

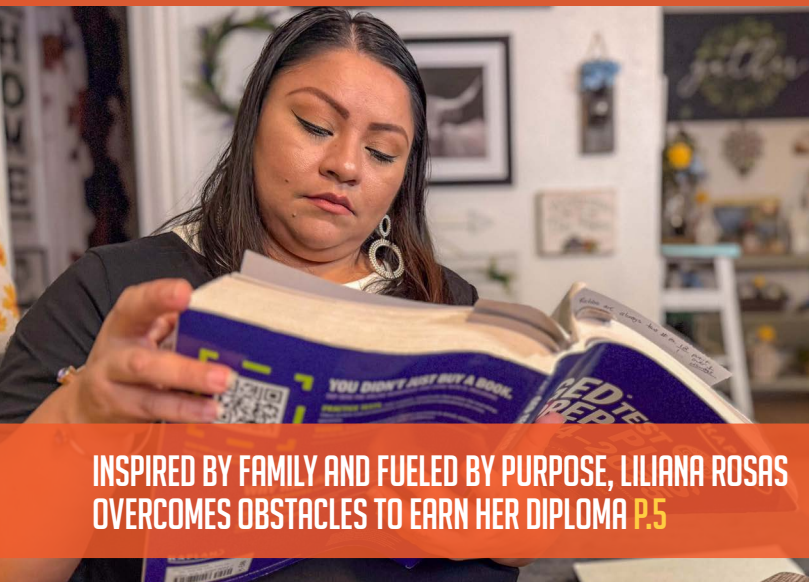


the CONNECTOR

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



FROM ROBOTICS CHALLENGES TO ART EXPERIENCES, HCDE STUDENTS
TURN LEARNING INTO REAL-WORLD SKILLS **P.3**



INSPIRED BY FAMILY AND FUELED BY PURPOSE, LILIANA ROSAS
OVERCOMES OBSTACLES TO EARN HER DIPLOMA **P.5**



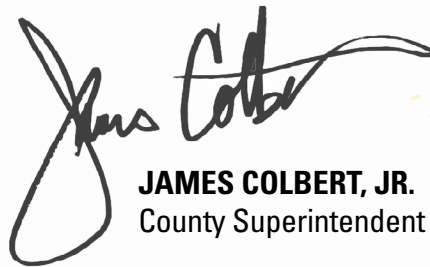
CASE FOR KIDS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM UP TO HELP
STUDENTS EXPLORE ADVOCACY THROUGH ART **P.9**

of Note

One of the things I love about our Special Schools is that our staff see beyond a student's disability and circumstances to the possibility of all he or she can achieve. Our schools provide opportunities and experiences students may not have on a traditional campus.

This is never more apparent than when our students with disabilities compete in the Ecobot Challenge with robots. Each summer, students at ABS East and West learn about STEM concepts through robots while reinforcing positive social skills like working together and staying calm in a pressure situation. Students then showcase their newfound knowledge on the technology battlefield, piloting robots through a series of missions. This exercise reinforces the STEM concepts but also allows students to engage in important life skills like problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration. These are students who would likely not participate in a robotics club at a traditional school. But at ABS East and West students are embraced for who they are, given the courage to step outside their comfort zone and explore new activities, all while learning to cope and manage their personal limitations and challenges. This is just one more reason why HCDE is VARSITY!

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by standing meetings with ELT staff members. On Tuesday, I met with the Leadership Team for our monthly gathering and on Wednesday, I met with Commissioner Adrian Garcia's Chief of Staff regarding a potential partnership endeavor. I started my day today fulfilling my duties as chairman of the UIL State Executive Committee followed by meetings with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. Have a relaxing weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Students and staff from Academic and Behavior School East pose for a photo after winning the team competition at the annual Summer All-Earth Ecobot Challenge on July 7. Facilitated by CASE for Kids, the competition is a modified version of the original challenge for students at ABS East and ABS West.

STEM ADVENTURE: ABS STUDENTS COMPETE AT SOCCER-INSPIRED ECOBOT CHALLENGE

EVEN DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS, students at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Academic and Behavior Schools were busy learning robotics and getting hands-on experience with STEM adventures.

On July 7, more than 20 students met at ABS West to showcase their newfound knowledge at the annual summer All-Earth Ecobot Challenge. Hosted in conjunction with the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids, Special Schools brings the competition to its students during the extended school year to practice social-emotional skills such as working together, managing frustrations and remaining calm in pressure situations.

Following a morning of friendly competition, it was ABS East which claimed the team trophy.

"This has been great. To see them go from not knowing anything about it to learning and even excelling at what they did was really rewarding," said ABS East teacher Frank Harris, who took the lead on helping students learn the robotics and better understand the tasks.

