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the CONNECTOR

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

NEXT STOP IS NEW YORK CITY FOR ALDINE ISD STUDENT PHOTOGRAPHERS WHO EARNED 2026 NATIONAL SCHOLASTIC AWARDS P.3

OVER 200 MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS USE SELF-CARE TO BEST SERVE OTHERS AT COUNSELOR SYMPOSIUM P.5

LONE STAR COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS CHECK OUT HCDE SPECIAL SCHOOLS ON TOUR WITH SUPERINTENDENT P.6

of Note

Students have many pathways to post-secondary education including academics, athletics, the military and even art.

The Scholastic Art and Writing Awards program provides that route for thousands of students whose talents lie in their words, skill with a brush or their view through the lens of a camera. As the second-largest regional affiliate for the prestigious art competition, HCDE routinely sends more than 100 students to the national competition every year.

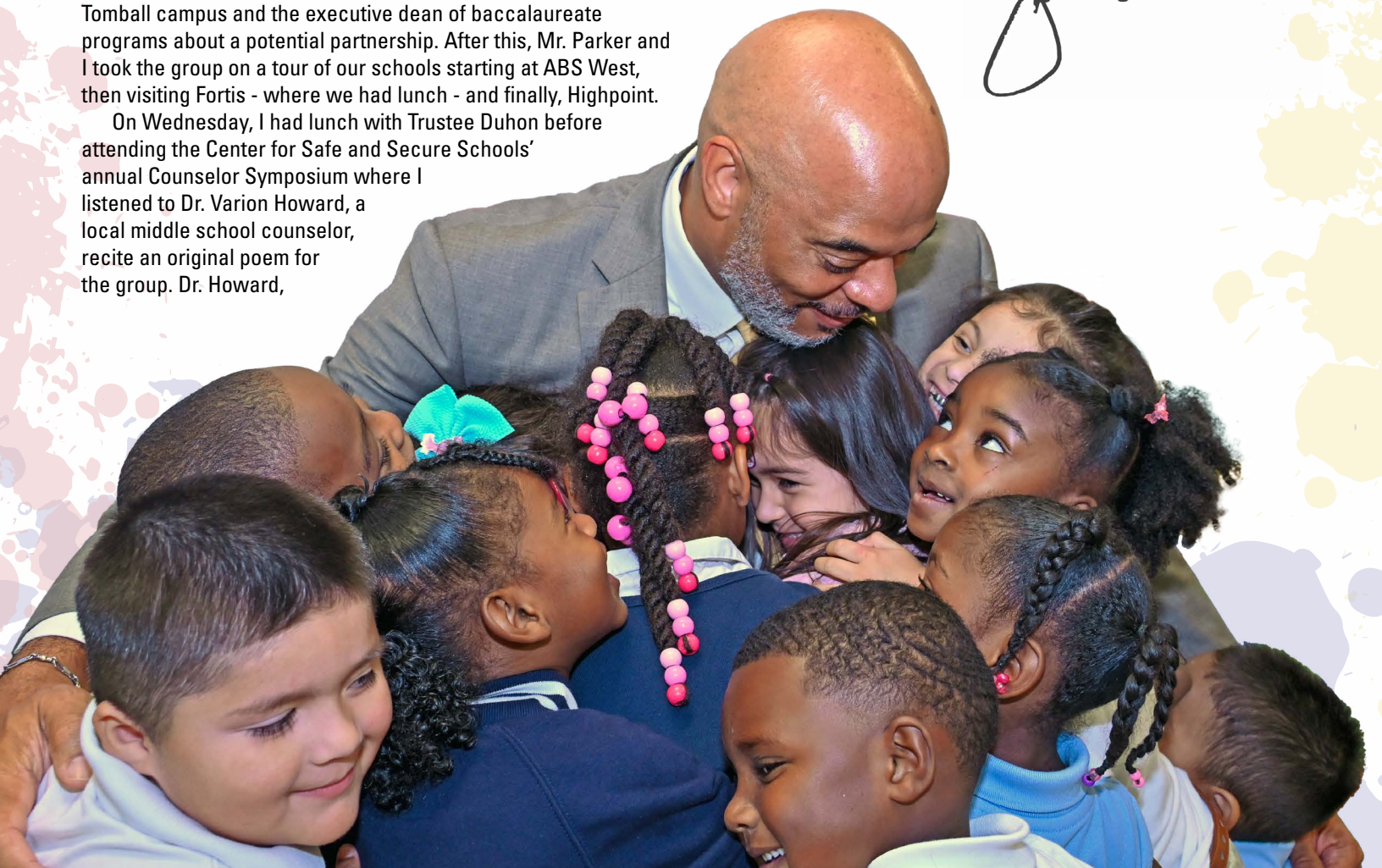
This week, we learn about two young photographers from Aldine ISD who are venturing out to the Big Apple next week for the national awards ceremony. When I look at the artwork students produce for this competition every year, I am blown away by their talent and the way they use their skill to portray emotions, beliefs and perspective. I take great pride in knowing that HCDE champions thousands of students in exploring these talents. And reading about how their art wins scholarships and recognition on the national stage is further proof that HCDE impacts students' futures in profound ways. I am proud of the Scholastic program HCDE runs and how we support fine arts in schools. I look forward to seeing how our students fare at the national competition and celebrating their creative achievements.

