



the CONNECTOR

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



**TRENT MANUEL LEADS WITH HEART, PURPOSE AS
NEW PRINCIPAL OF ABS EAST P.3**



**CSSS HELPS SCHOOL LEADERS BETTER PLAN THROUGH
OPERATIONALIZING SAFETY TRAINING P.5**



**LEADERSHIP HOUSTON FOSTERS IMPORTANT DISCUSSIONS
ON EDUCATION P.6**

of Note

As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedies today, I can't help but reflect on just how drastically our world and education have changed since those catastrophic events. I discussed this very topic yesterday as I moderated a panel of superintendents from around Harris County at a Leadership Houston event at Irvington.

In discussing how public education has shifted and flexed around the evolving landscape of our society, I urged six district leaders to share their perspective on the past, present and future of education. A common theme emerged: education may have changed, politics may have shifted and curriculum may look different. But our responsibility to our students and communities remains the same.

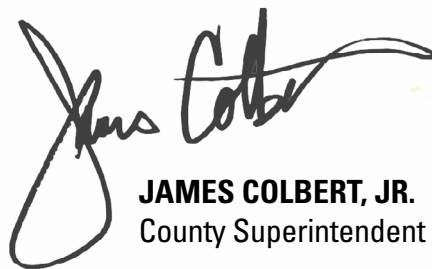
During the conversation, these fearless leaders discussed how they are facing controversial issues head-on in their districts, standing up for students and protecting the academic future of children. They talked about the changing face of campus and district leadership and the need for principals to navigate not just instruction but politics, community outreach and generational differences of opinion and behavior. They talked about how schools must be nimble in meeting the needs of changing student populations while remaining sensitive to the diverse populations we serve. And they touched on the need for adequate school funding that will not only keep the lights on but provide outstanding opportunities for students to succeed while ensuring that salaries and benefits keep pace with inflation.

It was a dynamic and fascinating conversation that provoked thought, introspection and curiosity all at the same time. I am proud to be an educator

and stand with these outstanding leaders shepherding the next generation of our community into the future. And while education will continue to be increasingly competitive, it is incumbent upon us as educational professionals to ensure that the quality, rigor and opportunity public education is known for stands strong.

I started the week with ELT on Tuesday after observing the Labor Day Holiday on Monday. On Wednesday, I participated in a UIL State Executive Committee meeting via Zoom followed by standing meetings with ELT staff about ongoing projects and initiatives. On Thursday, I moderated the educational panel for Leadership Houston in the Conference Center followed by meetings with staff.

Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Employee Spotlight



Trent Manuel, left, joined #TeamHCDE with more than 20 years of experience working with special education students. In his new role as ABS East principal, he is excited to lead students and educators with purpose and passion.

ABS EAST PRINCIPAL TRENT MANUEL KEEPS STUDENTS AT THE HEART OF HIS LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

TRENT MANUEL HAS HAD A FRONT ROW SEAT TO **EDUCATION FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE**, watching as his mother dedicated more than 30 years to the Louisiana public school system serving special education students. The love, kindness and passion she demonstrated daily planted a seed in Manuel that is now benefiting learners in Harris County through his latest role as the new principal of Academic and Behavior School (ABS) East.

“I see myself as a very patient leader, someone who’s going to take time out to understand what is going on, what is driving the campus and what motivates the staff and students,” he said. “My goal is to see that light bulb go off for my students. It doesn’t matter if it’s in a lesson, at graduation or in a positive phone call home, I want to see our kids soar.”

The New Iberia, La. native started his professional career as an occupational therapist, working to rehabilitate athletes, but described how he “didn’t feel complete.”

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Employee Spotlight

When a local educator approached him about coaching middle school basketball, Manuel jumped at the chance to work with students. He eventually found his way into special education, and that's when his passion ignited.

"There was always something about education that drew me to what my mother did," Manuel recalled. "When I started teaching, that spark ignited and to this day, I can still see the faces of my first group of students. They needed someone to pour into them and believe in them. It was the toughest year of my career by far, but so rewarding."

