

# the **CONNECTOR**



**MAY EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH PROMOTES 'LIFE-CHANGING' EXPERIENCES FOR YOUTH THROUGH CASE FOR KIDS P.3**



**AREA STUDENTS SOLVE REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS, LEARN SOCIAL SKILLS THROUGH 2026 ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE P.6**



**HCDE STUDENTS LEARN VALUABLE LIFE LESSONS, SHARPEN ACADEMIC SKILLS THROUGH CHESS P.8**

# of Note

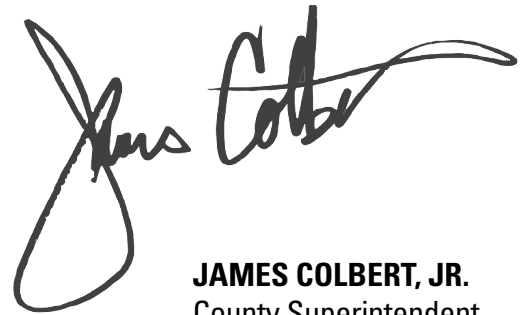
**I KNOW I KEEP SAYING IT**, but HCDE is really a cool and unique place. Sometimes I think of us like an educational Costco: able to serve multiple needs in one place. HCDE is one of the only places I know of that can cater to students on opposite ends of the spectrum at different events just days apart.

Today, we saw students from our four special schools showcase their critical thinking and strategic mindset at our annual chess tournament. This event is significant because students with disabilities can be excluded from these events at traditional schools. Last Saturday, students from schools around the region engaged in a robotics battle at our Ecobot Tournament, allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge of STEM concepts through engineering and robots. What a cool and diverse example of the impact HCDE has! Factor in how we support infants, adults and even young artists and it is clear why nobody else comes close to providing the breadth and depth of services we do! I am proud of the multitude of opportunities HCDE provides to our students and how we don't just influence student lives, we transform them.

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by three days of budget hearings. This is the time of the year when ELT and I listen to directors discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of their divisions in light of the upcoming budget. Even though sitting for three days to listen to more than 26 individual budget

presentations can be taxing, it is interesting to see how our divisions prioritize their work, how it fits into the overall scheme of HCDE and how we impact the communities we serve. On Thursday I attended the Greater Houston Partnership's State of Education Luncheon with the foundation and several leadership team members. Today I met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives.

It is supposed to cool down this weekend so I hope you have time to enjoy this last burst of spring weather before summer hits. Have a relaxing weekend.



**JAMES COLBERT, JR.**  
County Superintendent



# Employee Spotlight



Larry Moses II, a Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids project coordinator, was selected as the May Employee of the Month. He manages the City Connections and County Connections grant programs, overseeing the distribution of more than \$2 million in funding to nonprofit organizations that provide enrichment programming.

## THRILL SEEKER: LARRY MOSES II USES ADVENTUROUS MINDSET TO HELP CONNECT YOUTH, NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

**LARRY MOSES II** is a thrill seeker. Or as he calls himself, a “daredevil.”

We’re talking parasailing, roller coasters or riding jet skis in the ocean.

There was even ziplining through the jungles of Mexico when he turned 30 years old. It wasn’t so much the ziplining but more the climb up multiple flights of stairs to finally overlook trees and water while his heartbeat grew faster and faster in his chest.

He does have his limits, though.

“Not sky diving,” the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids project coordinator says with a chuckle.

Moses enjoys seeking those thrills and living his life on the edge, but he thoroughly loves being able to give opportunities like these – though on a different scale – to CASE for Kids participants. His passion for changing lives and creating those memories is what made him a worthy selection for Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) May Employee of the Month.

Over the past year, Moses took on the responsibility of managing the City Connections and County Connections grant programs simultaneously. Administered by CASE for Kids in conjunction with the Houston City Council



Larry Moses II, second from left, joins HCDE leadership and Houston City Councilman Joaquin Martinez in honoring District 1 organizations at the City Connections grantee ceremony.

and Harris County Commissioners, the initiatives provide funding for out-of-school time program providers and afford students with more educational opportunities outside school hours or during the summertime.

