

the **CONNECTOR**

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



CSSS LEANS ON TEAM'S EXPERTISE, FLEXIBILITY TO LEAVE MARK THROUGH NUMEROUS TRAININGS P.3



HOUSTON ISD STUDENTS SHOWCASE FUTURE ASPIRATIONS AT CASE FOR KIDS CAREER DAY EVENT P.6



LOCAL TV STATIONS HIGHLIGHT CASE FOR KIDS PARTNERS FOR NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING WEEK P.7

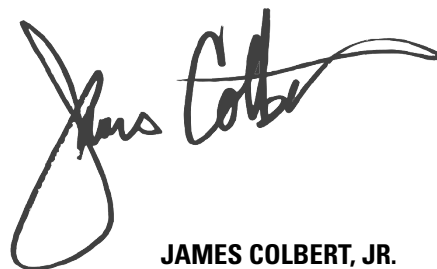
of Note

TWO OF THE GREATEST DUTIES of an HCDE trustee are to approve the budget in July and the tax rate in September. These two decisions set the stage for how the organization will function in the coming year from a fiscal and programmatic standpoint. They determine how much tax, fee and grant revenue we will receive and how we intend to spend it.

This week, Ms. Westbrook and I presented the board with a \$170M balanced budget for approval. Thank you to all the trustees who took the time to attend the meeting and support our plans for the coming year. HCDE is in a very healthy financial position and your governance and stewardship are two big reasons we are able to support our students, client districts and the community in new and innovative ways. Thank you!

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by standing meetings with staff. On Tuesday, I met with staff to discuss Convocation and conducted an appraisal. On Wednesday, I participated in the regular board meeting where Dr. Davis presided as president in Mr. Cantu's absence. Thank you for your support of the budget and the robust discussion. Today, Mr. Parker and I visited Lone Star College in Tomball to meet with a team of education program administrators regarding a potential partnership involving our schools.

Have a wonderful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Center for Safe and Secure Schools Climate and Culture Specialist Michelle Calhoun helped lead a Youth Mental Health First Aid training in Galena Park ISD on July 14. CSSS has conducted nearly 60 training sessions in four of the last five academic year cycles and will reach 80 by Aug. 1.



The Center for
**Safe and
Secure
Schools**

AS INDUSTRY EXPERTS, CSSS TEAM MEMBERS POUR INTO COMMUNITIES THROUGH TRAINING SESSIONS

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR the Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS), the best bet is at the team's office spaces at Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) North Post Oak location.

More than likely, however, one or more members won't be at their desks.

Instead, they'll be out in the community, leading a training session or presenting topics to help keep students, educators and school facilities safe.

"We have to be very intentional about how we meet," CSSS Director Leslie Etheridge said with a laugh, noting her team has a standing meeting every Monday morning. "We oftentimes work around the schedules of the school districts so it's hard for us to just have a meeting."

Established in 1999, CSSS was created at the request of school superintendents to answer the call of advancing safe and secure environments for learning and teaching. The division partners with entities and organizations locally, statewide and across the nation to help in the development of increased safety and security strategies, standards and best practices for K-12 educational environments.

Among the needs CSSS addresses are emergency management planning and operations, training and certification programs and safe and secure teaching and learning environments. Through their memberships with

CSSS, school districts and organizations receive action support and annual reviews, and regular collaboration with fellow school safety leaders.

CSSS initiatives include the Counselor Symposium, "Let's Talk Mental Health Series," and annual School Safety Summit.

The team also leads numerous training sessions. CSSS has conducted nearly 60 trainings in four of the last five academic year cycles (September to August), including 86 sessions in 2022-2023.

The division is on pace to top that for the 2025-2026 cycle. It's scheduled to reach 80 through month's end with August still to go, an impressive number as most of the team has less than four years with HCDE.

They are long-time fixtures in school or public safety, however.