Manuel moved to Baytown in 2005 with his wife and two children. He spent nearly 20 years working in Goose Creek Consolidated Independent School District, where he focused on understanding individual learning and behavioral needs by collaborating with colleagues, families and paraprofessionals to create environments where students could succeed. After seeing both the challenges and rewards of serving students with severe educational needs, Manuel pursued a master's in education administration at Grand Canyon University. He served as an assistant principal for several years in Humble ISD before joining #TeamHCDE in July, beginning his first principalship.

With students officially back on campus and the 2026-2027 academic year underway, Manuel's vision for ABS East is centered around the three P's: people, processes and partnerships.

"This year, we are focused on building trusting relationships with the people who visit our campus, aligning our processes to meet the needs of the students we serve and creating partnerships that extend vital services to our families," he explained.

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Manuel said his goal as principal is to always keep students at the forefront. It's a philosophy rooted in the lessons he learned from his mother, his years of serving special education students and the educators who encouraged him to step into leadership. Manuel hopes to bring that same patience, compassion and commitment to ABS East by leading alongside his staff, listening to students and ensuring every decision ultimately serves a purpose.

"The fact is, we are here for our students," he smiled. "It's easy for adults to get bogged down in the work, but I'm focused on helping our educators and staff remain true to the real core of why we come to ABS East every day, which is educating the next generation." 🌟



ABS East Principal Trent Manuel, right, and Assistant Principal Alyssa Webb conduct routine walkthroughs around campus to ensure students and staff have the necessary resources and support to be successful.

Board Briefs

SCHOOL LEADERS, EMERGENCY PERSONNEL GET HANDS-ON DURING CSSS OPERATIONALIZING SAFETY TRAINING

SCHOOL SAFETY CONTINUES TO BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF CONVERSATION IN EDUCATION, so Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS) continues to serve as an industry leader in providing professional development and training opportunities for school district leaders, first responders and community partners.

The latest training gave nearly 50 attendees a hands-on approach to best optimize their emergency preparedness plans. Held Sept. 9 at the Irvington conference center, the daylong "Operationalizing School Safety Training" best defined real-world strategies to manage incidents, demonstrated clear roles and responsibilities and helped participants develop tools to build safety and empower proactive action.

The event was a collaboration between CSSS, REDBAG Vice President Carly Posey and Circle of Trust Training Systems. Posey, whose son survived the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy, connected with CSSS School Safety and Security Specialist Janice Owolabi at a prior conference. The primary presenter was Chris Zimmerman, a principal in Colorado and former "I Love U Guys" Foundation instructor.

National partnerships continue to position CSSS as an industry leader in helping local school districts and organizations best realize the importance of operationalizing safety. ★



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR GALLERY](#)



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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES ROLLS OUT IRVINGTON C.L.E.A.R. DEVICE REFRESH

A TECHNOLOGY UPGRADE IS OFFICIALLY IN THE WORKS for #TeamHCDE as members of the Information Technology Services team roll out the Centralized Lifecycle and Equipment Asset Renewal (C.L.E.A.R.) Device Refresh initiative at Irvington. On Sept. 10-11, technicians made their way around the second floor to collect outdated computers, laptops and monitors from employees in Procurement, Communication and Creative Services and IT, before the divisions received new Lenovo laptops to support their work throughout the year.

The initiative works to modernize HCDE technology and improve support services by transitioning all employees into one processing system. IT piloted the deployment at the beginning of the academic year by distributing laptops to School-Based Therapy Services and Special Schools campus staff. Divisions included in the upcoming phase will receive information about their deployment schedule, preparation requirements, and what to expect before their scheduled deployment. ★

SUPT. COLBERT MODERATES 'SCHOOL DAYS' PANEL AT 3RD ANNUAL LEADERSHIP HOUSTON SYMPOSIUM

WHEN MORE THAN 60 AREA LEADERS GATHER UNDER ONE ROOF, it's imperative that education in Harris County be discussed. Superintendent James Colbert Jr. was invited to moderate the "School Days" Education Panel at the 3rd Annual Leadership Houston Symposium on Sept. 9 at the Irvington Conference Center. He posed questions about the state voucher program, campus safety and security, staffing shortages and more to six panelists, including Alief ISD Superintendent Dr. Anthony Mays, Houston ISD Chief Human Resources Officer Norma Castillo and Tomball ISD Superintendent Dr. Martha Salazar-Zamora. The 60-minute discussion was part of a daylong event celebrating 45 years of leadership and community impact

through the professional development of local leaders across various industries.

