



Choice Partners Take Guests 'Under the Sea' for Flavorful Nutrition and Product Expo

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THE CONNECTOR

A Weekly Newsletter From The Superintendent Of Harris County Department Of Education

HEALTHY MINDS, HEALTHY FAMILIES
CONFERENCE ATTENDEES DIVE INTO
'DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS'

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NEW BUSINESS SERVICES SENIOR DIRECTOR TO
LEAD THROUGH IMPACT, SERVICE

► P.7



► Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and the HCDE Board of Trustees pose for the photo with the four campus principals Oct. 21 in honor of National Principal Appreciation Month.

THEY'RE NOT LIKE US. That saying from rapper Kendrick Lamar is the perfect descriptor for our principals and the leadership they provide on their campuses every day.

October is National Principal Appreciation month and at the board meeting this week we had the opportunity to honor the soldiers who lead our four campuses.

Principals are the CEO of their building, responsible for every human on their campus. And as everyone knows, HCDE doesn't have the easiest kids in our classrooms. But that doesn't deter our principals. Each of them does an amazing job of managing instruction and operations on their campus, leading their staff to grow, love and teach children other districts don't know how to relate to. Our principals believe in loving and supporting our students no matter what issues, disabilities, behaviors or circumstances they bring with them to school. That is the unique nature and special quality of our schools. Our staff run to students that others run away from. I couldn't be more proud of the work that HCDE does in our classrooms every day and our principals are leading that charge. I am honored to celebrate and recognize our principals for the hard work they do.

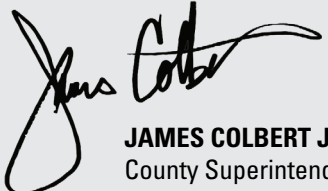
This week, I was out on personal business before returning for the board meeting on Wednesday. At this meeting, the board approved the tax rate. Along with passing the budget, this is the most important action our Trustees take each year. This sets the property tax for HCDE and determines our general fund budget. By leveraging the tax rate and profits from Choice Partners, HCDE can charge ISDs below market rates for other services

which in turn keeps money in their classrooms and supports public education in the county.

This year, HCDE once again reduced the tax rate. I am proud of the business model HCDE employs that has allowed us to cut the tax rate for 14 consecutive years, demonstrating that we are, without a doubt, great stewards of taxpayer dollars.

On Thursday and Friday, I represented HCDE at two different golf tournaments: the Aldine ISD Golf Tournament and Greater Northside Chamber of Commerce Golf Tournament respectively.

The weather is officially turning. Enjoy the beautiful weekend.



JAMES COLBERT JR.
County Superintendent

CHOICE PARTNERS COOPERATIVE

SCHOOLS, STUDENTS CONNECT WITH A SEA OF NEW FLAVORS AT THE 21ST ANNUAL NUTRITION AND PRODUCT EXPO



Choice Partners embraced an "Under the Sea" theme at the 21st Annual Nutrition and Product Expo on Oct. 22. Members of the team dressed up as characters from *The Little Mermaid*, sea creatures and more to inspire enthusiasm amongst district representatives and students.

► **The average school welcomes hundreds of students a day** who are ready to learn, host several athletic practices or games and has a variety of clubs scheduled to meet after school.

It's a whirlwind of activities that all require the right amount of sustenance to keep students and educators fueled to tackle the next mission.

That's where Choice Partners (CP) comes in. The national purchasing cooperative invited statewide district representatives and students from select school districts "Under the Sea" for its Annual Nutrition and Product Expo on Oct 22. Attendees like Tennia Gilbert networked with more than 160 vendors, sampled their latest products and prepared to take ideas for nutritious meals back to their campuses. The director of menus for Uplift Education, a charter school program serving more than 22,000 PreK-12th grade students in Dallas, has made the drive for the past five years because it's an opportunity to make meaningful, face-to-face connections with the companies that keep their cafeterias stocked and districts running strong.

"This show makes it easier for us to encourage the kids to eat a well-balanced meal in our cafeterias and branch outside of their normal fast-food options," Gilbert explained. "Our kids

are asking for a variety of cuisines and to see Asian, Mexican and American options at the show that are filled with flavor is exactly what we are looking for."

Several booths embraced the ocean theme by decorating their stations and dressing up as jelly fish, crabs and other sea creatures. That flair sparked the tastebuds of more than 150 students who traveled from several districts, including Boling, Houston and Galveston independent school districts (ISD) to sample new dishes that could soon be added to their cafeteria menus.

From personal pan pizzas and breakfast sandwiches to smoothies, culturally influenced cuisine and desserts, vendors ensured there was something for every palate to enjoy. Throughout the event, students were asked to provide feedback on the taste, texture and presentation of their samplings to vendors.

"I've never been to anything like this before, and it's a very eye-opening experience for me," Ariana Fernandez said, a senior and culinary student at C.E. King High School in Sheldon ISD. "It's been fun talking to all the vendors, seeing how they prepare the food, trying different options and learning the nutritional value of everything. I'm excited to try and take some of this knowledge back to my school."

CONTINUE ON P.4



Culinary students from Pearland ISD sample a smashburger pizza before providing feedback on the taste, texture and presentation of their samplings to vendors.



