



the CONNECTOR

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



AS SPECIAL SCHOOLS OPEN DOORS FOR 2026-2027, STUDENTS BEGIN
'UNRIVALED' CHAMPIONSHIP YEAR **P.3**



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DOORS TO AT-RISK YOUTH **P.5**

TOOLS **FOR**
TEACHERS



HARRIS COUNTY EDUCATORS REGISTER IN RECORD NUMBERS
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of Note

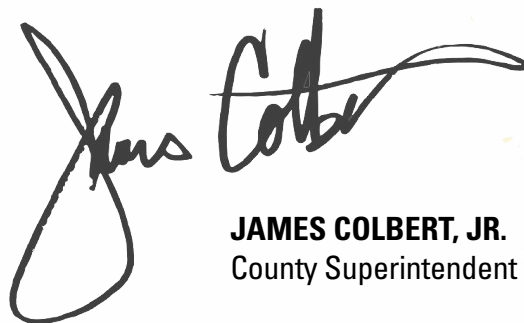
THERE IS A CERTAIN anticipation in the air during the first week of a school year. Students are excited to be back with their friends and ready to get into the school routine, teachers are eager to impart knowledge to thirsty young minds and support staff looks forward to working out all the wrinkles of school and program operations.

HCDE opened the doors at our four schools this week while the air of possibility was alive at all of our campuses. The facilities themselves shined after weeks of attention from our facilities crews while classrooms buzzed with first-day activities. Staff was eager to welcome students back into the fold and get them ready for learning with love and support. The true affection our staff show to students as well as their focus on each student's potential is one of the things that sets us apart from other alternative education programs. I love the idea that our schools focus on what a student can be. It's going to be a great year at our schools and with all of our programs. I am excited to see how all of HCDE shows just how Unrivaled we are!

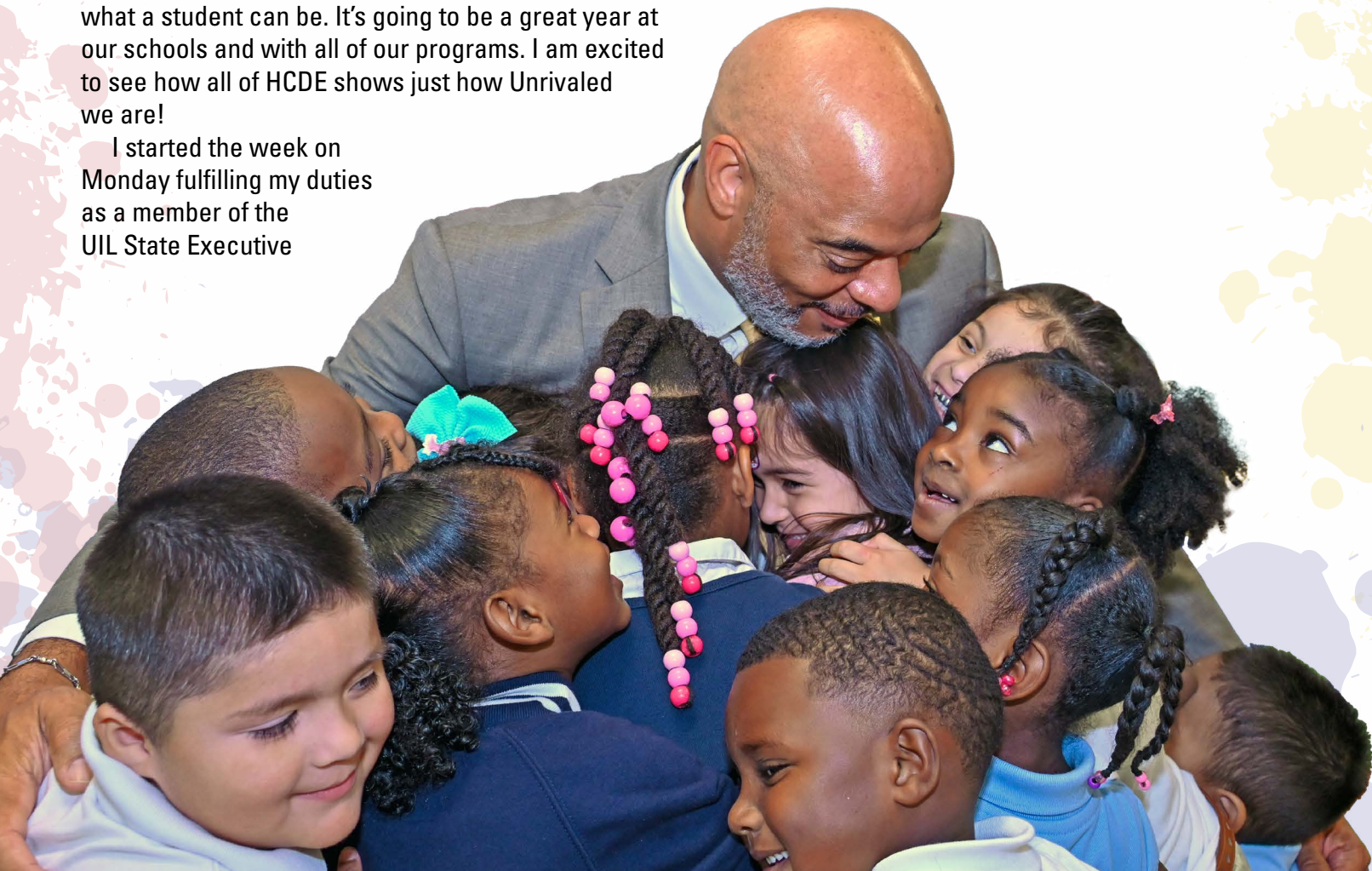
I started the week on Monday fulfilling my duties as a member of the UIL State Executive

