



the CONNECTOR

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



HYPE FREEDOM SCHOOL STUDENTS DISCOVER THE WORLD ONE STORY AT A TIME P.3



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EFHC HONORS SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS, SHOWS INVESTMENT IN NONTRADITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES P.7

of Note

I like to say that HCDE is an opportunity maker. We give students second chances and provide unique pathways for them to succeed. We do that in a variety of ways through diverse programs and services. An unlikely but truly significant partner in this endeavor with us is the Education Foundation of Harris County and the scholarships it awards to local high school graduates.

This week we see the power of one word. We see how saying "Yes" to a student's application for a \$2,500 scholarship could forever change the trajectory of his or her life. Through the eyes of a scholarship recipient, we see that HCDE's power is not always in the amount of money we spend but in the impact that money makes.

At the Scholarship celebration today, the foundation gave away \$30,000 to local high school graduates moving onto a community college or trade school. This small investment by the foundation and HCDE will reap great dividends as these students pursue productive careers that may not have been possible without HCDE's support. I love being part of an organization that can help make dreams come true and look forward to many more years of scholarship receptions celebrating the promise of a bright future for hundreds of Harris County graduates.

I started the week with ELT on Monday. That afternoon I met with Harris County Precinct 3 Commissioner Ramsey regarding a potential partnership. On Tuesday, I met with staff to receive updates about ongoing projects and initiatives. Wednesday, I met with HCDE legal counsel regarding ongoing issues and challenges and then participated in interviews to fill the Executive Assistant to the Board of Trustees vacant position.

Today, I met with staff for convocation planning after which I discussed leadership expectations and priorities for the upcoming year with our four school principals. I ended the week at the Education Foundation of Harris County Scholarship Celebration.

It looks like Tropical Storm Bertha will be hitting Texas this weekend. Stay safe.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Members of the CASE for Kids and Harris County Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity staffs visited HYPE Freedom School on July 21 to observe program offerings and learn how to better support the Precinct 1 County Connections site.

HYPE FREEDOM SCHOOL TURNS SUMMER READING INTO A JOURNEY OF GROWTH, EMPOWERMENT

SUMMER PROGRAMMING AT HYPE FREEDOM SCHOOL DOESN'T BEGIN WITH ATTENDANCE OR ANNOUNCEMENTS. Students are greeted with good morning cheers and breakfast before joining a Harambee circle. Inspired by the Swahili meaning of the word "pulling together," the spirited gathering filled with songs, affirmations and recognition encourages participants to believe in themselves and one another – embodying the heart of what it means to be a HYPE scholar.

"My mom signed me up for HYPE, and at first, I thought it was kind of boring because I didn't want to do the morning chants," 10-year-old Evan Cockerhan said with a laugh. "Then I started to get into it, and now I really enjoy coming every day, making new friends and reading all the books about our history."

This year, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) County Connections Youth Summer Initiative awarded the HYPE Freedom School a \$20,000 grant to support student literary development. Funding for the enrichment curriculum is approved by Harris County Commissioners and administered to

vetted programs by HCDE's Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids.

HYPE operates four campuses in the heart of the Sunnyside and South Park communities for a six-week program that keeps more than 350 kindergarten through 12th-grade students from low-income households engaged in literary, leadership and family engagement activities.

"Even if you never left the city or your community, when you read a book, it takes you to a new place," explained Brandi Brown, the executive director and co-founder of HYPE. "This program gives us a chance to take our young people all over the world through the books that they're reading, and in turn, engage their families in activities and showcases that demonstrate their newfound knowledge."

Each week, scholars dive into a specially designed integrated curriculum that uses diverse literary characters and stories to spark conversations about real-life challenges, including academics, community violence, grief, conflict resolution and

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Program Connections



HYPE Executive Director and Co-Founder Brandi Brown, right, embraces Mari Grays after she successfully led a practice for an upcoming group performance.

“EVEN IF YOU NEVER LEFT THE CITY OR YOUR COMMUNITY, WHEN YOU READ A BOOK, IT TAKES YOU TO A NEW PLACE.”

responsible decision-making. Rather than simply reading the material, students bring each lesson to life by acting out scenes, performing musical chapter summaries and leading group discussions that strengthen reading comprehension, critical thinking and public speaking skills.

