

the **CONNECTOR**



FORMER ABS EAST AIDE FINDS PASSION IN THE CLASSROOM, PATH TO TEACHING THROUGH CES ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM P.3



FOR BLACK HISTORY MONTH, ABS WEST BRINGS CULTURE TO LIFE AT 'TASTE OF OUR ROOTS' COOKOUT P.6



GRANTS DEVELOPMENT TEAM ADDRESSES AI, CHANGING LANDSCAPE IN FEDERAL FUNDING AT WORKSHOP P.7

of Note

AS SOMEONE WHO VALUES MENTORING, I am always happy to hear about educators who set a path for their career and then systematically move toward achieving it. This type of resilience, or grit as I often call it, is a character trait that cannot be taught and is one that I have found is a key factor in leadership and career success.

We see this concept play out this week through the eyes of an ABS East teacher, who is in her internship year through our Center for Educator Success Alternative Certification Program. Abey Fuentes went to school to work with troubled youth, but when the pandemic got in the way, she took a slight detour becoming an aide at ABS East. After working with students she found her true calling and decided to pursue her teaching credential and is now on the path to being a certified teacher with a lifelong career. Abey didn't stop her journey at the first destination. She kept her eye on the ball and worked toward becoming a teacher and she has achieved that goal with the help of CES. What a testament to resilience and the power of our teacher certification program! I always enjoy reading about how our programs support the community but love it even more when that support comes home to HCDE. I look forward to hearing about more teachers who have found their calling and are on the road to certification in HCDE and our surrounding districts.

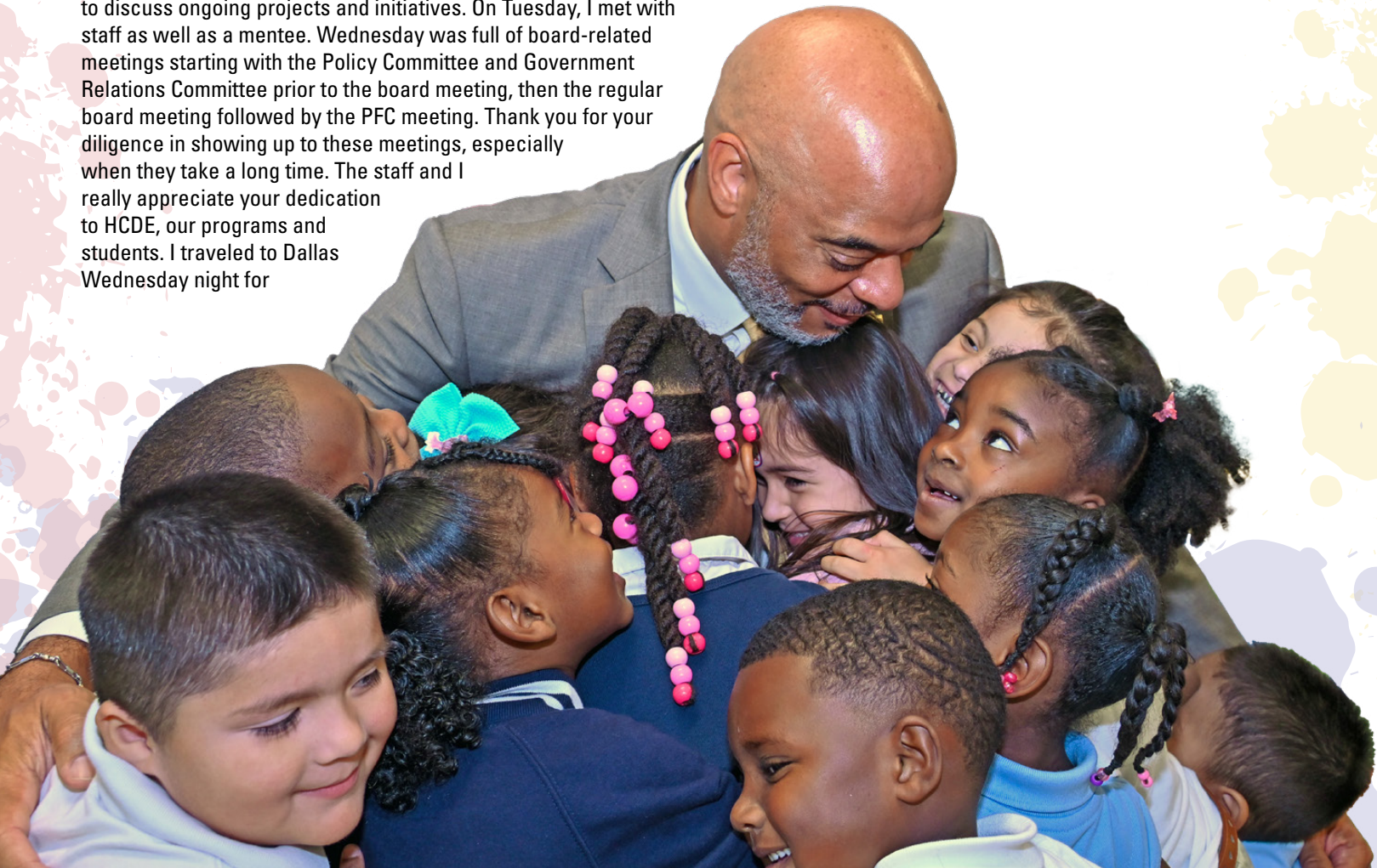
I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by meetings to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. On Tuesday, I met with staff as well as a mentee. Wednesday was full of board-related meetings starting with the Policy Committee and Government Relations Committee prior to the board meeting, then the regular board meeting followed by the PFC meeting. Thank you for your diligence in showing up to these meetings, especially when they take a long time. The staff and I really appreciate your dedication to HCDE, our programs and students. I traveled to Dallas Wednesday night for

