, perseverance and progress added up to an incredible experience. ★



EFHC, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT WELCOME SPRING 2026 INTERNS

THE HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) CONTINUES TO BE A STRONG ADVOCATE in growing the next generation of leaders across the greater Houston region, as shown by its continued participation in the University of Houston's Civic Houston Internship Program (CHIP).

As part of the Hobby School of Public Affairs, university juniors and seniors are matched with local government offices, nonprofit organizations, campaigns and private sector businesses. HCDE joins the offices of state legislators, City Council members, Harris and Fort Bend county officials and departments in hosting Spring 2026 CHIP interns.

Zahra Imam and Lucia Romo will work with HCDE's Education Foundation of Harris County and Civic Engagement teams, respectively, through May. Interns work an average of eight hours per week and receive upper-level political science or public policy credit.

"Now more than ever locally, education foundations are stepping up to serve communities that are in need and disadvantaged," said Imam, who interned with the 328th Judicial District Court in 2024. "I'm hoping to learn about that and how things have changed since government cuts."

Added Romo, who also interned with the Houston City Council – At-Large #1 Office: "I'm really passionate about people being able to vote. You can have a voice by voting so I feel like everybody should get the choice to vote if they're eligible to."

HCDE has partnered with CHIP since Fall 2024. Other divisions have had interns, such as the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids, which welcomed its first intern in at least a dozen years in September. ★



GRAB YOUR SPURS, SPICES AND SECRET RECIPES FOR HCDE'S ANNUAL CHILI COOK-OFF



DUST OFF YOUR SLOW COOKERS and sharpen those secret recipes because HCDE's annual Chili Cook-Off is back! In true Houston rodeo-season fashion, divisions are invited to compete on Feb. 27 by bringing their best chili, whipping up a delicious dessert and going all out with a decorated booth that shows team spirit. This beloved tradition is all about friendly competition, big flavors and even bigger laughs as we celebrate the connections among #TeamHCDE. Grab onto the reins because it will be a wild ride as we see if Information Technology Services nabs the title of "chili champs" again or if another division will swoop in and steal the heat. Saddle up, the competition for bragging rights begins at 11:30 a.m.! 🌟

CSSS TAKES THREAT ASSESSMENT TRAINING TO ALIEF ISD, CONTINUES SERVING AS INDUSTRY LEADER IN SCHOOL SAFETY

MEMBERS OF THE HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S (HCDE) CENTER FOR SAFE AND SECURE SCHOOLS (CSSS) ARE LEADING SCHOOL SAFETY locally and around the country. Staff are often considered experts in the industry and called upon to develop top strategies, standards and best practices for K-12 school environments.

CSSS demonstrated its standard bearer status when it recently hosted two workshops supported by the National Center for School Safety (NCSS). At the first workshop, CSSS staff helped local school districts and organizations better understand behavioral and digital threat assessment. Training objectives included conducting initial assessments through data collection, building a multi-agency threat assessment team and defining concerning and worrisome behaviors.

The second – put on at Alief Independent School District on Feb. 4 – allowed CSSS to lead district administrators through a visit with NCSS and better understand Alief's assessment plan.

CSSS and Alief ISD have partnered with a multi-pronged training approach to best suit the district, which included a separate session in October. They examined the district's emergency

management operations. After the review, Alief leadership participated in an exercise where administrators and department directors assessed an active shooter situation involving a campus evacuation followed by parent/student reunification.

In addition to training, CSSS supports organizations through certification programs, safety reviews, safety audits and emergency management operations and planning. 🌟



In the Community



HCDE SHOWCASES TALENT AND LEADERSHIP AT STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WAS WELL REPRESENTED at Mayor John Whitmire's State of the City Address on Feb. 12, joining local and state leaders for a look ahead at Houston's future. The event opened with a powerful moment as Jade Suan, administrative assistant for HCDE's Marketing and Client Engagement team, delivered a moving a cappella performance of the national anthem, showcasing her remarkable vocal talent and earning warm applause from the audience. High schoolers from the Diaz Music Institute, a CASE for Kids county and city connections funded site, were also invited to play Latin inspired orchestra selections throughout the ceremony. Their musical abilities provided the perfect atmosphere to discuss the future of the city and demonstrate the talent that lies within our students.

