

the **CONNECTOR**



ANNUAL HEART OF EDUCATION LUNCHEON HIGHLIGHTS CASE FOR KIDS, EFHC'S MISSION TO POSITIVELY IMPACT STUDENTS P.3



#TEAMHCDE RECOGNIZES 2025-2026 EDUCATORS OF THE YEAR P.6

ABS EAST CELEBRATES GRADUATES, KICKS OFF HCDE COMMENCEMENT SEASON P.7

of Note

When I first discussed the idea of HCDE Being Exceptional, I defined it as doing something nobody has thought of doing or doing it better/different than anyone else. There is no greater feeling than to watch one of our divisions gainfully move toward this goal.

The Center for Educator Success works with adults who want to transition into teaching. CES is definitely on the road to being exceptional as they approach certification differently than their competitors. There are lots of teacher certification programs out there, many larger than us. But we pride ourselves on the quality of the product (teachers we produce) as well as the wraparound services we provide (and support from instruction to certification and beyond).

The fruit of this labor can be seen this week as we recognize five CES candidates from Spring ISD who received accolades from the district in their first year of teaching. This is a tremendous honor for the candidates and HCDE! I am so proud of our CES division and all they have accomplished with their new teachers and look forward to seeing this program grow and thrive in the years to come.

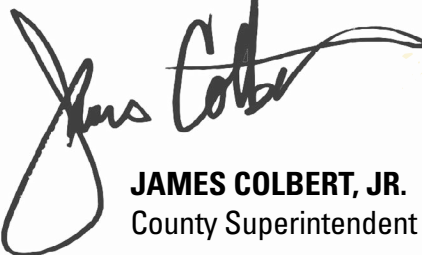
I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by standing meetings with staff. On Tuesday, I met with a credit union regarding a potential partnership involving financial benefits and options for employees. I plan to continue my efforts to identify the best credit union for these services in the coming weeks.

On Tuesday afternoon, I visited with Dr. Mark Smith, superintendent of Fort Bend ISD. On Wednesday, I attended the Education Foundation of Harris County's Heart of Education luncheon at the Junior League. This event has grown in the

last four years since we started it and continues to evolve.

This year's celebration was excellent! Special honoree, Donna Cole, was recognized for her contributions to the community, specifically as a founder of CASE's All-Earth Ecobot Challenge. I really enjoyed seeing Ecobot students demonstrate their robotic knowledge for attendees as well as listening to CASE students stage a mock debate. Ecobot originated as a foundation program funded in partnership with HCDE and corporate sponsors, while CASE Debates is funded by HCDE with support from private donors through the foundation. On Friday, I attended the ABS East graduation program and met with staff for Convocation planning.

Have a wonderful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent





Dr. Lisa Caruthers, senior director for the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids, poses with Spring Branch ISD students who participate in CASE Debates. The students did a mock debate to open the Heart of Education Luncheon on May 13.

EFHC'S HEART OF EDUCATION LUNCHEON TRANSPORTS COMMUNITY PARTNERS INTO A CASE FOR KIDS AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM

THE SOFT WHIR OF LEGO ROBOTS ROLLING ACROSS THE FLOOR MIXED WITH THE CHATTER OF EDUCATORS, community partners and Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) staff as guests stepped into the Junior League of Houston on May 13. More than 230 attendees at the Education Foundation of Harris County's (EFHC) annual Heart of Education Luncheon were welcomed by students eager to demonstrate the skills they developed long after the final school bell rang.

Two teams of students from Sam Houston Elementary School in Galena Park Independent School District drew crowds to each corner of the room as they participated in a mock All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, an afterschool program promoting STEM learning among elementary and middle school students. They built, coded and carefully guided their LEGO robots through a series of environmental-themed tasks as their eyes darted between computer screens and obstacle paths. Guests asked questions about the curriculum, cheered the students on and felt the joy of being momentarily transported into the energy and creativity of an afterschool program in action.

"These kids are so excited to show off their knowledge and robots, and it's really refreshing to see," EFHC Board Chair Michael Parks said. "This is a great opportunity for business leaders and community partners to learn about programs that they didn't know existed, and if we can get them to invest and help fill the gaps in education, then these students' future will only get brighter."

