



the CONNECTOR

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



HEAD START WELCOMES HARRIS COUNTY'S YOUNGEST LEARNERS TO
START THE 2026-27 SCHOOL YEAR **P.3**



NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS RECOGNIZED AS 'COUNTY
CONNECTIONS' GRANT AWARDEES **P.5**



GALENA PARK ISD LEADERSHIP VISITS FORTIS ACADEMY
AHEAD OF SCHOOL YEAR **P.7**

of Note

One of the most exciting times of the year in education is the beginning of a new school year. This week, Harris County Department of Education officially welcomed more than 1,100 infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children back to our 12 Head Start centers. For many families, it was a first step into a new learning environment filled with opportunities to grow, build confidence and develop the foundational skills that will support future success. I am grateful to our Head Start leadership, teachers and support staff for creating safe and nurturing classrooms where every child can thrive.

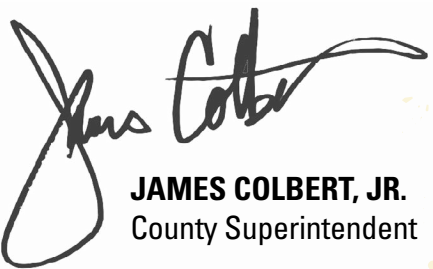
This week also gave us an opportunity to recognize the impact of community partnerships through the County Connections Youth Summer Initiative. Over the past four years, Harris County and HCDE have invested \$7.1 million in programs that help young people stay safe, engaged and learning while building skills and confidence for the future. This year alone, nearly 70 organizations received more than \$1.4 million in grant funding to expand opportunities for Harris County families. Thank you to our Harris County Commissioners, CASE for Kids team and community partners for investing in the success of our youth.

I began the week with our Executive Leadership Team meeting on Monday, followed by several standing meetings with staff. On Tuesday, I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Marc Smith in Fort Bend ISD before visiting several Head Start campuses to see our youngest learners settling into the new school year. On Wednesday, I attended the Board Policy Committee meeting as well as our regular Board meeting. On Thursday, Jonathan Parker and I visited several of our school campuses as preparations

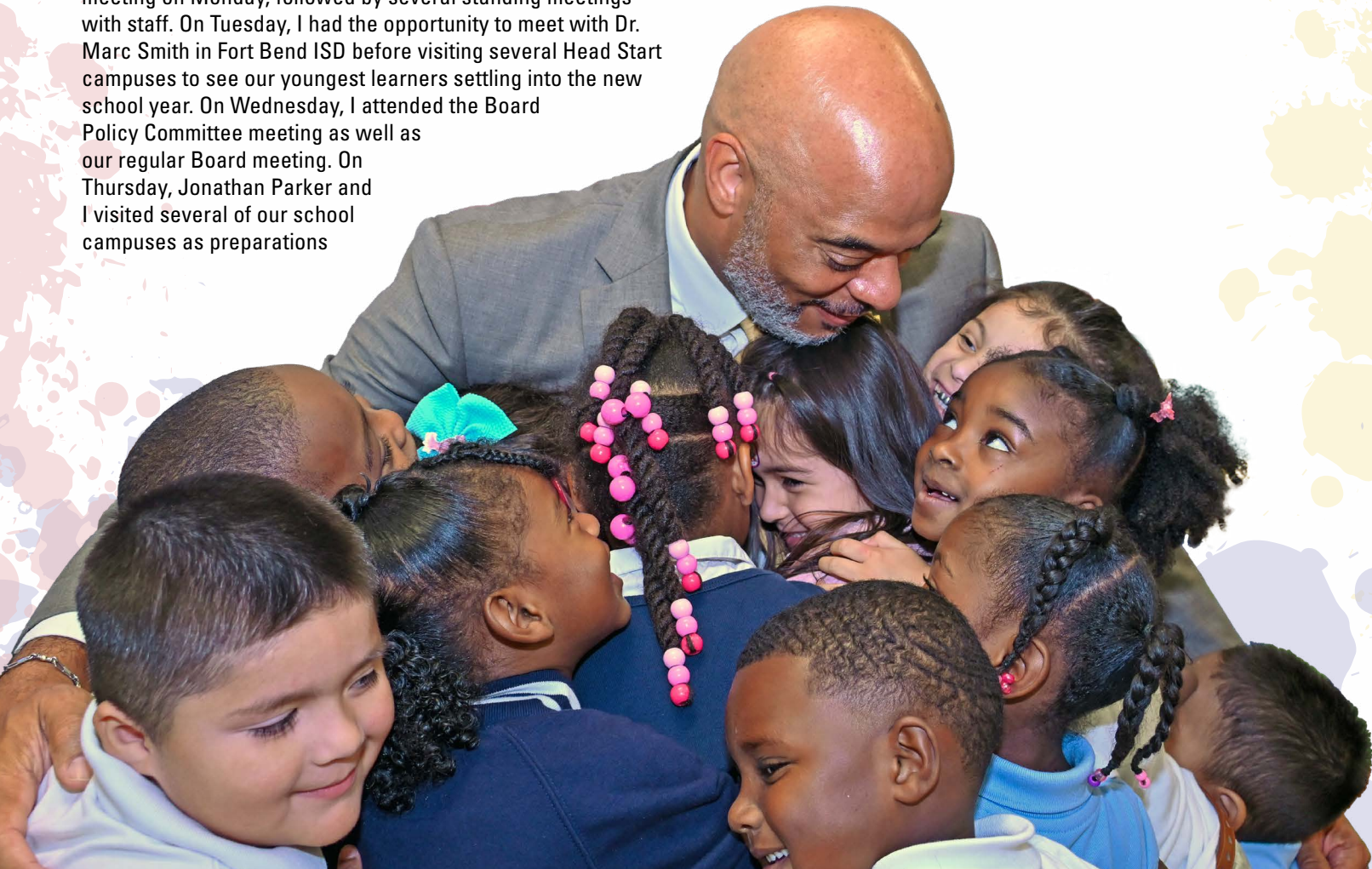
continued for the first day of classes at our Special Schools next week, along with one standing meeting. Today, I participated in standing meetings and interviewed the two finalists for our Senior Director of Business Services position.