Committee. On Tuesday and Wednesday my days were filled with meeting with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. On Thursday I attended the Alief ISD Young Women's Preparatory Network VIP Reception and Ribbon Cutting and today I met with staff at my NPO office.

August heat is in full force so stay cool and have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Harris County Department of Education's four special schools welcomed students back for classes Aug. 24, officially kicking off the 2026-2027 academic year. Everyone was smiling and prepared for an "Unrivaled" experience.

SPECIAL SCHOOLS BEGIN 2026-2027 ACADEMIC YEAR WITH NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO BE 'UNRIVALED'

A **S #TEAMHCDE CELEBRATED** the first day of classes for the 2026-2027 academic year, teachers and campus administrators were all smiles and enthusiasm, meeting and greeting students soon to fill the hallways and classrooms of the four special schools.

Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) is truly a unicorn in the public education space, as are most divisions that operate within HCDE to help serve students and families across the county. That's no different with Special Schools, where the four campuses live HCDE's mission to fill the education gaps.

That's what makes Academic and Behavior School East and West, Fortis Academy and Highpoint School "Unrivaled." And staff kicked off what is sure to be an unrivaled championship year with the first day Aug. 24.

"We are rocking and rolling, and hitting the ground running," said Trent Manuel, HCDE's newest principal, who begins his first year at ABS East. "The first day is really about building relationships with the students and setting routines. The students were excited to be back. The staff welcomed them with open arms, hugging them and just loving on them and showing them

that we care."

Added Highpoint Assistant Principal Troy Moore: "When you look at the first few days of school, we're trying to get students



Highpoint School Assistant Principal Troy Moore, right, welcomes a student to the campus on the first day of classes.

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Program Connections

settled. It's important they know their schedules and they get familiar with their teachers."

Whether it's new faces, new programs or even raising the bar of high-performing excellence, students and their families will continue to be impressed with the work happening across the four campuses.

Staff prepared through optional but well-attended summer "Learning Lagniappe" sessions, which then flowed right into new teacher bootcamp at the start of August before the entire division returned for professional development prior to the first day of classes.



ABS West Staff and students were all smiles on the first day of classes on Aug. 24.

"Today is extremely exciting because of all of the work and the preparation that we've done during the summertime and last two weeks getting our folks ready," said Dr. Margaret Patton, the division's director of curriculum and special services. "I can confidently say teachers were prepared, staff was prepared and even the students knew what to do."

At Fortis, growth in the culinary arts program will provide even more opportunities. Students last year competed in the Texas ProStart Competition in Waco for the first time.