Houston ISD Superintendent Mike Miles provided insight on the elements of transformation as the event's keynote speaker before various breakout discussions on economic stability, wellness and civic engagement. Harris County Sheriff Edward Gonzalez, a Leadership Houston Class XXIII alum, and the Pastor of New Faith Church, Dr. Andre Lewis, also hosted a fireside chat focused on leadership, faith and community. The symposium and Leadership Houston program were founded to brainstorm ideas, increase discussions and foster collaboration on projects that will improve the quality of life for Houstonians. 🌟



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR GALLERY](#)

BUSINESS, PROCUREMENT LEADERS SHARE BEST PRACTICES AT NATIONAL CONFERENCE

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE)

leaders continue to stretch the organization's footprint and share strategies nationally that help serve the betterment of students and families across Harris County.

Recently, Chief Financial Officer Ann Westbrooks, Director of Procurement Dr. Edna Johnson and Contract Manager Tameisha Davenport led two sessions business services and procurement at the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing Forum 2026. Held Aug. 23-26 in Columbus, Ohio, the conference is regarded as the premier event for public procurement professionals in North America.

Johnson and Davenport's session – Engage, Inspire, Win:

NIGP



Strategies to Attract Highly Qualified Emerging & Small Business – analyzed barriers to small business participation in public contracting, applied effective strategies and developed an action plan to expand opportunities. Johnson joined Westbrooks for a session titled, "AI-Powered P-Card Program: Innovation, Insight and Integrity in Public Procurement," where they examined automation, enhanced oversight and risk monitoring practices to undertake an AI-enabled procurement care program. 🌟

In the Community



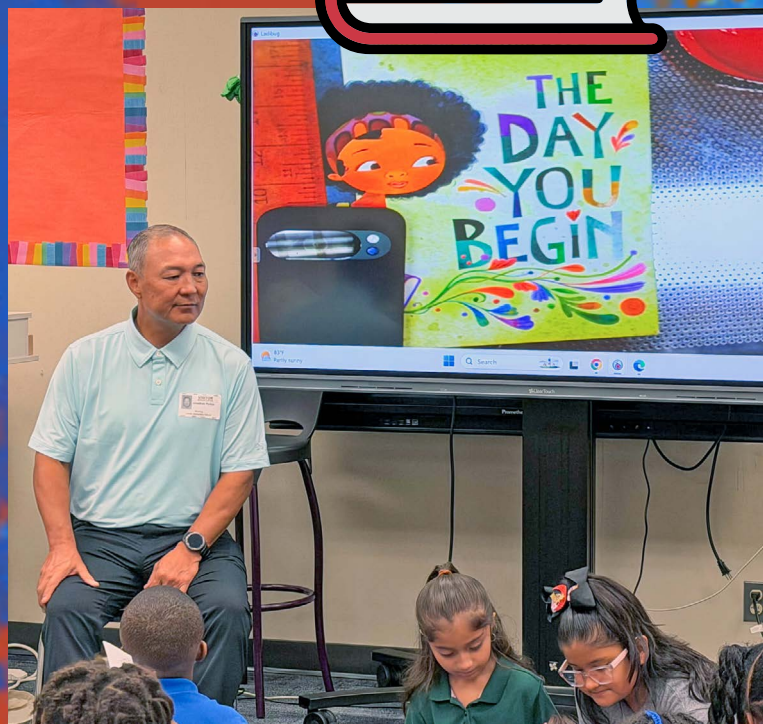
HCDE LEADERS POUR INTO ALIEF ISD YOUTH THROUGH MENTORSHIP, READING

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) assistant superintendents Dr. CJ Rodgers and Jonathan Parker are volunteering their time this school year to make an impact in Alief Independent School District, one of the 25 county districts directly impacted by HCDE and its services.