EFHC is the non-profit, philanthropic arm of HCDE, generating support for educational programs and initiatives within Harris County's 25 school districts. This year's luncheon theme — "From Backpacks to Briefcases: Building Skills for Tomorrow's Workforce" — highlights the impact the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids has in preparing students for success beyond the classroom. CASE for Kids connects students with high-quality afterschool programming and summer learning opportunities through partnerships with area school districts, community partners and local businesses, helping them gain access to academic support, arts enrichment, mentorship and leadership development. Operating year-round to provide a safe learning environment, the program not only helps students succeed academically but also prepares them for future careers and lifelong success.

"Their world exists within a few-mile radius, but afterschool programs introduce them to community partners that share their skills and passions and ultimately open their world to new possibilities," Division Senior Director Dr. Lisa Caruthers explained during her opening address. "That opportunity means everything to our kids because they might have an interest in various careers but have no knowledge of how to achieve their goals. That's where afterschool programs help fill the gap."

Spring Branch ISD students from the CASE Debates program impressed guests next as four high schoolers gathered on stage for a mock debate centered on the importance of investing in EFHC and life-changing opportunities made possible through community support. Attendees were

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Board Briefs

handed scorecards and encouraged to evaluate each side's arguments as students passionately defended how EFHC funding helps sustain afterschool and summer programming. As part of the presentation, students walked onto the stage carrying backpacks before exiting with briefcases in hand, a symbolic reminder of the luncheon's theme and the role CASE for Kids played in equipping students with the poise, persuasive oratory skills and ability to command a crowded room.

"We often hear from companies that they can teach students technical skills for a job but need them to come in with the soft skills," Caruthers said. "Employers can't teach people to engage with their colleagues or set the phone down, but students in CASE for Kids are already building those skills and that infrastructure inside themselves by participating in various activities that will naturally carry over into the workforce."

Leisa Holland-Nelson and Shavonnah Roberts Scheiber, the luncheon co-hosts and founders of the radio show Culture Club HTX, introduced a video further highlighting the impact of EFHC funding on CASE for Kids programming. Former afterschool students, including Adrian Izaguirre, shared how their experience was instrumental in finding colleges and career pathways that led to their current employment.

Izaguirre, who attended Houston ISD's Cesar Chavez High School, credits the CASE for Kids Ambassador program with changing his life. Designed to help students become representatives for afterschool programming and establish them as leaders on campus, the program also provides students with the necessary information and advocacy skills to meet with local, state and national government leaders. Izaguirre described how sharing the meaning of out-of-school-time

programming with elected officials was a critical turning point in his life, where he realized his potential.

"Being a CASE Ambassador laid the foundation for the leader I am today," he said with a smile. "I'm now able to give back to my community through the skills I learned afterschool and throughout my education, once again possible through the guidance of CASE staff and scholarship opportunities they helped me find."

The first-generation high school and college graduate returned to CASE for Kids as a County Connections site coordinator, spending five years identifying and funding nonprofit organizations that offer youth summer enrichment programs. They include sports, fine arts, academic enrichment, college-readiness initiatives and mentoring.

Izaguirre now serves as the Texas director for civic engagement at the NALEO Education Fund, where he leads efforts to empower Latino communities, drive voter turnout for upcoming elections and support naturalization workshops.



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)



HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. poses with students from Galena Park Independent School District's Sam Houston Elementary School who showcased the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge at the luncheon. The STEM initiative uses a hands-on, project-based learning model to help students navigate real-world environmental challenges.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

Board Briefs

“The impact that CASE for Kids has on students’ lives cannot always be measured quantitatively, but you can definitely see it,” Izaguirre said. “It’s shown up in my life and career in the people I’ve interacted and collaborated with, my peers and the memories and programs we reminisce about. Without a doubt, CASE for Kids is making an impact and changing people’s lives, just as it has changed mine.”



Luncheon attendees were tasked with judging a mock debate. Spring Branch ISD students from the CASE Debates program spoke on the importance of investing in EFHC and life-changing opportunities made possible through community support.

EFHC closed the event by honoring longtime supporter Donna Fujimoto Cole with the Heart of Education Champion Award for her enduring commitment to public education and youth enrichment programs across Harris County. The third-generation Japanese American entrepreneur founded Cole Chemical & Distributing, Inc. in the 1980s after earning a reputation for exceptional customer

service and high-quality products. Cole has become a passionate advocate for public school students and steadfast supporter of EFHC initiatives, which include her contributions as the founding funder of the CASE for Kids Ecobot program.