I started the week on Monday with ELT followed by standing meetings. On Tuesday, I met with the Lone Star College System executive vice chancellor of academics, the president of the Tomball campus and the executive dean of baccalaureate programs about a potential partnership. After this, Mr. Parker and I took the group on a tour of our schools starting at ABS West, then visiting Fortis - where we had lunch - and finally, Highpoint.

On Wednesday, I had lunch with Trustee Duhon before attending the Center for Safe and Secure Schools' annual Counselor Symposium where I listened to Dr. Varion Howard, a local middle school counselor, recite an original poem for the group. Dr. Howard, who goes by the name Se7en the Poet, runs the Poetry Lounge in Houston which provides a space for local poets to showcase their work. That afternoon, I attended the annual Financial Operating Guide training hosted by the Business Office and Procurement and continued with Convocation planning. Wednesday evening, I released a video for all staff wishing them well this summer and revealing the theme for Convocation this year. I explained how the idea for the NFL theme germinated and why we held a Draft Day, encouraging employees to embody the spirit of the team they were drafted to at Convocation on August 7.

Today, I participated in Agenda Review in anticipation of the June board meeting and met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. As a reminder, this is the first week of our flex schedule, so all schools and the Irvington administrative building will be closed tomorrow. Have a great weekend.

JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Aldine Independent School District students Stephanie Leiva, left, and Alexandra de León both earned National Gold Medals in photography through the 2026 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. The recent graduates from Blanson Career and Technical Education High School join more than 30 students across the Harris County region who will travel to New York City and be recognized at Carnegie Hall for their achievements.

TWO ALDINE ISD STUDENTS READY FOR 'BIG APPLE' AFTER EARNING NATIONAL SCHOLASTIC GOLD MEDALS

STEPHANIE LEIVA HAS NEVER BEEN TO NEW YORK CITY. Her friend and classmate Alexandra de León has once before, but she's still sharing in the same level of excitement and anticipation.

For the two seniors at Blanson Career and Technical Education High School in Aldine Independent School District, this isn't just a short getaway to the city affectionately known as the "Big Apple." They're traveling with dozens of fellow artists and creative teenagers across the greater Houston area and will be meeting hundreds more once in New York City.

Leiva and de León both earned National Gold Medals in photography through the 2026 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. The prestigious scholarship and recognition program is the nation's longest running for creative students in grades 7-12 and touts a number of prominent alumni in both visual and creative arts.

"For me, I've always been driven to create art for myself," Leiva said of receiving the news that she was a National Medalist. "I knew I had the ability to compete – I just had to put my art out there."

Said de León: "I've always been in art going back to middle school. I never tried photography until junior year. My dad is the one who owns a lot of cameras, and we have a whole bunch of pictures at home…but I really enjoy it now even though I didn't think I would."

Put in perspective, Leiva and de León are among less than one percent of those who entered the competition in December to earn a National Medal.