"One of our missions is to be impactful," said Etheridge, named division director in 2023 following a career with the New York City Police Department. "Everyone needs training so it's great that we provide those opportunities, often at a low cost or sometimes free with the memberships to the districts as needed."

CSSS has held sessions in 21 in-county and five out-of-county school districts, and 19 other organizations, including local universities

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Program Connections

and churches.

This week alone, CSSS is conducting five training sessions. Climate and Culture Specialists Michelle Calhoun and Dr. Tiffany Chaney held three sessions on Youth Mental Health First Aid in Galena Park ISD, while Officer of School Safety and Security Jeremy Foster is leading two ("Classrooms that Thrive" and "Inspiring Tomorrow's Heroes") in Alief ISD on July 18.

Mental health training is part of a state directive for school district staff members to be trained. The percentage increases every school year until 100% of staff are trained.

Through CSSS's Department of Justice Students, Teachers and Officers Preventing School Violence grant, the team can offer training on preventing school violence, threat assessment and responding to mental health crises.

Calhoun and Chaney led Galena Park ISD staff through the youth mental health course, which included non-crisis action plans and true crisis situations. Participants worked through scenarios, deciding the gravity of crisis and approach to intervene and assist through the lens of a teacher, campus administrator or parent.

The group also worked through suicide, identifying the



Officer of School Safety and Security Jeremy Foster presents on vitality at work to Procurement Services in May. CSSS routinely leads training sessions for HCDE employees in addition to district partners.

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The Center for Safe and Secure Schools has conducted 337 training sessions since September 2022, with no fewer than 42 over any academic year cycle.

Program Connections

signs and having the hard conversation of asking students if they plan to hurt themselves.

“Training is important and not just because it’s required,” said Ana Lara, Galena Park ISD director of early head start who attended the session with nearly a dozen of her staff. “We always touch on these hard-to-have conversations. Even in this scenario, it was not comfortable, so it’s important that we have those conversations because these are real-life scenarios.”

The session encompasses how CSSS has been able to make a sizable impact in the space of school and public safety.

“Now that we’re out and doing all these different trainings, we see the uptick,” Chaney said.

Team members are flexible and can adapt sessions to the partners and entities they’re working with. They are also able to meet school districts and organizations where they are, which goes back to the CSSS team routinely being out in the field instead of in its office space.

CSSS benefits from its high standards, as shown by the sheer number of touchpoints with partners. It’s normal for an entity to have training after attending a previous event and through a positive word-of-mouth testimonial.

“Every district is different with what their needs are,” Etheridge said. “We’re not a one-stop shop where we have this one training and we offer it the same across the board. Some districts are more advanced when it comes to emergency operations, and some are more advanced when it comes to behavioral threats. And some are not, so we can come in, meet you where you are, see where you are and bring you up to speed with the best practices.” ★

“EVERYONE NEEDS TRAINING SO IT’S GREAT THAT WE PROVIDE THOSE OPPORTUNITIES, OFTEN AT A LOW COST OR SOMETIMES FREE WITH THE MEMBERSHIPS TO THE DISTRICTS AS NEEDED.”

CSSS TRAINING SESSIONS BY THE NUMBERS

- 337** Total training sessions since September 2022
- 86** Most sessions during an academic year cycle (September to August)
- 80** Trainings in current cycle through July
- 26** School districts to have CSSS trainings (21 of 25 in Harris County)
- 16** Most sessions in a month (three times since 2022)



Dr. Tiffany Chaney, a Climate and Culture Specialist for the Center for Safe and Secure Schools, visits with Galena Park ISD staff during a Youth Mental Health First Aid training. CSSS has conducted nearly 60 training sessions in four of the last five academic year cycles and will reach 80 by Aug. 1.

Board Briefs

CHAVEZ HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS PRESENT POST-GRADUATE, JOB ASPIRATIONS AT CAREER DAY SHOWCASE

DRESSED PROFESSIONALLY and armed with their “about-me” elevator pitches, students at Houston Independent School District’s Chavez High School competed in the Career Day Showcase on July 15.