Moses oversees the distribution of more than \$2 million in funding annually and works closely with 16 councilmembers and four precinct commissioners to ensure grant awards are equitable, strategic and meet the community’s needs. In addition, he has

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# Employee Spotlight

built relationships with over 300 nonprofit organizations and service providers and became a valued resource to connect programs with opportunities that benefit area youth.

“He was happy to take on the extra tasks because he wants to learn and grow as a professional, so he never complained and he takes a lot of care and attention to detail when it comes to both projects,” said Federal Programs and Compliance Manager Jasmine Castleberry, who nominated Moses for employee of the month. “He handles all of that with ease, so it’s just really incredible to see him work.”

For Moses, the programs connect Harris County youth with experiences some may not have had without the funding and opportunities. These are their “thrill-seeking” experiences. It’s familiar because during his childhood, Moses experienced both missing out and having the support to reach goals.

Raised in a single-parent household, Moses watched his mother work two jobs to support the two of them.



At the County Connections appreciation reception, Larry Moses II, right, thanks representatives from each non-profit organization.



Larry Moses II, second from right, poses with team members from the Center for Afterschool, Summer, and Enrichment for Kids at Convocation in August.

He has an older sister, but she’s 12 years older and was off to college and into adulthood as Moses grew up. He credits his mom for doing all she could to provide support.

The thrill-seeking started early for Moses, who remembers jumping into the pool at 3 and 4 years old while visiting family in Las Vegas. He couldn’t swim and neither could most everyone else. His Aunt Precious – the lone swimmer in the family – was there to rescue him.

“In life we all should experience new things,” Moses said. “So, when opportunities come, yes be safe, but take advantage of it.”

Moses began his education career at Fort Bend Independent School District before joining the YMCA of Greater Houston in 2018 as a youth development director. In both stops, he thrived as a role model and father figure to many.

He learned of HCDE and CASE for Kids through the YMCA and saw firsthand how the Department is a valuable resource for organizations and fills in the gaps for Harris County students and their educational needs. Joining HCDE was an easy decision when an opportunity opened at the start of 2024.

“It’s a community – he grew up in afterschool programming,” CASE for Kids Senior Director Dr. Lisa Caruthers said. “So, he knows what they experience. He knows what they’re going through, and he’s been able to be a real resource to these community partners that are applying. Then he gets behind them, does the paperwork, the details, the charts and the money, and navigates all of that. He really is well-rounded.”

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# Employee Spotlight



**Added Programs Coordinator Brandi Nichols:** “Professionalism as a skill – if you’ve never seen it – is Larry, and he brings that with everyone we collaborate with.”

Moses still has plenty of room for fun, both at work and on his latest adventure. CASE for Kids is about enhancing the youth experience, and Moses takes that personal.

So, he’s very thorough with City Connections and County Connections. Even with site visits after grants are funded and put in motion. These are the full circle moments for him.

Like The Woods Project, which creates wilderness and outdoor exploration experiences for low-income high school populations in Houston. Students who are unlikely to backpack and hike, camp overnight under the stars or even see animals in the wild are now doing so.

Or perhaps a music program exposing youth to various instruments. Maybe even a simple field trip.

“I didn’t have those experiences,” Moses said. “Now with me working with these nonprofits and seeing the great work they are doing, my main vision for our youth is creating learning experiences. I’m always willing to take on challenges and nothing can come across my path to where I’m not going to take advantage of it, put in all my passion and effort to ensure the goal is complete.” 🌟

“PROFESSIONALISM AS A SKILL - IF YOU’VE NEVER SEEN IT - IS LARRY, AND HE BRINGS THAT WITH EVERYONE WE COLLABORATE WITH.”



Larry Moses II, right, poses with his mother after earning his master's degree in 2012 from Prairie View A&M University.



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

# Board Briefs



## KINGDOMS, CODING AND CREATIVITY COLLIDE AT ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE

**LIVING OFF THE LAND** is a foreign concept for most students in Harris County, given that they've grown up in a concrete jungle. The 2026 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, hosted by CASE for Kids, exposed nearly 100 students from districts across the greater Houston area to the everyday challenges and importance of learning to quickly adapt, innovate and create new life and food sources to survive.

