

the **CONNECTOR**

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



HCDE UNICORNS SHOWCASE 'UNRIVALED' CHAMPIONSHIP FORTITUDE AT 2026 CONVOCATION **P.3**



SPECIAL SCHOOLS DIVISION KICKS OFF START OF 45TH
ANNIVERSARY WITH ANNUAL MEETING **P.7**



BACK-TO-SCHOOL, RETURNING STAFF EVENTS PREPARE #TEAMHCDE
FOR 2026-2027 SCHOOL YEAR **P.8**

of Note

THE THEME FOR CONVOCATION and this school year is “Unrivaled.” That means that nobody does things the way HCDE does. We are unique. We are set apart from our peers. We are on a whole different level than anybody else in education.

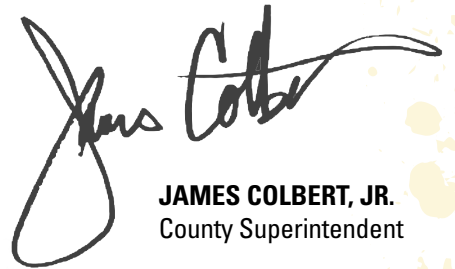
As I prepared to make introductory remarks at the Schools Kickoff meeting today, I realized that staff is a key reason why we are Unrivaled.

The Schools Division’s theme for their 45th Anniversary year is “Built Different.” That actually applies to all of HCDE. Everything we do is different from others in education. Our programs are built different. Our staff is built different. The way we approach education is different. The students we serve are built different. All of that, along with our programs, students and the heart we exhibit in our work everyday, come together to demonstrate how HCDE is Unrivaled. I told our school employees they were

handpicked for HCDE. They were chosen. That goes for all HCDE employees.

We see something in our staff that makes them unique and perfect for the populations we serve. I am proud of the work our employees do every day in our classrooms, in districts and through our programs. This year is going to be amazing and I look forward to showing just how Unrivaled HCDE is!

I started the week with my own back-to school ritual with an orientation meeting for the UIL State Executive Committee where I was elected as Vice President for the second year. I then met with ELT and other staff members throughout the day. On Tuesday, I met with staff and debriefed with the Communications team about Convocation. On Wednesday, I met with Mr. Gil Gaona, the new executive assistant to the board. On Thursday, I met with staff to receive updates about ongoing projects and initiatives and today I welcomed our school-based staff back to HCDE at the Schools Division Annual Staff Meeting.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz and Education Foundation and Community Partnerships Director Trina Silva show off their New Orleans Saints gear ahead of HCDE's UNRIVALED Convocation 2026.

#TEAMHCDE TAKES THE FIELD FOR AN UNRIVALED CONVOCATION

FOR MORE THAN 130 YEARS, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) has shown up, stepped up and delivered quality services and resources for the students, families and school districts that count on it. That kind of longevity doesn't happen by accident – it takes teamwork, preparation, resilience and a commitment to excellence every season.

That legacy took center stage Aug. 7 at the Department's annual Convocation as nearly 1,000 employees kicked off the 2026-2027 academic year with an NFL-inspired charge: UNRIVALED. Division leaders participated in a mock Draft Day back in May, where they "picked" the teams their divisions would represent at the all-staff meeting. Employees were decked out in their team gear and full of spirit as they entered the Kingdom Builders' Center, took photos at the trading card stations, played a football toss game and reconnected with colleagues.

"I've traveled across the country going to conferences and visiting classrooms, but I have yet to find anything like HCDE," Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said during his opening remarks. "We're unrivaled. There's simply nothing else to compare us to. We are unicorns, extremely rare and the only ones in Texas."

HCDE is unrivaled because of people who have spent their careers dedicated to service. Superintendent Colbert recognized more than 90 employees for their time, among them two veteran team members who have spent three



Members of the Center for Educator Success and Communications & Creative Services team come together for a picture after sharing trading cards.

decades helping the Department move the chains on the field to score repeatedly. Lloyd Compton, a maintenance technician in Facilities, and Arlita Kyles, a food contract assistant in Choice Partners, received standing ovations from colleagues as they were celebrated for 30 years of service.