In 2021, Special Schools and CASE for Kids leadership worked together to bring the Ecobot Challenge to students at ABS West.

The original competition is held during the school year for elementary school and middle school students across Harris County. Facilitated by CASE for Kids, the hands-on, project-based competition features teams building, programming and piloting LEGO MINDSTORM EV3 robots through a series of missions to navigate real-world environmental challenges. Teams learn the year's theme in January (2026 was Kingdom of Ecobot: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink) and start crafting their strategy and programming their robots.

Nearly 100 students competed at the challenge in April.

The Summer Ecobot Challenge is tailored for AB Schools students, who work through intellectual, developmental and behavioral disorders and other significant health impairments, and can mean so much more. This year's theme was soccer inspired by the summer's 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Competitions included students controlling Sphero coding robots on a soccer pitch, using an iPad

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Program Connections



Ecobot Challenge participants earned points for themselves and their respective campuses by competing tasks within each game. ABS East finished with 271 total points to edge ABS West, which totaled 255.

as a joystick and moving balls toward a goal to score points. In others, students used the robots or coded Dash Robots to move around boundaries and knock over bowling pins. The day ended with Sphero races.

"We love the summer Ecobot Challenge because it allows us an opportunity to modify our main competition for our ABS students," CASE for Kids Assistant Director Trina Finley said. "Plus, it's a great opportunity to help celebrate National Summer Learning Week. We bring in the STEM but it's fun. We have a good time."

Students earned points throughout the challenges, from completing a task to finishing within a certain time frame.

The challenge helped students like Anthony Broussard (ABS West) and Gabriel Ryan (ABS East) build and strengthen their life skills. They and their peers needed to solve problems and think creatively in real time when their robots didn't move

accordingly. They needed to exercise patience when changes occurred, such as losing connectivity or bumping into an obstacle on the course.

Broussard (85 points) and Ryan (36) were the top point scorers from their respective campuses.

At the end after the scores were tallied, ABS East edged out ABS West for the team trophy by a 271-255 margin.

Regardless of their finish, students fully embraced the friendly competition. They cheered each other on and watched each other's hard work come to life.

"Seeing them work together and getting through everything is great," Harris said. "From Day 1, which is a very tentative time because they're now sure how to control them and they're going everywhere, to more time going and them getting a better understanding of what do with them."

For more information about the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, visit <http://EcobotChallenge.com>. 🌟



The soccer-inspired Ecobot Challenge featured one competition on soccer gameboard with students tasked to move a Sphero coding robot and score goals.



The Summer Ecobot Challenge allowed ABS students to thinking critically and problem solve in real time.



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY

Program Connections



Liliana Rosas recently graduated from HCDE's Adult Education program after passing all the qualifications exams to earn her High School Equivalency (HSE) certification, 15 years after dropping out. She joined nearly 150 students who completed their HSE or English as a Second Language classes at a graduation ceremony on June 27.

ADULT EDUCATION GRADUATION FUELED BY HOPE: ONE MOTHER'S STORY OF PERSEVERANCE, PURPOSE

LILIANA ROSAS' LIFE CHANGED THE MOMENT HER DAUGHTER, LEAH, WAS DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISM.

Like many parents, she was overwhelmed with questions and uncertainty in a desperate search for answers. She spent hours researching therapies, navigating long waitlists and learning how to advocate for her youngest daughter, and along the way, she discovered her calling.

"I wanted to help her figure out how to move forward," Rosas said. "I ended up realizing how much I wanted to help kids facing the same diagnosis, and that motivated me to finish high school so I could explore a career that involves special needs."

That newfound mission led Rosas back to the classroom she left 15 years earlier when a fear of failing caused her to drop out. On June 27, she walked across the stage as one of nearly 150 Harris County residents who earned their High School Equivalency certification (HSE, formerly known as GED) or

completed English as a Second Language (ESL) coursework during the 2025-2026 academic year.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr., Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment Dr. CJ Rodgers and Adult Education Senior Director Dr. Eduardo Honold joined graduates and their families to recognize their accomplishments. Precinct 2 Commissioner Adrian Garcia delivered the keynote address, encouraging graduates to view the ceremony as a stepping stone rather than a finish line.

"Everybody here today has earned and fought for the certifications and diplomas that they received," Garcia told graduates. "To the Class of 2026, you can, and you will continue to be lifelong learners. Do not stop here, continue to the next level."

