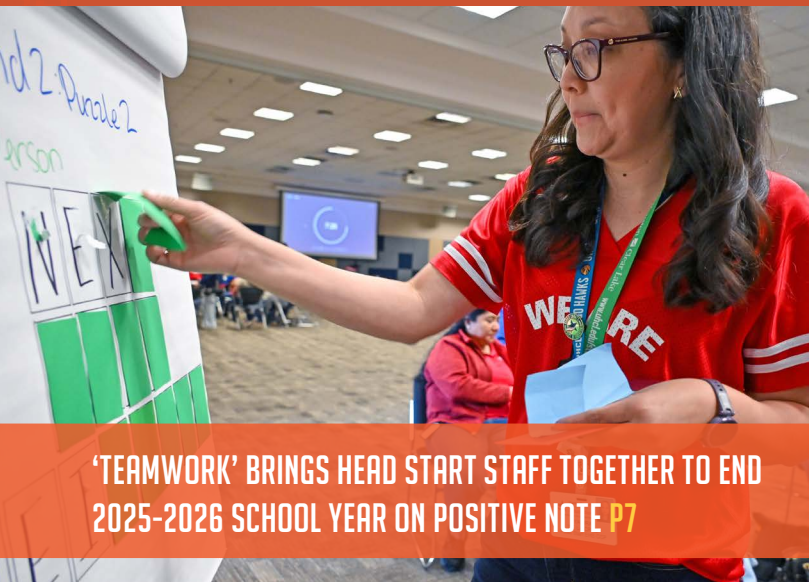


# the **CONNECTOR**

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



**HCDE CELEBRATES ITS CLASS OF 2026 GRADUATES, HONORS THEIR ROADS TO OVERCOME ADVERSITY P.3**



**'TEAMWORK' BRINGS HEAD START STAFF TOGETHER TO END 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR ON POSITIVE NOTE P7**



**AS KEYNOTE SPEAKER, DR. SYLVESTER CONGRATULATES FONWOOD LEARNERS AT END-OF-YEAR CELEBRATION P.8**

# of Note

**The last week of May** is bittersweet in education. While we are sad to see our students go for the summer or when they graduate, we are also super excited for them to experience new opportunities and adventures. And days after they walk across that stage or head out for the long break, we dive into planning for next school year and how we will welcome them back in August.


This week we get a glimpse into this multifaceted period of time as we congratulate the Class of 2026 from our schools, honor our Teacher and Educational Aide of the year, celebrate the end of the year with Head Start and continue safety trainings and convocation planning. May and June can be hectic at HCDE but I take pride in knowing we are providing a memorable send-off for students and staff. The last day of school for Head Start was May 22 and school is done on June 4. Welcome to summer 2026!

I started the week on Tuesday with ELT after the Memorial Day holiday. Tuesday afternoon I met with staff and then attended a retirement celebration for a Center for Educator Success employee. On Wednesday, I held standing meetings and continued planning for Convocation. I started my day on Thursday recording an end-of-year video message for staff before meeting with Dr. Ford Fisher, chancellor of Houston City College, about future potential collaborations. That evening, I attended the Teacher and Educational Aide of the Year celebration dinner with our Schools Division. Today, I had breakfast with President

Cantú and met with staff regarding ongoing projects and initiatives.

We start our summer flex schedule next week in which employees work four 10-hour days during June and July. During this time, main office hours are 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. With this schedule, all schools, Head Start campuses and the Irvington administration building will be closed on Fridays. Our NPO offices will remain open for those employees who choose not to participate in the flex schedule.

Have a great weekend.



**JAMES COLBERT, JR.**  
County Superintendent



# Program Connections



Cendria Brumfield proudly holds up her certificate of completion from ABS West at the graduation ceremony on May 21. She has gained employment with her home district, Brenham ISD, with the skills learned through the campus' life skills workforce program.

## PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE: CLASS OF 2026 COMBINES GROWTH, #TEAMHCDE SUPPORT TO CROSS THE STAGE

**C**ONGRATULATIONS TO THE CLASS OF 2026 graduates from Harris County Department of Education's Special Schools! Over the last few weeks, HCDE and campus leaders joined partnering school district personnel, family members and loved ones in celebrating 18 students who "crossed the stage" to earn their diplomas and certificates of graduation. These joyous occasions showcase what is possible when students and their respective villages come together through support and hard work to accomplish academic and life success.

At Fortis Academy, students are empowered to take a path of sobriety, while those at HCDE's Academic and Behavior Schools have worked to overcome emotional or physical limitations.