the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators (TABSE) Annual Conference where I watched HCDE staff from our Special Schools and Technology divisions present on the power of AI in lesson planning, instruction and communications. For the next three days I attended sessions about trends in education, listened as colleagues discussed challenges and successes in their districts and networked with other educators from around the state. I will return to the office on Monday.

Have a relaxing weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Abey Fuentes, standing, is a former education aide at Academic and Behavior School East now working toward becoming a classroom teacher through the Center for Educator Success alternative certification program. She plans to finish her intern year this spring with plans to become a fully certified ABS East teacher for the 2026-2027 academic year.

ABEY FUENTES PROVES THAT WHEN PLANS CHANGE, PURPOSE PREVAILS

WHEN ABEY FUENTES GRADUATED from the University of Houston-Downtown in December 2020, she had her heart set on working with troubled youth in Harris County's criminal justice system. However, life had other plans because on the heels of the coronavirus pandemic, she couldn't break into the field. An educator at Academic and Behavior School (ABS) East, a school dedicated to supporting special education students with profound cognitive, emotional and physical needs, informed her of an opening for an educational aide. Within a matter of months she was working with the unique population, assisting teachers and building relationships with students.

"Day by day, I started building the connection with [students] and would see them let their walls down so I could help them," an emotional Fuentes recalled. "I saw myself in them because I went through a rebellious streak where I didn't want to listen to anyone, but I know how to reach these kids and get them to see all the

different choices they can make! The possibilities and growth made me start to love them and want to stay in education."

Colleagues witnessed her developing passion and began encouraging her to consider the Center for Educator Success' alternative certification program, designed to help aspiring teachers transition into the classroom while earning their certification. She denied the program twice out of fear and hesitation, but started to realize that her impact didn't have to happen inside detention centers or group homes to be meaningful.

Fuentes learned how to build trust with her students and found that often, all they needed was a little patience and consistency. When she was approached again about the alternative certification program, her response was, "the third time's the charm, yes."

"Abey is our ideal candidate," said Johanna Sanchez, the CES officer of elementary education who helps guide certification candidates through the program. "She showed up every day ready to learn! She

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Program Connections



CES alternative certification candidate Abey Fuentes helps one of her students get ready for dismissal as he smiles proudly with his favorite teacher.

had decided to become a special education teacher and remained committed to that.”

Fuentes was admitted to the CES program in 2024 and completed more than 200 pre-service instructional hours, exceeding the state-required 150 hours while she continued working at ABS East as an aide. Through the alternative certification classes, Fuentes sharpened her classroom management strategies, deepened her understanding of the subject matter and mastered the first round of the state’s certification exams.

That drive earned her a full-time special education teaching position at ABS East, where she’s currently completing her internship. Fuentes leads a handful of elementary students, whom she affectionately calls “my littles,” as they navigate their academic and behavioral challenges, offering one-on-one guidance, reinforcing lessons, and de-escalating tense moments.

She described the past few months as the most rewarding and challenging times of her life.

“Leading a classroom is a lot of responsibility, but I feel like my first class is molding me into the teacher I’m supposed to be because I’ve learned so much from them,” she said. “Everyone always mentions their behavioral challenges, but I see kids who are still learning everything. They’re capable of doing so much and just need someone to give them a chance.”

