

the **CONNECTOR**



ABS WEST OFFICIALLY WELCOMES NEW PRODUCTION LAB FOR ADULT TRANSITION PROGRAM, UNVEILS ROLLING LIBRARY P.3



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SPECIAL SCHOOLS RECOGNIZE HISTORY, ACCOMPLISHMENTS WITH BLACK HISTORY MONTH PROGRAMS P.7

of Note

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS about our Special Schools is that we see beyond behaviors and disabilities. We see potential and possibilities.

This concept struck me this week as I attended the Black History Month program at Highpoint School. The level of participation by the students was amazing. I was impressed with the fact that despite whatever infraction sent the students to Highpoint, they stood with confidence during their portion of the program and I could easily see the potential in them.

I was excited to see representatives from several of our partner school districts at the program as well as choral presentations by a high school in Humble ISD and a Sheldon ISD elementary school. It was great to see our partner districts supporting our schools in this manner and the student performances were fantastic.

All of this reaffirmed for me that what HCDE does is unique and that the second chances we offer so many of our students truly transforms lives. Just another reason why HCDE is Varsity!

I started the week with ELT on Monday morning followed by the annual Budget Planning session hosted by Business Services. This is my opportunity to talk to staff each year about how the budget is shaping up and any constraints we are putting in place for the new fiscal year. On Tuesday, I met with the Schools Division to review student data followed by meetings with ELT staff for my regular updates later that afternoon and all day Wednesday. I started Thursday at Highpoint School where I

participated in their Black History Month program, returning to the office to meet with staff. Today, I met with staff this morning before judging cornbread at the Annual Chili-Cookoff. This is a great way for us to kick off rodeo season in Houston by wearing our western gear and letting divisions duke it out in a head-to-head culinary challenge. Staff really get into the competitive spirit! We had some new winners along with some long-time favorites emerge again this year. Thank you to those of you who were able to attend. I know staff enjoys fellowshiping with you at these events.

Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Academic and Behavior School West unveiled a new Production Lab for its Adult Transition Program on Feb. 27. Participants will be able to print shirts and hats with heat press machines and also other products with a 3D printer.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES: HCDE UNVEILS ABS WEST PRODUCTION LAB, PROVIDES NEW HANDS-ON LEARNING FOR ADULT TRANSITION PROGRAM

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) prides itself on seeking solutions for unique student populations at its four Special Schools while filling the gaps in public education in the region. At HCDE's two Academic and Behavior Schools (East and West), that means giving staff the tools needed to best serve students, aged 5-22, with autism spectrum, intellectual, developmental and behavioral disorders.

ABS West staff and students unveiled their newest resource this week with a grand opening celebration for the new Adult Transition Program Production Workroom. HCDE Leadership were gifted with custom t-shirts at the ribbon cutting on Friday, February 27.

The new workroom features two shirt and one hat heat press machines as well as a 3D printer. Staff will lead students in creating finished products. Once fully operational, program participants will learn more on-the-job training and employable skills. The long-term goal is selling products with revenue going

back into the program.

"We want our students to be seen as people who can contribute to society," ABS West Principal Jatata Hutton said. "They can learn, they can facilitate job skills and they can advocate for themselves. This program actually empowers students and empowers families to see their students outside the limitations that society places on them."

HCDE's Adult Transition Program, offered at both ABS East and West, is for students aged 14-22 with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). These plans feature customized goals for students. The transition program is built on the belief that with the right support, students with disabilities can lead independent, fulfilling lives. It features a three-pronged approach focused on education and training, independent living skills and employment/workforce readiness.

Students in the program are tasked with small "jobs" around campus, such as shredding papers, wiping tables or sorting and folding laundry. These pre-employment skills are an introduction to working with

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Program Connections



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



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

business partners like the Houston Food Bank and Goodwill. In collaboration with these partners, students are placed in low-risk work environments where they can train and learn various roles while reinforcing skills they learn in the classroom and around campus.


Principal Hutton served at a similar program in Humble Independent School District where students produced a variety of items that were then sold in a spirit store at the district's administration building. Upon joining HCDE in 2023, Hutton knew he wanted the same for his Adult Transition Program students at ABS West.

Through grant funding, Hutton and his staff were able to secure new equipment and supplies for the production workroom.

