

the **CONNECTOR**



HCDE HONORS EDUCATORS, CELEBRATES THEIR MISSION THROUGHOUT TEACHER APPRECIATION WEEK P.3



EDUCATION ONLINE PLATFORM FINALSITE HOLDS ITS LARGEST ONSITE WORKSHOP AT HCDE'S NPO LOCATION P.6



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM SHARES ELECTION INFORMATION WITH ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS, HEAD START PARENTS P.8

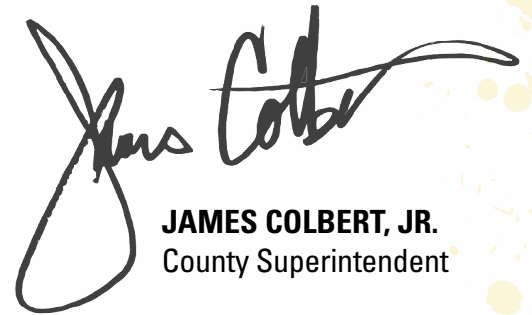
of Note

EVERYONE KNOWS that the most important factor in a child's academic success is the teacher in front of the classroom. Teachers do more than just teach students their ABCs and 123s. For so many students, teachers may be the only positive adult interaction they experience. They are a source of comfort, solace, advice and support. They help students find resources for food, clothing and even medical care.

Today's teachers wear so many hats. They are deserving of all our praise and appreciation. This week we honor and recognize the hard work of HCDE teachers and educators around the region during Teacher Appreciation Week. I love to hear students talk about how a teacher impacted their choices and changed the trajectory of their life. Thank you to all the educators in HCDE who work so tirelessly for our students and those in our client districts. Your work is worthy, valued and so important!

I started the week with ELT followed by standing meetings with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. On Tuesday, I met with the Leadership Team and unveiled the theme for this year's Convocation: NFL. We staged a mock draft where each division "picked" their

team and got a hat to take their photo for Draft Day 2026. The divisions were encouraged to dress up and embody the spirit of the team they picked for Convocation. We will reveal more details about Convocation in the coming weeks including showing a short promotional video at the board meeting later this month. Later that day, I met with Harris County Administrator (and former HCDE Trustee) Erica Lee Carter. On Wednesday, I met with Lone Star Community College Chancellor Dr. Mario Castillo about a potential future collaboration. On Thursday, I participated in Agenda Review in anticipation of the May board meeting and today I met with Dr. LaTonya Goffney, superintendent of Aldine ISD. Have a wonderful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Special Schools Director of Curriculum and Special Services Dr. Margaret Patton, right, serves a hamburger to Academic and Behavior School West Adult Transition Teacher Priscilla Bradshaw. Division staff hosted a cookout at the four campuses for Teacher Appreciation Week.

THANK YOU: TEACHER APPRECIATION WEEK HONORS HCDE EDUCATORS WHO POSITIVELY IMPACT STUDENTS

WEARING A PERSONALIZED black apron and overseeing a smokey grill loaded with hamburgers and boudin sausage, Dr. Charles Ned said Special Schools leadership could have easily ordered catering or had boxed meals delivered to Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) four campuses in celebration of Teacher Appreciation Week.

But for the division's senior director, going to the teachers and educational aides and personally treating them was the gesture he and his staff wanted to do – as did the honorees.

"We tell them, 'Thank you' constantly, but this is very intentional, purposeful and real," Ned said on May 4 at Academic and Behavior School (ABS) West, the first of four on-campus cookouts. "A personal touch goes a long way, and this is what the



Teachers and staff at ABS East and West were treated to coffees, lattes and other drink options on May 5 from Travelin Tom's Coffee Truck.

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Program Connections



Special Schools Senior Director Dr. Charles Ned serves a fresh hamburger off the grill to staff at Academic and Behavior School West on May 4.

staff requested. For us, it's about being able to engage with the staff, truly celebrate them and let them know we appreciate what they do."

HCDE joined school districts and agencies nationwide in recognizing educators and celebrating their purpose during Teacher Appreciation Week, observed annually during the first week of May. Leadership prides itself on creating learning environments where students can be successful, be it as their first opportunity (Head Start), second chance (Special Schools) or more (Adult Education and Center for Educator Success).

The tasks aren't easy, nor are they taken lightly. Within these divisions, educators continually show their dedication to students goes well beyond the four walls of the classroom. They invest hours into individualized plans to meet students where they are and routinely create innovative strategies to advance them to their next checkpoint.

"Personally, I come here to make the difference with the kids so to hear someone say, 'Thank you,' and to have your administration notice your hard work makes you feel good," ABS West teacher Razjhe Johnson said. "And it's a great time. This gives us that extra push, and as teachers and educators, we need that. We need that little appreciation, and it goes a long way."



Highpoint School teachers were gifted personalized illustrations as a token of appreciation.

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Program Connections



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

Administrators thanked teachers with tokens of appreciation throughout the week. From specialized meals and treats to personalized gifts, teachers were flying on cloud nine.