Like many first-year teachers, Fuentes quickly realized leading her own classroom came with challenges she could not fully prepare for in a textbook or through interactive activities within the CES program. Managing behaviors and guiding students through social-emotional development while creating a structured learning environment tested her in new ways. She relied on consistent coaching and encouragement from Sanchez and the CES staff, who helped refine her skills. In turn, Fuentes has seen

growth in her littles, not just academically but in their ability to self-regulate, build relationships and believe in themselves.

“First day of school, the kids were getting to know me, but now Asher walks in and gives me a hug. Before I was told he wasn’t affectionate with anyone. Grace is almost non-verbal, but has grown to become so silly with us,” Fuentes explained. “I’ve worked hard to make this classroom a safe space where they can be free to be whoever they are, and it’s beautiful watching them open up with me.”

Added Sanchez: “I’ve done observations of Abey in her classroom and watched kids have a total meltdown, but she takes a breath and is right there with her students. She is not afraid; she is in tune with them, and seeing her gain that confidence and grow into the teacher we know she can be throughout the last year makes all the hours of instruction we provide worth it every time.”

The CES alternative certification program is unique in that candidates receive unwavering support long after they step into the classroom. This support comes in the form of weekly check-ins, after-hours calls, weekend tutoring sessions and consistent classroom observations throughout both their instructional and internship years. Even after earning their teacher certification, educators receive an additional year of guidance to close instructional gaps and strengthen their practice. The hands-on, wraparound approach ensures new educators are not only qualified but also confident, prepared and positioned for long-term success.

“On those hard days when I kept asking myself if I was making the right decisions, Ms. Johanna and the rest of the CES team were right there in my ear, encouraging me and telling me that I could do it,” an emotional Fuentes said. “They’re so supportive, and I’ve felt guided throughout this whole process, like they genuinely want me to succeed. I love it, and I’m grateful for them.”

Fuentes plans to finish her intern year strong in the classroom and pass her last round of tests to become a fully certified ABS East teacher by the start of the 2026-2027 academic year.

“Becoming a teacher is work, and it’s fruitful work that will change the lives of kids and generations to come,” Sanchez smiled. “Abey and anyone admitted into our alternative certification program understand that this is not just a job, it’s a calling for education.” 🌟



A student in Fuentes’ elementary class proudly shows off a Valentine’s Day project she helped him make.

COMMUNICATIONS, MARKETING CONTINUE TO SERVE AS INDUSTRY STANDARD LEADERS AT SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS CONFERENCE

TSPRA STAR AWARDS BY THE NUMBERS

HCDE earned top honors for its work in communications and marketing at the 2026 Texas School Public Relations Association Conference.

41 Total Star Awards earned by Communications and Marketing & Client Engagement, the second consecutive year the divisions have topped 40 awards.

21 Categories (out of 57) in which HCDE received Star Awards

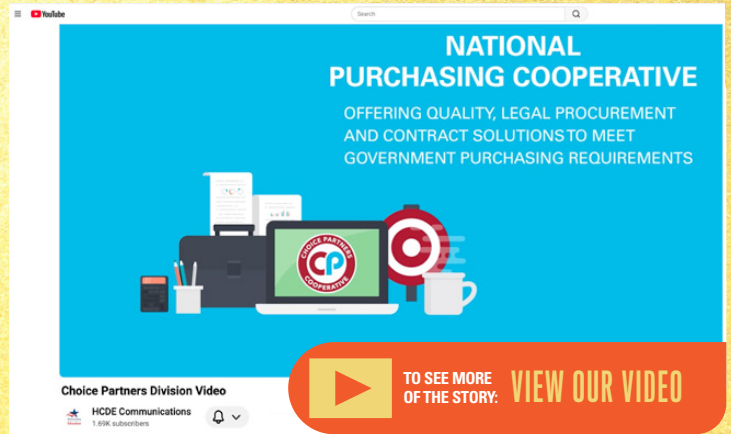
21 Gold Star Awards earned by HCDE

13 Silver Star Awards earned by HCDE

7 Bronze Star Awards earned by HCDE



1 BEST OF CATEGORY MARKETING VIDEO



THROUGH COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) is at the forefront of investing into the next generation of school public relations professionals and the industry's latest trends. Both aspects were all full display through creative and innovative presentations, and recognition for award-winning work this week at the Texas School Public Relations Association annual conference in Galveston.

Held Feb. 16-19, HCDE's Communications and Marketing & Client Engagement divisions joined more than 400 public information, marketing and school communications professionals who serve Texas public school districts and education associations, foundations and organizations. HCDE also served as a conference sponsor and showcased Department services at a vendor table.