“We wanted children who weren’t from affluent households to be able to compete with kids from wealthier neighborhoods who already had access to computers and internet access,” she recalled. “Now we get to see hundreds of students each year solve coding problems, express their creativity and have fun in a program many people found difficult to conceive when we first started.”

Cole’s funding came full circle when Galena Park ISD students who participated in the Ecobot demonstration at the start cheered her on and offered shouts of gratitude for their STEM curriculum. Cole explained how every student deserves the chance to discover their strengths and passions, even when those talents are not found in a traditional classroom setting.

“Whether it’s STEM, music or arts, afterschool programs encourage students to grow,” Cole said. “They create a space for them to learn how to play and work with other people, keep kids out of trouble and stimulate the talents within them. We must make sure those programs are available to them, and that’s where your donations to EFHC start making a difference, because when kids pursue things they are passionate about, their potential for growth is endless.”

The Heart of Education Luncheon raised more than \$95,000 to support CASE for Kids and other EFHC initiatives that expand access to scholarships, resources and programming for students across Harris County. As guests said their goodbyes, the “Backpack to Briefcases” theme once again lingered as a reminder that, with the right support, mentorship and opportunities, students can develop the confidence and skills needed to succeed beyond the classroom. ✨



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR DONNA COLE PROFILE VIDEO](#)



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

Board Briefs

SPECIAL SCHOOLS 2025-2026 EDUCATORS OF THE YEAR HONORED FOR EXCELLENCE AND IMPACT

MORE THAN 170 EDUCATORS STRIVE DAILY TO DEVELOP INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT STUDENTS with unique challenges who attend one of Harris County Department of Education's four special schools. However, a few rise above expectations, providing instruction that changes students' lives through their ability to lead with skill and empathy.

This week, Academic and Behavior School (ABS) West and Highpoint School were a source of pride as division leadership surprised Christina Aggison, the 2025-2026 Teacher of the Year, and Dotwaun Harris, the Educational Aide of the Year, at their respective campuses for their well-deserved recognition.

"I think when you have individuals that really go above and beyond to break through the ceiling of what people have deemed impossible, you have to celebrate them, and we are more than happy to do that," said Senior Director of Special Schools Dr. Charles Ned. "That raw emotion you see from the honorees is a byproduct of them thinking about their journey and recognizing how far they and their students have come."

Shouts of "the best in the West," a popular phrase of encouragement used at ABS West, could be heard as Aggison was surprised. She joined the team in 2022 as a relief teacher and quickly realized she wanted to take her career to the next level. HCDE's Teacher of the Year completed her



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

alternative certification program through the Teachers of Tomorrow program in February and has been dedicated to helping students regulate their mental, emotional and social health. The task is no easy feat. However, Aggison handles each challenge with grace and meets her students with extraordinary patience and consistency.

"I'm so honored to be given this title, because to me it's not just a title, it's proof of my dedication, proof of my hard work, and proof that I'm supposed to be here," an emotional Aggison said. "I'm happy my students were able to share that experience with me because I love them so much. They give me the energy to come here every day, laugh with them, grow with them and experience a genuine love I didn't know existed before working at ABS West."

Connection is key at Highpoint School, and Dotwaun Harris has the gift. He stepped on campus as a natural leader in 2025, able to meet students where they are, have real conversations about their behavior, and relate with them about topics beyond academics. Founder of the "The Shop," a mentorship program for young men on campus, HCDE's Educational Aide of the Year takes pride in his personal relationship with students, which allows him to instill life lessons, discipline and motivation in the next generation. Harris takes the campus motto, "a place for second chances," to heart by empowering students to believe in their potential and pursue meaningful paths in life.

"I believe that everyone needs a mentor or some type of guidance because you don't know everything," he explained. "I want to continue guiding these students and putting them in the right positions to be successful, because everyone is responsible for creating their reality. Every decision these students have made up to this point is why they are at Highpoint, but if they can learn to make better decisions, they can do anything they set their minds to."