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The program received more than 335,000 entries from over 110,000 teens. Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) serves as the second-largest regional affiliate for Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and received nearly 14,000 submissions from students across Harris, Galveston and Fort Bend counties. Nearly 92,000 regional awards were presented, including 1,220 gold keys locally.

Blanson Career and Technical Education High School teacher William Brink, left, poses with Stephanie Leiva and Alexandra de León and their National Gold Medal photos. Both entries were part of their senior portfolios, representing issues or people that are significant to each.

The 103rd Class of National Medalists is just over 2,500 works. That includes nearly 130 students across the Harris County region and only two – Leiva and de León – from Aldine ISD.

National Medalists are invited to Carnegie Hall in New York City and will be recognized on June 10 for their achievements. Thiry-four students representing seven area school districts, five private schools and four private art and writing schools across greater Houston are scheduled to attend the ceremony alongside their teachers, district and organization representatives, and loved ones.

"I'm so excited," Leiva said. "I've always wanted to travel, so it's great to be able to do that while also being recognized for something that I worked for."

Leiva and de León are Aldine ISD's second and third National Medalists in two years, showcasing the district's efforts to expand opportunities and enriching experiences for students beyond the traditional class setting. With HCDE's partnership with Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and many in the greater Houston area, students are able to showcase their passion for writing or visual arts.

"We are dedicated to ensuring every student has the choices and opportunities to pursue their passions at the highest level," Aldine ISD Superintendent Dr. LaTonya Goffney said in a district release.

Both created their pieces as part of their senior portfolios.

For Leiva, her portfolio focused on climate change and sustainability, giving her a chance to answer questions she had during brainstorming and creating. The photo, "Blinded Truth," answers her question of how plastic affects daily life. It shows the subject's hands cutting fruit but everything in the photo (knife, fruit, cutting board and more) is wrapped in plastic.

"Art didn't pull me in like photography did," Leiva said. "I liked being able to build the story throughout the process."

De León's artwork has normally centered around womanhood, femininity and relationships she has with the important women in her life. "Act of Faith and Love" showcased the relationship with her mother and how religion and prayer helped create a nurturing environment for her to become a young woman. It shows de León's mother in the kitchen preparing food but also surrounded by candles.

"Only my mom would be willing to get in the kitchen in the middle of the night and make quesadillas and tortillas for me," she said. "I just loved that it was her, and I could show her. This is her in my eyes."

Her mother will also join de León and Leiva for the trip, as will their teacher, William Brink, and Kaileigh Newman, the district's director of visual arts.

Stephanie Leiva, seated right, and Alexandra de León discuss their work with Kaileigh Newman, Aldine Independent School District's director of visual arts.

"These extraordinary wins place Aldine ISD students in the top tier of national talent," Newman said in the district release. "This outstanding achievement truly reflects the technical mastery and emergence of unique personal voices among our students."

SCHOOL COUNSELORS GATHER TO RECHARGE, REFLECT DURING 'THRIVING, NOT JUST SURVIVING' SYMPOSIUM

TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY

PLAYING OFF THE WORD "RELAX," school counselors and licensed professionals gathered June 3 at the Irvington Conference Center to rejuvenate, energize, laugh, ascend and 'xhale. The well-deserved break following the school year came into focus at the second annual Thriving, Not Just Surviving: Celebrating Professional Counselors Symposium, connecting those who work hard every day to support, uplift and empower students.

Nearly 230 attended the day-long conference hosted by Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS), including roughly half returning from last year.

CSSS Climate and Culture Specialist Tiffany Chaney developed the idea for the symposium during the fall of 2024. A former school counselor, Chaney saw the need to create a safe space where professionals could invest in themselves after nine months of focusing on the mental health and well-being of their students.

"When we as mental health professionals go to a conference, it's usually about how to do our job," Chaney said. "But we have a responsibility to take of ourselves first and if we don't do it, then we're pouring from an empty cup. There's nothing like this so and that's why we created it – there's no symposium like this anywhere."

Guest speakers and panelists shared insights, strategies and experiences with attendees, with topics ranging from recreational therapy and staff rejuvenation to the power in the pause and restorative care.