At the four Special Schools, staff were treated to a cookout with burgers, hot dogs and sausages prepared and served by division team members. Sundaes and other sweet treats followed lunch, while each staff member was encouraged to write a note of encouragement to a teacher or educational aide. Teachers and aides also received a raffle ticket for prizes that include prize packs from the Houston Rockets and Trill Burgers.

Travelin Tom's Coffee Truck visited both ABS East and ABS West thanks to a division partnership with Houston Loves Teachers, a citywide initiative by Good Reason Houston designed to support, recruit and retain high-quality educators across the area. Over at Highpoint School, staff members got their dessert fix courtesy of a visit from Gelato Galore food truck.

"They are the boots on the ground every single day and with our population, we just never know what we're going to get each day," Highpoint Principal Courtney Waters said. "And really, 'Thank you' is never enough for me to express my gratitude to them. I believe in celebrating them all the time because I need them to know how much I value them and appreciate them."

Similar scenes and acts of appreciation occurred with partner school districts this week when Center for Educator Success (CES) team members recognized candidates in the

division's alternative teacher certification programs. Most were already working in the classroom in some capacity at their respective district and ultimately answered the call to take the next step.

CES visited teacher candidates in Cypress-Fairbanks and Goose Creek Consolidated independent school districts on May 6, and those in Channelview and Springs ISDs the next day.

As candidates gain classroom management skills and certification hours, they're also receiving an opportunity to start impacting the next generation with CES.

Teachers and staff were recognized for their role in shaping young minds at HCDE's 12 Head Start campuses across north and east Harris County. Their work with the county's youngest students sparks a curiosity that helps build the foundation of a lifelong learner, supports academic growth and fosters the confidence and joy to explore and dream big.

No matter the age or location, students are positively impacted by HCDE teachers and educational aides. It's why HCDE leaders celebrate their dedication and commitment to providing exemplary services to Harris County students year-round, but especially during Teacher Appreciation Week.

"We're in a profession in which you do it for the love of the kids and the impact that you make with the students," Ned said. "And I feel like if you're not in the classroom with the kids, you have to love on the ones that are loving on the kids." ★

AREA COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS EXAMINE WEBSITE STRATEGIES, DIGITAL FOOTPRINT AT LARGEST FINALSITE ONSITE WORKSHOP

WITH NEARLY 50 ATTENDEES at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) North Post Oak Conference Center, educational communications platform Finalsité held its largest onsite workshop across the nation on May 6. The full-day event allowed school communications professionals and website managers to network and collaborate while examining their school district or organization's digital footprint in today's competitive school choice environment.

Workshops were also held in Fort Worth and San Marcos this year, but due to the overwhelming registration response in Houston, Finalsité CEO Jim Calabrese joined in person to meet with district personnel. HCDE Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark, Director of Communications Kristoffer Smith and Web Content Coordinator Oliver Dyke were among those to attend the workshop. 🌟



NATIONAL CONFERENCE INSPIRES LOCAL IMPACT FOR HCDE'S HEAD START PROGRAM



ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT of Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker, Senior Director of Head Start Venetia Peacock and members of the Head Start leadership team traveled to Minneapolis on May 4-7 to attend the National Head Start Conference and Expo, a premier gathering of early childhood leaders, educators and policymakers from across the country. The multi-day event featured workshops, keynote sessions and collaborative forums focused on topics such as early brain development, family engagement, inclusive practices and the latest federal guidance shaping Head Start programs. Attendees gained practical strategies, shared best practices and left energized by a renewed sense of purpose and connection to a national network committed to supporting young learners and their families. Harris County Department of Education's presence at the conference helps bring back innovative ideas to our campuses, which are vital to strengthening our comprehensive services. 🌟

Board Briefs

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM SHARES ELECTION INFORMATION

TO EXPAND ACCESS to nonpartisan election information, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Civic Engagement Team began visiting Head Start end-of-year parent meetings and Adult Education classes this week.

On May 6, Civic Engagement Coordinator Austen Ross-Yorko and Specialist Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero presented to an Adult Education High School Equivalency Diploma class. Sandoval-Guerrero then visited Humble Head Start to meet with parents. In addition to election dates, the duo highlighted HCDE's "Your Voice Matter" Sticker Competition, which is open to all interested participants and runs through June 30.

Key Harris County election dates in May include a runoff for the vacant Houston City Council, District C seat (May 16) and both Primary Runoff early voting (May 18-22) and Election Day (May 26). 🗳️



COURTNEY ATKINSON REPRESENTS HCDE IN REGIONAL TEACHER LEADERSHIP PROGRAM



SPECIAL SCHOOLS' Instructional Coach Courtney Atkinson is leaving her mark on education, working with teachers to improve classroom management and individualize instruction for students who face unique challenges. She was recently selected to join the inaugural

Teacher Leadership Cohort, sponsored by Good Reason Houston and Houston Loves Teachers, alongside nearly 20 educators from across the region. On May 7, Atkinson received her certificate of completion and a \$500 scholarship from the organization to continue learning new strategies that will aid educators. She was supported at the celebration by CJ Rodgers, assistant superintendent of education and enrichment, and Margaret Patton, director of curriculum and compliance services.