The divisions took home 41 total state awards and one Best of Category for marketing video. MCE Assistant Director Mizti Loera, who previously served as a video coordinator for communications, won the top spot for her Choice Partners Division piece.

In addition, Department team members led four conference sessions, including Loera welcoming a standing-room-only crowd for a second straight year to showcase how AI created engaging memories for HCDE's Convocation. Communications Manager Angel Verdejo presented on how to capture that perfect sports photo while Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark co-hosted "TSPRA Academy" for members new to the industry. She also led a session for veteran communicators about Superintendent alignment and career trajectory. 🌟

ABS WEST SERVES HISTORY AND DELICIOUS MEALS DURING 'TASTE OF OUR ROOTS' COOKOUT

NOTHING BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER or shows the beauty of one's culture like food. The aroma of more than 100 years of recipes passed down through generations filled the halls of Academic and Behavior School West on Feb. 20 as staff showed students the magic of Black History Month during their "Taste of Our Roots" cookout.

Staff prepared a variety of traditional dishes, such as fried chicken, collard greens, cornbread and gumbo, and shared the history behind the culinary traditions. Lessons ranged from southern techniques that influenced the rich

flavors of gumbo to the resourcefulness of enslaved Africans transforming humble ingredients like leafy greens and cornmeal into nourishing staples. Students learned that each meal tells a powerful story of resilience, creativity and community.

The cookout is one of many ways students and educators throughout Harris County Department of Education are celebrating Black History Month. ABS West will continue its learning on Feb. 26 with a special program featuring influential figures, music and more. ✨



STUDENTS USHER IN YEAR OF THE HORSE IN STYLE

ABS WEST STUDENTS ushered in the Year of the Horse with an energetic celebration that blended culture, history and hands-on fun. Lunar New Year, observed in many Asian countries, marks the beginning of a new year based on the lunar calendar and is a time for family, reflection and hopes for prosperity and good fortune. This year's celebration highlighted the Year of the Horse, symbolizing strength, determination and energy, qualities found in each student across HCDE's four special schools.

The campus came alive with excitement as students enjoyed a vibrant dragon show, learned about traditional customs and tested their chopstick skills in a friendly challenge that sparked plenty of laughter. Relief instructor Chung Ng shared stories about his native country and personal experiences celebrating the holiday, giving students a meaningful glimpse into the traditions behind the festivities. Through music, movement and storytelling, the event offered more than just fun — it created a memorable opportunity for cultural connection and learning. ✨



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

Board Briefs

GRANTS DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP DISCUSSES WRITING, AI AND FEDERAL FUNDING



PROPER FUNDING can make or break an organization's impact. On Feb. 17, experts in the Center for Grants Development hosted the "All About Grants Workshop," designed to help new and experienced grant writers expand their skillset. The workshop focused on identifying ways to locate funding and draft proposals that accurately describe how grants are leveraged for the betterment of Harris County students and families.

More than 30 representatives from area school districts, nonprofit organizations and government agencies attended the one-day professional development workshop, which featured several sessions, networking opportunities and prizes. Development Prospect Researcher Kristal Frazier premiered a new AI session that demonstrated how information helps artificial

intelligence better understand an organization's mission, generating more accurate and relevant content for grant proposals.

Director Joyce Akins moderated a panel discussion to highlight how organizations are addressing the ever-changing landscape of federal funding. The inaugural panel included Avis Chambers, senior vice-president of the YMCA of Greater Houston; Lynne Cook, chief development officer for Houston Public Media; and Rhonda Horn, president of Sterling.

The workshop is an opportunity for HCDE to empower local educators and organizations to secure resources for the individuals they serve while also increasing the Department's impact throughout Harris County. ★

HCDE EDUCATORS RECOGNIZED AT HAABSE ANNUAL OUTSTANDING TEACHER AWARDS AND RECOGNITION CEREMONY

FOUR OUTSTANDING HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) TEACHERS were recently recognized for making lasting impacts to learners, joining others across the region highlighted as top educators this week.

The star teachers, who work at HCDE's four special schools, were recognized with hundreds of other educators at the Houston Area Alliance of Black School Educators (HAABSE) 39th Annual Outstanding Teacher Awards and Recognition Ceremony on Feb. 12. Each was nominated by their respective campus principal and selected for work done to impact students in their communities. HAABSE honorees will now represent the Houston area for the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators Teacher of the Year.