"Learning has to be sneaky, and that's why we love Ecobot," Harris County Department of Education's Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz said. "Every year is a new challenge, and this year, they're protecting their kingdom in creative ways, but we are also creating the next generation's workforce by letting them play and learn about different careers."

The All-Earth Ecobot Challenge is an innovative engineering competition for students in grades four through eight that combines problem-solving, critical thinking and the application of solutions for real-world problems. Teams use *LEGO MINDSTORMS EV3* Core robotics kits to design, build and program autonomous robots that can complete a series of challenges.

This year's theme – "Kingdom of Ecobot: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink" – prompted students to design an imaginary kingdom, where they determined how to build homes, harvest energy and manage trash in eco-friendly ways.

"This is an amazing experience," squealed Gianna Ochoa, a fifth grader from Sam Houston Elementary School in Galena Park Independent School District. "I have been in this program for the past two years, and I think it's a really fun activity to do



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# Board Briefs

afterschool because we learn so much.”

Aliyah Howard, an Alief ISD fourth-grade student, joined the STEM club at Alexander Elementary to learn more about robots. She worked with educators and her teammates to learn coding techniques, and while she was nervous walking into the competition, she kept her head high and trusted in their work.

“I liked learning how to code the robot to bring the larvae from the pond to the chickens in the coop and collect trash,” Howard said. “Ecobot is teaching us about recycling and how to live off the land without polluting the Earth.”

Students were assigned roles to drive, code and set up the game space and were encouraged to be

flexible in finding solutions to challenges throughout the competition. New this year, judges provided “ecobucks” — fake currency redeemable for snacks and toys — to students who persevered. Jacque Sanchez, an educator at Sam Houston, described the bucks as an added encouragement and kudos for teams who worked hard to learn engineering, recycling and communication skills and more.

“I’m so proud of my kids because they built most of the stuff on their gameboards and the robot alone, I was really only there to supervise,” she smiled. “Some of these guys have never worked together, but they are getting along, problem-solving and working together. It’s been amazing to watch.” 🌟

## ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE WINNERS

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COMPETITION WINNERS

#### 1st Place

Tice Elementary, Galena Park ISD

#### 2nd Place

Lyons Elementary, Houston ISD

#### 3rd Place

Lyons Elementary, Houston ISD

### GRAND CHAMPION AWARD Tice Elementary, Galena Park ISD



### MIDDLE SCHOOL COMPETITION WINNERS

#### 1st Place

Alief Middle School, Alief ISD

#### 2nd Place

RYSS Middle School at East Aldine, Aldine ISD

#### 3rd Place

North East STEM Academy, Aldine ISD



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

## A GAME OF STRATEGY PROVIDES SPECIAL SCHOOLS STUDENTS WITH LESSONS FOR LIFE

**THE ROOM FELL QUIET** except for the soft tap of chess pieces and the occasional deep breath as students leaned in to study their boards and contemplate their next moves.

Moments like these defined Harris County Department of Education's tenth annual Chess Tournament on May 1, where more than 40 students from Academic and Behavior School (ABS) East and West, Fortis Academy and Highpoint School put months of preparation to the test. What unfolded wasn't just a competition, but a showcase of patience, discipline and the kind of strategy that extends beyond the board.

"We often talk about exercising the body, but here we are expressing the importance of exercising the mind," said James Hudson, the chess coach who works with students at each campus throughout the year. "The strength of the body and the power of the mind are synonymous, and when they work together, these students become complete and ready to succeed."

What may look like a simple board game is, for many Special Schools students who face intellectual and behavioral

challenges, a pathway to deeper learning. HCDE's partnership with Hudson and Perfect TeamPlay, Inc., uses the game to teach math and motivate students in new ways. Chess also helps reinforce intervention strategies practiced across campuses, such as avoiding impulsive decisions, adapting to new circumstances, taking responsibility and persevering through challenges.