For Compton, who has worked under five superintendents during his tenure, the secret to staying in the game is simple.

"I'm still trying to take in these 30 years of service, but it's really the people that keep me here," he said with a smile. "My bosses are great, everyone is easy to work with and while I may come in with a few work orders on my plate, for the most part,

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Program Connections

every day is different. I'm asked to create things for the superintendent or events like Convocation, and I try my best to keep everyone satisfied."

While explaining the thinking behind this year's theme, Colbert introduced his trusted teammate Cipher, HCDE's AI-powered creative assistant. He detailed how they spent the past few weeks training the assistant to learn everything there is to know about HCDE. Colbert then prompted Cipher to envision HCDE as the NFL's newest football franchise featuring Department divisions and employees. The conversation turned into a full-fledged season on the big screen, complete with recruiting, player introductions, game-day hype and a championship run.

The videos were an imaginative way to showcase not only the all-star players who make HCDE's success a reality, but also the challenges divisions overcame in the previous year. While many employees laughed at seeing themselves or their colleagues depicted as football players, fans in the stands or cheerleaders, they also recognized the vital role everyone plays in the overall success of #TeamHCDE.

"All the videos were pretty awesome. I'm still trying to figure out how they captured exactly what I look like with a cap on," laughed Marcial Chavez, a service desk technician from Information Technology Services who was featured in one of the videos. "That message of camaraderie, working through challenges as a team and knowing that we can pick each other up and get to that goal line... it emphasized that we are unrivaled."



Superintendent James Colbert Jr. presents Lloyd Compton, a maintenance technician in Facilities, with a crystal award for more than 30 years of service at HCDE.

When the final whistle was blown, the Unicorns walked away as Super Bowl champions after defeating the Cowboys in an UNRIVALED season.

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Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya, a resource development specialist from the Center for Grants Development, smiles with HCDE's take on the NFL trading cards.



Highpoint School Principal Courtney Waters, left, and Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey share a laugh as the Bears mascot spreads some Convocation joy.

Program Connections

Cheers erupted throughout the building as an AI-generated version of HCDE Board President Richard Cantu announced a 2.5% pay increase for all eligible employees during the presentation of the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

"We've given out raises for 15 years in a row, and that's because you are masters at what you do," Colbert explained. "You could choose to do anything, but you choose to work at HCDE, where we represent and support kids who don't get the credit they deserve, and you do it fearlessly. You help them aspire to maximize their potential, and that is why you are UNRIVALED. I love you all, let's have a great year!" 🌟

“THAT MESSAGE OF CAMARADERIE, WORKING THROUGH CHALLENGES AS A TEAM AND KNOWING THAT WE CAN PICK EACH OTHER UP AND GET TO THAT GOAL LINE... IT EMPHASIZED THAT WE ARE UNRIVALED.”



Superintendent James Colbert Jr. poses with HCDE Board of Trustee President Richard Cantu after announcing a 2.5% raise for all eligible employees.



Members of the School-Based Therapy Services division show off their pride and support for Senior Director Carie Crabb depicted as a Rams quarterback.



Head Start educators mingle with Uni, HCDE's unofficial mascot, before the Convocation program begins.

Program Connections



Choice Partners colleagues go head to head in a football toss, one of the many activities #TeamHCDE was encouraged to participate in throughout the day.



Trustee Andrea Duhon greets HCDE employees during the UNRIVALED Convocation 2026 program.



HCDE's mascot, Uni, shouts words of encouragement at the HCDE tailgate backdrop to get employees excited about the new academic year.



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OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR SERVICE AWARDS GALLERY](#)



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TO SEE MORE
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SPECIAL SCHOOLS CELEBRATE A LEGACY OF EDUCATORS THAT ARE 'BUILT DIFFERENT'



EACH OF HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S (HCDE) four Special Schools focuses on equipping students with the knowledge, social-emotional skills and behavior intervention techniques to return to their home districts and thrive in a traditional classroom. Many educators say it's no easy feat, but one they love because they are "built different." That sentiment took shape at the division's annual back-to-school meeting Aug. 14, where more than 200 educators reflected on HCDE's legacy of excellence and commitment to student well-being. The event offered insight into creating a positive environment for the 2026-2027 academic year, training on legal and compliance changes, and individualized learning techniques to effectively track student behavior and create impactful reports.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker stopped by the all-staff meeting to introduce educators to key division leaders before recognizing employees who have dedicated five to 25 years of service to HCDE.