Brandon Wolfe (ABS East), Cendria Brumfield (ABS West) and Jerry Garza (Fortis) are three success stories, but they also represent the magic that happens at HCDE's four special

*Special Schools Class of 2026*

**▶ TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: VIEW OUR VIDEO**

Harris County Department of Education

schools every day. They show that when a strong support system combines with passionate educators, the result is top-notch services. Here's a look at these three:

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# Program Connections



## ABS WEST VALEDICTORIAN CENDRIA BRUMFIELD PROVES STUDENT POTENTIAL HAS NO LIMITS

**WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT SYSTEM**, lots of hard work and determination to better oneself, anything is possible. Cendria Brumfield was referred to Academic and Behavior School (ABS) West by Brenham Independent School District and has made great strides in overcoming the challenges of her emotional disability and Autism Spectrum Disorder.

On May 21, Brumfield crossed the stage, received her diploma and was named class valedictorian as campus staff, parents, family and friends cheered her on. She was joined by a handful of graduates who also face their own trials with life skills or behavioral handicaps.

“You are all skilled, and I see that in your daily work,” Principal Jatata Hutton said to graduates during the ceremony. “As I look at you all, I see nothing but potential and possibilities.”

Educators described Brumfield as extremely reserved when she first arrived on campus, struggling to control her emotions or express herself to peers. When they learned more about her home life, they realized the teen had endured trauma and needed to be surrounded by women who showered her with love.

**“ YOU ARE ALL SKILLED, AND I SEE THAT IN YOUR DAILY WORK. AS I LOOK AT YOU ALL, I SEE NOTHING BUT POTENTIAL AND POSSIBILITIES. ”**

“Some of the other female teachers and I really took her under our wing and gave her all the extra love that she needed, and we quickly started to see changes in her behavior,” said Christina Aggison, Brumfield’s current teacher, who has known her from day one. “She has come a long way. Now, she can call out her problems or mistakes, apologize or say, ‘Let me breathe.’ She knows her techniques and uses them daily.”

While enrolled in the life skills program, students link academic lessons to real-world experiences through volunteer opportunities at the Houston Food Bank, Goodwill and partnering ISDs. The work creates a space for developing critical thinking, communication, problem-solving and job training.

That hard work paid off for Brumfield, who shared during



*Educational Aide Reginald Wright, left, and Principal Jatata Hutton, center right, proudly pose with two graduates from the Class of 2026 students.*



*Cendria Brumfield’s teacher, Christina Aggison, congratulates her with flowers and makes her promise to come visit to share her success with other*

the commencement address that she secured a job with Brenham ISD after graduation. She credits the opportunity to ABS West educators and staff who helped her achieve her potential.

“I’m blessed to have Ms. Aggison as my teacher; she was always nice to me and helped me,” an excited Brumfield said. “I want autistic students to know that if they are nice and don’t make bad choices, they can be like me, graduate from school and get a job.”

Brumfield looks forward to earning real wages, opening up a bank account and working with her new colleagues. She promised to return to ABS West to visit and serve as an inspiration and a reminder to students that anything can happen when you put your mind to it.

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# Program Connections



## FORTIS ACADEMY GIVES JERRY GARZA NEW OPPORTUNITIES, PATH TO SUCCESS WITH SOBRIETY



Fortis Academy graduate Jerry Garza, center, poses with his family and Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert Jr. following the school's graduation ceremony on May 22. Garza credits the school staff and its offerings for helping turn his life around.

**WITH A DIPLOMA OF GRADUATION IN HAND** and his late brother affixed on his white shirt, Jerry Garza didn't hesitate when speaking on what Fortis Academy can do for someone struggling with addiction and other forces.

The reason he speaks so openly is because he's living proof of the words he is saying.

"I don't think I'd be living right now if it wasn't for this school," said Garza, an Aldine Independent School District senior who joined four classmates graduating from Fortis on May 22. "It's given me so many new experiences and opportunities I thought I'd never see. Here, with the teachers and the love, it's all so genuine and it changed my whole life."

Last summer, Fortis became just the 11th school nationwide to earn accreditation by the Association of Recovery Schools. As the area's only public recovery school, Fortis helps students referred by their home district gain and maintain sobriety while pushing them to excel academically.

Garza dealt with many outside distractions, which included losing his older brother and falling into addiction. His mother credits him with wanting more and making the call to get to Fortis.

"He's had obstacles in his life but with anything, he faces it, he

takes it on, and he deals with it," an emotional Natalie Sanchez said after the graduation. "He's grown so much with this school. That's my baby boy and a lot of people said he wouldn't make it, but he made it and he did it."

Garza fully embraced all Fortis offered. He and three others in the culinary arts program competed at the Texas ProStart Competition, becoming the first non-traditional campus to enter. Garza cooked alongside award-winning chef Adrian Torres during a campus visit in July.

Through the school's partnership with nonprofit Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say, Garza and other students used poetry and storytelling to build confidence. Garza eventually shared his poem, "What Love Means to a Chicano," at a local restaurant in front of a live audience.

