

the **CONNECTOR**

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



WITH HER IMPACT THROUGHOUT HCDE, SHELBY BUCHTIEN IS
HONORED AS SEPTEMBER EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH **P.3**



ASPIRING DEBATORS BEGIN 2026-2027 SEASON AT
CASE DEBATES OPENING SEMINAR **P.6**



CHOICE PARTNERS NUTRITION AND PRODUCT EXPO TO TAKE
PATRONS 'UNDER THE SEA' FOR SCHOOL FOOD OPTIONS **P.7**

of Note

ONE OF THE THINGS that makes HCDE special is that our impact is not limited to classrooms and campuses. It is reflected in the experiences we create, the partnerships we build and the ways we bring people together to celebrate achievement. This week, we recognize that impact through the selection of Shelby Buchtien as HCDE's September Employee of the month. As event coordinator for Communications and Creative Services, Shelby is the creative force behind many of the gatherings that employees, students and families look forward to each year. From Convocation and Picnic in the Parking Lot to the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and the Early Childhood Winter Conference, her work helps create meaningful moments that strengthen our culture, recognize excellence and showcase the value of public education. Her contributions are a remind that every role at HCDE plays an important part in supporting our mission.

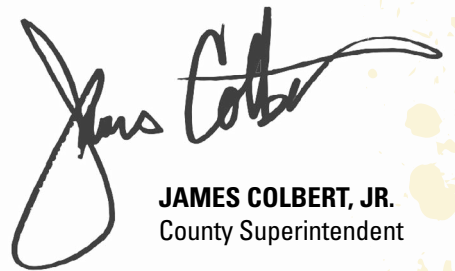
This week also highlighted the growing awareness of HCDE's programs and services throughout the community. In July, alone our awareness campaign generated more than 2.7 million impressions across digital and traditional platforms, helping connect Harris County residents with opportunities available through HCDE. Whether it is Head Start, Adult Education, CASE for Kids or School-Based Therapy Services, increasing visibility means more families can access programs

that support student success and improve lives. These efforts help ensure our work remains accessible, relevant and impactful for the communities we serve.

I was out of the office on Monday, and all HCDE facilities were closed Tuesday as a precaution due to Tropical Storm Edouard. On Wednesday, I participated in standing meetings with staff. Thursday included our agenda review meeting and additional standing meetings. Today, I participated in standing meetings at NPO.

Thank you to our employees whose dedication continues to strengthen HCDE's impact across Harris County. Whether serving students directly, supporting our programs behind the scenes, or helping tell our story, each of you contributes to the success of our organization and the communities we serve.

Have a wonderful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Employee Spotlight



Events Coordinator Shelby Buchtien, right is the woman behind the curtain for nearly 15 annual events at HCDE that celebrate and acknowledge students, staff and families. She was named September Employee of the Month for her outstanding collaboration with divisions and contributions to the Department's positive climate and culture.

SHELBY BUCHTIEN IS THE CREATIVE TOUCH BEHIND EVERY HCDE CELEBRATION

THE PERSON CONTROLLING THE FLOW of a basketball or volleyball game is called a playmaker. The brain behind the scripts for a live theatrical performance is called a playwright. Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) hosts nearly 15 events annually to celebrate and acknowledge students, staff and the families who support them, and none of them would be possible without the Department's playmaker, Shelby Buchtien.

As the event coordinator for Communications and Creative Services, Buchtien is the woman behind the curtain for major Department gatherings such as Picnic in the Parking Lot, the Education Foundation of Harris County's annual luncheon and Adult Education graduation.

"I pour a lot of my heart into each event because I want people to feel appreciated and recognized," said Buchtien, HCDE's September Employee of the Month. "Whether it's the holiday parties or Celebration of Excellence, our employees deserve to feel special. I also get an opportunity to work with our outward-facing divisions, and seeing those events come to light really drives the purpose of what we do at HCDE to support the educational advancement of our community."

Buchtien spends months collaborating with host divisions to shape event themes, scout venues, and plan every detail – from the background music to the centerpieces, the dessert bar, and the lavish decorations that make employees' pictures at the themed backdrops stand out on a Facebook feed. She ensures everything runs smoothly and that guests have a marvelous experience.