The duo joined other male volunteers for Alief ISD Literacy MENTors, a reading initiative patterned from HCDE's SuperMENTors. Established in 2002 as part of the Head Start Significant Male Initiative, SuperMENTors connects male role models with students at HCDE Head Start centers. Community volunteers and business partners join HCDE staff, among them Superintendent James Colbert Jr., all four Executive Leadership Team male members and various division directors, at the 12 campuses.

Alief ISD Superintendent Dr. Anthony Mays is a former HCDE senior director of schools, serving in the role from 2017-2020.

Mentors visit their respective campuses once a month during the school year to read to students. In Alief ISD, mentors are reading to third-grade students. Parker visited Landis Elementary School on Sept. 4, and Rodgers read at Sneed Elementary School. ✨



IN THE NEWS

CSSS DIRECTOR REFLECTS ON TIME AS NYPD OFFICER FOR HOUSTON PUBLIC MEDIA 9/11 SPECIAL



AS NEWS OUTLETS ACROSS THE COUNTY SHARE STORIES AND VIDEOS this week to commemorate the 25th anniversary of 9/11 and attacks in New York City and Washington D.C., Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Leslie Etheridge recently shared her experience as a New York City Police Department officer during the tragedy with Houston Public Media.

Her interview will be part of the station's 9/11 special, joining other testimonials and accounts. Michael Hagerty, Houston Public Media and Houston Matters senior producer, interviewed Etheridge on Sept. 8. The two discussed her time with the NYPD, the day of the attacks and weeks that followed, and her thoughts and memories now 25 years later.

Now the director for the Center for Safe and Secure Schools, Etheridge served various roles in the NYPD, including over the department's school safety division. After her retirement, she joined Texas Southern University as captain of police in 2017 before joining HCDE in 2023. ✨

[View Houston Matters video here.](#)



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: **VIEW OUR VIDEO**

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

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE C: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

- Ensures that the system for recruiting and selection results in personnel recommendations based on defined needs, goals, priorities and candidate credentials/qualifications.



ABS East First Day of School 22: ABS East Principal Trent Manuel was inspired to become an educator by his mom, who dedicated more than 30 years of service to the Louisiana public school system. He plans to complete his first year as principal by leading with patience, compassion and commitment.

THIS WEEK, WE FORMALLY INTRODUCE TRENT MANUEL TO #TEAMHCDE AS THE NEW PRINCIPAL AT ABS EAST. The son of a long-time public educator, Manuel said his goal is to 'see that light bulb go off for my students.' What I appreciate from Manuel's words is that the light bulb could be a simple lesson learned to crossing the stage at graduation. His mother set a positive example during her 30-plus years serving special education students. Manuel didn't immediately go into education – he started his career in occupational therapy – before jumping at an opportunity to work with middle school students and coach basketball. Twenty years later, his career brought his family to greater Houston and through multiple area school districts before his calling to serve at ABS East. His plan is simple with his first principalship – people, processes and partnerships. I look forward to seeing Manuel serve our ABS East students, families and partner schools districts, and know his heart in the right place to see the best from everyone on campus.

Our divisions continue to showcase why HCDE is an industry leader and in some cases, the best available option for organizations and school districts. The Center for Safe and Secure Schools held a training this week through a collaboration

with Circle of Trust Training Systems and Carly Poses, whose son survived the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy. The daylong workshop helped attendees better understand the need for clearly -defined roles and responsibilities and being proactive with their emergency action plans. Our CSSS team members – like their fellow HCDE counterparts – have been exceptional at identifying needs for organizations within the county and beyond, and training leaders and teams to have the answers when problems arise.

Finally, I was honored to moderate the "Schools Days" Education Panel during this week's Leadership Houston Symposium. The six-person panel, which included superintendents from Alief and Tomball independent school districts, and I tackled some of today's most pressing issues in education. Among those were the state's voucher program and staffing shortages. These discussions are necessary, especially in a room full of leaders who quickly realize struggles in their respective industries are similar to others. Thank you to all who participated and those who visited HCDE to attend the symposium.

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



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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