“I thought I was bad at reading because I would mess up and think to myself, ‘I should have known that,’” said Mari Grays, an incoming eighth grader and HYPE student for longer than she can remember. “HYPE has helped me become more confident in my abilities, and now I have fun laughing with my friends about what’s happening in the books and connecting with the stories.”

Learning extends well beyond the classroom through partnerships with organizations such as the YMCA, Precinct One and the Children’s Museum Houston, giving students the opportunity to mingle with those enrolled at various HYPE campuses during weekly field trips.

“This is a life-changing experience for some of our scholars,” Brown said. “When they leave us, these kids show up to the new academic year looking like more confident, experienced and polished students. While their peers may not have been part of a structured enrichment activity, we know HYPE scholars are a step above everyone else, and that’s because of funding from CASE for Kids and the County Connections program, so we are super grateful.”

The grant allows HYPE Freedom School to offer the six-week program at no cost to families, removing barriers that often prevent children from participating in high-quality summer programming. Families are asked only to invest their time and commitment in their children’s HYPE experience by attending recitals, talent shows and more.

Parents with younger children not old enough to enroll are invited to participate in the morning and afternoon Harambee circles, giving them the chance to experience the program’s culture while introducing the next generation of scholars to HYPE. To further support the well-being of every family, the organization also provides free therapy and counseling services, recognizing that students thrive when their mental and emotional

health – and that of the family members supporting them – are prioritized.

“We strive to ensure our scholars know that we support the adults in their lives just as much as we support them,” Brown explained. “That’s part of the intergenerational model that we are constantly working toward, from our students to the parents, to the college students we have leading our classrooms. We want everyone to leave this program stronger and more productive than when they arrived.”

At the heart of HYPE is the belief that everyone can grow when given the right support, opportunities and encouragement. Scholars are challenged to step out of their comfort zones, explore new ideas and discover the joy of learning. For Grays, that journey changed the way she viewed herself as a reader, and now she hopes other students will give HYPE the same chance.

“To the kids who say reading all summer sounds terrible, I say, ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover,’” she said. 🌟



Two elementary school children take turns reading a book out loud during summer programming.

HCDE LEAVES IMPRINT AT 2026 NATIONAL SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S (HCDE) COMMUNICATIONS & CREATIVE SERVICES COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING & CLIENT ENGAGEMENT TEAMS joined fellow industry professionals for networking and professional development at the 2026 National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Conference, held July 19-22 in New Orleans.

Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark received a Golden Achievement Award for the "Recover Together: Teen Addiction Campaign."

The communications team received multiple national awards. Multimedia Manager Debra Sanchez-Treese earned Digital Media Awards of Excellence for three videos: "HCDE Graduation 2025: The Story is Just Beginning," "Danielle Clark – Barry Gaskins Mentor Awardee" and "HCDE: A Place for Hope, Healing and Opportunity." Multimedia Content Coordinator Jessica Lieng earned an Award of Merit for her video, "2025 Scholastic Art and Writing Student Features."

Clark was named NSPRA South Central Region Vice President, joining the organization's Executive Board. She ran unopposed for the position, which allowed the Executive Board to affirm her without an election. In addition to her duties on the Executive Board, Clark will represent the South Central Region, which includes Arkansas, Louisiana, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas, and their respective state associations. Her three-year term begins Oct. 1.

Clark also presented at NSPRA. Her session, titled "Throw Yourself a Lifeline: Navigating Today's School PR Storms," showcased being your own advocate, building resilience and maintaining personal and professional peace while handling adversity through a career in school communications.

Marketing & Client Engagement Director Stephanie De Los Santos and Assistant Director Mitzi Loera, and Communications & Creative Services Communications Manager Angel Verdejo also attended NSPRA, learning strategies and tips to best serve Harris County students and families. 🌟



LUCKY MOMENTS ALL AROUND!



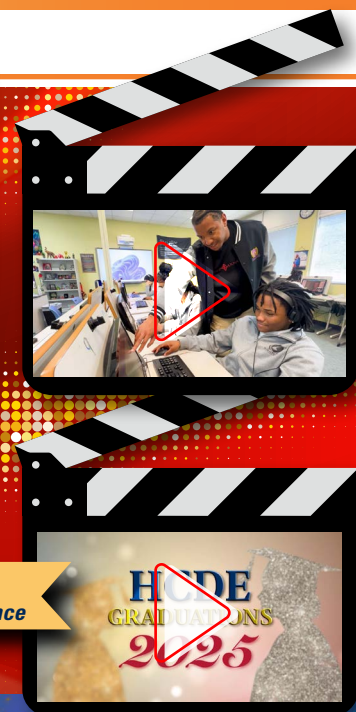
Danielle Clark
Golden Achievement Award



Jessica Lieng
Award of Merit



Debra Sanchez-Treese
3 Digital Media Awards of Excellence



Board Briefs

HCDE RELEASES 2026-2027 COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL CALENDAR