CES CELEBRATES SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF INAUGURAL LEAD STRONG ACADEMY

WITH THE GOAL TO STRENGTHEN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Educator Success (CES) recognized the completion of its inaugural Lead Strong Academy in celebratory fashion.

Held June 1 at HCDE's Adult Education Learning Center, the cohort, which was comprised of campus principals representing Aldine, Alief and Sheldon independent school districts, met with CES and Department leadership to celebrate its nine-month professional development journey. The academy curriculum centered on developing school climate and culture, strengthening instructional practices, investing in staff growth and fostering family and community engagement.

HCDE's collaborative approach to empowering area leadership featured Department leaders serving as guest

speakers. Superintendent James Colbert Jr. presented on crafting a leadership set, while Chief Human Resources Officer Dr. Tyrone Sylvester joined an administrators panel and also presented with Director of Human Resources Stacie Gibson on talent development.

SUPT. COLBERT SHOWCASES HCDE SPECIAL SCHOOLS, STUDENT INITIATIVES TO LONE STAR COLLEGE REPRESENTATIVES

TO SHOWCASE HOW HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IS TRANSFORMING the school experience for students often overlooked in traditional district settings – with visions of even more opportunities post-graduation – Superintendent James Colbert Jr. welcomed Lone Star College representatives on a tour June 2 of Department campuses.

Joined by Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker, Colbert welcomed three members of Lone Star College's leadership team: Dr. Lee Ann Nutt, president at Lone Star College-Tomball; Dr. Megan Mariveles, Lone Star College System executive dean of Baccalaureate Programs; and Dr. Seelpa Keshvala, LSCS executive vice chancellor of academics. After an initial meeting at the Irvington Administration building, the group traveled to Academic and Behavior School West, Fortis Academy and Highpoint School East.

They met with campus leadership and staff and learned how HCDE's four Special Schools best serve students with individualized educational needs daily. Among the initiatives were the production lab at ABS West for students in the adult transition program and commercial-grade kitchen at Fortis to support the culinary program. Culinary instructor Daisy Alvarez and food service clerk Lyric Lawrence, a former Fortis student now working at the campus, even prepared a three-course lunch for the guests.

TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY

#TEAMHCDE HONORS EMANCIPATION AND CELEBRATES PROGRESS ON JUNETEENTH

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION JOINS ORGANIZATIONS and school districts nationwide in celebrating Juneteenth, a significant day in American history. The event marks the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in Texas on June 19, 1865. In honor of Juneteenth, a day of reflection, freedom and progress, HCDE will be closed on Friday, June 19 (during summer flex schedule, HCDE staff will return to a regular eight-hour schedule June 15-19).

A video exploring the role education played as Black Americans worked toward equality will be highlighted on HCDE's social media pages. HCDE offices will resume summer flex hours on June 22.

SUPERINTENDENT COLBERT SHARES 'UNRIVALED' ANNOUNCEMENT WITH END-OF-YEAR MESSAGE

SUMMERTIME IS HERE! Superintendent Colbert officially bid farewell to the 2025-2026 academic school year this week with the release of his annual end-of-year message to Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) staff members. He talked about how HCDE has become his destination due in part to the unique and fantastic programs and initiatives staff do every day to serve Harris County learners and families.

Colbert also reiterated the 2026 Convocation theme during his video message – "NFL." He encouraged #TeamHCDE to embrace their selected NFL team from the draft and prepare to represent their organizations for this year's theme. Staff will assemble at Kingdom Builder's Center in southwest Houston on Friday, Aug. 7, 2026, where he will recognize employees through the Service Awards, reflect upon the past school year and describe for employees how HCDE is "unrivaled" and how it impacts public education.

IN THE NEWS

LOCAL TV STATION HIGHLIGHTS UPCOMING CSSS SCHOOL SAFETY SUMMIT

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S 2026 "BE THE IMPACT" School Safety Summit drew the spotlight from one local media outlet, highlighting the growing concerns surrounding school safety and one opportunity HCDE's Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS) is providing the community.