The Teacher Leadership Cohort provided educators with professional development focused on solving real problems in their schools and communities, including initiatives on teacher belonging, educator sustainability and parent engagement. Atkinson and her cohort members also served as ambassadors for their profession to Good Reason Houston, Houston Loves Teachers, and their sponsors Chevron and Citgo.

Atkinson's participation in the cohort highlights HCDE's reputation as a leader in education and underscores the importance of having Department representatives in conversations shaping the future of schools across the region. 🌟

IN THE NEWS

TELEMUNDO HIGHLIGHTS HEAD START JOB FAIR



WATCH THE INTERVIEW [HERE](#).

TO HELP HIGHLIGHT Head Start's recent Job Fair on April 28, Harris County Department of Education Translations Coordinator Wendy Utterback recorded an interview with Telemundo 47. The segment was featured in an online article published before the event.

Utterback spoke on Head Start looking to fill various roles, including teachers, administrative personnel, cooks, custodial staff and more. Utterback said HCDE and the division are looking not only for interested individuals but candidates with genuine interest in early childhood education. 🌟

WELCOME TO HCDE

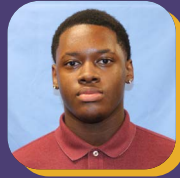
Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for April! Seventeen new faces have joined our Adult Education, Business Services, CASE for Kids, Communications & Creative Services, Head Start and Special Schools divisions



Mario Brownell
Educational Aide III
ABS West



Amanda Chavez
Campus Clerk
Head Start



Charles Cole
Afterschool Program
Specialist
CASE for Kids



Andrea Dangerfield
Quality Assurance Coordinator
Business Services



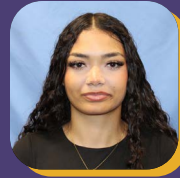
Estrella Gonzalez
Teacher
Adult Education



Sherica Green
Teacher
Head Start



Ulandus Jones
Educational Aide III
Highpoint School



Lyric Lawrence
Food Service Clerk
Fortis Academy



Kiara Lopez
Financial Assistant
Head Start



Teshana Mathurn
Teacher
Adult Education



Joanna Pena
Early Childhood Teacher
Head Start



Dasani Rogers
Substitute Teacher
ABS West



Kristoffer Smith
Director of Communications
Communications and Creative Services



Emely Velasquez Lored
Aide
Adult Education



Aretha Walker
Substitute Teacher
Special Schools



Ashley West
Afterschool Program Specialist
CASE for Kids



Kiril Williams
Teaching Assistant
Head Start

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATION MORALE

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.



Highpoint School teachers pose behind a yard sign celebrating them for Teacher Appreciation Week. Throughout Harris County Department of Education, educators were celebrating and recognized this week for the week they do positively impacting students.

A PARENT IS a child's first teacher, but educators can have an incredible – and immediate – impact on students as early as a few months old, through adulthood. These teachers and educational aides choose to pour into their students and work tirelessly every single day to ultimately see the best in those they serve. It's an act of servitude that deserves recognition every day, but Teacher Appreciation Week (observed annually the first week of May) is a reminder to thank those who helped us reach our personal goals and who are investing in the next generation of scholars and leaders. At HCDE, these educators cover the wide spectrum of education, from our youngest learners at Head Start, our unique student populations at the four Special Schools, and even beyond with Adult Education. I was pleased to see the amount of gratitude shown to our HCDE educators – division leaders showered teachers with gifts, treats and other tokens of appreciation. The gratitude even extends to the school districts we serve – Center for Educator Success team members traveled to campuses at four school districts to recognize candidates in the division's alternative teacher certification program. These moments may be small, but the meaning behind each 'thank you' is immense. Teachers are vital to ensuring students are prepared for the future, so I join others in extending my appreciation to all educators.

We welcomed nearly 50 school communications and website management

professionals to our NPO location for an onsite workshop for Finalsité, the educational communications platform. The event allowed school district team members to network and collaborate on their respective digital footprints. The education space is changing, so a website isn't simply a homepage with informative links, but a marketing tool necessary to stand out in today's school choice environment. Due to the high demand, Finalsité's top executive even attended to show his support and personally meet with district representatives. #TeamHCDE was well represented in the workshop, which shows we continue to be at the forefront of the evolving digital space and how it best serves our stakeholders.

Finally, local elections are right around the corner, and our Civic Engagement team is meeting parents and students to provide nonpartisan information. Members presented to Adult Education High School Equivalency Diploma students and to the first of many Head Start parent groups. Not only did the team offer voter information but also highlighted HCDE's "Your Voice Matters" Sticker Competition, open to all interested parties to spark interest in their civic duties and the legislative process. Thank you to the Civic Engagement team for providing this service to our students and parents.

By acknowledging excellence within the organization, I am working to meet the needs of demonstrating fair and equitable management practices. 🌟



HCDE BOARD

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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](#)