The new lab takes teaching, learning and implementation of employable skills to another level. It bridges skills students already have, like folding and sorting laundry and remembering to wear protective gloves on a worksite, to those they'll acquire such as best practices around heated machinery and using a timer for each shirt or hat on the press.

"This is wonderful," Adult Transition Teacher Priscilla Bradshaw said. "We have academic and behavior deficits, but once we started teaching them and letting them do real hands-on work, it became easy. We're always up for a challenge and now we're at the next phase."

As the program grows, the skills will too, a factor Hutton and staff are ready for their students to master.

"My hope is that each kid experiences success and stretches beyond the possibilities that society says they can't do or they're not expected to achieve," Hutton said. "And my hope is that these families really feel the impact. We talk about 'Being the Impact,' so I hope they FEEL that impact." 



 TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR VIDEO ABOUT THE ADULT TRANSITION PROGRAM](#)



ABS West staff also unveiled its Rolling Library: Link to Literacy initiative on Feb. 27. The three mobile carts each feature books for the separate student groups (elementary, secondary, Life Skills) and will be available throughout the school day. Through generous donations, more than 1,000 books are already in place for the mobile library and will be shared with students at ABS East.



CHILI COOK-OFF HELPS BUILD TEAM MORALE, CELEBRATE CULINARY SKILLS FOR #TEAMHCDE DIVISIONS

THERE WERE JUDGES and scores, so of course Friday's Chili Cook-Off was a competition.

But for Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) staff members, the annual event is a lot more than which team can whip up the best chili, cornbread and dessert.

Part of becoming a top workplace both across the Houston area (HCDE has been named such four times) and nationally (2025) is building a culture where staff members thoroughly enjoy being at work and working together toward a common mission. Events like the Chili Cook-Off encompass all this for #TeamHCDE.

Staff wore their boots, belt buckles and rhinestones, while delicious scents filled the air in the Irvington Conference Center for the head-to-head friendly – but fierce – competition. Special School served up a clean sweep, stealing the show for best chili, earning top bidding for its lagniappe boudin cornbread, and winning bragging rights for dessert with its bayou boots peach cobbler cake. Adult Education won over judges in booth decorating with its setup inspired by Buc-ee's.

The Chili Cook-Off brought #TeamHCDE together for a day of good food, good music and good company. 🌟