"I am so excited to start this new school year," Fortis Principal Travita Godfrey said. "We're welcoming a brand-new chef, so



Buses and vehicles of all shapes, sizes and colors drop off students at the four special schools.



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR GALLERY](#)

we're very excited for all of the things we'll be able to do."

Soon enough, students across the four campuses will be excelling academically while also overcoming adversities and challenges. They will put on showcases and programs for loved ones and home district representatives.

Some will even pick up chess for the first time – likely with coaching from a peer – to later compete in HCDE's annual competition. And before you know it, graduating seniors will don caps and gowns and cross the stage with cheers from family and friends.

Before all those accomplishments happen, however, HCDE's four schools and their staff set the foundation with a successful first day.

"We have the playbook and we've been practicing and had lots of preparation," ABS West Principal Jatata Hutton said. "So, this is going to be a year like none other." ★



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

Program Connections



Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment

ONE DAY, HE'LL PLAY IT FOR HER: A CHILDHOOD PROMISE TURNED INTO A FUTURE IN MUSIC



Ashton Garcia, a senior with the Diaz Music Institute, first learned the trumpet out of curiosity in the fifth grade, but has since become an accomplished musician. He earned All-State honors and hopes to pursue music in college.

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, Ashton Garcia can be found at the back of the music room at the Raul Yzaguirre Schools for Success. You might not immediately see him, but your ears will undoubtedly pick up the incredible string of notes consistently coming from his trumpet solo. The senior has been a star pupil of the Diaz Music Institute (DMI), a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering at-risk youth through Latin music education, for more than seven years.

"Music has changed my life, I don't know where I would be without it because it's literally shaped who I am as a person," an emotional Garcia said.

This year, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) County Connections Youth Summer Initiative awarded DMI a total of \$80,000 across Harris County's four precincts to support student growth. 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.

A core component of DMI's mission is to help youth develop

skills, talent and discipline for a professional career in the music industry. Every student learns the fundamentals on the piano and must master the instrument before transitioning to one of their choice, be it saxophone, trumpet, percussion, bass or more.

Acclaimed musician and educator, José Antonio Diaz, founded the program more than 20 years ago and works to connect budding musicians with peers, professionals and life-changing opportunities. That includes trips to the Houston Symphony and the chance to compete at the national level.

"With the increase in technology and social media, it's removing the emotional aspect of what it means to be human," said Diaz, who also serves as the program's artistic director. "Having a strong music program that provides the opportunity to connect is something these kids don't get often. Music opens their minds and hearts to a sensitivity that's disappearing. We as humans must be able to come together to communicate and create something greater than ourselves, and to see these kids doing that, it can bring you to tears."

For Garcia, DMI is not a means to keep

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Program Connections



Founded more than 20 years ago, the Diaz Music Institute helps empower at-risk youth through Latin music education and experiences. DMI was awarded \$80,000 through the HCDE County Connections Youth Summer Initiative to serve students across Harris County's four precincts.

busy during out-of-school hours. It's personal. In fifth grade, he picked up the trumpet out of curiosity, and his mother soon gave him a challenge: learn to play "Havana." Garcia couldn't do it then but promised her he would.

"I ended up forgetting about it and didn't pick up music again for a couple of years because all I wanted to do was play basketball," he recalled.

By the time Garcia found his way back to music in seventh grade and joined DMI, something shifted. The trumpet had become more than an instrument – it became a part of who he was.

County Connections funding provided Garcia and his peers opportunities to meet prominent musicians, vocalists, composers and educators, thereby extending high-level music instruction to underserved students through out-of-school-time workshops and clinics. These mentors offered lectures on syncopation and ensemble listening before breaking into small groups by instrument for individualized attention and exercises.

"When we start to play, sometimes you do get in that zone where you close your eyes and just hear what you're playing," Garcia explained. "But sometimes I'll look out at the crowd and see people tearing up, and I'm always filled with joy to know that my music, our music, can affect someone like that."

Garcia has learned a variety of classic- and Latin-inspired selections for class, competed at the local and national level, and was even named a 2025 All-State trumpet player. However, he will never get the chance to fulfill his childhood promise to his mom, who died in February.