Put on by Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids at the Charlton Community Center, the event gave participants the platform to set their dreams and aspirations into motion. The summer project pushed students to assess their values and skills and then project their fit in the workplace and the path needed to achieve future goals.

More than a dozen students designed and decorated tri-fold boards, including information about themselves, the selected future career – with education requirements and labor marker information attached – and other long-term goals. Among the professions were storm chaser, art teacher, propulsion engineer, chef and pediatrician.

Community Members and CASE for Kids staff visited each student to judge the displays and career pitches. Division staff also conducted mock interviews with students, giving them a foundation for confidence and professional skills.



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

The summer project was a rousing success, as participants were celebrated for their research and self-assessment. These building blocks in a supportive environment will assist students as they grow professionally. ★

CASE FOR KIDS CONNECTS COMMUNITY PARTNERS THROUGH BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS SUMMER SERIES



TO HELP CREATE MORE meaningful conversations among out-of-school time professionals and stakeholders, Harris County Department of Education’s Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids established a summer series with no requirements other than food and fellowship.

Breakfast of Champions is designed as a low-pressure, informal networking opportunity, with those invested in the afterschool and out-of-school time space sharing best practices and addressing current trends and challenges. Two were held in June in Precincts 1 and 2.

On July 9, participants gathered at Be A Champion, Inc. within Precinct 3 for a discussion centered on student voice and choice, and how programs can empower young people while fostering responsibility and growth.

Precinct 4 will host July 17 at the World Youth Foundation. ★

HCDE HIGHLIGHTS LANGUAGE ACCESS COMMUNITY AT ANNUAL TRANSLATORS, INTERPRETERS CONFERENCE

THE PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS CONFERENCE (PTIC) returns for a second year, showcasing the only conference in Texas geared toward highlighting the vital role of language professionals in education, healthcare, insurance, legal and other settings.

Now extended to two days, PTIC will be held July 30-31 at the Irvington Conference Center.

A second language is not required to attend, as sessions and presentations are applicable to roles not directly involved in communicating with families and stakeholders who are non-English or limited English speakers.

Attendees are able to obtain up to 8.5 hours of professional development through HCDE for translators, interpreters, bilingual educators and staff members who are called upon to translate and/or interpret. PTIC also qualifies for 10 hours of continuing education points through the American Translators Association.

New this year is exploring quality interpreting for deaf and hard of hearing students. Presenter M. Cody Francisco, the director of Deaf & Hard of Hearing Services at MasterWord Services, has more than 20 years of

experience in the interpreting industry and brings expertise in legal, medical, emergency response, advocacy and educational settings.

Also new are five masterclass sessions and a VIP leadership brunch available on Day 1, and three exclusive small group lab sessions featuring practical interpreting exercises on Day 2. ✨



IN THE NEWS

CASE FOR KIDS SHOWCASES NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING WEEK, LOCAL PROGRAMS ON LOCAL TV INTERVIEWS

TWO LOCAL MEDIA OUTLETS helped put a spotlight on National Summer Learning Week (July 6-10), the importance of summer learning and how the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids helps Harris County youth avoid the “summer slide.”

On July 7, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Translations Coordinator Wendy Utterback joined Univision 45 Houston during its midday webcast, #EdiciónDigitalHouston. She joined anchor Laura Sierra for an interview via Zoom where they discussed the importance of learning in the summer months between school years for not only retaining information but also building new skills.

The next day, CASE for Kids Senior Director Lisa Caruthers was a guest on Fox 26 Houston’s “HTX @10,” the station’s local 10 a.m. webcast following live news programming. Morning anchor Melissa Wilson and Caruthers talked about the many organizations offering

summer programming for Harris County students and the benefits – both physical and mentally – for learning.