On June 1, KPRC 2 reporter Andy Cerota interviewed CSSS Director Leslie Etheridge at HCDE's North Post Oak location. Among the many topics discussed, Etheridge said addressing mental health – alongside emergency planning and school climate and culture – is vital to being proactive with school safety. The goal is to see the warning signs sooner, which Etheridge said entails a collaborative effort from parents and guardians in addition to teachers and school personnel.

KPRC 2 aired the interview during its 5 p.m. broadcast, while photos showing the walk-and-talk interview were posted to HCDE's social media channels. The media attention affirms the importance Harris County Department of Education's efforts to bring visibility and resources to local professionals.

WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for May! Thirteen new faces have joined our Adult Education, Facilities, Head Start and Special Schools divisions.

Erica Cabrera
Family Services Provider
Head Start

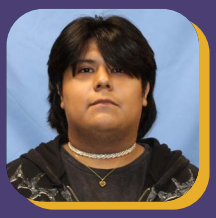
Sadie Carter
Custodian
Head Start

Sykera Harris
Custodian
Head Start

Lillie Johnson
Substitute Teacher
Highpoint East

Raven Jones
Nutrition Services Coordinator
Head Start

William Lee
Teacher
Adult Education



Enrique Martinez
Custodian
Facilities

Imari Queeley
Early Child Teacher
Head Start

Norma Rangel
Early Child Teacher
Head Start

Monique Rayford
Substitute Teaching Assistant
Head Start

Bridget Robinson-Walton
Teacher
Head Start

Aracely Torres
Early Child Teacher
Head Start

Johana Torres
Early Child Teacher
Head Start

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.

Aldine Independent School District students Stephanie Leiva, seated right, and Alexandra de León earned National Gold Medals in photography through the 2026 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. The recent graduates from Blanson Career and Technical Education High School will be recognized at Carnegie Hall in New York City for their achievements.

PART OF WHERE HCDE EXCELS IN SERVING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES across Harris County is the partnerships we have in place to close gaps, offer opportunities and expand our reach. Through working together with independent school districts, educational organizations and both community and business partners, #TeamHCDE is able to provide top-notch programming and solutions. We see two examples of that this week, beginning with a look at two Aldine ISD students, Stephanie Leiva and Alexandra de León, who are preparing to head to New York City after earning National Gold Medals through the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. In total, the area has nearly 130 national medalists who will be recognized at Carnegie Hall on June 10. The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards offer a platform for students to showcase their talent, regardless of their background or circumstances, and I'm proud that HCDE is the second-largest regional affiliate. The creative and visual arts are essential to helping produce well-rounded students. Congratulations again to Stephanie and Alexandra!

I had the opportunity to meet with leadership from the Lone Star College System on June 2, including the executive vice chancellor of academics and president of the Tomball campus. Joined by Mr. Parker, we toured three of our Special Schools (ABS West, Fortis Academy and Highpoint School East) and showcased the individualized programming and initiatives each campus has to meet students where they are. This meeting is more than opening the door to another community partner but setting the stage for future opportunities, which could be possibilities in higher education. Thank you again to Dr. Nutt, Dr. Mariveles and Dr. Keshvala for taking the time to see what HCDE has to offer students and their families.

Finally, the Center for Safe and Secure Schools division welcomed school counselors and educators for a day of supporting mental health and well-being in the workplace. After its successful debut last year, the second annual "Thriving Not Just Surviving" Counselor Symposium saw more than 200 attendees connect with like-minded professionals – many navigating the same turbulent waters in today's educational space. Speakers and panelists shared their stories and expertise, while vendors were on hand to showcase their resources. Self-care is just as important as taking care of others, or as the saying goes, "You can't pour from an empty cup." This was a great opportunity to recharge and refresh and allow us to better serve students.

By keeping the public well-informed of the activities of the Department and maintaining involvement in the community with stakeholders, I continue cultivating and working relationships between HCDE and its various community partners.

HCDE BOARD

Board President
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 10-13
TASB Summer Leadership Institute (San Antonio)

June 11
iPASS

June 13
Adult Education Career Workforce Day

June 17
Board Meeting

June 17-20
TASB Summer Leadership Institute (Fort Worth)

June 18
School Safety Summit

June 19
Juneteenth (HCDE Closed)

June 26-30
Annual Recovery Schools Conference