Anixa Diaz, a Highpoint student from Channelview Independent School District (ISD), is learning just how impactful each lesson can be in students' long-term success. Despite joining Coach Hudson's chess lessons only two weeks ago, the senior was placed in the advanced competition due to her ability to read the board and strategize. Diaz went head-to-head in a game against Superintendent James Colbert Jr., where her attempts to sneak her pieces into position were unsuccessful.

"I was trying to trick him, but he wasn't going for it and ended up tricking me," Diaz laughed. "I take my loss with pride because it was a learning opportunity. It was a good



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# Board Briefs



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

match, and I had a lot of fun playing against him and seeing all the students having fun too.”

As the final matches came to a close, the room slowly filled with noise again as Highpoint School’s Josiah Eaden, an eighth grader from Aldine ISD, called out, “checkmate,” securing their back-to-back first-place win in the tournament. Cheers, laughter and the looks of pride cross the faces of students who had given it their all. Whether they walked away with a trophy or not, students left the tournament with something far more valuable: the confidence to make thoughtful decisions and approach challenges with patience and purpose. ★

## HCDE CELEBRATES AANHPI HERITAGE MONTH, ‘POWER IN UNITY’

# AANHPI

ASIAN AMERICAN • NATIVE HAWAIIAN • PACIFIC ISLANDER

HERITAGE MONTH • MAY 2026



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

**MAY IS** Asian American, Native Hawai’ian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, and Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) celebrates by embracing this year’s theme, “Power in Unity: Strengthening Communities Together.” This unity is showcased by #TeamHCDE’s dedication to its employees and their commitment to

investing and pouring into students and families across Harris County. Throughout the month, HCDE will recognize the contributions of our AANHPI colleagues through a video shared on HCDE’s social media channels and across internal platforms. These efforts honor the voices and stories that help shape our community. ★

## CHOICE PARTNERS SHOWCASES SERVICES, OPPORTUNITIES AT DALLAS-FORT WORTH AREA MEMBER WORKSHOPS

**TO BETTER SERVE MEMBERS AND VENDORS** beyond the greater Houston area, – Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) national purchasing cooperative is taking its information and networking opportunities on the road. Choice Partners regularly held the regional member workshops until the COVID-19 pandemic, and division staff are pushing to bring them back. The first was in San Antonio in January.

Choice Partners leadership and purchasing consultants recently traveled to the Dallas-Fort Worth area for two more – April 22 at the Grapevine Convention Center and April 23 at Region 11 Education Service Center. Over two days, nearly 70 members were trained on the ins and outs of Choice Partners, while more than 30 vendors connected with decision makers across local school districts, colleges, counties, cities and other agencies.

Presentations included general and background information, legal compliance, navigating the Choice Partners website and rebate portal, and job order contracting. 🌟



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*The Right Resources. Right Now.*

## INTERESTED CANDIDATES SEEK HEAD START OPENINGS AT JOB FAIR



**HEAD START IS RECRUITING** talented, passionate professionals to help build strong foundations for Harris County’s youngest learners. On April 28, division leadership welcomed more than 70 prospective employees seeking to fill positions for teachers, family service providers, nutrition service managers, special education coordinators, facilities and custodial staff and more.

Interested attendees participated in onsite screenings to determine their eligibility, and promising candidates who met necessary certifications received an opportunity for expedited employment. #TeamHCDE members showcased the division’s dedication to educating and serving Harris County youth. Potential applicants can visit [headstarthires.org](http://headstarthires.org) for more information about upcoming job fairs and to apply for open positions. 🌟

# In the Community

## HCDE SUPPORTS GREATER HOUSTON PARTNERSHIP STATE OF EDUCATION, FUTURE OF TEXAS LUNCHEONS



**HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE)** leaders attended recent Greater Houston Partnership (GHP) events to network with community partners and showcase the Department and its mission to best serve students and their families in the region.