Aggison and Harris were gifted flowers, a Raising Cane's gift basket, and a \$1,000 check, sponsored by the Education Foundation of Harris County and partners from PowerSchool and Quality Security. They will also be honored at HCDE's Celebration of Excellence on May 20, an event that recognizes key employees of the Department's instructional divisions. ★



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

STUDENTS, FAMILIES CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS AT 2ND ANNUAL ABS WEST TRANSITION FAIR

TO GIVE ITS STUDENTS AND FAMILIES OPPORTUNITIES TO BEST PLAN THEIR FUTURES, Academic and Behavior School West staff connected them with a multitude of community partners at its Transition Fair: Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow. The second annual event, held May 13, links



attendees with representatives and organizations that can help students as they transition to adulthood.

“Parents, this is for you,” ABS West Principal Jatata Hutton said to open the fair. “I know we may get busy a lot of times and I don’t get the chance to speak with you as much as the assistant principals and teachers, but do know that when we talk about you’re children exiting ABS West, we want to set them up for success. We want to make sure we see them being productive and you have the support you need.”

Businesses like H-E-B discussed student employment opportunities upon graduation. Other organizations included Summerhouse, which supports adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through employment, volunteerism and partnerships, and the Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD.

Harris County Department of Education’s two Academic and Behavior Schools (East and West) provide supportive learning environments for students aged 5-22 with intellectual, developmental and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorder and other health impairments. The Transition Fair created a space that empowered families with resources they may not have known existed and showed students a future filled with support. ★

ABS EAST COMMUNITY, DEPARTMENT LEADERS COME TOGETHER TO HONOR GRADUATES

FOUR ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIOR SCHOOL (ABS) EAST CLASS OF 2026 GRADUATES were honored and celebrated May 15 for their academic achievements. With family, friends, campus staff and Harris County Department of Education leadership in attendance to celebrate the honorees, the graduates enjoyed their commencement moments.

The ceremony began with campus leadership recognizing student achievement, including most improved honors and other awards. Graduates – Dawt Chin and Caleb Clark (both of La Porte Independent School District), Jorge Faria (Houston ISD) and Brandon Wolfe (New Caney ISD) – were then presented with certificate of completion.

Principal Mercedes Loves thanked parents for entrusting HCDE and ABS East staff to invest in their children, while Superintendent James Colbert Jr. offered words of encouragement.

“A school year is hard and being an educator is difficult,” he said. “But what you see today are the highlights of what a year can become where we get to celebrate those kids who have stuck with the system and have made it to the end.” ★



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



SUPERMENTORS, HEAD START YOUNG LEARNERS END SUCCESSFUL 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEARS WITH CENTER CELEBRATIONS

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) LEADERS AND COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS were celebrated this week as part of the Head Start Real SuperMENTors Read Program. Each May, Head Start campuses honor their SuperMENTors for their yearlong commitment to serving Harris County's youngest learners. Following introductions in September, the male role models visit monthly to read to students through April.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr., and assistant superintendents Jonathan Park, Dr. CJ Rodgers and Dr. Tyrone Sylvester were among those to visit students on May 14. In total, more than 40 volunteers served the 12 Head Start centers.

Students made personalized gifts and cards to thank mentors for their impact to the program. A number were also treated to song and dance performances. 🌟



CES COHORT TEACHER CANDIDATES EARN TOP YEARLY EDUCATOR AWARDS IN SPRING ISD

IN WORKING WITH PARTNER INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICTS, the Center for Educator Success (CES) has successfully helped prepare candidates to become fully-certified classroom teachers. Their growth is positively affecting students they serve and others are taking notice.

Five Spring ISD candidates recently earned district-wide recognition or beyond. Dekaney High School Special Education teacher Bryce Curz earned the New Elementary Teacher Alliance Teacher of the Year Award.

Hoyland Elementary School's TreMill Trotter was recognized as the District of Innovation Teacher of the Year.

Eryn Davis (Hoyland) and Marks Labostrie (Ponderosa Elementary School) were among those named Spring ISD's Rookie Teachers of the Year.

Contance Thomas-Martin (Burchett Elementary School) earned an Exemplary designation through the Texas Incentive Allotment, established by the 86th Texas Legislature with House Bill 3 to reward, retain and recruit effective teachers. In addition, she was a District of Innovation Teacher of the Year nominee. 🌟



Board Briefs

HEAD START EDUCATORS HONORED DURING TEACHER APPRECIATION WEEK



FROM MEALS AND TREATS TO PERSONALIZED GIFTS, teachers and educators at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) 12 Head Start centers were celebrated and honored for the positive impact they're having on the area's youngest learners.