Special Schools educators will complete professional development training Aug. 19 at the Play on Discourse – Curriculum Connections Conference before students return to campuses Aug. 24, turning their newfound knowledge into meaningful learning experiences for Harris County students. ★

EDUCATORS DISCUSS INTERVENTION STRATEGIES, CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT AT NEW TEACHER BOOTCAMP

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS ESSENTIAL for building educators equipped to handle the unique challenges posed by students in special education. On Aug. 5-6, members of the Special Schools leadership team welcomed nearly a dozen teachers and assistants from Harris County Department of Education's four special schools to discuss the practical realities of the classroom. The annual bootcamp series is designed to provide the necessary tools and resources for a successful year by exploring behavior intervention strategies, reward systems and classroom management techniques. Educators shared battle-tested practices to build positive, supportive relationships with students and discussed ways to improve their systems in the new year. HCDE principals also stopped by to share additional insights into campus life and answer questions about students, staff and expectations. Bootcamp serves as educators' first taste of what it means to be a part of #TeamHCDE, where professional development and a passion for students come together throughout the year to ensure success. ★



HEAD START LEANS ON 'KINDNESS, SERVICE AND LEARNING' AS DIVISION KICKS OFF 2026-2027 SCHOOL YEAR



IN A FILLED-TO-THE-BRIM Irvington Conference Center, team members of Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Head Start division welcomed each other for the 2026-2027 Back to School rally. The annual event brings together staff across Head Start's 12 centers alongside the division's administration team for a day of fellowship and catching up and preparing for the start of the upcoming academic year.

The theme, "Harmony: Kindness, Service and Learning," was carried out through the day through activities and a message from keynote speaker, Michael Prince. He emphasized the importance of every individual within Head Start to best provide top-tier service to Harris County's youngest learners and support to their families.

For all but two Head Start campuses, classes are set to begin Aug. 17. Dogan and Fonwood centers, which are housed at Houston Independent School District campuses, started Aug. 10 with the district. 🌟



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

DOGAN, FONWOOD HEAD START CENTERS WELCOME STUDENT TO START 2026-2027 SCHOOL YEAR

CLASSES ARE UNDERWAY for some of Harris County's youngest learners. For those who attend Dogan and Fonwood Head Start centers, both which are housed at Houston Independent School District campuses, Aug. 12 was the first day of classes. Parents dropped off students bright and early to begin their academic careers with lessons from the FrogStreet Press curriculum.

On the first day, children aged 3-5 were served healthy meals, learned classroom etiquette and started building relationships with peers and teachers. While some parents and their students shed a few tears at drop off, these young minds adjusted to new classrooms and prepared for the excitement of the upcoming year. Harris County Department of Education's Head Start campuses will return to class Aug. 17. 🌟



SCHOOL-BASED THERAPISTS MEET FOR ANNUAL RETURNING STAFF ORIENTATION



NEARLY 200 occupational (OT), physical (PT) and music therapists (MT) in School-Based Therapy Services gathered Aug. 4-6 to review legal and licensure updates that ensure staff and student safety when providing therapeutic services across Harris County districts. Senior Director Carrie Crabb and members of the management team provided professional development presentations on creating student reports, the latest research-based practices and service recommendations. Members of the Information Technology Services team were also on hand to begin the rollout of the C.L.E.A.R. Device Refresh initiative amongst #TeamHCDE. Therapists turned in outdated technology and received new Lenovo laptops to support their work throughout the year. The returning staff orientation event was an opportunity for therapists to connect and share ideas and best practices with others before returning to their districts. 🌟

SCHOLASTIC AWARDS STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL RETURNS, EMPOWERS YOUTH TO HELP SHAPE REGIONAL COMPETITION

THERE'S NO BETTER WAY TO SHOW the success from last year's inaugural Scholastic Art & Writing Awards Regional Student Advisory Council than by 11 of the 15 original members returning to participate for a second year.