During the address, Mayor Whitmire outlined his progress and vision for Houston, focusing on public safety, infrastructure improvements, fiscal responsibility and strengthening partnerships that support neighborhoods and families. He emphasized collaboration among government agencies and community organizations as a key driver in creating long-term change for residents.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr.; HCDE Trustees Andrea Duhon, Eric Dick, Silky Joshi-Malik and Dr. John McGee; Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz; Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) Director Trina Silva; and EFHC Board Chair Michael Parks attended the event. Their presence underscores the Department's commitment to being an active and visible partner in regional conversations that shape policy and progress. HCDE's presence alongside elected officials and government leaders highlights the essential role education plays in workforce development, community stability and the future success of the greater Houston area. 🌟

EDUCATION FOUNDATION RECOGNIZED AS TOP SUPPORTER OF STUDENT PROGRAMS AND TEACHER GRANTS

THE EDUCATION FOUNDATION OF HARRIS COUNTY (EFHC) AND DIRECTOR TRINA SILVA have been acknowledged in recent weeks for their philanthropic efforts in supporting students and educators across the region.

On Jan. 30, EFHC was recognized at the Katy ISD Education Foundation Investor Breakfast for its Inspiring Imagination teacher grants. The program funds grants up to \$5,000 for teachers or through campus collaboration.

The Spring ISD Education Foundation honored EFHC and fellow partners at an appreciation breakfast on Feb. 5. EFHC donated nearly 400 backpacks to Spring ISD students to start the school year and has contributed more than \$80,000 in grants since the 2020 fiscal year.

EFHC, through its partnership with Harris County Department of Education, funds programs and initiatives that support students and educators in the 25 independent school districts throughout Harris County. 🌟



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.



Fortis Academy counselor Nakia Lee-Francis, left, and teacher Ariel Coates prepare for their trail ride Feb. 6 at Cypress Trails Ranch. The facility partnered with Harris County Department of Education for equine therapy services to students.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE PARTS ABOUT WORKING with the special population of students HCDE serves at our four campuses is the unique experiences we develop to help them grow and challenge themselves to be better. When we first partnered with Self-Improvement through Riding Education to offer equine therapy to Harris County youth, we hoped to help a few students learn responsibility and develop emotional skills through various aspects of horsemanship. Through a new partnership with Cypress Trails Ranch, we've seen students experience riding lessons that require them to control their minds and bodies to lead their horses. I'm incredibly proud of the growth these students demonstrate every time they step foot on the ranch, because not only are they trying something new, but they are also showing their continued commitment to overcoming their behavioral, academic or substance abuse challenges by any means necessary.

That same commitment to meaningful learning extends beyond our campuses and into the community. Through our continued partnership with the University of Houston's Civic Houston Internship Program, we are investing in the next

generation of public servants and community advocates. This spring, we welcome Xahra Imam and Lucia Romo, who will support the Education Foundation of Harris County and Civic Engagement teams. Their passion for diverse resources, informed voters and stronger communities reflects the values we champion at HCDE. When we open our doors to these young adults, we strengthen our organization and reinforce our role as trusted partners in developing thoughtful, service-minded professionals who will shape our nation.

Finally, I was proud to see HCDE's strong presence at Mayor Whitmire's State of the City Address. From Jade Suan's stunning a cappella performance of the national anthem to our Board Members and leadership team joining regional stakeholders in conversations about Houston's future, HCDE stood proud alongside community leaders working to strengthen neighborhoods and expand opportunities for the families we serve.

By developing processes that ensure each student's learning goals are met or exceeded, I am utilizing effective practices that maximize achievement of student potential within HCDE schools. ★



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UPCOMING EVENTS

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

March 28
[Afterschool is Cool Youth Expo](#)