"I call that 'the Shelby effect' because everyone here has experienced something that has her fingerprint on it," Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark said. "She's made an indelible impact on this organization, on our morale, the culture and the events that everyone looks forward to."

Born and raised in the Cypress community with her three sisters, Buchtien developed a deep love of exploration and creativity under her parents' influence. Every year throughout her childhood, the family

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TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR VIDEO

Employee Spotlight



Buchtien, center bottom, and her family spent two weeks of every summer vacation driving across the country in their RV, exploring national parks, visiting loved ones and creating memories.

spent two weeks of their summer vacation driving across the country in their RV, exploring national parks, visiting loved ones and creating memories.

"I remember driving to our destination, and we'd be playing games at the dining table while my mom had the big map out, telling my dad where to turn," she recalled, laughing at the memory. "I think all the activities we would do to keep us busy contributed to my love for all things crafts and DIY. I love to sew, crochet, punch needle, scrapbook and journal. I love it all!"

Buchtien attended Texas A&M University intending to study business, but her creative mind had other plans. Earning a degree in Event, Tourism and Recreation, Buchtien put her talents to work as a wedding planner before transitioning to The Briar Club, where she focused on family-friendly events and learned how to transform a vision into memories.

Those skills became vital in the planning and execution of widely anticipated, well-attended events such as the Early Childhood Winter Conference (ECWC) and the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards ceremonies, both hosted by the Center for Educator Success (CES). When Dr. Chandel Bonner-Hancock, the officer of professional learning and student recognition, joined CES in 2025, she began working closely with Buchtien to organize the 40th annual ECWC and immediately found a kindred spirit for new and exciting ideas.

"I came in with a definite vision for ECWC and knew we wanted to grow the conference and make it impactful for Texas educators and leaders," Bonner-Hancock explained. "I didn't know how far I could push Shelby's creativity, but it was amazing because she responded so easily, and we just hit the ground running."

The pair collaborated on everything from conference design and signage to the presenter schedules, vendors and registration. Their meticulous planning and promotion tripled the conference's size in January compared with the previous year. With more than 1,000 educators and industry leaders under one roof, the conference faced no major challenges and received outstanding reviews from attendees.

Bonner-Hancock and Buchtien worked together again to organize the Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Award Ceremonies in March for middle and high school students. They introduced several new elements to the recognition event, including selections of three-dimensional art and QR codes that linked to recordings of students reading excerpts from their written creations.

"Scholastic is one of those events that we get to impact students directly, and I came up with some big ideas that had the potential to go awry," Bonner-Hancock said. "Shelby was right there with me, without hesitation, trying to figure out how to make this experience magical for students and families."

Bonner-Hancock recruited student volunteers to undergo an extensive audition process for the opportunity to serve as the program's master of ceremonies and stage managers. However, the logistics and day of execution were organized by Buchtien.

"I've learned that no job is too big or small for me, and I have to be ready to jump in at any point," Buchtien said. "This year, we needed a technical director. So, I was backstage at Scholastic, making the calls to bring the lights on at certain times, making sure the students came out on cue and helping close out the event. It's always awesome watching everything I've worked on come to light, and that feeling is what

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Before joining #TeamHCDE, Buchtien put her talents to work as a wedding planner before transitioning to The Briar Club, where she focused on family-friendly events and learned how to transform a vision into memories.

Employee Spotlight

reignites me for the next event.”

Their bond and trust developed over months of working closely became unmatched, and Buchtien’s direct impact on the success of CES’s two largest events is exactly why the division nominated her for employee of the month.

“If Shelby came to me and said, ‘We needed to cancel,’ in the middle of ECWC or Scholastic, I would be like, ‘Why? And okay,’” Bonner-Hancock laughed. “That’s how much I trust her! She’s an invaluable part of what we do. I feel that I’m a mentor to her, and at the same time, I learn so much from her daily.”

Added Clark: “I think the most special part of the employee of the month program is when a division works with someone in a different division, and they recognize their contributions. Shelby calls the Communications division home, but the impact of her work bleeds throughout the entire organization.”

