



the CONNECTOR

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



DESPITE YEARS OF REGRET, KEYA SMITH COMPLETES JOURNEY TO EARN HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA P.3



CES SUMMER INTENSIVE ENDS WITH ASPIRING TEACHERS SHOWCASING NEWFOUND KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS P.5



HCDE EMPLOYEES PREPARE FOR UPCOMING OPEN ENROLLMENT AT HUMAN RESOURCES BENEFITS FAIR P.8

of Note

I'm always amazed at how the theme for Convocation perpetuates throughout the year. We see evidence of this in presentations, at events, on our school campuses and even from guest speakers at board meetings.

The 2025 Convocation theme, Varsity, has washed over into several conversations amongst staff and the board lately. When we talked about the budget being "Varsity" at the workshop this week, I began reflecting on how our other divisions are portraying these characteristics as well. One of the major character traits of a varsity player is grit: the ability to face adversity, get back up after a fall and not give up.

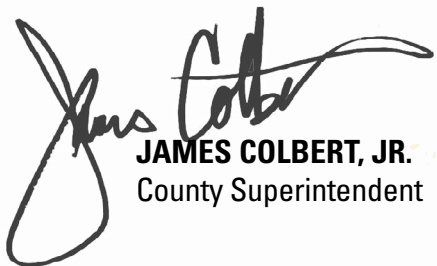
We see this persevering spirit this week with a preview of the Adult Education GED graduation this weekend. On Saturday, more than 150 adult learners and their families will gather at HCDE to watch loved ones walk across the stage and get their High School Equivalency diploma. For some, this has taken multiple decades to accomplish. Now that is grit! These students' determination to go back to school to positively impact their future while supporting families and current jobs is a testament to their will and determination. You can't teach perseverance and these students have it in spades. I love these graduations and am excited to see us awarding more diplomas every year. This shows why Adult Education and HCDE are VARSITY!

I started the week with ELT followed by meetings with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. On Tuesday, I participated in the Board Budget Workshop. Thank you to those of you who could make it. Ms. Westbrook did an outstanding job of explaining the budget in an easy-to-understand manner. We will have one more Board Budget Workshop in July where you can ask any questions after which we will present you with the formal budget for approval at the regular board meeting.

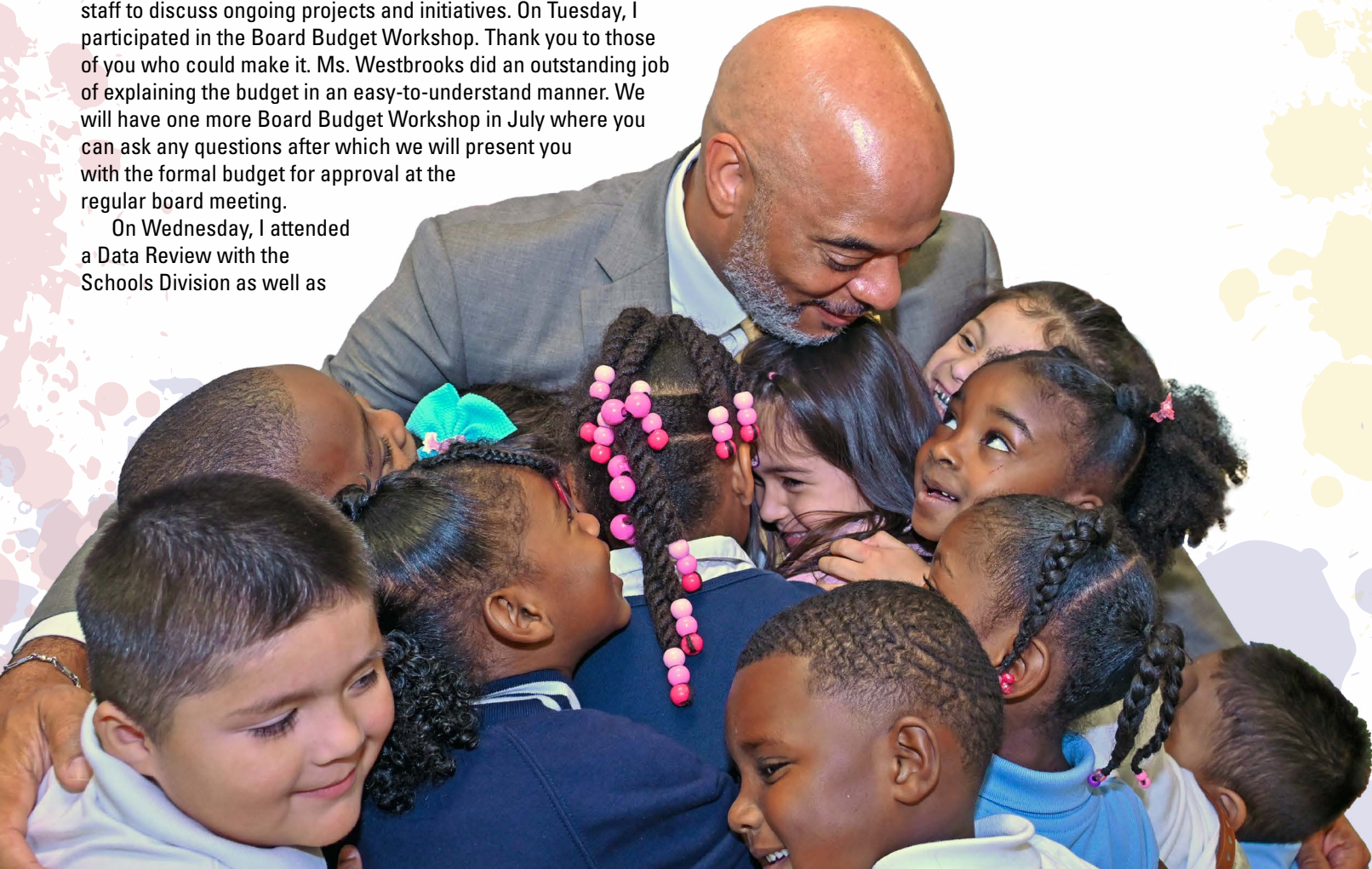
On Wednesday, I attended a Data Review with the Schools Division as well as

