



the CONNECTOR

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



CAREER KICKOFF DAY CELEBRATES ADULT LEARNERS EARNING EMPLOYMENT OFFERS TO TOP HARRIS COUNTY BUSINESSES P.3



CSSS EXERCISE HELPS ALIEF ISD STRENGTHEN STUDENT REUNIFICATION IN EMERGENCIES P.5



CSSS SUMMIT ADVANCES COORDINATION, PREPAREDNESS ACROSS SCHOOL SAFETY PARTNERS P.6

of Note

I HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE in my heart for students who need a second chance. So many of our programs focus on providing a hand-up to our students, be they three years old or 90 years old! That's just one of the reasons why HCDE is my favorite place to work.

So, when I see one of our programs helping students get a second lease on life through career placement and advancement, I am excited to see HCDE making a difference in the lives of our students and impacting our community. This week, we read about the inaugural Adult Education Career Kick off, which is replacing the Signing Day we have had for the last three years. At this celebration, HCDE recognized dozens of Adult Education students who landed a new job in their chosen career field thanks to their newfound skills learned through our pathway programs. It is gratifying to see how HCDE not only supports students in transitioning careers but transforms their lives in the process. I am proud of the workforce programming Adult Education has implemented in the last few years and look forward to seeing these programs grow and flourish in the years to come.

I started the week with an Education Foundation of Harris County meeting followed by ELT on Monday. I then met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives before

participating in a UIL meeting. Monday afternoon, I traveled to Waller ISD to meet with the superintendent. On Tuesday, I met with the communications team for ongoing Convocation planning followed by standing meetings with ELT members. That afternoon, I met with Ms. Westbrook in anticipation of the Board Budget Workshop next week. I continued preparations for the budget workshop on Wednesday morning followed by the regular June Board Meeting.

All HCDE facilities will be closed Friday in recognition of the Juneteenth holiday. Have a wonderful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Nearly 30 Adult Education students who completed workforce training and earned employment were recognized at the division's first Career Kickoff Day, held June 13 at the Irvington Conference Center. Among those honoring the students were Adult Education Senior Director Dr. Eduardo Honold, left, and Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment Dr. CJ Rogers, right.

ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS BEGIN NEW EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AFTER 'CROSSING THE STAGE' AT DIVISION'S CAREER KICKOFF DAY

NEARLY 30 ADULT LEARNERS were celebrated for not only completing workforce training and obtaining certifications but also earning career opportunities and employment offers from some of Harris County's top businesses. The new event – Career Kickoff Day – was a success for Harris County Department of Education's Adult Education division, which strives to change lives and be a difference maker for adult learners.

Held June 13 at the Irvington Conference Center, the day was about shining a spotlight on the achievements of the honorees.

"This is graduation season – high school graduations, college graduations and we'll even have our GED graduation in two weeks," Dr. Eduardo Honold, Adult Education Senior Director, said to open the ceremony. "But you guys are even more special. You not only achieved your credential, but you



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

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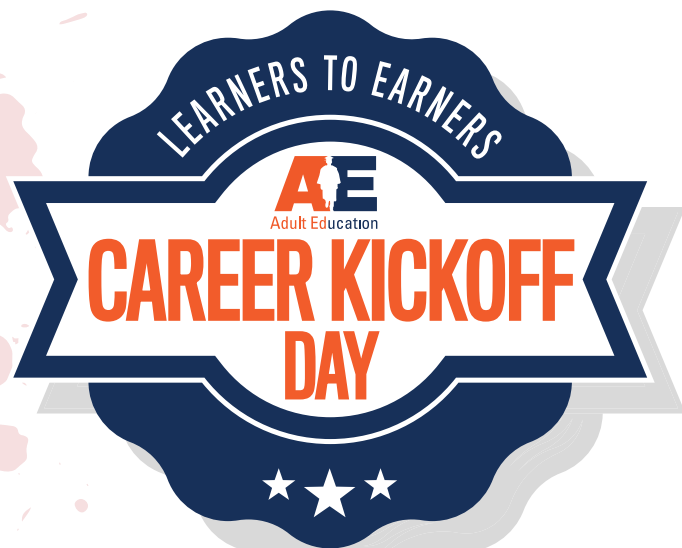
Program Connections



Blake Beard, Family Tree Private Care market director, congratulates the students for their achievements. Numerous business partners routinely seek Adult Education graduates to fill vacancies and credit their training and preparation.