Photos of Caruthers and Wilson’s interview were posted on HCDE’s social media channels. The media attention affirms the importance of HCDE’s efforts to bring resources and visibility to Harris County youth and organizations that serve them. ✨



UNIVISION

WATCH THE UNIVISION INTERVIEW

HONORING HCDE'S 2025-2026 RETIREES

Harris County Department of Education recognizes 13 full-time and part-time employees who elected to celebrate their retirements during 2025-2026. We thank them for their years of service to Harris County learners, families and stakeholders.



Silvio Leiva
4 Years of Service

Teacher
Adult Ed



Phyllis Gage
30 Years of Service

Senior Customer Supp/Img Specialist
Records Mgmt



Jesus Amezcua
17 Years of Service

Asst Supt - Business Svcs
Business Svcs



Patricia Menard
22 Years of Service

Assistant Director - HR
HR



Gregory Johnson
8 Years of Service

Head Start Teacher - AA
HS-Dogan



Evelyn Lane
20 Years of Service

Cook
HS-Sheffield



Lydia Hill
27 Years of Service
Early Childhood HS Teacher
EHS-Baytown



Ann Petty
33 Years of Service
Music Therapist
Therapy Svcs



Susan Schwaitzberg
16 Years of Service

Occupational Therapist
Therapy Svcs



Ananiel Gonzales
9 Years of Service

Physical Therapist
Therapy Svcs



Davietta Ford
21 Years of Service

Educational Aide III
ABS West



San Juanita Montes
31 Years of Service

Secretary to Senior Director
Adult Ed



Diane Washington
19 Years of Service

Head Start Teacher
HS-Tidwell

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 coordinate way.



Center for Safe and Secure Schools Climate and Culture Specialists Michelle Calhoun and Dr. Tiffany Chaney (pink tops) pose for a photo with Galena Park ISD staff following a Youth Mental Health First Aid training. The division will reach 80 training sessions during this academic cycle by Aug. 1.

THIS WEEK, we put a focus on the Center for Safe and Secure Schools and the impact the team has across Harris County and beyond with the sheer number of training sessions it continues to lead. From September through the end of this month, CSSS will be on pace to reach the highest number of training sessions over the last academic year cycles. That's impact but it also shows the intentionality of what CSSS does for our community partners and stakeholders. This division is flexible and able to tailor teaching objectives to each school district and organization based on needs. The team conducted three sessions on youth mental health first aid in Galena Park ISD this week and will add two more Saturday in Alief ISD. CSSS reflects what HCDE offers – a team with leading industry experts who are able to positively impact teaching and learning environments and address concerns in school safety. I appreciate the work CSSS is doing and look forward to seeing what else the team does in the future.

Summertime is vital for students to stay engaged with learning and building skills before heading to the next school year, and CASE for Kids offers those vehicles through numerous programs across Harris County. At Chavez High School in Houston ISD, students explored post-graduation paths and career aspirations during the summer and displayed those dreams at a Career Day Showcase. It was impressive to see display boards, which students created

and featured self-assessments, education and career information, and even job market and labor growth projections. This better prepares students to make well-informed choices in professions that are growing. The career day even featured mock interviews, giving students experience but more importantly, building a foundation for confidence in social settings. Congratulations to everyone who participated and to community members who attended to support these future professionals.

Finally, two local media outlets helped HCDE and CASE for Kids highlight summertime programming and National Summer Learning Week (July 6-10). Translations Coordinator Wendy Utterback joined Univision 45 Houston for a discussion about the importance of learning in the summer months between school years, while CASE for Kids Senior Director Lisa Caruthers joined Fox 26 Houston's "HTX @10" and spotlighted several area organizations offering a variety of programming to benefit students both mentally and physically. Having a positive relationship with media partners allows them to look at HCDE when seeking industry experts or trusted sources to speak on issues in education.

By maintaining involvement in the community with stakeholders, I continue cultivating and working relationships between HCDE and its various community partners. ★



HCDE BOARD

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Richard Cantu

1st Vice President
Dr. Erica Davis

2nd Vice President
Dr. John McGee

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

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)