As part of the Teacher Appreciation Week, observed annually during the first week of May, HCDE joined school district and organizations across the nation in recognizing teachers and educational aides and celebrating their purpose in creating learning environments where students can be successful. At Head Start and Early Head Start center across the county, that impact begins as early as six months. ★

HCDE, EDUCATION FOUNDATION CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS AT RECENT EVENTS

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz and Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva supported local initiatives and represented the Department at a number of recent community events.

Bartz attended a luncheon honoring former HCDE Board Trustee Erica Lee Carter, who was appointed in February as the new Harris County Administrator. She is the first African American woman to hold the position. Carter served as a HCDE Board Trustee from 2013-2019.

On May 5, EFHC Board Member Steven David, who serves as chief strategy and operations officer for Houston Mayor John Whitmire, presented the city's fiscal year 2027 budget and key policy decisions during a Greater Houston Partnership Future of Texas luncheon.

Silva attended a Bridgerton-inspired tea benefitting Houston Texans Head Coach DeMeco Ryans' The Ryans Family Foundation and True Recovery for Single Moms Legacy She Builds Benefit on May 3. She connected with nonprofit organization leaders, some who supported the EFHC Heart of Education Luncheon through silent auction contributions.



On May 1, Silva joined community partners and state and local legislators at the Latin Women's Initiative Spring Fashion Show & Luncheon. She sat with Sen. Carol Alvarado, Precinct 4 Commissioner Leslie Briones and EFHC Topgolf Tournament honoree Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca among others. ★

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE D: COMMUNITY RELATIONS

- Works with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way.



Donna Fujimoto Cole, second from right, was honored as the Heart of Education Champion Award honoree at the Education Foundation of Harris County's luncheon on May 13. An avid supporter of public education and afterschool programming, Cole is a founding funder of the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge and volunteer with Head Start.

THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF HOUSTON WAS NEARLY STANDING ROOM ONLY THIS WEEK FOR THE ANNUAL HEART OF EDUCATION LUNCHEON,

a fundraiser to generate support for educational programs and initiatives in Harris County. HCDE leaders and community leaders came together to celebrate the Education Foundation of Harris County's support within the county's 25 school districts. The event highlighted the impact CASE for Kids has in preparing students for success outside school hours. Guests were able to see firsthand the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, as students from Galena Park ISD moved their LEGO robots across the gameboards. They also served as judges for a mock debate featuring CASE Debates participants from Spring Branch ISD. Many CASE for Kids students wouldn't have access to high-quality afterschool programming had it not been for these partnerships and initiatives. It then made sense that Donna Fujimoto Cole was honored with the Heart of Education Champion Award at the luncheon. She's a founding funder of the Ecobot program and is a passionate advocate for public education and EFHC initiatives. Part of HCDE and the foundation's mission is to fill in the gaps in public education, and I'm proud to live in a community that values education and supports the work we do.

Coming off a successful Teacher Appreciation Week, our Special Schools Division surprised our Teacher of the Year and Educational Aide of the Year. The 2025-2026 honorees are impacting our

students at Academic and Behavior School West and Highpoint School, respectively. ABS West's Christina Aggison is the living example of finding and seeking your purpose, as she joined HCDE as a relief teacher in 2022 before completing her alternative certification program and now serving as a Life Skills teacher. Dotwaun Harris takes pride in building connections and relationships with students, a vital skill for Highpoint students. He empowers them to believe in their potential and helps put them in positions to be successful. Both are more than deserving of this honor. Congratulations to Aggison and Harris and I look forward to highlighting them at our Celebration of Excellence at the end of May.

Finally, four ABS East students crossed the stage on Friday in front of family and supporters. It's the first of three graduation ceremonies we'll have across Harris County Department of Education – ABS West and Fortis Academy are May 21-22, respectively. With our knowledgeable and passionate educators combined with supportive families, we're able to work together to meet the needs of each student and assist him or her to find a successful path. Congratulations to our ABS East graduates.

By functioning as the primary ambassador for the Department and maintaining involvement in community events, I am meeting the expectation to partner with governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students. ★



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UPCOMING EVENTS

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

June 11
iPASS

June 13
Adult Education Career Workforce Day