Buchtien uses all the momentum and inspiration from each event’s success throughout the year to keep pushing herself to find new ways to bring that WOW-factor. But of all the events on her calendar, it’s Picnic in the Parking Lot that brings her the most joy.

“It’s just the most fun to plan because I get to really branch out,” she said. “Sometimes I start up really high with crazy ideas, like I really wanted to have a dunk tank with members of the Executive Leadership Team being dunked. I’ve also had some silly ideas like somebody that can come and do chalk artwork, and I’ve even considered a bounce house.”

Despite how much #TeamHCDE might love to see Superintendent James Colbert Jr. or one of the division leaders getting dunked at an employee appreciation event, those out-of-the-box ideas were met on the chopping block.

“When she comes to me with some crazy stuff, I receive it with an open heart and an open mind and the spirit with which it is presented, which is to have fun,” Clark laughed. “Sometimes we have to rein her in a little bit because she’s out there with her creativity and her ideas, but that’s all part of her charm.”

From the smallest details to the biggest celebrations, Buchtien’s creativity has become part of the fabric of #TeamHCDE. Her fingerprints can be found in the events employees anticipate throughout the year, but her impact goes beyond the décor, themes and behind-the-scenes logistics. She creates moments that give employees something to look forward to, students and families something to celebrate and the entire HCDE community another reason to come together. As Buchtien continues dreaming about what’s next, her willingness to try something new ensures there will always be another idea around the corner.

“I would challenge anyone to find a person at HCDE who doesn’t look forward to the Chili Cook Off, or isn’t excited about Convocation,” Clark said. “Shelby Buchtien’s fingerprints and flair are on all those events. She’s taking us to the next level, and I think she epitomizes what it means to be exceptional.” ★



Buchtien served as the technical director for two, two-hour Scholastic Art and Writing Awards Ceremonies, leading student volunteers, venue staff and backstage hands throughout the program.



Buchtien, center right, began collaborating with CES’s Dr. Chandel Bonner-Hancock, right, to organize the 40th annual Early Childhood Winter Conference. Their planning and promotion tripled the conference’s size compared with the previous year.

Board Briefs

JULY AWARENESS CAMPAIGN UPDATE

BRIGHT FUTURES BEGIN HERE

**Harris County
Department of
Education**

SEE THE IMPACT ON HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOLS

HCDE-TEXAS.ORG

IT WAS HARD TO MISS HCDE'S EFFORTS to inform Harris County residents about the Department's programs and services, as the awareness campaign expanded its marketing, yielding more than 2.74 million impressions across digital and traditional platforms in July.

The general campaign achieved significant wins on social media, including year-over-year increases of 141% for total page engagements and 698% for total video views. The highest-performing Facebook ad featured a carousel of information about divisions like Adult Education, CASE for Kids and School-Based Therapy Services. The ad garnered nearly 100,000 impressions, more than 2,200 clicks to links offering details on free programming, at an average cost of \$0.30 per click.

Key performance indicators for online advertisements trended upward, while cost per click trended downward. In July, more than 3,000 clicks and 574,000 impressions (a 20% month-over-month

increase) were generated at \$0.48 per click (down from \$0.60).

Billboard promotions remain a positive branding tool that yields millions of impressions as Houston drivers commute daily. Signage with the Department's See the Change Your Change Makes branding promoted HCDE's Head Start program and Special Schools from early July to mid-August. Stationed at Highway 6 and Beechnut Street, and 610 North at Homestead Road, the billboards gained more than 2.1 million impressions.

Television ads on FOX 26 Houston ran a rapid, high-frequency advertising campaign that delivered more than 609,000 impressions. The five-second spots ran 150 times over the course of the week.

These efforts underscore the importance of sustained awareness campaigns in amplifying HCDE's mission, ensuring our programs remain visible, accessible and top of mind for the community we serve. ★

CASE DEBATES KICKS OFF 2026-2027 SEASON WITH LARGER NUMBERS, MORE COLLABORATION

WITH NEARLY DOUBLE THE COUNT from a year ago, 160 students representing 12 schools across greater Houston gathered Aug. 29 at the University of Houston for the CASE Debates Seminar. The daylong program officially kicks off CASE Debates, an initiative within Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids and funded for inner-city youth at no cost to participants. The program provides aspiring debaters with training and access to coaching and tournaments.