As we continue preparing for another successful school year, I am encouraged by the dedication of our employees, the strength of our partnerships and the impact our programs make across Harris County every day. Thank you for all you do to support students, families and the communities we serve.

Have a wonderful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



“HE ACTUALLY SPENT ALL SUMMER ASKING WHEN HE WAS COMING BACK TO SCHOOL...”

Four-year-old Sergio Monsivais, left, gets one final embrace from his mother, Imelda, before starting his first day at Coolwood Head Start on Aug. 17. Imelda is a longtime Head Start parent who has already seen two children excel because of the program's educational foundation.

HEAD START LEARNERS TAKE THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS ACADEMIC SUCCESS

HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN AS MORE THAN 1,100 YOUNG LEARNERS BID ADIEU TO THE FAMILIAR EMBRACE OF THEIR PARENTS' ARMS, officially kicking off the 2026-2027 academic year at Harris County Department of Education (HCDE). With backpacks in tow, a mix of curiosity, excitement and perhaps a few last-minute tears, students stepped into their new classrooms Aug. 17, ready to explore new surroundings, meet new friends and begin a school year filled with opportunities to learn, grow and discover.

“With children, it could be easy, or it could be very challenging, but it's important to make sure everybody's ready to start the school year on a positive note,” Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock said. “The most important thing is kindness, nurturing and making sure the children understand they're in a safe place, they're loved, and they're going to be taken care of – the teaching comes after that.”

HCDE's 12 Head Start campuses support children's growth from birth to age 5 through services centered on early learning

and development, health and family well-being. Students in the Early Head Start and Head Start programs follow the Frog Street Press curriculum, which promotes school readiness for infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children from low-income families.

For Imelda Monsivais, the decision to enroll four-year-old Sergio at Coolwood Head Start was an easy one. As a long-time Head Start parent, she has already seen the program make a difference in the lives of her two older children, both currently enrolled in a charter school operated by Houston Independent School District.

“The curriculum helped them in so many ways,” Monsivais said. “They are more social with other kids, they learned the fundamentals of learning early, and they are more interested in their books than phones, which is a huge plus.”

Sergio, who returned for his second year in the program, handled the first day like a pro, waltzing in to meet his teacher, who tasked students with storing their belongings in cubby shelves before washing their hands for a nutritious breakfast. Healthy meals are

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Program Connections

one of the program's cornerstones and provided daily at all campuses.

