

# the **CONNECTOR**

A Weekly Newsletter from the Superintendent of Harris County Department of Education



## HCDE HONORS ITS BEST OF 2025-2026 AT ANNUAL CELEBRATION OF EXCELLENCE **P.3**



VOICES OF THE WEST CHOIR BUILD TOGETHERNESS AMONG STAFF MEMBERS, STUDENTS **P.6**



CLASS OF 2026 GRADUATES CELEBRATED AT ABS WEST, FORTIS ACADEMY **P.7**

# of Note

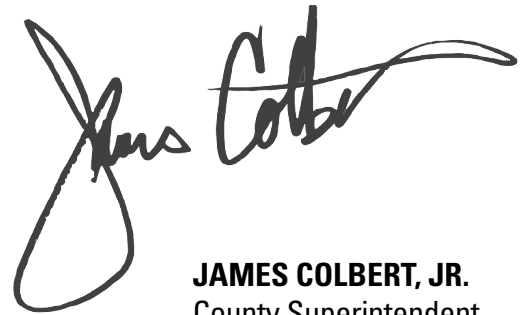
**LEADERSHIP IS** one of my favorite things to study and talk about. I love to learn about the different facets of leadership and then apply those concepts to my current and past work experiences.

This week, I related a tale of leadership to about 100 young leaders in Laredo, emphasizing that their success in college and life will depend on how well they govern their attention to the things that matter versus how well they govern the distractions that can take them off course. This is an important lesson that I try to impart to as many young people as possible as I have seen first-hand how attitudes and behavior can dramatically alter a person's future. I always enjoy talking to students and listening to their perspective and I look forward to watching these capable young leaders lead our communities in the future.

I started the week traveling to Laredo on Sunday for the Youth Leadership Conference where I gave the keynote remarks on Monday. On Tuesday, I attended standing meetings before meeting with an HCDE advocate to discuss issues that may impact the organization. On Wednesday, I attended the regular board meeting followed by our annual Celebration of Excellence. This is a wonderful event we started about four years ago to recognize the efforts of staff in our instructional divisions as well as our employees of the month. I enjoy emceeding this event each year, talking

about each division and how our employees directly impact student outcomes. This is just another way that HCDE stands out with our positive work culture and how we celebrate the hard work our staff exhibit on a daily basis. On Thursday, I attended the ABS West graduation followed by lunch with Dr. Anthony Mays, superintendent of Alief ISD. Today, I met with staff and then delivered remarks at the Fortis Academy Graduation.

All HCDE facilities will be closed Monday for the Memorial Day holiday. Have a great three-day weekend.



**JAMES COLBERT, JR.**  
County Superintendent



# Employee Spotlight



Adult Education award honorees pose for a photo with Superintendent James Colbert Jr., second from left, division Senior Director Dr. Eduardo Honold, second from right, and members of the HCDE leadership team.

## BEST OF THE BEST: #TEAMHCDE'S TOP EMPLOYEES RECOGNIZED AT CELEBRATION OF EXCELLENCE BANQUET

**WHETHER IT WAS** Ann Petty, a music therapist completing her 33rd year with Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), or Educational Aide Rockette Simpson, who started at Fortis Academy in February, their feelings were similar.

As employees gathered May 20 for the Department's fourth annual Celebration of Excellence banquet, many reflected on the impact of working for an organization that not only supports learners of all ages across Harris County, but also pours into its staff and truly honors their achievements and commitment to serve the community.

"This feels amazing and just means a great deal," Petty said. "I tell my friends when things are happening to me and they'll say I definitely work for an organization that honors people."

Added Simpson, who joined HCDE after stops in teaching and working for the city and state: "I know I just got here but I want to be impactful."

In total, 41 employees from HCDE's five instructional divisions – Adult Education, Head Start, Special Schools, School-Based Therapy Services and the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids – and



Superintendent James Colbert Jr. poses with Christina McCartney, who was named the Head Start division's Assistant Campus Manager of the Year. McCartney serves at Barrett Station Early Head Start.

the 2025-2026 Employees of the Month were recognized. Each received certificates of appreciation in front of colleagues and loved ones, smiling for photos and taking in the cheers.