"Sometimes life brings the unexpected," an emotional Garcia said. "I'm still working through all my grief and trying to heal, but I'm sticking with the trumpet because one day I want to be able to play 'Havana' for her. I fully intend to keep that promise to my mom."

For now, the senior is focused on college, attending workshops on finance, arts entrepreneurship and college-readiness offered by DMI.

"Our goal is to get them into colleges outside of Houston because they tend to build friends within the music program community who have a similar collegiate mindset," said Elizabeth Diaz, the executive director who co-founded the institute with

her husband, José. "These kids want to graduate, get good grades and make something of themselves. Often, when our students stay in Houston, they might have friends who were not as fortunate as they were in going to college. We see them get wrapped up in partying, and their interest in school declines."

Added Garcia: "I've heard about this great trumpet professor in Indiana, so I want to audition there, and, obviously, The Juilliard School is on the list. I'm preparing for that process now because I think one of the biggest lessons I've learned at DMI is that you can only go as far as you prepare for."

County Connections funding allows programs like the Diaz Music Institute to provide Garcia and thousands more with access to experiences, mentors and resources that turn their passions into a pathway for the future. But perhaps the greatest impact isn't measured in competitions, college auditions or the number of instruments mastered. It's seen in the confidence students gain as they discover their voice, find their place in the world and begin to envision what's possible.

"It's exciting because I get to watch them grow daily," Diaz said with a smile. "You see those moments when their eyes light up, their confidence sprouts, and they become more gracious about themselves. I feel like we played a small part in helping them figure out who they are meant to be." ★



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR GALLERY

In the Community

EDUCATORS WASTE NO TIME CLAIMING TOOLS FOR TEACHERS \$100 VOUCHERS



TOOLS FOR TEACHERS

REGISTRATION
AUGUST 28

SHOPPING
SEPTEMBER 14-21



Harris County
Department of
Education



Education
Foundation
of Harris County

THAT'S A WRAP on the sixth annual Tools for Teachers program. It took less than an hour for more than 1,900 educators to request vouchers on Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) website when registration opened on Aug. 28. The initiative is designed to support Harris County independent school district teachers by mitigating the personal cost of classroom supplies at the start of the academic year.

The Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) dedicated \$162,800 to this initiative, which the HCDE Board of Trustees allocated from its annual budget. The first 1,628 eligible registered teachers will receive a \$100 credit to purchase supplies through local vendor, Challenge Office Products, from Sept. 14-21. All supplies will be shipped directly to the teacher's school free of charge.

Efforts to promote the initiative included contacting local media, coverage on small blog sites, emails to school district communication representatives and posts on various social media channels.

Eager for the initiative, Harris County educators' passion and determination to equip their students with the best tools for success are evident. The continued annual demand also underscores HCDE and EFHC's dedication to supporting teachers and enriching learning across local classrooms. 🌟

EDUCATION FOUNDATION HONORED BY PASADENA ISD FOR PARTNERS IN EDUCATION GRANT



AS ONE OF 12 PARTNERS IN EDUCATION grants awarded by the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) for Spring 2026, Pasadena Independent School District's "Wiggle, Wonder and Learn: A Whole Body Adventure for Pre-K3" is already helping young learners build a strong foundation for success.

With the \$8,200 grant, Pre-K3 classrooms will be fitted with hands-on learning tools, flexible seating and fine-motor activities designed to help students strengthen focus, self-

regulation, social-emotional growth and early academic skills. These daily learning opportunities to move and explore can make a meaningful difference for some of Harris County's youngest learners.

Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva and EFHC Board Chairman Michael Parks visited Pasadena ISD on Aug. 18, as the district's education foundation celebrated EFHC and Harris County Department of Education for their generous donation. 🌟

LOCAL NEWS OUTLETS SHOWCASE COOLWOOD HEAD START, CSSS



KPRC 2 reporter Brittany Jeffers, seated right, interviews Santrice Jones-Hare, Children at Risk's director of its Strong Start: Greater Houston Early Childhood Alliance, on Aug. 14 at Coolwood Head Start.