"Being a student here means everything to me, and this graduation is more than just words I can put together," he said. "Take that leap of faith and take that transition from being out in the streets and doing all those bad things to straightening your life and getting it together. It's all going to work out, and you'll be able to achieve anything you ever wanted."

"This school will bring life back into you."

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# Program Connections



## ABS EAST 'VILLAGE' HELPS BRANDON WOLFE CONTROL BEHAVIOR, SUSTAIN PATH TO GRADUATION

**FOR BRANDON WOLFE'S MOTHER**, part of her frustration before Brandon attended Academic and Behavior School (ABS) East was that she couldn't venture too far from her phone. Brandon deals with behavior issues, and while in New Caney Independent School District, some behavior got him in trouble, and campus staff called Michelle Wolfe to pick him up.

"It's hard when you have a kid with these issues, so I couldn't do anything," she said. "You can't plan appointments – or anything really – because you never knew when they were going to call. But by sending him home every day, that's what he learned."

Brandon transitioned to ABS East heading into high school, following in his older brother's footsteps, and the experience has been nothing but positive.

More significantly, Brandon hasn't been sent home once. In fact, he joined three other classmates in crossing the stage May 15 during the school's graduation ceremony. Wearing his New Caney High School blue cap and gown, he smiled as he was celebrated by family, school staff and district representatives.

"It's just a blessed day," he said between taking photos. "It made me happy to see everyone cheering for me. Everyone here helped and got me through this."

Having staff trained and experienced with specific and individualized behaviors made the difference for Brandon. Both ABS East and West provide educational environments for students with disabilities that range from autism to profound emotional, behavioral or intellectual special needs.

It's normal for all campus staff – even beyond teachers and

educational aides – to have a hand in helping students forge their path to success.

"You need more schools like this, and I can't say enough nice things," Michelle said. "From day one I knew it was different. I tell everyone I can about this school and the experience because there are a lot of parents that don't know about it and they're struggling in the school system that I was struggling in."

At the ceremony, Brandon sat patiently while his schoolmates were recognized for academic and behavioral achievements and growth. He was honored for "Exemplary Effort."

Brandon said he wants to get a job and continue working toward his independence, using many of the strategies he's learned while at ABS East.

"My other kids have graduated but it hit a little harder this time," Michelle said. "He's had to struggle and a lot to overcome that my other kids didn't. But this was the right school. I love it and I still love it." 🦅



Academic and Behavior School East student Brandon Wolfe, center, poses with his parents at the school's graduation May 15. He followed his brother's footsteps in attending and excelling at ABS East.



Brandon Wolfe and loved ones were all smiles at his graduation. His mother credits ABS East staff for helping Wolfe better control and manage his behavior issues.

## HEAD START STAFF EMBRACE 'TEAMWORK,' GAME SHOWS TO CELEBRATE 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

**WITH AN ARRAY OF GAMES** such as Family Feud, Wheel of Fortune, trivia and more, Harris County Department of Education's Head Start division and its staff members enjoyed a fun afternoon together to recognize employees as the driving force behind educating the county's youngest learners and celebrate their accomplishments.

Held May 28 at the Irvington Conference Center, the event carried the theme, "Teamwork." Staff members were randomly grouped together among five activities and then placed into five teams. They competed against each other, from guessing answers in trivia and Family Feud or acting them out in charades.

HCDE staff from divisions such as Business Services and Procurement Services helped run games, but it also allowed Head Start employees to meet those who support their everyday operations.

Harris County Department of Education serves more than 1,300 students through Head Start and Early Head Start centers annually, providing a safe learning environment that supports growth academically, socially and emotionally. 🌟



## DR. SYLVESTER DELIVERS ‘SUPERHERO’ KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT FONWOOD PRE-K CELEBRATION



**A NUMBER OF** Harris County Department of Education male leaders serve Head Start campuses as SuperMENTors, going above and beyond to help the county’s youngest learners.

Dr. Tyrone Sylvester, HCDE’s Chief Human Resources Officer, mentors at Fonwood Early Childhood Center, which offers the Head Start program through a partnership with Houston Independent School District campus. While he reads to one class, school leadership saw Dr. Sylvester’s impact and invited him to be the keynote speaker for the campus-wide pre-K celebration on May 26.

During his remarks, he congratulated the students, parents and campus staff, recognizing each group as “Superheroes” in ensuring the young learners are prepared for kindergarten. 🌟

## CSSS TEAM SHOWCASES INDUSTRY EXPERTISE IN MULTIPLE TRAININGS THROUGHOUT MAY

**THERE’S NO BETTER WAY** to showcase Harris County Department of Education staff members as leading experts in their respective fields than by counting the sheer number of presentations and training sessions they lead on a routine basis.