"It is a blessing to lead this organization but the biggest blessing I have are the people I get to work with who are as passionate as I am about working with special needs students, adult education students and little, little children," Superintendent James

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# Employee Spotlight

Colbert Jr. said during opening remarks. “Those you’ll hear about were selected by their colleagues and recognized as the exception.”

What shows with Petty and Simpson sharing the same stage is HCDE recruits staff members who can make an immediate presence, have a lasting impact and all things in between.

Six honorees have at least 16 years of service to HCDE, including Petty and Rolanda Ates, the Head Start teaching assistant of the year celebrating her silver anniversary (25 years).

A whopping 24 have five years of service or less, meaning division leaders and Human Resources are identifying talented individuals to jump right in and continue the outstanding work being done across HCDE.

“It feels amazing to work at a place like this,” said Dotwuan Harris, honored as the Highpoint School and HCDE Educational Aide of the Year. “I feel grateful and thankful for the staff I work with and to be part of the HCDE team.”



Loved ones cheered on and took photos of the many honorees. In all, 41 HCDE employees were recognized among the five instructional divisions and Employees of the Month.



Highpoint School’s administration team poses with Dotwuan Harris, third from left, and Chelsea Bryant, third from right. The two are the school’s nominees for Educational Aide of the Year and Teacher of the Year, respectively.



The fourth annual Celebration of Excellence honored 41 HCDE employees across the five instructional divisions and Employees of the Month.

Colbert closed the evening by sharing his gratitude for the honorees with their loved ones in attendance and again thanking employees for continuously committing their lives to better those of Harris County students and communities.

“I hope you saw how special they are and how special the divisions they represent are,” Colbert said. “Just as personal as all this is to me, the people who came up here have a story of why it’s personal to them. They could work at any place they want to or probably make more money doing something else, but for whatever reason, they chose to do what they do and chose to do it with us. That’s what makes it special.” 🌟

# Employee Spotlight



*ABS West assistant principals Tawana Daniels, left, and Gaylynn Sanders cheer on the honorees.*



*Superintendent James Colbert Jr. congratulates Sashaleann Medina, who was honored as the CASE for Kids Afterschool Program Specialist of the Year.*



*Superintendent James Colbert Jr., center middle, joins team members of School-Based Therapy Services for a photo.*



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)



## VOICES OF THE WEST CHOIR USE MUSIC TO BUILD CONFIDENCE, COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

**MUSIC IS** one thing that connects everyone, whether through the sound of a good beat or the harmonies of lyrics that touch your heart. As Teacher Cornell Stallworth led members of the Academic and Behavior School West choir in their performance at HCDE's Celebration of Excellence on May 20, more than 40 employees and their families were overjoyed as they reveled in the group's talent.

The choir started after a couple of colleagues heard each other humming in the ABS West hallways and decided to sing a few gospel selections at a Christmas program. When guests were moved to tears, the group was asked to perform at school assemblies, heritage month celebrations and holiday parties. Ten employees joined Stallworth in a matter of months, and before long, students wanted in on the fun as well.

Though unable to attend the Celebration of Excellence event, Jayden Dunbar joined the choir earlier this year and has worked with staff to expand his vocal range and improve his ability to take instruction. Referred to ABS West by Waller Independent School District for challenges navigating his emotions and behavior, Dunbar has used the choir as a positive outlet, helping him learn to express himself and gain confidence in his abilities.

"Music is a universal language that brings people together regardless of age or background and creates a sense of unity among our staff and students," Stallworth



explained. "This choir has allowed us to build relationships and create a positive outlet for our students where we inspire one another, celebrate our school community, and create lasting memories."

The ABS West choir was asked by HCDE leaders to perform a selection of uplifting songs at the Celebration of Excellence to remind employees their work is important. The lyrics of songs like "Love," "More Than Anything," and "I Will Be Blessed" were perfectly arranged to leave attendees feeling inspired, uplifted, and encouraged to return to their campuses and continue going above and beyond for HCDE students and programs. ★

# Board Briefs

## ABS WEST GRADUATION CELEBRATES RESILIENCE AND STUDENT GROWTH



**ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIOR SCHOOL (ABS) WEST** celebrated a powerful milestone on May 21 as six seniors crossed the stage surrounded by proud families, staff and classmates cheering them on every step of the way. HCDE leaders attended the ceremony, which not only highlighted academic success, but also the resilience, determination and personal growth the graduates demonstrated throughout their educational journey.