Rosas considered returning to school several times over the years, like her classmates, but the timing never seemed right. However, with all three of her children enrolled in school, and the need to advocate for Leah's medical, mental and educational well-being arose, Rosas knew she needed to act. She enrolled

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Program Connections



Precinct 2 Commissioner Adrian Garcia delivered the keynote address, inspiring students to use their accomplishments as a stepping stone that launches them into the next step of their careers.



Leah Rosas, center, was diagnosed with Autism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feeling alone and unsupported, Lilianna Rosas was inspired to help families facing a similar diagnosis.

at HCDE's Baytown Adult Education site and finished her coursework ahead of schedule. Rosas was one of the first students in her class to pass all the HSE exams and even found herself encouraging classmates who struggled.

"The Adult Education program was easier than I thought," she said. "The teachers were amazing and very helpful. I enjoyed learning and even felt empowered enough to start encouraging my classmates, saying, 'You can do it, you can pass.'"

Honold reminded graduates at the ceremony that their accomplishments reflected months – and for some – years of determination and resilience to earn their certifications and pursue a better life for themselves and their families.

"Each of you showed up to your classes daily with grit, and you probably shocked some people who underestimated you," Honold said. "You earned your place on this stage, and we expect a lot more from you."

Rosas' husband and children were among the proud families cheering as Honold handed her a diploma at graduation. She described feeling immense pride in herself and a commitment to ensure her children graduate from high school and attend college.

"I'm proud that they were able to see I completed my education at the age that I did, but I want them to do it sooner," she laughed. "I'm glad they know that no matter what age, you never stop learning."

The recent graduate plans to attend Lee College to study a field related to special education, with the hope of working with children with special needs. She also hopes to support families who might feel alone as they navigate unfamiliar diagnoses and therapies.



Rosas, left, received support from her husband and three children in her efforts to complete her HSE. She strives to ensure they graduate from high school and college, and remain lifelong learners.

"When your child receives that diagnosis, you feel like there's no way out, and that's not true," an emotional Rosas said. "We're not alone, and there's a lot of help out there. I'm proud to be on the journey to become part of that help."

The diplomas and certificates earned by Adult Education's Class of 2026 represent more than a second chance. They are the foundation for the future each graduate wants to build, where lessons learned become a source of hope for prospective students. ★

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Program Connections



Nearly 150 Harris County residents received their diploma or certification from HCDE and Adult Education leadership as friends and family cheered them on. The celebration marked a milestone that reflected months - and for some - years of dedication and resilience to earn.



TO SEE MORE
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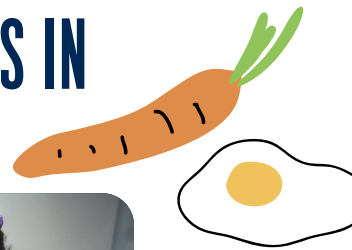


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STUDENTS EXPLORE CAREERS, LIFE SKILLS IN CASE FOR KIDS SUMMER PROGRAM



CASE FOR KIDS' SUMMER PROGRAMMING IS A TIME TO BUILD PRACTICAL LIFE SKILLS

that will serve students long after the school year begins. More than a dozen students from De Witt Middle School in Spring Independent School District have spent the past few weeks practicing interview techniques, strengthening communication skills and learning the importance of teamwork.

Out-of-school time professionals use funding from the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Center to introduce students to a variety



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

of career pathways through interactive, hands-on experiences designed to spark curiosity. Students recently explored the world of cosmetology through styling workshops, where staff taught them to create various hairstyles and manicure designs, while partnerships with businesses like Lift Enrichment offered culinary classes. Students spent an hour each week with Chef Teri, where they prepared recipes together and learned about nutrition, food safety and the value of making informed choices in the kitchen.

By combining career exploration with real-world skills, CASE for Kids continues to ensure summer learning is both enriching and memorable. Each activity and experience empowers students to return to school with new knowledge, greater confidence and a broader view of their future possibilities. ★

FORTIS ACADEMY LEARNS, LEADS AND CONNECTS AT ARHE/ARS/AAPG CONFERENCE

FRESH IDEAS, MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS AND INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES were all on the agenda as Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) and Fortis Academy staff traveled to Denver on June 26-30 for the Association of Recovery in Higher Education/Association of Recovery Schools/Association of Alternative Peer Groups (ARHE/ARS/AAPG) Conference. HCDE Assistant Superintendent for Academic and Support Services Jonathan Parker and Fortis Counselor Nakia Lee-Francis, Recovery Program Coordinator Melody Burr and Educational Aide Rockette Simpson joined professionals from the clinical, medical and other school-based recovery programs to explore the latest research, share best practices and discover new approaches for supporting people on their recovery journey.

Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey and Communications Coordinator Shelby Trahan also took to the stage to present "Beyond the Inner Circle: Using Authentic Messaging to Reach New Audiences." The session explored



how organizations can develop authentic content, connect with audiences beyond their existing supporters and use artificial intelligence to simplify communications workflows. The conference equipped the Fortis team with fresh perspectives and practical tools to strengthen both student support and community engagement. ★

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM COMBINES ART AND ADVOCACY TO CASE FOR KIDS YOUTH ON TRIP TO ART IN THE HEART

STARTING WITH BLANK CANVASES – albeit a flowerpot, button or notebook – area youth got a better understanding of advocacy, finding their voice and civic engagement on a recent trip to the Art in the Heart, a nonprofit organization which combines creativity and community.

The trip was organized by Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Civic Engagement Team. Students from six Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids Texas ACE Cycle 11 grant campuses sites traveled to the house located on Houston's northeast side on July 1.

Participants rotated through multiple activities. They included decorating flowerpots, creating buttons advocating for issues students wanted to tackle, designing journals on being

a good community steward, and creating bags that reflected personal values.

Art in the House offers camps, art classes and workshops and mobile programs. Founder Veronica Cabrera converted her childhood home to an art complex that now features multiple classrooms and spaces for creativity.

"I finished the field trip with a lot of hope," Civic Engagement Coordinator Austen Ross-Yorko said. "It's difficult to encourage anyone to speak up about their values and worldviews, let alone young people who commonly feel like their voices don't carry as much influence in the world. Art In the Heart did a great job creating a space where students could safely express themselves, using art to ease them into weighty discussions." ★



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for June! Nine new faces have joined our Adult Education, Business Services, CASE for Kids, Center for Educator Success and Head Start.



Ardavia Darden
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Yisel Gutierrez
Relief Teaching Assistant
Head Start



Sharonda Britten
Senior Accountant
Business Services



Ashley Hernandez
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Amber Hunter
Early Child Teacher
Head Start



Robin Jackson
Manager of Teacher Support
Center for Educator Success



Trishti Oneal
Assistant Campus Manager
Head Start



Joshua LaTouche
Afterschool Program
Specialist
Case for Kids



Yazmin Flores
Manager
Adult Education

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.



Top finishers from both Academic and Behavior Schools at the annual Summer All-Earth Ecobot Challenge pose for a group photo. The event is tailored for AB Schools students, who are able to problem solve and think creatively in the challenges.

AS PART OF CELEBRATING NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING WEEK, the Academic and Behavior School All-Earth Summer Ecobot Challenge was held at brought together more than 20 students from both ABS East and ABS West for a morning of friendly competition and milestone victories in STEM. Events like this are beneficial, especially during the summer months when students are prone to the “summer slide” and interaction between peers can be limited. The challenge is tailored for AB Schools, who work through intellectual, development and behavioral disorders and significant health impairments, and they programmed and maneuvered Sphero coding and Dash robots through different courses. Thank you to our campus staff and teachers for stepping up and supporting their students during competition. With students at our four special schools, completing projects and overcoming obstacles are reasons to celebrate. Congratulations to all participants and winners on their hard work and success.

On June 27, HCDE and the Adult Education division congratulated nearly 150 Harris County residents who “crossed the stage” and earned their High School Equivalency diplomas. Graduates heard motivational words from Precinct 2 Commissioner Adrian Garcia, who credited the honorees for their journey and overcoming adversity thrown in their path. Among those graduates was Liliana Rosas, who used her daughter’s diagnosis of autism to

change her path. She returned to the classroom 15 years after dropping out and excelled, even being a student who encouraged others to reach their goals. Rosas has plans to attend Lee College and work in special education where she can help and support families like her own. It was a privilege to stand on stage with each graduate, see the emotions on their faces and hear the cheers from their loved ones. I look forward to hearing more success stories.

Finally, our Civic Engagement team helped organize a recent trip for six CASE for Kids Texas ACE Cycle 11 grant campuses to the Art in the Heart. The nonprofit organization combined creativity and community – founder Veronica Cabrera converted her childhood home to an art complex that includes multiple classrooms and spaces to create art. Students rotated through multiple activities where they decorated flowerpots and created personalized buttons and bags. Each station incorporated conversations and lessons on advocacy. Giving young people a voice for civic engagement is invaluable as they will soon become leaders and influential members of their respective communities. Thank you again to our Civic Engagement for spearheading the trip.

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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Dr. Erica Davis

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Dr. John McGee

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Silky Joshi-Malik

UPCOMING EVENTS

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

August 17
Head Start
First Day of School

August 19
Board Meeting

August 24
Special Schools
First Day of Classes

September 7
Labor Day
(HCDE Closed)