participated in Commissioner Briones' Harris County Coalition on Early Childhood Education and Care steering committee meeting. Today, I met with staff to continue planning for Convocation after which I visited CES' Summer Intensive to view teacher candidates demonstrate what they have learned in the last few weeks. It was super cool to hear their perspective about their teacher certification journey.

The Irvington building is closed tomorrow for our flex schedule. The Connector will be on hiatus next week as it is a very short week with the July 4 holiday. Enjoy your weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Keya Smith earned her High School Equivalency certification (HSE, formerly known as GED) at age 46, closing the unfinished chapter of her youth after walking away just weeks before graduation. She credits HCDE's Adult Education program for her next phase in life and her new career in medical coding and billing.

KEYA SMITH RECLAIMS HER FUTURE THROUGH ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

FOR YEARS, KEYA SMITH CARRIED A DECISION SHE WISHED SHE COULD TAKE BACK. Raised in a typical middle-class household on the south side of Chicago, she spent summers playing outside with neighborhood kids. She maintained a close relationship with her family, which instilled the value of education and hard work. Smith was a strong student with every intention of graduating, but like many teenagers, she became distracted by friends and the desire to be anywhere but the classroom.

Smith started skipping school and eventually decided to drop out just weeks before graduation.

"I've always regretted it," she said.

That feeling stayed with her for decades. While she was able to build a career and hold several management positions across various industries, the missing diploma remained an unfinished chapter in her life.

"The further I got up in age, it started to bother me," Smith recalled.

On June 27, Smith will put that long chapter of regret behind her as she joins more than 150 learners graduating from Harris County Department of Education's Adult Education program.

Each has worked tirelessly to meet the requirements for their High School Equivalency certification (HSE, formerly known as GED) or completed English as a Second Language (ESL) coursework during the 2025-26 academic year.

Their accomplishments represent more than credentials. Each diploma and certificate represents perseverance, growth and a promise that each learner made to themselves to pursue a goal and not let anything get in their way.

"I would get out of class at 9 p.m., go home and immediately study what we learned in class," Smith laughed. "I studied every day because it was the only way I retained what was taught in class. I even used the sites and tools that HCDE gave us to practice math and reading assignments."

Her commitment quickly stood out to instructors.