One recent example is the Center for Safe and Secure Schools, which led presentations nearly every third day throughout May. Over three weeks (May 5-22), CSSS team members Dr. Tiffany Chaney (climate and culture specialist), Jeremy Foster (school safety and security officer) and Robert Marquez (school safety and security specialist) offered 11 training sessions. The majority were within Alief Independent School District, which has partnered with CSSS to better its safety and emergency preparedness.

The series concluded May 22 with a session led by Foster for Procurement and Business Services staff, promoting strategies for long-term health, stress reduction and better work-life balance. 🌟



# Board Briefs

## SPECIAL SCHOOLS END THE YEAR WITH FUN, FRIENDSHIP AND FIELD DAY GAMES



**AS THE ACADEMIC YEAR** comes to a close, Academic and Behavior School East students traded classrooms for laughter, teamwork and friendly competition during an exciting end-of-year field day on May 29. From relay races and tug-of-war to sack races, spoon races and a high-energy basketball tournament, students eagerly cheered one another on before ending the celebration with a picnic. While the games brought plenty of fun, the day also highlighted the growth students made throughout the year as they practiced emotional regulation, communication and teamwork skills learned in the classroom. Whether encouraging a teammate or managing the excitement of competition, students demonstrated the strategies that helped make the year a success. 🌟



## EDUCATORS OF THE YEAR TREATED TO DINNER WITH SPECIAL SCHOOLS LEADERSHIP

**THE IMPACT** Christina Aggison and Dotwaun Harris make on students each day was celebrated on May 28 as Special Schools leaders honored HCDE's 2025-2026 Educators of the Year during a dinner at Brennan's of Houston. Aggison (Teacher of the Year) and Harris (Educational Aide of the Year) were first surprised at Academic and Behavior School West and Highpoint School, respectively, following the May 12 announcement, and recognized at the Department's Celebration of Excellence on May 20.

Joined by campus principals and division leadership, the educators were celebrated not only for their professional achievements, but the compassion, patience and encouragement they bring to students facing unique challenges. Their dedication to building relationships, creating supportive learning environments and helping students grow academically and emotionally continues to leave a lasting impact across Special Schools. 🌟



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

## SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE E: INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

- Ensures that goals and objectives form the basis of curricular decision-making and instruction and communicates expectations for student achievement.



Academic and Behavior School East student Brandon Wolfe was surrounded by loved ones at his graduation on May 15. Over the past few weeks, Harris County Department of Education celebrated 18 students across its Special Schools earning their diplomas and certificates of graduation.

**OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS**, we've held graduations at Fortis Academy and both ABS East and West. In total, 18 students at the three campuses symbolically "crossed the stage" in front of HCDE leadership, school staff and loved ones, earning their diplomas and certificates of graduation. Each graduate has overcome so much through his or her journey, dealt with adversity and relied on a strong support system of teachers, coaches and family members to reach milestones. To highlight these journeys, we showcased three graduates: Cendria Brumfield (ABS West), Jerry Garza (Fortis Academy) and Brandon Wolfe (ABS East). They represent what is so special about our Schools Division and the magic that happens each day. As educators, we invest in bettering the lives of Harris County learners, and that's especially true for those special populations or those caught in the blind spots of public education that a traditional school district may not have the resources for. Thank you to the families and home district for entrusting HCDE to serve these students and congratulations again to all our Class of 2026 graduates.

While it's normal for students and educators alike to count down to the last day of classes and look forward to the summer months, I still believe it's important to sit back and celebrate the work that was done in the classroom and all the milestones achieved along the way. Our

Head Start division and its staff members did just that this week. The team gathered on May 28 at the Irvington Conference for its end-of-year celebration. Everyone was matched into various teams, which allowed employees from different centers to know more about each other. It also made the afternoon interesting as everyone played games such as Wheel of Fortune, Family Feud, charades and trivia. Congratulations on another successful school year and enjoy some time to relax and rewind over the summer months.

Finally, HCDE functions as a partner across the county and greater Houston region, be it working with the 25 independent school districts in Harris County or the many agencies and organizations that help make our communities better. So, it's always positive when a new audience is introduced to HCDE and our role. Dr. Sylvester serves as a SuperMENTor at Fonwood Early Childhood Center, which offers the Head Start program through a partnership with Houston ISD. He served as keynote speaker for the center's pre-K graduation ceremony, sharing a positive message to the young learners and their loved ones, but also introducing HCDE to ceremony attendees who didn't know the partnership existed.

By utilizing effective practices that maximize the achievement of student potential, I am meeting the expectation to ensure that the learning goals of students are met or exceeded. ★



## HCDE BOARD

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Richard Cantu

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

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

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

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**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

**June 27**  
Adult Education Graduation