Dr. Eduardo Honold, Adult Education Senior Director, congratulates a student during the ceremony. In addition to the recognition, each student received a Chromebook to help on his or her journey, be it employment, more education or both.



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

went out and found a job related to that credential.

"How many graduates can say that? Not too many. So, you are special."

Career Kickoff Day celebrates students in Adult Education's Career Pathways Program who recently completed workforce training and earned employment from numerous area business partners. Whether it is changing careers or forging a new path after years of waiting, graduates have given themselves a new opportunity.

The group was recognized in front of loved ones, HCDE and Adult Education leadership, and community partners.

"I'm proud of each and every one of you," said graduate Arcadia Gandara, who earned a job with Gulf Coast Regional Blood Center after completing her training. "I felt like quitting at one point but one of the cool things about determination is it shows you exactly what you're made of. Some of us had other employment, school or just home life that could have got in the way, and yet you did continue to show up every single day. Pride yourselves in that."

Gandara spoke of being at a low point in her life before finding workforce training.

"I ran headfirst into something I had no knowledge of and I found understanding," she said. "I found something that sang to my soul like I never felt before and I found a purpose. That's why I'm so grateful to the Harris County Department of Education for having programs like this."

Following words of encouragement from business partners and a keynote address from Dr. CJ Rodgers, HCDE Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment, the students were each called on stage for recognition. Each then received a Chromebook to help on his or her journey, be it employment, more education or both.

"This is not the top of the mountain," Rodgers said to the graduates after thanking the business partners and family members. "I know the view looks good and you can see everything, but this is not the top of the mountain. This is just a testament of how far you can climb. Throughout all the tears and hardships, you kept getting up, you kept showing up and you didn't stop." ★



 TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

CENTER FOR SAFE AND SECURE SCHOOLS LEADS REUNIFICATION EXERCISE WITH ALIEF ISD FOR ‘OPERATION: GET READY, STAY READY’ PARTNERSHIP

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), Alief Independent School District leadership and emergency management personnel conducted and reviewed their Standard Response Protocol and Standard Reunification Method through a one-day exercise on June 15.

Hosted by HCDE’s Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS), the workshop evaluates the preparedness and response capabilities of participants to safely reunify students with their parents and guardians during crisis situations. Focus area included processes and responsibilities, incident command structure efficiency, and emergency responses.


The organizations have worked together over the school year, beginning with CSSS assessing the district’s emergency and operations plans. In October, they met for a tabletop workshop, conducting a real-life exercise featuring an active shooter situation, campus evacuation and reunification.

This met this week to execute the reunification plan. More than 100 Alief ISD administrators and staff members

participated. Among those were Superintendent Dr. Anthony Mays and his entire 14-member leadership team.

“We have all the leaders in one room, and that is what’s going to make it work,” said CSSS Officer of School Safety and Security Jeremy Foster, who led the exercise. “That’s going to allow us to get on the same page, so we all know what we need to do in a time of need. We have one mission today and that one mission is always the same thing – keep the students and staff of Alief safe.”

Using Alief ISD’s Center for Talent Development, Foster led a briefing and overview before the exercise. Personnel were assigned to their specific areas, which includes parent and guardian verification, command center and support. Others acted as students and parents, bringing real-life emotions and points of concern to the exercise.

The day concluded with a debrief session. Evaluators observed the exercise and will provide feedback, which CSSS and Alief ISD will use to improve and solidify plans. 

CSSS KEEPS EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS ON FOREFRONT AT ANNUAL SCHOOL SAFETY SUMMIT



FOLLOWING A SUCCESSFUL DEBUT, the second annual “Be the Impact:” School Safety Summit again served first responders, law enforcement officers and fellow industry personnel by gathering them under the same roof to learn, share insights and strategies and get on the same page in preparation for next school year.

Hosted by the Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS), the summit moved to Houston City College’s Northeast Campus for the day-long conference on June 18. In total, more than 100 participants, speakers and agency representatives grew together.

The goal behind the summit was to keep organizations, districts and agencies best informed through legislative sessions and new mandates. This allows consistency across the board well before the start of the next school year.