"Keya has been a go-getter since the first time I laid eyes on her," said Adult Education Instructor Lisa Waddell, who taught Smith in Reading-Language Arts and Social Studies. "She came in enthusiastic, and she completed all her tasks and assignments to the utmost of her capabilities. I knew that she was going to accomplish what she set out to do."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Program Connections

Smith stayed steadfast in her mission to gain her diploma, even when life tried to hold her back. With her husband's support, she made the difficult decision to quit her job after supervisors changed her schedule in a way that conflicted with evening classes.

She never looked back, and that decision led her to a path of growth. In a matter of months, she passed all the necessary exams to earn her HSE.

"Students have to be motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically because there's only a certain number of things that teachers can do to motivate our students," Waddell explained. "When students have that intrinsic motivation and the right support, they become unstoppable and will never let obstacles stand in their way. Getting to witness that is one of my favorite parts of this job."

In need of new employment opportunities, Adult Education instructors encouraged Smith to consider the division's workforce program, which provides students with training and certifications to gain employment in various fields, such as Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), business office technology, phlebotomy and more.

Smith enrolled in the hybrid medical billing and coding class designed to prepare students to work with insurance

companies and perform administrative tasks. The 8-week accelerated curriculum taught her how to translate patient diagnoses and services into universal codes used to process insurance claims accurately and ensure that healthcare providers are paid correctly.

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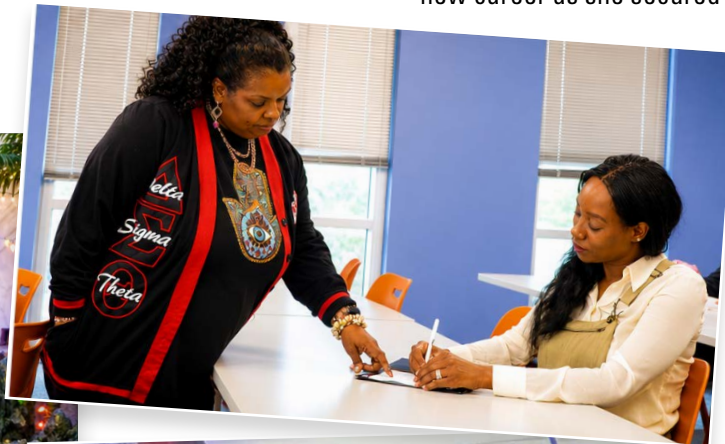
The rigorous coursework paid off, helping launch Smith's new career as she secured employment with a Houston-area medical financial services company.

"Being part of the HCDE program has been priceless for me," Smith said. "This program has given me the knowledge and the tools I needed to succeed. It has given me renewed confidence in my abilities."

As Smith looks to the future, she plans to keep education at the forefront of her life, pursuing additional certifications and working towards becoming bilingual. Her journey serves as a powerful reminder that one decision does not define a lifetime. With the right support and second chances like those provided by Adult Education, anyone can transform regret into confidence, obstacles into opportunities and an unfinished story into one of success.

Whereas she once walked away from education, Smith now recognizes the endless possibilities available to lifelong learners.

"I'm never satisfied," she smiled. "I'm excited and proud of myself for the accomplishments and the goals that I've reached, but I must keep going. I have more goals to reach." 🌟



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR VIDEO

Smith's husband and family have been a constant source of support throughout the past year as she worked towards graduation. Her mother and brothers were overjoyed to hear about her recent accomplishments.

TEACHER CANDIDATES DISPLAY NEWFOUND TECHNIQUES, KNOWLEDGE TO END CENTER FOR EDUCATOR SUCCESS' SUMMER INTENSIVE

IN CLOSING OUT THREE WEEKS OF LESSONS AND A FULL SLATE OF INSTRUCTION, 16 alternative teacher certification candidates successfully completed their Summer Intensive cohort on June 25. The program, put on by the Center for Educator Success (CES) at the Adult Education Learning Center, was themed "Heroes in the Classrooms" and embraced educators as superheroes who change the lives of their students on a daily basis.

Cohort members participated in daily lessons on topics that included instructional planning and delivery and classroom management.

On the final day (June 25), candidates demonstrated knowledge and skills in 10-minute comprehensive presentations in front of colleagues, CES staff and school district representatives.