Continuing its collaboration with the University of Houston's Speech and Debate Program, CASE Debates participants were able to select a specialized track and attend breakout sessions that featured lectures on each of the debate formats. Attending coaches were also offered a track to help them train their students on speech and debate.

Teams will compete in five tournaments throughout the year, beginning Sept. 19. The program culminates in the Houston Urban Debate League's City Championship Finals, scheduled for Feb. 27. ★



Board Briefs

TRANSLATIONS COORDINATOR PERSONALLY DELIVERS PTIC GIFTS, SHOWCASES HCDE TO WINNING DISTRICTS



Harris County Department of Education Translation Coordinator Wendy Utterback delivered interpreting audio equipment this

week to Clifton Independent School District and connected with district leadership on the Department's key initiatives. The equipment was donated by Audio Resource Group for the Professional Translators and Interpreters Conference in July and Viki Villarreal, Clifton ISD's English as a Second Language director had her name drawn. Utterback met with Villarreal and Clifton ISD Superintendent Andy Ball on Aug. 30.

She will deliver a second set to Weimar ISD and winner Irene Juarez, paraprofessional at Weimar Elementary School, on Sept. 10.

In addition to teaching them how to use the equipment and explore scenarios, they discussed disadvantages small districts face when it comes to providing language access services to students and families. Networking with school districts across the state – Clifton ISD is northwest of Waco and Weimar sits between Houston and San Antonio – further extends HCDE's footprint as a leader in public education. ★

CHOICE PARTNERS GOES 'UNDER THE SEA' TO CELEBRATE FOOD CHOICES AT NUTRITION AND PRODUCT EXPO

MARK YOUR CALENDARS for the 21st annual Nutrition and Product Expo, where Choice Partners will take patrons "Under the Sea" while they explore nutritious food choices. On Oct. 22, Harris County Department of Education's national purchasing cooperative celebrates providing high-quality meals and food options to more than a million students across the greater Houston region. Invited attendees will be able to network with more than 150 top food vendors, including Kraft Heinz, Smucker and Tyson Foods, while also learning more about available contracts solutions and procurement through Choice Partners. Students from area school districts will also attend to taste-test food samples and provide immediate and data-driven feedback to school district nutrition directors and representatives. Join us at the Humble Civic Center for a blend of healthy options and sweet treats as school districts plan for upcoming cafeteria menus.

Save the date and join Choice Partners "Under the Sea" to celebrate healthy school meal choices. On Oct. 22 at the Humble Civic Center, expo attendees will network with 150+ food vendors, explore contracts and taste what's next for Harris County school cafeterias. ★

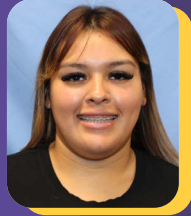


WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for August! Fifty-two new faces have joined our Adult Education, Center for Educator Success, Head Start, School-Based Therapy Services and Special Schools divisions.



