

the **CONNECTOR**



BUILDING CULTURE: HCDE CELEBRATES STAFF MEMBERS, THEIR INCREDIBLE WORK THROUGH EMPLOYEE APPRECIATION EVENTS P.3



CASE FOR KIDS STAFF CELEBRATE IMPACTFUL WORK DURING AFTERSCHOOL PROFESSIONALS APPRECIATION WEEK P.6

#TEAMHCDE JOINS LEADERS ACROSS HARRIS COUNTY AT COMMISSIONER'S LUNCHEON, NETWORKING EVENTS P.8

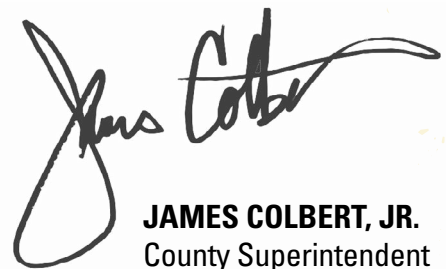
of Note

One of the most unique features of our Dynamic Strategy is the idea that our staff will be “Front and Center” in their field. The idea is to have our staff demonstrate their expertise at conferences and meetings around the region, state and nation. These actions showcase how knowledgeable HCDE employees are and position the organization as a thought leader in that specific arena. In doing so, HCDE is looked to as a leader in education and often consulted for best practices and successful program strategies.

Staff was out in full force this week demonstrating their focus on being “Front and Center” through presentations at local, state and national conferences. From an Early Childhood Coffee Break to the American Educational Research Association and the Texas Education Foundation Network Conference, HCDE leaders showcased their knowledge, skills and abilities in diverse areas from research best practices to alignment with partners and the use of AI in everyday tasks. What a broad scope of talents and expertise HCDE staff have! I am so proud of all our employees who stand in front of others to provide insight into the valuable work we do every day.

I started the week on Monday with ELT followed by meetings to prepare for upcoming budget hearings with each division. On Tuesday I met with staff to discuss various issues including budget and preparing for Convocation 2026. Later that afternoon, I met with a representative from the Houston Police Department to discuss our partnership as it relates to facility usage. On Wednesday I met with staff in the morning followed by

Commissioner Lesley Briones’ Annual Superintendent Luncheon. On Thursday I went to Region IV Educational Service Center for a school safety meeting and table top exercise with Harris County Sheriff’s Office, fulfilling my obligation under HB 33. That afternoon I fellowshipped with staff at our second Picnic in the Parking Lot celebration at NPO. Today I met with staff followed by lunch with a vendor regarding potential future collaboration. Have a wonderful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Board Briefs



Harris County Department of Education's Facilities team poses for a photo at Picnic in the Parking Lot on April 23.

EMPLOYEE APPRECIATION EVENTS DRIVE POSITIVE CULTURE, CELEBRATE PEOPLE BEHIND HCDE'S MISSION

WHEN MEMBERS OF #TEAMHCDE ARRIVE at any Harris County Department of Education facility, they're almost guaranteed to see a smiling face, hear a warm greeting or be pulled in for an embrace.

"HCDE is a big organization, but it also seems so small," explained Lorna Patterson, an assistant campus manager at Humble Head Start. "We may have 19 different divisions, but it feels like we are all one because our leaders have created a space for everyone to collaborate and just be ourselves."

That sense of unity doesn't happen by chance – it has been carefully cultivated over the last decade in the moments when employees step away from their daily responsibilities and come together to celebrate one another. Picnic in the Parking Lot, held annually in April at HCDE's Irvington and North Post Oak locations, is one way leaders create intentional opportunities for employees to connect.

"I've been here two years, and I've never had one morning that I've gotten up and not wanted to come into work," Chief Human Resources Officer Dr. Tyrone Sylvester said. "This is a beautiful place, and it's the mission that drives us to give



Employee appreciation events like Picnic in the Parking Lot allow employees to fellowship over good food and cool treats.



For divisions like School-Based Therapy Services and Head Start, where employees serve at various campuses, Picnic in the Parking Lot is one of the few times colleagues are together to connect.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Board Briefs

people second chances, but it's events like Picnic that revitalize employees so they can keep giving their all to students and families daily."