Summer Intensive prepares educators for content exams, which candidates must pass before continuing in their respective certification programs. 🦸



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



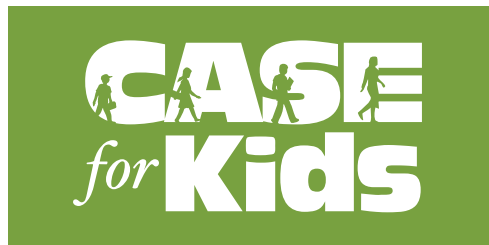
CASE FOR KIDS STUDENTS EXPLORE HEALTHCARE CAREERS AT HCC



SUMMERTIME IN HARRIS COUNTY MEANS STUDENTS IN THE CASE FOR KIDS PROGRAM GET AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE NEW HORIZONS. On June 18, nearly a dozen students from Chavez High School in Houston Independent School District participated in Biology Day at Houston City College.

Campus professors and college students guided the group as everyone stepped into simulated healthcare scenarios, working with medical mannequins and trying out hands-on activities that gave them a glimpse into real healthcare training. Enthusiasm radiated throughout the classrooms as the students asked questions about various career pathways, techniques and continuous learning in dynamic environments. Campus representatives met with prospective students to discuss admission requirements, financial aid, scholarship opportunities and curriculum options.

CASE for Kids partnerships with local colleges and universities create unforgettable experiences for more than 15,000 students annually by exposing them to academic and career pathways and helping them take meaningful steps towards their futures. 🌟



Board Briefs

HEAD START CELEBRATES STRONG LEADER PIPELINE WITH INAUGURAL RISING STAR LEADERSHIP ACADEMY GRADUATION

TO HELP PRODUCE FUTURE CENTER LEADERS, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Head Start division recently completed its first-ever Rising Star Leadership Academy.

The graduation ceremony held June 18 at Maggiano's Little Italy, honored Lorna Patterson, Amber Soileau, Jeanette Barnhart, Donette Sawyer and Zenita Sanders. The group successfully completed the nine-month program, creating a strong leadership pipeline within Head Start.

"It has been a privilege to watch them grow both personally and professionally, and I'm truly excited to see the leadership they are already bringing to their roles and how they will continue to rise and make an impact on our Head Start program in the future," Senior Director Venetia Peacock said.

Designed to cultivate leadership skills, managerial knowledge and organizational vision, the program covered a range of topics and featured a variety of speakers who are leaders within HCDE, Head Start and in the community. Topics included building



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

relationships, developing people, effective communication and accountability.

Participants credit the program for strengthening their leadership skills and giving them a space to grow. ✨

MAY AWARENESS AND TEACHER RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN UPDATE

EFFORTS TO RAISE AWARENESS about HCDE recorded significant year-over-year gains in May, driven by a reallocation of funds for pay-per-click ads and increased interest in teacher recruitment campaigns.

The latest social media wins include a year-over-year increase of 49% in total reach, 53% in total page engagements and 126% in total video views. Facebook's best-performing ad gained more than 122,000 impressions and more than 2,500 page clicks at an average of \$0.30 per click. The ad promoted the Department's Adult Education program, boasting available high school certifications, English as a Second Language (ESL) and workforce classes offered over the summer.

Online clicks decreased slightly month over month, with just over 2,000 clicks and 514,000 impressions in May, compared to 3,600 clicks and 838,000 impressions in April. However, the general awareness campaign yielded an 84% year-over-year increase in total impressions, driven by a reallocation of funds

BRIGHT FUTURES BEGIN HERE



Harris County Department of Education

[SEE THE IMPACT ON HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOLS](#)

[HCDE-TEXAS.ORG](#)

to account for conversion increases.

Billboards in two locations — Highway 249 at Lincoln Dr. and Interstate 45 at Little York Rd. — bearing HCDE's See the Change Your Change Makes branding garnered more than 4.2 million impressions.

The push for teacher recruitment also gained nice traction online with a 20% month-over-month increase in total reach on LinkedIn. Social media posts across the professional platform and Facebook yielded more than 670,000 impressions and 33,000 users who interacted with the Department's home pages. Videos on Facebook logged more than 66,000 views. The campaign's online Google ads saw an 8.64% increase in click-through rate, with a cost per click of \$4.36.