THIS WEEK, Harris County Department of Education distributed its annual comprehensive school district calendar, which features key dates for the 25 public school districts in Harris County. The Department compiles and provides the calendar annually as a public service for media outlets and education reporters. The comprehensive calendar is also

Harris County Department of Education		HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT CALENDAR		
DISTRICT	CLASSES BEGIN	THANKSGIVING	WINTER BREAK	SPRING BREAK
Aldine	Aug. 12	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 21-Jan. 5	March 15-19
Alief	Aug. 12	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 21-Jan. 4	March 8-12
Channelview	Aug. 12	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 21-Jan. 5	March 8-12
Clear Creek	Aug. 12	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 21-Jan. 4	March 8-12
Crosby* (4-day week)	Aug. 5	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 18-Jan. 4	March 8-12
Cypress-Fairbanks	Aug. 12	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 21-Jan. 4	March 15-19
Dayton	Aug. 12	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 21-Jan. 4	March 15-19
Deer Park	Aug. 12	Nov. 23-27	Dec. 21-Jan. 5	March 15-19

published on HCDE's blog and is available to the public on the Department's website.

View the Comprehensive Calendar: <https://www.hcde-texas.org/calendar/harris-county-school-calendar>. ★

HCDE CONNECTS WITH EDUCATION FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS AT MENTORSHIP LUNCHEON

IN HONORING CLASS OF 2026 GRADUATE SOON TO BEGIN THEIR FIRST SEMESTERS OF COLLEGE, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Trina Silva, Director of Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) and



Partnerships, and Christina Niño, Client Services Manager for Choice Partners, joined other community leaders at the East End Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Annual Mentorship Program Luncheon on July 16. The event brings recent graduates from Houston's East End with professional mentors who will help guide them through this important transition. Four were also honored this week as EFHC Scholarship recipients.

Attendees participated in table discussions, exploring topics such as navigating college life, building support systems and preparing for a successful first year.

Silva serves as board secretary for the East End Chamber of Commerce Foundation, and Niño volunteers as a mentor in the program. Their involvement reflects HCDE and EFHC's commitment to building strong community partnerships and expanding opportunities for students and families across Harris County. ★

CASE FOR KIDS BASKETBALL PROGRAM BUILDS CONFIDENCE, TEAMWORK AND LEADERSHIP

SUMMER ENDED ON A HIGH NOTE for students in Crosby and Sheldon independent school districts as CASE for Kids wrapped up another season of high-quality programming with Vessel Support Services. Throughout the program, students in kindergarten through fifth grade strengthened their basketball fundamentals while building confidence, teamwork and leadership skills through interactive drills and team-based activities. Focusing on more than just the game, participants developed healthy habits, practiced perseverance and discovered the value of working together. Each skill contributes to their success on and off the court. ★



Board Briefs



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

ONE 'YES' OPENS THE DOOR TO ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES FOR HARRIS COUNTY STUDENTS

WORDS CARRY IMMENSE POWER. They have the power to break people down, bring someone to tears or enact social changes. However, there is one word that reigns supreme – “yes” – three letters strung together that can alter a person’s life.

The Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) celebrated a dozen high school Class of 2026 graduates who were recently awarded scholarships that will support their nontraditional educational paths, whether that be attending trade school, enrolling in community college with plans to transfer or completing a certification/licensure program. In total, EFHC awarded \$30,000 in scholarships to graduates from nine high schools representing six school districts.