Patterson, who was recently appointed to campus leadership, described the opportunity to break bread with colleagues as a necessary part of making connections in her new role.

"I'm now getting so many emails from people across divisions, but Picnic and these other employee events are a great opportunity for me to put a name to a face," she laughed. "But I also love that we can play games with our senior director or members of executive leadership, because that's a vital part of building a great community and getting to know each individual's qualities or expertise we bring to HCDE."

For some divisions, like Head Start and School-Based Therapy Services, where employees are on various campuses, events are the one time of year when colleagues have an opportunity to connect and fellowship.

"It's always fun to see people from other districts and all of our managers," said Nora Contreras, a physical therapy assistant working in the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District. "I love that the administration brings us all together to appreciate us, give out phenomenal prizes, and just hang out with us."

Creating a positive workplace climate and culture requires work, and Department leaders are strategic in planning events throughout the year to keep employees connected, engaged and revitalized. Chili Cook-Off, held annually in February, provides a space for friendly competition after the new year. Picnic gives employees the boost they need to finish the school year strong, while Convocation prepares them for the new year and provides

new goals that continuously push #TeamHCDE to excellence. Finally, the festive holiday parties in December are another show of gratitude for staff dedication and an opportunity for leaders to urge employees to rest throughout the winter break.



HCDE leaders host festive holiday parties in December at the Irvington and NPO locations to show gratitude and urge employees to rest during winter break.

The synergy felt at each event is palpable as conversations flow easily; colleagues reconnect and share moments that make another workplace hard to compare. With more than 900 employees, there is never a dull moment and always someone new to meet. Whether they recently joined the Department, like Patterson, or have spent the past 30 years employed in Adult Education.

Maria Rodriguez-Chavez earned her high school equivalency diploma through Adult Education, and when leaders recognized her potential, they hired her as an administrative assistant. She



Picnic in the Parking Lot features plenty of games and friendly competition among staff. This year even included dominoes, Jenga and classic card games.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

Board Briefs



At the annual Chili Cook Off, many staff members dress to impress while others compliment their division's theming.

helped prospective students identify which program they wanted to enter and obtain the necessary documentation.

"I love getting to help the students and tell them about the opportunities that HCDE provides, and I love to show myself as the example of what they are capable of," she described.

She's since worked her way up to a data entry clerk and describes HCDE appreciation events as family affairs. The sentiment is not empty words. Rodriguez-Chavez has several family members who also work for the Department, including a daughter in Human Resources and a daughter-in-law in the Special Schools division.

"I come out, and I'm just so happy to be here, see everyone dancing, laughing and having a good time together," Rodriguez-Chavez smiled. "I think it's wonderful. I love to see my family enjoying themselves."

Whether it's sharing a meal, enjoying a friendly game or simply spending time with colleagues outside of the workplace, the gatherings give employees a chance to feel seen, valued and appreciated.

"When it's time to work, this whole Department works hard, but it's not all about being in the classroom or our office," Patterson explained. "We need an opportunity to let our hair down and have some fun because sometimes we can forget to celebrate ourselves, the work we do and the daily impact we make on this community."

More than just events on a calendar, the employee appreciation events serve as meaningful reminder that the work done across every division matters and the people behind that work matter just as much.

"It feels like our leadership really cares about us," smiled Jasmine Castleberry, the manager of federal programs and compliance in CASE for Kids. "We experience so many changes on the job, but to have events like Picnic or the holiday parties where we can let all that stuff go and have a great time with each other is necessary and appreciated." 🌟



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



Board Briefs

HCDE CELEBRATES CASE FOR KIDS PROFESSIONALS MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN YOUNG LIVES



ACCORDING TO THE NATIONAL AFTERSCHOOL ASSOCIATION (NAA), more than 10 million children participate in afterschool programs each year, and for every child enrolled, two more wait to get in. The Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids plays a critical role in supporting the academic, social and emotional development of more than 18,000 Harris County students annually.