On April 30, HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. attended the State of Education luncheon, which featured a panel discussion on why early childhood education matters to Houston's business community and how current policy momentum is creating new opportunities for impact. He was joined by Board Trustee

Eric Dick; assistant superintendents Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers; Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz; Adult Education Senior Director Dr. Eduardo Honold; Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids Assistant Director Trina Finley; Head Start Assistant Director James Stancill; and Education Foundation of Harris County Director Trina Silva.

On April 23, Bartz connected with local leaders and partners at the GHP's Future of Texas luncheon. Attendees heard from Rep. Armando Walle and discussed early childhood education initiatives. 🌟

## EDUCATION FOUNDATION HONORED AS STAFFORD MSD PARTNER AT APPRECIATION BREAKFAST



**STAFFORD MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DISTRICT** recently recognized the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) as a supporter and community partner at its annual Volunteers in Public School Appreciation Breakfast. During each of the last three fiscal years, EFHC gave grant funding to Stafford MSD. That includes funding to the JROTC program (students presented the colors at the 2025 Heart of Education luncheon) and welding program (students made trophies for the inaugural EFHC Topgolf Tournament).

Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva also supported recent education foundation events by Lone Star College Team 249, a collaborative partnership between the schools Tomball and University Park campuses, and Clear Creek Independent School District.

Through its partnership with the Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) proudly funds programs and initiatives impacting students across 25 school districts. 🌟



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

## SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATION MORALE

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.



Larry Moses II, a Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids project coordinator, was selected as the May Employee of the Month. He manages the City Connections and County Connections grant programs, overseeing the distribution of more than \$2 million in funding to non-profit organizations that provide enrichment programming.

**IN A FEW WEEKS**, we'll gather for the Celebration of Excellence to recognize, acknowledge and honor employees for their outstanding work and contributions to serve Harris County learners. Among those are the nine Employees of the Month, including May's honoree – CASE for Kids Project Coordinator Larry Moses II. While the division went through staffing changes, Moses took on the responsibility of overseeing both our City Connections and County Connections grant programs simultaneously. The incentive is a valuable partnership between HCDE and the Houston City Council and Harris County Commissioners, where more than \$2 million in funding is allocated to nonprofit organizations and program providers that offer opportunities outside school hours and during the summer. Building relationships with legislators and their staffs, and more than 300 organizations is a task Moses handles well and part of the large undertaking he's handled without complaining. Students across the region benefit from these grant programs, so I appreciate the entire CASE for Kids team for helping create these opportunities and Moses for steering this with professionalism. Thank you for making an impact for #TeamHCDE.

The All-Earth Ecobot Challenge is another opportunity for area students to learn outside the traditional classroom setting. In the engineering competition, students use robotics kits to build and program autonomous robots

to complete a series of real-world challenges on a game board. This year's challenge, "Kingdom of Ecobot: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink," prompted participants to construct a plan for building homes, harvesting energy and managing trash in eco-friendly ways. In addition to the challenge itself, some of the best stories to come out of Ecobot is hearing from students who participate over multiple years, learn from their previous experiences and have better outcomes. Congratulations to the winners and all the participants who found solutions to problems they could very well face in years down the road.

Finally, Highpoint School hosted one of my favorite events of the year – HCDE's annual chess tournament. Over nine years, the chess tournament has created a space where students from all four of our special schools can come together, compete and show their peers and HCDE leaders what they are capable of when given the opportunity. Chess isn't just a game I thoroughly enjoy, but it's an activity that teaches so many lessons. Congratulations again to everyone who competed. I always enjoy seeing the determination and resilience on display, and I am already looking forward to seeing what's in store for everyone next year.

By treating every person with respect and dignity, and acknowledging excellence within the organization, I am working to meet the needs of demonstrating fair and equitable management practices. ★



### 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

**May 13**  
[Heart of Education Luncheon](#)

**May 15**  
**ABS East Graduation**

**May 20**  
Board Meeting  
Celebration of Excellence

**May 21**  
**ABS West Graduation**

**May 22**  
Fortis Graduation

**May 25**  
Memorial Day (HCDE Closed)

**June 3**  
[Center for Safe and Secure Schools Thriving Not Just Surviving: Celebrating Professional Counselors Symposium](#)