"He actually spent all summer asking when he was coming back to school, but he thought he was going to go back to his same class, so that did take some explaining," Monsivais said as she laughed.

On the other hand, many first-time parents could still be seen lingering outside classrooms throughout the week, trying to get a glimpse of how their child was adjusting to the new setting and routine. Jaleah Jones learned about the Head Start program online but has not been disappointed by its rapid educational impact on her one-year-old Ka'aliyah.

"The teachers said she had a great first day and stopped crying as soon as I left," Jones described. "Then today, I drop Ka'aliyah off, and she's saying, 'food.' She's never said that before! I'm glad she's already learning, and I'm patiently waiting for another spot to open for my other child."

Those early moments and milestones are just the beginning of what the staff strives to turn into meaningful growth for every child who walks through their doors. From developing language and social skills to building confidence and a willingness to try new things, the program is designed to equip children with the tools they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond.

"By the end of the school year, I hope our parents will be able to articulate the difference they've noticed in their child, the growth, the language, the collaboration that they have daily with other kids because they were enrolled in a Head Start program," Peacock said. ★

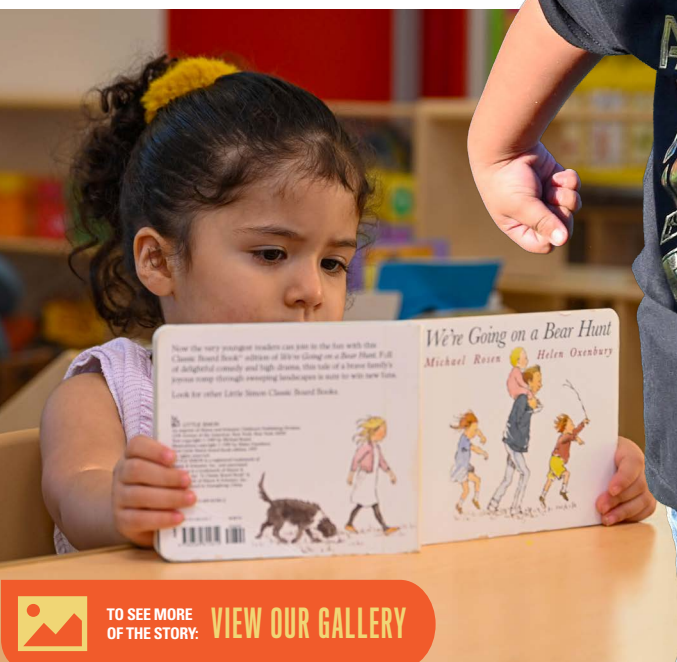


Sheffield Head Start teacher Tae Ijha Briggs, right, helps one of her reluctant students say goodbye to his mom before serving him a nutritious breakfast.



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR VIDEO



TO SEE MORE
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In the Community

CASE FOR KIDS, HARRIS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS CELEBRATE 2026 COUNTY CONNECTIONS AWARDEES

HARRIS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS AND THE CENTER FOR AFTERSCHOOL, SUMMER AND ENRICHMENT (CASE) FOR KIDS, a division of Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), recently recognized the 2026 County Connections Youth Summer Initiative awardees during ceremonies held the last few weeks.

Harris County Commissioners and HCDE approved a four-year interlocal agreement totaling \$7.1 million to support the program in April 2023. In its final year, County Commissioners Rodney Ellis, Adrian Garcia, Tom Ramsey and Lesley Briones joined CASE for Kids leadership in recognizing grantees and thanking partners for their investment in Harris County youth.

This year, more than \$1.4 million in grants were awarded to nearly 70 non-profit organizations that provided youth summer enrichment programming like sports activities, fine arts, academic enrichment, college readiness initiatives and youth mentoring programs. Grants ranging from \$5,100 to \$20,000 infused funding for programs held throughout the summer months and were used to purchase materials and supplies for activities, add programming opportunities, and reduce fees and offer scholarships to families.

Organizations representing all four county precincts received grant funding and services were customized to meet the needs of each community. Funding for the initiative is provided by Harris County and administered to vetted programs by CASE for Kids.