This week, Harris County Department of Education joined the nation in celebrating Afterschool Professionals Appreciation Week (April 20-24), a time to recognize, appreciate and advocate for those who work with young people during out-of-school time. CASE for Kids staff members were treated to a hearty breakfast on Tuesday, where they also received personalized letters of appreciation from colleagues. Members of the team were also recognized on the Department's social media channels, which boasted the importance of a great staff which can create a safe environment for students.

CASE for Kids provides year-round resources and programming to Harris County learners through activities like the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, the LevelUp Afterschool is Cool Youth Expo, CASE Debates and more. ✨

#TEAMHCDE CONTINUES ROLE AS INDUSTRY LEADERS BY SHARING EXPERTISE WITH RECENT PRESENTATIONS



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) staff have proven themselves as experts in their respective fields, most notably by divisions routinely leading sessions at state and national conferences.

For the third time in four years, Research and Evaluation Institute (REI) presented at the American Educational Research Association, the world's largest gathering of education researchers. This year was the first time REI had two submissions accepted: Director Yolanda Pyrtle, Research Manager Akua Obeng and Research Coordinator Likita Holmes presented on the Impact of the afterschool programs on student behavior and social skills, while Research Coordinator Dr. Jesus Campos presented on uncovering AP stem gaps for girls of color in Harris County schools.

On April 14, Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva attended the Texas Education Foundation Network Conference, which brought together more than 300 attendees. Her presentation, "Using ChatGPT as Your Part-time Assistant" showcased using the AI platform to help streamline processes. ✨

BRIGHT FUTURES BEGIN **HERE**

SEE THE IMPACT ON HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOLS



Harris County
Department of
Education

HCDE-TEXAS.ORG

MARCH AWARENESS AND TEACHER RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN UPDATE

HCDE'S AWARENESS AND TEACHER RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGNS are making a successful impact throughout the Harris County community.

Social media remains a positive branding tool, with more than 977,000 impressions throughout March. Big wins include month-over-month increases by 122% in total reach and 99% in total clicks to informational pages about HCDE programs and divisions. Videos created by marketing teams yielded a 218% year-over-year increase in views. March logged the best-performing Facebook ad with more than 76,261 users and 2,886 page clicks recorded from a single post.

The teacher recruitment campaign also performed well throughout its first month of advertising, garnering more than 628,000 impressions and 61,153 video views. Of the

more than 250,000 users reached, 11,000 visited the Department's application portal and 28,000 navigated HCDE's social media profile.

Ad video campaigns drove budget adjustments for pay-per-click Google ads, resulting in a 65% year-over-year increase compared to March 2024. Impressions dipped to 578,000 as a result of the adjustment. However, page visits remained steady at 2,300 clicks, with an average cost-per-click of \$0.85.

Billboards in two locations – 610 West Loop at 18th Street and Beltway 8 North at Lee Road – bearing the See the Change Your Change Makes branding garnered more than 2.6 million impressions.

Overall, the campaigns yielded 4.1 million impressions across all channels in March. ★

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM SHARES ELECTION INFORMATION AT ADULT EDUCATION, HEAD START'S POLICY COUNCIL

TO EXPAND ACCESS to nonpartisan election information ahead of the May elections, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Civic Engagement Team visited Adult Education classes and spoke to Head Start's policy council this week.

Civic Engagement Coordinator Austen Ross-Yorko and Specialist Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero presented to Adult Education High School Equivalency Diploma classes. The two also spoke to Head Start division and parent leadership on April 21.

Early voting for local elections and Texas Senate District 4 began April 20 and continues through April 28. Election Day is May 2. Other key Harris County election dates include a runoff for the vacant Houston City Council, District C seat (May 16) and both Primary Runoff early voting (May 15-22) and Election Day (May 26).

HCDE's Civic Engagement team joins agencies from Aldine,

Alief, Houston and Spring independent school districts that receive Houston Endowment grant funding for staffing and initiatives. ★



ELT MEMBERS REPRESENT HCDE AT EARLY CHILDHOOD COALITION, BREAKFAST 'COMMONS GROUNDS' MEETING



HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SERVES as a partner to numerous community organizations and initiatives to best support students and their families. This week, members of HCDE's Executive Leadership Team represented the Department at various meetings and events.