HCDE's awareness and teacher recruitment campaigns continue through the summer, using social media, billboards and TV promotions to draw interest to the Department's resources and Special Schools. ✨

Board Briefs



HCDE CLOSURES JULY 2-3 TO OBSERVE INDEPENDENCE DAY

INDEPENDENCE DAY IS A TIME TO REFLECT ON THE FREEDOMS AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT SHAPE OUR NATION WHILE CELEBRATING THE VALUES OF LIBERTY AND COMMUNITY. In observance of the holiday, Harris County Department of Education offices will be closed on Thursday,

July 2 and Friday, July 3. Fortis Academy and Academic and Behavior Schools East and West will remain open on Thursday, July 2, in accordance with the extended school year schedules. Summer flex hours for all HCDE employees and facilities will resume Monday, July 6. ✨

EMPLOYEES PREPARE FOR OPEN ENROLLMENT AT HUMAN RESOURCES BENEFITS FAIR

AS HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) AND ITS BENEFITS-ELIGIBLE EMPLOYEES HEAD TOWARD OPEN ENROLLMENT, Human Resources offered staff two information sessions this week.

The “Know Before You Enroll” Benefits Fair was held June 22 at North Post Oak and June 24 at Irvington. At both locations, employees were able to gather information and speak to representatives from many of HCDE’s benefits providers. The vendor



fair-style setting offered personalized support and empowered staff members to feel more confident when making benefits selections.

Open Enrollment is scheduled for July 6-24 and any changes made during this time will take effect on Sept. 1. ✨

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE C: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

- Administers a compensation and benefits plan for employees based on clearly defined goals and priorities and ensures consistency in all personnel practices.



For months, Keya Smith could often be found working on assignments and studying for tests at the Adult Education Learning Center. Her dedication will pay off as she receives her diploma alongside more than 150 GED and ESL graduates on June 26.

OUR ADULT EDUCATION GRADUATION CONTINUED TO INCREASE IN SIZE, which includes more than doubling just a few years back (2024). It's a trend I appreciate seeing year after year. Congratulations to the more than 100 graduates from our Adult Graduation program who complete and earned their high school equivalency diplomas (HSE), formerly known as GED, during the 2025-2026 school year. We heard the amazing story of graduates like Keya Smith, who dropped out just weeks before graduating high school. That feeling of regret stayed with her for 25 years before she made the decision to earn her diploma. But even that came with challenges, including an employer that changed her work schedule to prevent her from attending classes. One common trait among our adult learners is grit, and Smith embodies that. Congratulations again to all the graduates and good luck as they advance to the next steps in their respective journey.

As Open Enrollment nears (July 6-24), HCDE benefits-eligible employees will soon have the opportunity to select or change the plan and options best for them and their loved ones. With a new enrollment system in place this year for #TeamHCDE, our Human Resources division is working hard to keep employees well informed. This week, the team hosted "Know Before You Enroll" Benefits Fairs at both Irvington and North Post Oak locations.

Instead of a traditional PowerPoint presentation, representatives from the many HCDE benefits providers were available to employees in a vendor-style setting. This allowed for more personalized attention some need to ask questions catered to their individual needs, which can lead to more confidence when it's time to make those benefits elections. Thank you to Human Resources for meeting employees where they are and being able to accommodate the needs of many.

Finally, the three-week Summer Intensive cohort ended on June 25 for the nearly 20 alternative certification teacher candidates. Hosted by the Center for Educator Success, the cohort ended with each participant demonstrating their newfound skills and knowledge gained while in the program. I enjoy the 10-minute comprehensive presentations as it shows what they've learned but also the presence each has while speaking in front of cohort members, CES staff and school district representatives. It's a lot in three weeks, including daily lessons and instruction to best prepare participants for content exams and support their future classrooms. Kudos to CES for pouring into their educators and good luck to the cohort members and future teachers.

By not accepting mediocre performance, I am meeting the expectation of establishing a culture among the staff so that all strive to achieve excellence. ★



HCDE BOARD

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UPCOMING EVENTS

June 25-29
Annual Recovery Schools
Conference

June 27
Adult Education Graduation

July 2-3
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](#)

August 7
Convocation