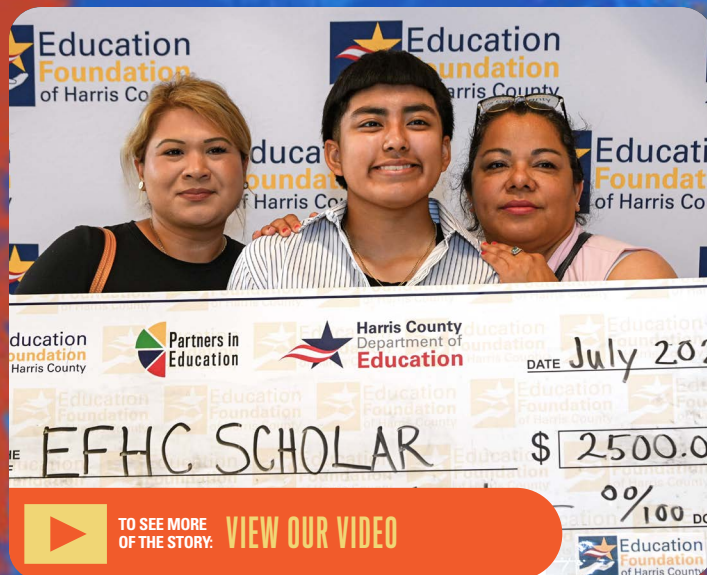
During the ceremony July 23, Aixa Andrade was among several honorees who became emotional when presented with an EFHC Scholarship. The moment marked the culmination of hard work and determination throughout a period of struggle in her life.

“Receiving this scholarship fills me with gratitude, because it means my hard work is seen and my dreams have room to grow,” she said.

Andrade lost her grandmother entering her freshman year at North Shore High School in Galena Park Independent School District and described feeling like she lost a piece of herself. Soon after, she watched a cancer diagnosis almost fell her father.

She maintained her honors and pre-advanced placement academic standing as hospital visits became the new normal, and accumulating medical bills put a financial strain on her family. When Andrade attempted to start working to help support her three siblings, her father pushed back.

“He would say, ‘Mija, you have all your life to work, preserve



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

your youth and education while you still have the chance. I work with my hands so you can work with your mind. Break the cycle,” an emotional Andrade said.

Her father was the loudest person in the room as Andrade was awarded the \$2,500 scholarship. She recently earned her associates degree and welding certifications from San Jacinto Community College – North Campus. Andrade plans to continue her welding education and start career that will allow her to support her family while building her own future.

The scholarships represented “yes” to an opportunity, “yes” to believing in someone’s potential and “yes” to a future that seemed just out of reach for twelve students. One small word that has become the beginning of their next chapter. ★

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.



HYPE Freedom School invites members of the community or family members of program participants to read book after morning Harambee circles. The initiative is part of its intergenerational model that exposes students to success at all ages of life.

AT THE END OF THE SUMMER, HCDE and the Harris County Commissioners come together to honor the numerous area nonprofit organizations that received grant funding through the County Connections Youth Summer Initiative and provided enrichment programming. While the recognition ceremonies are notable, watching these programs in action and seeing the impact firsthand reminds us why County Connections was established in the first place. We took a look at the HYPE Freedom School this week and saw why the program is so vital to more than 350 students from low-income homes in Houston's Sunnyside and South Park communities. Participants engage in literacy, leadership and family engagement activities, going even further by acting out scenes from books and performing musical chapters, all to bring the topics to life. Families are encouraged to attend recitals and talents shows, and even those with young children not old enough yet are invited, building investment into HYPE for years to come. Thank you, HYPE Freedom School for giving our youth the joy of reading and making our communities better.

More than a dozen Class of 2026 high school graduates were honored this week as scholarship recipients by the Education Foundation of Harris County. In total, EFHC awarded \$30,000 in scholarships to graduates representing nine area high schools and six school districts, helping support their nontraditional education paths (trade school, community college with plans to transfer or a certification/licensure program). Among

the recipients is a recent graduate from Galena Park ISD who lost her grandmother entering her senior year and watched her father face a cancer diagnosis. She maintained her rigorous class schedule and even tried working to help support her family before her father pushed back. Now, with the \$2,500 scholarship, she hopes to attend a welding certification to help her family and build her future. Stories like this are what make EFHC so impactful to Harris County students and families. Congratulations to all the recipients and their loved ones.

Finally, our talented Communications & Creative Services Communications and Marketing & Client Engagement teams left a notable impression this week at their National School Public Relations Association annual conference. Our team walked away with multiple national awards for their incredible work. In addition, Ms. Clark was named the NSPRA South Central Region Vice President, assuming a role with the executive board that will allow her to help mentor even more young professionals in the field and guide the association's direction of better advocating for public education and crafting stories that showcase all the good going on in our classrooms. HCDE is well-regarded across the nation, and this is just the latest example of how we're able to grow our footprint.

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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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)

September 16
Board Meeting