Center for Safe and Secure School Director Leslie Etheridge was interviewed by KTRK 13 reporter Nick Natario earlier this month for a story on school districts preparing for the 2026-2027 academic year alongside new legislation and policies. Among them are the handling of growing e-bike usage, where new district policies across Harris County range from defining which electric cycles are allowed to campus bans altogether.

Etheridge said storage is an issue and recommended to be physically located away from buildings as e-bikes – like electric vehicles – can't be extinguished if there is a fire.

She also touched on a new bill requiring school districts to develop cardiac arrest policies, saying the processes need to be created quickly and also account for before- and after-school activities.

KPRC 2 used Coolwood Head Start and its library as the backdrop for an interview Aug. 14 between reporter Brittany Jeffers and Santrice Jones-Hare, Children at Risk's director of its Strong Start: Greater Houston Early Childhood Alliance. The two discussed new early childhood policies, legislation and initiatives, while Jones-Hare advocated for Head Start as an excellent option for Harris County families. ★



WATCH THE ABC INTERVIEW HERE

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION continues to showcase itself as an industry leader in public education, as shown by local news organizations and their coverage.

#TEAMHCDE VISITS LOCAL MEDIA STATIONS TO NETWORK, SHARE IDEAS



SOMETIMES THE BEST WAY to spread a message is face-to-face. That's why members of the Communications and Marketing & Client Engagement teams have spent the past few weeks traveling to various media outlets to network with industry professionals, strengthen HCDE's relationship with decision makers, and better understand each organization's strategy in covering education across Harris County.

During visits to Telemundo Houston 47, Houston Public Media and FOX 26 Houston, #TeamHCDE shared more about Department programs, services and the impact it has on students, educators, families and school districts across

Harris County. The visits provided an opportunity to put names to faces, exchange contact information and ensure news professionals know who to turn to when they need an HCDE expert, story ideas or timely resources. With a calendar full of programs throughout the year, the team also highlighted upcoming coverage opportunities and shared ways media partners can stay connected to #TeamHCDE.

These face-to-face conversations are another way HCDE is building lasting media relationships and ensuring the stories of the Department and the people it serves reach the communities that count on us. ★

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.



Staff at Academic and Behavior School East welcomed students off the busses on the first day of classes Aug. 24. Special Schools leadership credit teachers and campus staff for their readiness to the year following rigorous summertime learning and professional development.

THOUGH MOST OF GREATER HOUSTON students and educators began classes earlier this month, our four special schools officially opened its doors for the 2026-2027 academic year on Monday. Just like at our Head Start campuses the week prior, it was such a pleasure to see smiles as they greeted students and welcomed them back into the classroom. For our campuses, those smiles and hugs mean something different than what you may see at a traditional school district. Because we serve such unique student populations, staff is dedicated to helping students succeed, whether that is returning to their homes campuses or transitioning to independent life as a young adult. Thank you again to our educators for rolling out the red carpet, and good luck to all of our students across the four schools.

HCDE's County Connections Youth Summer Initiative has been nothing short of a grand success over its four years. We've seen countless youth across the county able to grow and be given opportunities they never thought possible through funding approved by the Harris County Commissioners. One program we highlighted this week is the Diaz Music Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering at-risk youth through Latin

music education. Students are not only introduced to musical instruments, but are able to collaborate with professional musicians and composers, and even attend concerts by the Houston Symphony. Thank you again to the many programs over this four-year initiative that poured into Harris County youth and changed so many lives.

Finally, Tools for Teachers again continues to leave an impression across Harris County. In just under one hour, nearly 2,000 educators to request vouchers on Aug. 28, which is both gratifying and telling. Now in its sixth year, the initiative provided \$162,800 through the Education Foundation of Harris County for teachers and it's no surprise that educators across Harris County were ready at their computers to register. Thank you again to all those teachers who showed interest in Tools for Teachers and those who will benefit from the initiative and EFHC's efforts to support local districts. Also, thank you Trustees for allocating resources and seeing its importance this year.

By partnering with other organizations and Harris County independent school districts to best support students and educators, I am meeting the expectation to meet the needs of students while placing the Department is a community ally. ★



HCDE BOARD

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Richard Cantu

1st Vice President
Dr. Erica Davis

2nd Vice President
Dr. John McGee

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

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