To learn more about CASE for Kids, visit www.hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone. 🌟



Precinct 1



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

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Precinct 2



TO SEE MORE
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Precinct 3



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Precinct 4



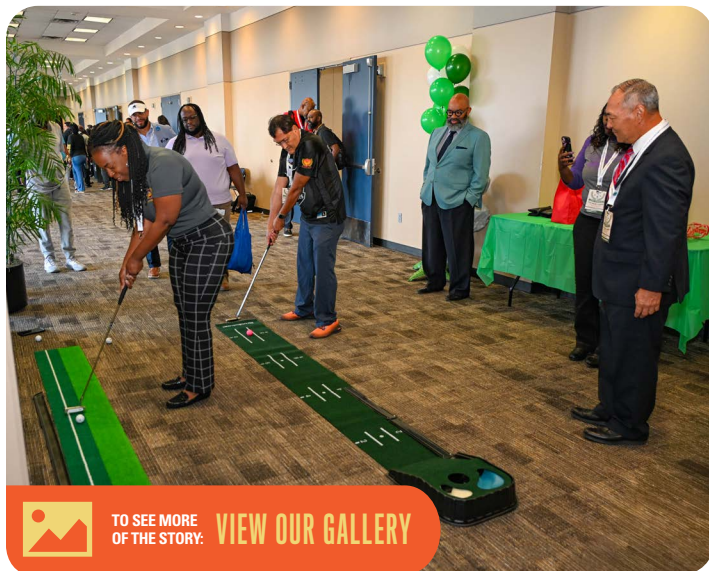
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HCDE EDUCATORS GET ON PAR FOR STUDENT SUCCESS AT CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS CONFERENCE

THE THIRD ANNUAL SPECIAL SCHOOLS CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS CONFERENCE was a hole-in-one for professional development. Nearly 200 educators gathered at the Irvington Conference Center on Aug. 19 to explore the power of purposeful

classroom dialogue in driving student learning. The event embraced a golf theme as #TeamHCDE members put on their game faces for a little “Play on DisCourse.” Organizers kept teachers engaged throughout the day by incorporating the pastime into strategies that intentionally guide instructional communication, help learners think critically and engage students in meaningful discussion. Several breakout sessions also focused on how effective communication fosters collaboration and lasting learning experiences for students and families. 🌟



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

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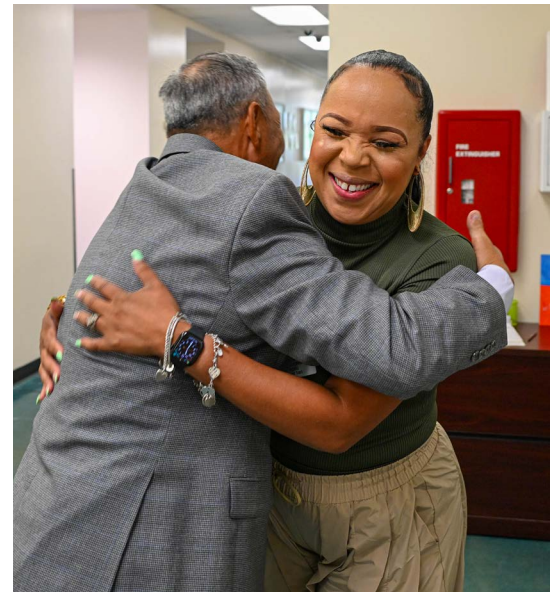


HUMAN RESOURCES CONNECTS WITH HIGHPOINT STAFF AT BACK-TO-SCHOOL PRESENTATIONS

HUMAN RESOURCES HAS BEEN MAKING ITS WAY AROUND HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S FOUR SPECIAL SCHOOLS to connect with staff, answer questions and provide updates on policy changes. This week, Chief Human Resources Officer Dr. Tyrone Sylvester and Director Stacie Gibson visited Highpoint School, where they offered policy insights on topics like paid time off and personal online behaviors. Staff were engaged as they reviewed workplace expectations, discussed classroom behavior standards and strategies for creating safe, supportive learning environments that comply with Texas law. HR also provided staff with important reminders and practical guidance to ensure campuses are prepared for a successful year. 🌟

Board Briefs

SUPERINTENDENT COLBERT VISITS HEAD START CENTERS, SPECIAL SCHOOLS TO START 2026-2027 ACADEMIC YEAR



AS HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION HEAD START CENTERS GET UNDERWAY and the four Special Schools ready for first day of classes on Aug. 24, Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker visited the campuses this week to check in on staff and ensure everything was set to receive students for the

2026-2027 academic year.