The council was established to highlight student voices and perspectives in helping shape the Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards experience. Students (13 seniors and three juniors) representing seven school districts and two private schools will collaborate with educators and competition partners to increase engagement and educational impact for the thousands of participating artists and writers. They met for the first time on Aug. 5 and will support efforts through social media, promotion and input to the exhibitions and ceremony.

Dr. Chandel Hancock, officer of professional learning and student recognition with Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Center for Educator Success, welcomed the group to the workshop and led students through purpose and goals. They also met with HCDE leadership, the Civic Engagement team, and Alliance for Young Artists & Writers leaders. The council will meet six times during the school years (three in person and three virtually). 🌟



CASE FOR KIDS SHOWCASES IMPORTANCE OF PLAY, CONNECTS OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROFESSIONALS AT CONFERENCE

CELEBRATING THE CREATIVITY, connection, joy and innovation of “play” was the stage Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for kids set for the more than 380 professionals at the third annual Houston Out-of-School Time Conference.

Held Aug. 3-4 at Kingdom Builders’ Center, the event featured more than 50 workshops and conference sessions that highlighted the importance of youth development spaces to afterschool and out-of-school time programs and organizations. They ranged from panel discussions and roundtable talks to interactive classes.

Student demonstrations showcased robotics, golf through the Little Birdies Mobile Golf Academy, and chess

through the Girl Chess Power and Beyond organization.

National Play Ambassador and Missouri Afterschool Network co-chair Tyler Kearns served as conference keynote speaker, while HCDE Board of Trustees President Richard Cantu and First Vice President Dr. Erica Davis expressed their gratitude for out-of-school time organizations during remarks on the second day.

CASE for Kids closed the conference with the 26th Annual Spirit of Excellence Celebration, which featured two performances from Rising Stars Academy of Dance and Performing Arts. Division leadership honored top leaders and service providers in afterschool – HCDE executive assistant Theresa Perez was named the Volunteer of the Year. ★



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[VIEW SPIRIT OF EXCELLENCE GALLERY](#)

SPIRIT OF EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

Outstanding Youth Support Professional Award

Kanosky Munoz, Segundo Barrio Children’s Chorus

Organizational Excellence Award

Segundo Barrio Children’s Chorus

Outstanding Service Provider Award

BenCheri’ Educational Center

Emerging Leader Award

Tanisha McDaniel, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Houston

Excellence in Program Leadership Award

Rebecca Minnock, Literacy Now Houston

Visionary Leadership Award

Sydney Ealy, TWST4Girls

Youth Advocacy Award

Emmanuel Salas, The Woods Project

Volunteer of the Year Award

Theresa Perez, HCDE

Director’s Award of Excellence

Kimberly Akinyemi, HCDE

Board Briefs

HCDE SHINES SPOTLIGHT ON LANGUAGE SERVICES PROFESSIONALS AT TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS CONFERENCE



A YEAR AFTER ESTABLISHING the state's first conference to serve language professionals in education, Harris County Department of Education's Marketing and Client Engagement team continues to grow learning opportunities to those who serve families who speak languages other than English.

The second annual Professional Translators and Interpreters Conference (PTIC) was another success, as attendees came from inside and outside Harris County –

travelling as far as across the nation.

Held July 30-31 at the Irvington Conference Center, PTIC added a second day. It opened with the inaugural VIP leadership brunch and panel discussion. Dr. Lupita Hinojosa, former Spring Independent School District superintendent, served as moderator and led a discussion on the importance of language access and equipping professionals with tools to best serve families and communities.

A full day of sessions, networking and collaboration followed for more than 130 conference attendees. New this year were sessions that explored quality interpreting for deaf and hard of hearing students. 🌟



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OF THE STORY:

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PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS CONFERENCE IMPACT AWARDS

Legacy in Leadership Award

Andy Benzo, American Translators Association
Liliana McKean, Houston ISD

Legacy of Influence Award

Asmaa Sabre, Zain Linguistics

Pioneer in Language Access Award

Dr. Jennifer Bassett-Alvarez, Spring ISD
Ludimila Golovine, MasterWord

Initiative Impact Award

Ivan Tamayo, Aldine ISD

WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for July! Thirteen new faces have joined our Adult Education, Center for Educator Success, Facilities, Head Start, Human Resources and Special Schools divisions.