On April 20, HCDE hosted the monthly Harris County Early Childhood Education subcommittee meeting at its NPO location. Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz and Dr. CJ Rodgers, Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment, attended the meeting in addition to Harris County Commissioner Lesley Briones (Precinct 4), who alongside Adrian Garcia (Precinct 2) created the coalition. The initiative brings together executives across greater Houston – including HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. – who will work collectively to deliver recommendations to the Texas Legislature this fall aimed at improving educational quality and funding statewide. On April 21, Rodgers attended the Commons Grounds Coffee Break at the Region 4 Education Support Center. Educational leaders met at the



breakfast meeting for meaningful conversations and to advance alignment among partners and vendors to best serve more than one million students across greater Houston. 🌟

SUPT. COLBERT JOINS FELLOW EDUCATION LEADERS AT PRECINCT 4 SUPERINTENDENT'S LUNCHEON



PRECINCT 4 COMMISSIONER LESLEY BRIONES welcomed school district superintendents across her precinct together on April 20 for their annual luncheon. The networking event allows attendees to discuss partnerships, needs across the precinct and steps to build a strong educational community among the various agencies. Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz represented the Department at the luncheon, joining leaders from Alief, Cypress-Fairbanks, Houston, Katy, Tomball and Waller independent school districts. 🌟

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE C: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

- Encourages, oversees and participates in staff recognition activities.




HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. visits with staff at Picnic in the Parking Lot on April 23. Employee appreciation events are a time for Department leadership to give thanks and show gratitude to staff members for their hard work and dedication.

PICNIC IN THE PARKING LOT IS MORE THAN JUST AN AFTERNOON OF FOOD, music and fellowship. It's one facet to why Harris County Department of Education is a destination more than simply a job for staff. Our team members feel valued because they are, and between myself and the Executive Leadership Team, we make sure to echo that notion across numerous employee appreciation events throughout the year. With Picnic in the Parking Lot, we celebrate the hard work everyone has accomplished during the school year and all the positive outcomes for Harris County students and families. We kick off the school year with Convocation, bringing everyone together in August after summer break, while the two holiday parties in December provide an opportunity to reset and head toward that much needed rest over winter break. And don't forget about Chili Cook Off, where divisions break out their competitive spirits alongside the boots and cowboy hats. All these events showcase the best of HCDE – a family that works hard to create not only a climate people want to be a part of every day, but outcomes that best support learners across Harris County.

Speaking of celebrating, this week is Afterschool Professionals Appreciation Week and join me in recognizing the fine work our CASE for Kids team does. These individuals meet the needs of students of all ages during out-of-school time, which we know is vital in the development of well-rounded young men and women. Staff

members were treated to breakfast on Tuesday in addition to personalized letters of appreciation from colleagues. The scope of CASE for Kids' initiatives is too broad to fully capture here, but their impact is unmistakable. From the NPO building to afterschool programs across Harris County, staff provide students with the resources and opportunities needed for long-term success. Thank you again to all of our out-of-school time team members.

Finally, members of the Executive Leadership Team joined me in attending meetings and events this week to help further our mission to best serve Harris County students. I joined my fellow Precinct 4 superintendents on April 20 at an annual luncheon hosted by Commissioner Lesley Briones. We're able to share partnership initiatives and discuss the educational needs across the precinct. Dr. Rodgers attended a similar networking event at the Commons Grounds Coffee Break at the Region 4 Education Support Center. The day before, he joined Ms. Bartz in helping host the monthly Harris County Early Childhood Education subcommittee meeting. The partnerships and networking opportunities help HCDE better align with school districts and educational agencies across greater Houston. I look forward to continuing these projects and seeing the results with successful outcomes at our schools, programs and Head Start centers.

By setting clear expectations and fostering a culture of excellence, I ensure high standards are met by not accepting mediocre performance. 



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

April 25
[All-Earth Ecobot Challenge](#)

April 28
[Head Start Job Fair](#)

May 13
[Heart of Education Luncheon](#)

May 15
[ABS East Graduation](#)

May 20
[Board Meeting](#)
[Celebration of Excellence](#)

May 21
[ABS West Graduation](#)

May 25
[Memorial Day \(HCDE Closed\)](#)