A highlight for the day was keynote speaker Jamie L. Reyna, who serves as Juvenile Division Chief for the Harris County District Attorney’s Office. She spoke on the many challenges facing today’s youth, the intersection of school safety and juvenile justice, and strategies organizations can use to help create safer schools and stronger communities.

The day began with an opening session featuring STAR Award presentations.

Breakouts followed – topics included the gravity of complacency, e-Bike safety, applying military rehearsal methodology to enhance active threat preparedness, and combating human trafficking.

Critical Response Group, the nation’s leader in indoor mapping data, served as the summit’s underwriter. 🌟



The Center for
**Safe and
Secure
Schools**

#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. 🌟



HCDE CONNECTS FIFA WORLD CUP TO LANGUAGE ACCESS



MARKETING & CLIENT ENGAGEMENT WELCOMED nearly a dozen translators and language representatives at HCDE Connects: A Multilingual Network on June 16. The brainchild of Harris County Department of Education's Translations Coordinator Wendy Utterback, the quarterly meeting strives to identify best practices in interpretation for local districts and organizations and how to establish collaborative processes for all parties.

Utterback used the presence of the 2026 FIFA World Cup in large, diverse cities nationwide to showcase how they welcomed soccer fans from around the world while providing adequate language access. She highlighted the importance of not only having bilingual volunteers but also creating a place for translators, signs in native languages and talk boxes that offer real-time translations. Attendees participated in exercises that highlighted the importance of having similar representation and services within their businesses or school districts to enhance customer and family experiences. 🌟

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE E: INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

- Ensures that appropriate data is used in developing recommendations and making decisions regarding the instructional program and resources.



Nearly 30 Adult Education students were recognized at the division's first Career Kickoff Day. Among those honoring the students were Adult Education Senior Director Dr. Eduardo Honold, left, and Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment Dr. C.J. Rogers, right.

AS I CONTINUE WORKING with our Communications team to prepare for Convocation – less than two months away – I am reminded that just when you think there's a break here in the summer months, that's not really the case for those working to change lives across Harris County. June has been loaded with impactful events across numerous divisions. That includes this week, starting on Saturday with Adult Education's first Career Kickoff Day. We celebrated nearly 30 students in our Career Pathways Program who completed workforce training and earned employment from a number of top Harris County businesses. Thank you to those partners for seeing the value in our programs. I've shared many times that our adult learners have grit, picking themselves up after many were knocked down at some point. This was a time to recognize them and their achievements. Congratulations to everyone and I look forward to hearing more success stories from our Adult Education division.

Two days later, the partnership between our Center for Safe and Secure Schools and Alief ISD moved from a tabletop workshop in October to a real-life reunification exercise. Alief ISD leadership entrusted CSSS to develop emergency management procedures and protocols and those plans were put in place with more than 100 district administrators and personnel. During the exercise, the two sides worked through a hypothetical reunification scenario, and Alief ISD

leaders were able to work through the best ways to keep students safe and work with parents and guardians to reunite them with their children, all while keeping stakeholders informed and communities at ease to the best of their ability. This exercise is vital to creating safe learning environments, and I'm thankful CSSS can lead or assist districts and organizations in better preparing themselves.

- Finally, CSSS closed the week by hosting its second annual "Be the Impact:" School Safety Summit at Houston City College's Northeast Campus. The day-long event brings together first responders, law enforcement officers and industry personnel, and other community partners to share experiences and strategies, network and learn from each other. More importantly, participants aim to get on the same page when it comes to current legislation and safety mandates as we look ahead to the 2026-2027 school year. Thank you to Jamie L. Reyna, Juvenile Division Chief for the Harris County District Attorney's Office, for serving as the keynote speaker and speaking on the challenges today's youth face. Creating safe schools can help improve learning, so I'm glad CSSS continues to be an industry leader to push organizations to make improvements.

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. ★



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UPCOMING EVENTS

June 19
Juneteenth (HCDE Closed)

June 26-30
Annual Recovery Schools Conference

June 27
Adult Education Graduation

July 3
Independence Day observance (HCDE Closed)

July 15
Board Meeting

July 30-31
Professional Translators and Interpreters Conference

August 3-4
CASE for Kids Houston Out of School Time Conference