Trent Manuel
Principal
ABS East



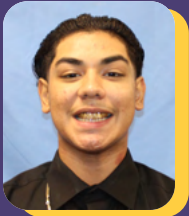
Mayra Lopez
Grant & Budget Compliance Specialist
Adult Education



Monica Patel
Assessment Manager
Center For Educator Success



Pamela Graves
Manager Of Teacher Advancement
Center For Educator Success



Jerry Garza
Parking Monitor
Facilities



Rita Jefferson
Custodian
Facilities



Patricia Melendez De Castillo
Custodian
Facilities



Daniela Castillo
Early Child Teacher
Head Start



Shimeka Dade
Teacher
Head Start



Elva Juarez
Teacher
Head Start



Rianna Sarmiento
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Viridiana Trevino
Teaching Assistant
Head Start



Julian Alexander
Benefits Coordinator
Human Resources

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE F: ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

- Ensures that key planning activities within the Department are coordinated and consistent with Board policy and applicable law, and that goals and results are communicated as appropriate.



#TeamHCDE spent the UNRIVALED Convocation celebrating colleagues who hit milestone years of service with the Department and the announcement of a 2.5% salary increase. They left energized and ready for the new academic year.

WE'VE OFFICIALLY KICKED OFF the 2026-2027 academic year and did so once again in a big way! Last week, I was honored to welcome nearly 1,000 #TeamHCDE members decked out in NFL-inspired jerseys, hats and other paraphernalia to the Kingdom Builders' Center for our "Unrivaled" Convocation. Hopefully, you caught the unicorn logo on my shirt – representing HCDE's own one-of-a-kind mascot. We cheered on more than 90 employees who received service awards, highlighting their commitment to Harris County Department of Education and the work we do every day to support students and families. And kudos to our two staff members recognized for 30 years of service. With help from Cipher, HCDE's new AI-powered creative assistance, I shared a message of our divisions coming together, forming the NFL's newest team and overcoming our trials of adversity over the past year to win the ultimate prize – the Super Bowl. Even more so, I was able to proudly announce a 2.5% pay increase for all eligible employees. HCDE is continuing to move in the right direction as we strive to be leaders in everything we do.

As we get closer to welcoming students back at our four Special Schools, the division kicked off a notable milestone this week. Schools is celebrating its 45th anniversary, marking more than four decades of helping fill the gaps with public education and offer solutions to families. More than 200 staff members gathered at the Irvington Conference Center to reflect on the division's legacy of excellence and commitment to student well-being. It's always an honor to speak to this group and thank them for the work they do.

The commitment is evident as I saw numerous teachers and aides over the summer months during the many professional development opportunities offered by division leadership. All this work and preparation can only result in a successful 2026-2027 academic year and positive outcomes to the students and families we serve.

Finally – in addition to Special Schools – staff members from Head Start and School-Based Therapy have been busy. It's been a pleasure to see all the buzz at the Irvington and NPO conference spaces, as the divisions conduct professional development, teacher bootcamps and returning staff orientation events. Education is a profession that requires lifelong learning and routine check-ins to remember why we are all in the field of impacting youth. Schools welcomed more than a dozen teachers to its bootcamp. Head Start took a hands-on approach during its Back-to-School Rally, with center staff piecing together an artistic "quilt of kindness" and other works to showcase their mission. And more than 200 therapists gathered to review the latest research-based practices at their orientation in addition to receiving new technology as part of the C.L.E.A.R. Device Refresh Initiative. Good luck to everyone on your respective campuses and I look forward to hearing of the positive impact HCDE has throughout the county.

By developing and implementing a clear vision for the Department and understanding HCDE's role in the changing educational environment, I am meeting the expectation to foster an entrepreneurial spirit for the Department and staff members. 🌟



HCDE BOARD

Board President
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

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