They toured facilities Tuesday and Thursday. In addition to meeting with employees and seeing some of Harris County's youngest learners already in action – Head Start classes began Aug. 17 – Colbert and Parker walked around the facilities and made notes on items to be updated. ★

GALENA PARK ISD BOARD VICE PRESIDENT, LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBERS TOUR FORTIS ACADEMY

FORTIS ACADEMY LEADERSHIP OPENED THE DOORS TO ITS CAMPUS AUG. 18 to representatives from Galena Park Independent School District, including its Board of Trustees Vice President. Joining Fortis Principal Travita Godfrey was Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker and Dr. Charles Ned, Senior Director of Special Schools. They met with Galena Park ISD's Jose Jimenez, Chief Administration Officer Dr. Wanna Giacona, Executive Director for Secondary School Administration Dr. Christopher Eckford, and Director for Educational Support Myra Castaneda.

Galena Park ISD is a proud partner with HCDE and Fortis Academy. Multiple students have successfully overcome addiction challenges and maintained sobriety while attending Fortis, an addition to graduating – Castaneda served as a featured speaker during the 2024 ceremony. ★



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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE F: INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

- Ensures that goals and objectives form the basis of curricular decision-making and instruction and communicates expectations for student achievement.



More than 1,100 young learners officially kicked off the 2026-2027 academic year for HCDE on Aug. 17, with each ready to explore new surroundings, meet new friends and begin a school year filled with opportunities.

THIS WEEK, HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICIALLY OPENED THE DOORS TO ITS 12 HEAD START CENTERS

and welcomed more than 1,100 of the county's youngest learners back to the classroom for the 2026-2027 school year. It was emotional and there were tears from both parents, loved ones and their children, but also smiles, laughs and encouraging signs of the opportunities ahead for these infants, toddlers and preschool-aged students. For these young minds, this time marks just the beginning of new learning and new experiences. Bonds and relationships will be established within our Head Start centers that could follow these students well into elementary school and beyond. Division leadership and staff have set them up for success, from ample professional development and preparation, to providing nutritious meals and healthy snacks daily to ensure no one goes hungry. The Frog Street Press curriculum promotes school readiness, and it will be amazing to watch these young minds grow and impress their teachers and loved ones by year's end. I look forward to hearing all the success stories from each center.

Over the last two weeks, HCDE and Harris County Commissioners were able to personally thank and truly appreciate the many nonprofit organizations and agencies who positively impact county learners through the County Connections Youth Summer Initiative. Over the course of the four-year initiative (2023-2026), \$7.1 million in grants were awarded to programs and it's been

refreshing to hear all the work being done. Nearly 70 organizations were awarded \$1.4 million in grants alone. I appreciate everyone on hand to thank these individuals for their work. It's also refreshing to hear from our Harris County Commissioners and their support for HCDE and the work we're doing to serve people of all ages across the county. Thank you again to all who were involved in shining a light on these honorees and organizations.

Finally, as staff at our four special schools are in the home stretch for the first day of classes on Aug. 24, Fortis Academy opened its doors to visitors from Galena Park ISD, including its Board of Trustees vice president and chief administration officer. The group toured the campus, met the staff and learned the ins and outs of how Greater Houston's only public recovery school helps students gain and maintain sobriety on the path to high school graduation. We can talk all day long about how great Fortis is for students, but the message hits home for our partners when they can walk the campus and see the classrooms, commercial-grade kitchen and outdoor spaces. Seeing that picture brings HCDE's mission of transforming the school experience for students often overlooked in traditional settings to life. Thank you again to Galena Park ISD for your partnership.

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

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Dr. Erica Davis

2nd Vice President
Dr. John McGee

Board Members
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Amy Hinojosa
Silky Joshi-Malik

UPCOMING EVENTS

August 24
Special Schools First Day of
Classes

September 7
Labor Day (HCDE Closed)

September 16
Board Meeting

September 18
Celebrating Impact: Donor
Appreciation Breakfast

October 8-11
[TASA/TASB txEDCON](#)

October 21
Board Meeting

October 22
Choice Partners Nutrition
Show

October 23
Healthy Minds, Healthy
Families Conference