Cendria Brumfield from Brenham Independent School District delivered an inspirational speech reflecting on the challenges and progress students made while attending school. He shared how the support of teachers and staff helped them develop strategies to better manage behaviors and stay focused on their goals while earning the credits needed for commencement. Brumfield was joined by fellow graduates Dylan Stallman, Ode Nwachukwu and Tirza Baiza (Alief ISD), Parrish Ford (Pasadena ISD), Ezequiel Perez (Spring Branch ISD) and Brian Brown (Spring ISD).

Campus staff expressed their pride in the graduates, noting the confidence, maturity and perseverance the students showed both inside and outside the classroom. As caps flew and applause filled the room, the ceremony served as a reminder that every student's path to success looks different, and every victory deserves to be celebrated. 🌟



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

## FORTIS ACADEMY STAFF, COMMUNITY CELEBRATE CLASS OF 2026 GRADUATES

**FOR FIVE SENIORS** at Fortis Academy, May 22 wasn't just the end of the week but a time to celebrate their achievements and recognize their accomplishments.

Friends and family – in addition to Harris County Department of Education and campus staff – did just that for Gerardo Contreras and Ruben Rodarte (Galena Park Independent School District), Jerry Garza and Crystal Leal (Aldine ISD) and Crystalyn Hall (Barbers Hill ISD). They celebrated the Class of 2026 high school graduations and cheered on as the five students donned their caps and gowns and took in all the pomp and circumstance.

Graduations are special to Fortis students, who are benefactors of the only public recovery school in the greater Houston area. They received diplomas from their home school districts and have the opportunity to participate in those ceremonies as well.

Brandon Flora served as the featured speaker. A former student at Highpoint North before it was transformed to Fortis, Flora congratulated the graduates and their families and encouraged each student to pursue their aspirations. 🌟



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

## HCDE LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS FORMER ELT MEMBER, SUPT. COLBERT SERVES AS KEYNOTE SPEAKER AT CONFERENCE IN LAREDO

**MEMBERS OF** Harris County Department of Education's Executive Leadership Team joined Superintendent James Colbert Jr. in support of Dr. Jesus Amezcua at the 22nd Annual Youth Leadership Conference at Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) in Laredo.

Amezcua retired from HCDE in December after serving 18 years as Assistant Superintendent of Business Services. Before joining the Department, he spent 19 years as an adjunct professor at TAMIU while serving at Cotulla Independent School District. Amezcua is co-founder of the conference, where featured speakers provide leadership insights and experiences to youth in the Laredo and south Texas area. HCDE is a sponsor of the conference.

Colbert gave the keynote address. Also attending in support were Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker, Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark and Chief Operations Officer Dr. Michelle Williams. 🌟



## EDUCATION FOUNDATION DIRECTOR CONNECTS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS AT LOCAL EVENTS

**EDUCATION FOUNDATION AND PARTNERSHIPS** Director Trina Silva recently connected with local organizations and initiatives, a number which support Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) and its philanthropic arm – Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC).

Among the events she attended were:

- East End Chamber of Commerce's 14th Annual Education Symposium, which featured panel discussions exploring post-graduation opportunities. Silva serves as secretary for the chamber's Foundation Board of Directors.
- H.E.A.R.T. Program's "The Goal is in the H.E.A.R.T. Luncheon" as a guest of NRG. The program creates opportunities for adults with intellectual or development disabilities by providing training, housing and employment initiatives. Silva connected with Amegy Bank, an EFHC Heart of Education Luncheon sponsor.



- Community Conversation hosted by the One Chase Community Team, which brought together community leaders and nonprofit partners to discuss financial challenges impacting local families and explore collaborative solutions. 🌟

# Board Briefs



Trustee Richard Cantu, President



Trustee Erica Davis, First Vice President



Trustee John McGee, Second Vice President

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES ELECT NEW PRESIDENT, OFFICERS FOR 2026

**DURING THE** May Board of Trustees meeting, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) welcomed Trustee Richard Cantu back to the center seat of the dais as the new elected board president. He follows Trustee Amy Hinojosa, who proudly served two consecutive terms.