HCDE's 2026 honorees were: Christina Aggison (Academic and Behavior School West), Zachary Bradford (Fortis Academy), Jim Vela (ABS East) and Chelsea Bryant (Highpoint School East). ★



#TEAMHCDE SHOWCASES WINNING AI STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

staff teamed up to present innovative ways educators can responsibly and effectively integrate artificial intelligence into their daily workflow. Titled “The AI Prompt Playbook: Winning Strategies for AI Success,” the session at this week’s annual TABSE State Conference provided practical guidance for using AI as a thought partner and not a replacement.

Dr. Margaret Patton, curriculum and compliance services director; instructional coaches Shauntee Johnson and Courtney Atkinson; and Raechel Mozer, product manager of technology training and curriculum, walked attendees through the fundamentals of strong prompt writing, emphasizing clarity, context and intentionality to generate meaningful results. The team shared real-world examples of how AI can support lesson planning, differentiate instruction and draft family communications.

By highlighting the opportunities and responsibilities that come with emerging technology, #TeamHCDE underscored the importance of equipping statewide educators with tools that enhance efficiency while keeping students at the center of decision-making. ✨



REI HIGHLIGHTS AI IN THE CLASSROOM, DATA-DRIVEN CALL FOR RECOVERY HIGH SCHOOL EXPANSION AMONG RECENT PRESENTATIONS



THE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION INSTITUTE (REI) team remains at the forefront of data analysis and solution-based assessments that empower educators and fellow Harris County Department of Education divisions. School districts and organizations strengthen their programs by utilizing the information, while the research is proven to be more cost effective and tailored through REI’s work.

Presenting at the Southwest Educational Research Association’s 49th annual conference this week in New Orleans, REI staff led four sessions. Among the presenters were division director Yolanda Prytle and coordinator Dr. Jesus Campos, who highlighted a case for expansion of recovery high schools as a response to substance use at the state level and nationally.

HCDE’s Fortis Academy is the Houston area’s only public recovery school and among 40 recovery high schools nationwide. Of those, Fortis became just the 11th – and only in Texas – to earn accreditation by the Association of Recovery Schools.

Research coordinator Jonathan Khandaker examined growing AI integration in education, which includes growing concerns regarding academic integrity, data privacy and equitable access. ✨

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE G: PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

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



ABS East Teacher Abey Fuentes, back right, smiles with her elementary class students, whom she affectionately calls “her littles.” Fuentes is an alternative teacher certification candidate with the Center for Educator Success who is currently completing her internship year to become fully certified by August.

PART OF WHAT MAKES HCDE SPECIAL is the opportunities afforded to staff members for professional development and career advancement. If someone wants more, there’s a path for goals to be reached. This week provided another example as we read about Abey Fuentes, a one-time educational aide at Academic and Behavior School East working toward becoming a classroom teacher. Through encouragement from ABS East staff who saw potential in Fuentes, she enrolled in the Center for Educator Success’ alternative certification program. Fuentes has flourished, exceeding the state-required 150 instructional hours while continuing to thrive as a special education educator at ABS East. Her handful of students are also thriving, both academically and socially, and it’s due to Fuentes and her growth as an impactful educator. The CES alternative certification program is valuable in part due to the division’s continued support for candidates. Good luck to Ms. Fuentes on her path to becoming a fully-certified teacher and continued support of our ABS East students.

Over at ABS West, our teachers are impacting students as well. For Black History Month, campus staff hosted a “Taste of Our Roots” cookout this week. They prepared a variety of dishes and desserts for students. Each provided a culinary and history lesson, demonstrating how simple ingredients and southern cooking

techniques produced many of the traditional staples enjoyed for generations. The cookout is among the many ways our HCDE educators and students are celebrating Black History Month and highlights how learning goes beyond traditional learning. We’ll see even more at the end of the month as our schools will host Black History Month special programs and feature student and staff performances.

Finally, our Center for Grants Development team hosted its annual “All Abouts Grants Workshop” this week. The one-day event helped attendees identify ways to locate funding and better draft proposals to better serve Harris County students and stakeholders. The Grants team added new sessions to this year’s workshop, focusing on the ever-changing landscape in education. One showcased AI and using technology that can better understand an organization to help generate relevant content for grant proposals. Division Director Joyce Akins moderated a panel discussion where representatives from YMCA of Greater Houston, Sterling and Houston Public Media spoke on federal funding and how educators can secure resources as the landscape continues to shift.

By providing staff development opportunities and assessing new and effective development tools to HCDE staff, I am meeting the expectation to provide and maximize professional growth. ★



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 27
Chili Cook-Off

March 9-13
Spring Break
(HCDE Closed)

March 26
[Scholastic Art & Writing Awards Celebrations](#)

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

April 3
Spring Holiday (HCDE Closed)

April 10
Choice Partners Vendor Exhibit