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Board Briefs



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

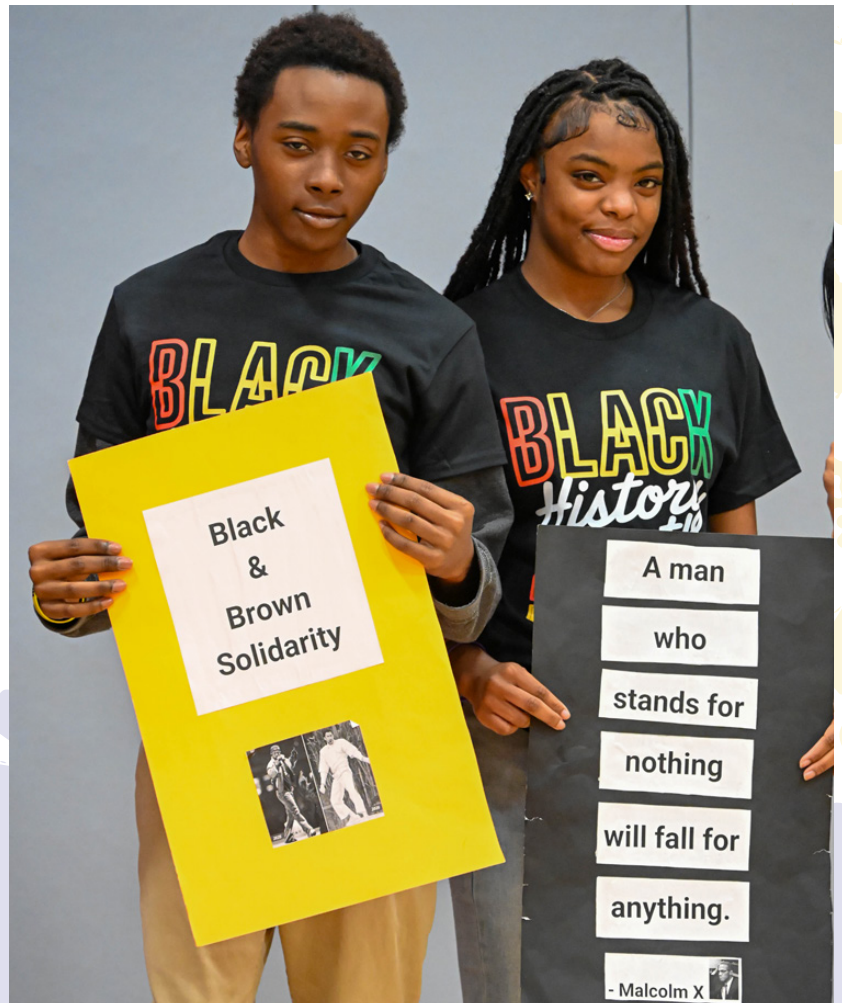


SPECIAL SCHOOLS HONOR A CENTURY OF PROGRESS THROUGH BLACK HISTORY MONTH PROGRAMS

SPECIAL SCHOOLS STUDENTS closed out the centennial Black History Month celebration with vibrant programs that honored historical progress while looking forward to the future. Campuses were filled with music, student performances, spoken word and powerful reflections that highlighted how far Black Americans have come throughout the past 100 years.

Students at Academic and Behavior Schools East and West showcased their storytelling skills through research projects that explored the resilience and leadership of influential African American figures whose impact continues to shape the nation. From civil rights pioneers to modern-day trailblazers in science, education, activism and the arts, Highpoint School students created meaningful presentations that highlighted how Black excellence can be seen in every field.

Showcasing their newfound knowledge in front of peers, families and educators, students demonstrated pride in American history and the changemakers they all have the potential to become. The programs prove that Black History Month is more than an opportunity to look back; it is a time when students can see themselves reflected in stories of perseverance and unlimited potential to impact the world. ✨



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Board Briefs



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW ABS WEST GALLERY](#)



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



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW ABS EAST GALLERY](#)

#TEAMHCDE RECEIVES PRESTIGIOUS FINANCIAL AWARDS AT TASBO ENGAGE CONFERENCE



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION was well represented at the Texas Association of School Business Officials (TASBO) Engage Annual Conference in Grapevine this week. Chief Financial Officer Ann Westbrooks, Chief Operating Officer Michelle Williams and Director of Procurement Services Edna Johnson joined school finance professionals from across the state for learning and collaboration. #TeamHCDE was recognized during a reception on Feb. 25 for its outstanding professional standards in acquisition and innovation in financial management and reporting. The Department received the Award of Merit for Purchasing Operations for the 16th consecutive year and was also honored with the Award of Excellence in Financial Management. The prestigious awards underscore HCDE's continued commitment to transparency, accountability and excellence in service. ✨

Board Briefs

HCDE HOSTS INAUGURAL SUBCOMMITTEE MEETINGS FOR HARRIS COUNTY COALITION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



WITH THE HARRIS COUNTY COALITION on Early Childhood Education and Care in place, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) leadership joined regional partners for a discussion on how to support early childhood education in the county. As part of a subcommittee, HCDE is one of a handful of local organizations who will work together to deliver recommendations to the Texas Legislature this fall surrounding funding and quality of education.

HCDE hosted the initial subcommittee meetings on Feb. 20, bringing together partners for Programming and Operations, Workforce Development and Economic Mobility, and Communications and Advocacy. Chief of Staff Danielle



Bartz and Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids senior director, represented HCDE.

The coalition was created by Harris County Commissioners Adrian Garcia (Precinct 2) and Lesley Briones (Precinct 4), and features HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and fellow executives from Greater Houston Partnership, Houston Endowment, Rice University, Houston-Galveston Area Council, Children at Risk, United Way of Greater Houston, Baker Ripley and the University of Houston. Coalition will meet quarterly, while staff from these organizations will meet monthly to narrow down recommendations. ★

REI TEACHES DISTRICT LEADERS TO ELEVATE THE STORY BEHIND THE DATA

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION INSTITUTE (REI) Director Yolanda Pyrtle and Coordinator Tracy Yager transformed complex data into meaningful stories at Region 4's DataCon on Feb. 26. Their session, entitled "Smarter, Not Harder: Using Data and Tools to Tell a Better Story," guided local school district leaders through strategies for pairing strong data tools with clear narratives that enhance communication and decision-making. Pyrtle and Yager provided real-world dashboard examples that illustrated various ways to highlight a district's success and share priorities with stakeholders. As industry experts, #TeamHCDE helped local leaders gain valuable insights to inform potential partners about the impact of their donations and partnerships on the community, which ultimately strengthens support for students and families. ★