Cantu previously served as board president in 2022.

Trustee Erica Davis will join Cantu as the First Vice President and Trustee John McGee will serve as the Second Vice President.

#TeamHCDE looks forward to its next chapter of educational excellence, leadership and service to others. 🌟



## CASE FOR KIDS HOSTS INFORMATIONAL SESSION FOR YOUTH SERVICE PROVIDERS, NONPROFITS



**COMMUNITY PARTNERS**, nonprofit organization leaders and youth services providers gathered on May 19 to learn more about how the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids supports the out-of-school time community across Harris County. Senior Director Dr. Lisa Caruthers welcomed more than 20 guests to the interactive sessions, which provided an overview of the division and the Harris County Department of Education's various programs and services. She then welcomed Procurement Director Dr. Edna Johnson for a fireside chat that detailed HCDE's bid and procurement processes and strategies for securing contracts and funding. Afterward, attendees broke out into small groups where experienced CASE partners could learn how to expand their services, and new clients could explore how CASE can support their work. Creating a space for partners to share challenges, ideas and goals reinforced the importance of collaboration in strengthening programs and resources that benefit children throughout the region. 🌟

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

## SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATION MORALE

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.



Celebration of Excellence award honorees from the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids pose for a photo with members of the HCDE leadership team. The staff recognition event honored employees from HCDE's five instructional divisions as well as the Employees of the Month during the 2025-2026 school year.

**WHETHER IT'S SPEAKING TO STAFF** or community partners regarding our organization, one consistent thought I've always shared is Harris County Department of Education is the best place I've worked. A big reason is due to all the dedicated employees. From #TeamHCDE working with students at the Head Start campuses, four Special Schools and the Adult Education Learning Center, to our many School-Based therapists and CASE for Kids site and program coordinators across Harris County, to talented individuals within our support divisions providing services to our employees. At the annual Celebration of Excellence, leadership congratulated and recognized our exceptional team members and honored them for their outstanding work. This event highlights the contributions from staff members across HCDE's five instructional divisions in addition to recognizing the Employees of the Month from the past year. What makes the event more meaningful is that the room is filled with family members and colleagues beaming with pride for their loved ones and teammates. I am thankful to all the honorees for being the standard bearers for this outstanding organization.

A treat to Celebration of Excellence was showcasing the talented choir from ABS West. Starting from a few staff members hearing their respective melodies in the hallway, the ensemble has quickly become a mainstay at ABS West events, performing at heritage month programs, holiday parties and the like. It's a treat to know staff come together to showcase their talent. But the ABS West choir is more than an ensemble

– it's become another educational tool to help students. Two students asked to join the choir, and participating has not only helped expand their vocal range and ability to follow instructions but also to gain self-confidence and better navigate their emotions and behavior. Learning is beyond the four walls of the classroom so knowing this choir positively impacts our students reaffirms the "why" for us as educators. Hopefully everyone enjoyed the tunes at Celebration of Excellence, but I'm also hoping everyone walked away equally impressed with what the choir has done for our participating students.

Finally, we celebrated two more graduation ceremonies this week as six ABS West and four Fortis Academy students crossed the stage Thursday and Friday. Graduation isn't something to be taken lightly, especially with the students we serve at our Special Schools. Every year, we watch Fortis Academy students overcome adversity to reach and maintain sobriety, as well as Academic and Behavior School students reach their full potential and conquer challenges. In both cases this week, supportive staff members and structured learning environments make graduations possible. HCDE is fully behind all the students, families and communities we serve, and it's an honor to celebrate the Class of 2026 graduates. I look forward to seeing what the future holds and hearing success stories from these students.

By promoting the great work of staff, I am meeting the expectation to establish a culture of excellence at HCDE. ★



### HCDE BOARD

**Board President**  
Richard Cantu

**1st Vice President**  
Dr. Erica Davis

**2nd Vice President**  
Dr. John McGee

**Board Members**  
Amy Hinojosa  
Eric Dick  
Andrea Duhon  
Silky Joshi-Malik

### UPCOMING EVENTS

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

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

**June 10-13**  
TASB Summer Leadership Institute (San Antonio)

**June 11**  
[iPASS](#)

**June 13**  
Adult Education Career Workforce Day

**June 17**  
Board Meeting