Ebony Amos
ARD Clerk
ABS East



Vanessa Moreno
Receptionist Clerk
ABS East



Curtis Stewart
Teacher
ABS East



Ashley Whyte
Teacher
ABS East



Jose Figueroa
Teacher
ABS East



Eliset Garcia
Secretary To Principal
ABS East



Shereleta Collians
Educational Aide II
ABS East



Tyronne Singleton
Assistant Principal
ABS East



Myra Jones Lavergne
School Nurse
ABS East



Cierra Davis
Records Clerk
ABS West



Aaron Bowers
Educational Aide
ABS West



Yolanda Pena
Educational Aide
ABS West



Clenetra Sims
Teacher
ABS West



Amber Samuel
Records Clerk
ABS West



Ashley Eldridge
Substitute Teacher
ABS West



Tatyana Miller
Educational Aide III
ABS West

WELCOME TO HCDE



Laura Munoz
Aide
Adult Education



Areli Villa De Leon
General Office Clerk
Adult Education



Daisy Lozano
Aide
Adult Education



Elizabeth Mireles Angel
Perform & Account Specialist
Adult Education



Eliana Perez-Jennings
Aide
Adult Education



Kimberly Smith
Administrative Assistant
Center For Educator Success



Portia Teal
Teacher
Fortis Academy



Chavun Chadwick
Teacher
Fortis Academy



Christopher Nix
Food Service Clerk
Fortis Academy



Labria Lanaux
Culinary Arts Teacher
Fortis Academy



Megan Bell
Teacher
Head Start



Jayla Boseman
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Marcela Forero
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Georgina Herrera
Cook
Head Start



Tracey Norman
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Brianda Garcia
Teacher
Head Start

— WELCOME TO HCDE —



Tiara Washington
Teaching Assistant
Head Start



Linda Munoz Rodriguez
Teaching Assistant
Head Start



Vanesa Reyes
Teaching Assistant
Head Start



Jose Orozco
Family Services Provider
Head Start



Destinee Wells
Wraparound Specialist
Highpoint School



Lanell Hubbard
Teacher
Highpoint School



Kia Robinson
Teacher
Highpoint School



Damarcus Thompson
Educational Aide III
Highpoint School



Daniel Lee
Relief Instructor
Highpoint School



Dierdre Adeniyi
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Norma Aguirre Carmona
Occupational Therapy Assistant
School-Based Therapy Services



Lisa Koblenz
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Autumn Olin
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Marisa Sookraj
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Rhianon Thomas
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Joli Twa
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services

— WELCOME TO HCDE —



Virginia Yabut
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Dana Howe
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Hayley Tatom
Occupational Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services



Analíel Gonzales
Physical Therapist
School-Based Therapy Services

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE C: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

- Encourages, oversees and participates in staff recognition activities.



Shelby, Buchtien, bottom right, poses with members of the facilities team at the 2025 Convocation. September's Employee of the Month routinely works with a number of divisions to help plan, organize and put on multiple events throughout the year.

THIS WEEK, we begin our 2026-2027 campaign showcasing some of HCDE's top employees with our first Employee of the month. From September through May this year, we will highlight employees from all corners of #TeamHCDE and the impact each has on the day-to-day operations. We'll tell their stories, showcase their interests and families, and shine a light on how each follows the mission we have here in uplifting public education for students and families across Harris County. Shelby Buchtien, our event coordinator, starts things off. Working behind the scenes with our Communications team, Buchtien is the "playmaker" and person behind the curtain most of HCDE's major events, including the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards ceremonies, Picnic in the Parking Lot and Adult Education graduation. Her work isn't always seen, but the impact is felt due to events going off without a hitch and attendees having a good time. This past year, Buchtien worked with CES to help take Scholastic and the Early Childhood Winter Conference to the next step, resulting in increased attendance and participation. I'm thankful for Buchtien's passion and can't think of a more deserving person to kick off this school year's employee appreciation campaign.

CASE Debates also recently kicked off its year with the opening seminar at the University of Houston. I'm thankful for this partnership,

as aspiring debaters are not only introduced to speech and debate, but they also get a front-row seat to what their future could be if they choose to. In just a few weeks, debaters will compete as they work their way toward the HUDL City Championship Finals in February. Good luck to everyone this season and thank you to all the coaches who oversee these programs and invest in youth through debate.

Finally, the Choice Partners 21st annual Nutrition and Product Expo is right around the corner. Scheduled for Oct. 22 at the Humble Civic Center, the expo invites school district representatives to network from more than 150 top food vendors while also learning more about procurement through HCDE's national purchasing cooperative and how Choice Partners helps provide meals to more than a million students across greater Houston. And we don't forget about another important perspective – the students themselves. Busloads of students from area districts will also attend, taste-test food samples and provide immediate feedback for vendors and school nutrition directors. These opinions help shape future school menus and I'm always thankful for their participation.

By having a staff that does not accept mediocre performance, I am establishing a culture where all team members strive to achieve excellence. ★



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

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

November 3
Election Day

November 18
Board Meeting