In the Community



PUBLIC INFORMATION MANAGER JOINS DISCUSSION TO DECREASE BARRIERS INTO EDUCATION AT TEACH FOR AMERICA ALUMNI EVENT



WINFORD ADAMS, HCDE's Public Information & Policy manager, joined fellow Teach For America (TFA) alumni for a recent discussion regarding the future of education as a career. Conversations focused on increasing recruitment efforts for educator candidates and removing barriers for hopefuls looking to join the teaching profession.

The event, held Feb. 20, was part of new TFA Chief

Executive Officer Aneesh Sohoni's nationwide tour to meet and greet organization alumni. Conversations are leading up to TFA's 35th Anniversary Summit later this year.

Adams, a 2003 corps member in south Louisiana, joined in the discussion with other local alumni, discussing various issues impacting teaching including recruitment and retention and the cost of certification. ✨

IN THE NEWS

HCDE MENTIONED AS HOST SITE FOR HOUSTON CITY COUNCIL-LED COMMUNITY MEETING IN EARLY MARCH



HOUSTON CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS Tiffany Thomas and Martha Castex-Tatum are scheduled to lead the second of two community engagement meetings at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Irvington building.

HCDE was mentioned as a host site in a story by Houston Public Media on Feb. 11. Houston City Council is considering adopting ordinances that would create a registry of "high-risk rental buildings" based on repeated health safety violations. The community engagement meetings will allow council members to hear from stakeholders before policy moves to the council's housing and economic development committee.

Alief Neighborhood Center (Feb. 19) and HCDE (March 5) were the two sites. ✨



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

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATION MORALE

- Creates an open and positive environment for sharing resources and exchanging ideas to improve organizational climate.



Highpoint School students and administration pose for a photo following their Black History Month program.

WE SERVE STUDENTS and learners who routinely fall within the blind spots in education. Populations where resources may be limited or requirements to invest in these students may be long and arduous. Harris County Department of Education staff is resourceful – if there’s a way to better the educational experience for learners across the county and region, #TeamHCDE will find it and use it. This week, ABS West unveiled its newest venture – a Production Workshop for its Adult Transition Program featuring two shirt heat press machines, one hat heat press machine and 3D printer. Students in the program are already learning living and employment skills, with the goal to help those who can lead independent, fulfilling lives. The program even partners with local businesses to put those job skills to work outside the classroom and campus. A production workshop takes the learning opportunities to the next level. Not only will students be able to expand their workforce training by designing and producing shirts and hats, but the finished products will benefit the program down the road with sales and revenue. I applaud Mr. Hutton’s vision of bringing this working lab to our students and can’t wait to see how it expands in the future.

This week, students and educators across our Special Schools closed out February by showcasing their dedication to meaningfully celebrating Black History Month. From the talented performances at our Academic and Behavior campuses to the insightful presentations at Highpoint School, students

showcased their knowledge and appreciation for those in Black culture who left their mark and made significant contributions. Even our staff members were part of the show – kudos to the ABS West staff choir members, who never disappoint with their amazing voices and melodies. Our staff across all four campuses are passionate educators who every day ensure learning go beyond the classroom’s four walls. Thank you all for making these celebrations inspiring and educational.

Finally, I can’t thank #TeamHCDE enough for large participation and true engagement at the annual Chili Cook-Off. It’s obviously a number of our employees truly know their way around a kitchen and it showed once again through impressive chili, cornbread and dessert selections on hand to try. We even have divisions who hold their own internal competitions that determined eventual entries to the cook-off. While I appreciate the competitive spirit, the Chili Cook-Off give HCDE staff a chance to come together for fun and fellowship. Events like this build a culture where everyone feels valued and enjoys doing our work to serve Harris County learners. Coming up next is our Picnic in the Parking Lot events, and I’m looking forward to honoring the hard work and dedication of our team over good food and fun.

By celebrating accomplishments and excellence, I am meeting the expectation to create an open and positive environment to improve organizational climate. ★



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UPCOMING EVENTS

February 28
Houston Urban Debate
League City Championship

March 5
CASE for Kids City
Connections Grantee
Recognition Ceremony

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