A district representative reads the nutrition label on an Asian-inspired sauce while chatting with a vendor about menu options for her campuses.

VIEW VIDEO



Nutrition specialists from Baker Ripley select healthy meals for more than 2,000 Head Start students in the Houston area. The team walked away with dozens of food samples, vendor contact information and a variety of new options for students.

“WE WANT TO ENSURE OUR KIDS HAVE A VARIETY IN THEIR DIET, AND THE **CHOICE PARTNERS NUTRITION EXPO** HELPS MAKE OUR JOB EASIER”

Nutrition directors use the students’ responses to evaluate food and beverage products being considered for their menus, while CP uses the feedback to plan for future food contracts, enabling the co-op to maintain its standard of service. Choice Partners’ food division is one of the biggest in the state in terms of the number of members, vendors and competitively bid contracts. School districts use co-op contracts to purchase food for millions of student lunches annually.

“It’s easy to pick a couple of menu options from a computer screen, but it’s so much better to be able to taste them in person,” Child Nutrition Specialist at Baker Ripley Megan Robertson said. Her team helps select nutritious meals for more than 2,000 Head Start students in the Houston area. “We want to ensure our kids have a variety in their diet, and the Choice Partners Nutrition Expo helps make our job easier.” ★



NATIONAL PRINCIPALS MONTH

 [VIEW VIDEO](#)

COURTNEY WATERS CHANGES LIVES BY ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO REWRITE THEIR STORIES


 [VIEW VIDEO](#)

One of the best ways to help children thrive is to meet them with a bit of empathy, and Courtney Waters is no stranger to many of the experiences and challenges her students face. She grew up in the same North Shore community she now serves, was bullied by her own peers, faced financial hardships at home and was not afraid to take matters into her own hands.

In the six years she's served as principal of Highpoint School, her mission has always been to build relationships with her population of troubled and adjudicated youth to help them catch up academically, learn to regulate their

behavior, and see their potential in life.

"I tell my students all the time, 'You are not your circumstances. You are not your environment. You still have the autonomy to make better choices,'" Waters explained. "I see past my students' mistakes, tell them I love them and that they are awesome people who will be impactful citizens one day. I don't want them to let their past determine their future, so I keep pouring that message into them. It's more than words to me – it's the truth."

In honor of National Principals Month, the Communications and Creative Services team sat down with Waters to learn more about the experiences that shaped the empathy she exudes daily, her belief in second chances for her students and her mission to break down the misconceptions about disciplinary alternative education. ★

STUDENTS EXPLORE FUTURE JOB POSSIBILITIES AT ANNUAL FORTIS 'CAREER ON WHEELS' FAIR

On Oct. 23, Fortis staff brought career opportunities to students with the second annual "Career on Wheels" initiative. Students had the chance to connect with community and business partners, all while learning from those representatives and the careers they hold.

Among those who attended were first responders and law enforcement officers, physical therapists and mortuary services. Students also met with area college and trade school representatives, and music industry professionals among others.

Opportunities like these inspire Fortis students to continue their educational journeys and pursue post-graduate careers. ★

 [VIEW PHOTO GALLERY](#)




HEAD START HELPS FAMILIES, EDUCATORS EXPLORE THE ‘DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS’ AT HEALTHY MINDS, HEALTHY FAMILIES CONFERENCE

Wellness is multifaceted, but when most people think of the idea, physical health is what comes to mind. Head Start helped more than 100 educators and parents broaden their horizons to the “Dimensions of Wellness” at their annual Healthy Minds, Healthy Families Conference on Oct. 23. Hosted in conjunction with the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, the full-day conference brought wellness advocates to the Irvington Conference Center to share resources and strategies that strengthened attendees’ mental health so they might better serve Harris County’s

youngest learners. Sessions looked beyond physical wellness, providing information and best practices for emotional, financial and environmental wellness. Parents were also informed about various services that Harris County Department of Education divisions offer to improve career and intellectual wellness, such as English-as-a-Second Language and workforce certification classes offered by Adult Education. The Healthy Minds, Healthy Families annual conference is just one way Head Start provides comprehensive services to help families thrive. 🌟





ROOTED IN SERVICE, CHRIS RODNEY SETS HER SIGHTS ON IMPROVING HCDE BUSINESS OPERATIONS



Childhood is considered a formative period because the lessons and values instilled during that time become one's beacon, the guiding light he or she relies on throughout life and reverts to when making important decisions. Chris Rodney was raised in New Orleans by an educator (mom) and a mechanic (dad) alongside four siblings. Their light – service – is an understanding that the heart of a community lies in its ability to lend a helping hand.

Rodney joined Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) in September as the senior director of Business Services, with a vision to make the systems that support the organization work better for everyone. Equipped with a Master of Business Administration from the University of Houston-Downtown, where she concentrated on project management and process improvement, she is focused on identifying inefficiencies and strengthening the processes that guide the business office. Her team is currently taking steps to improve contract response times, enhance customer service experiences and develop training opportunities for internal staff and external partners.

"We are here to provide a service to Harris County families and residents, and we want to make sure that we are doing our due diligence to make life easier for our stakeholders," she said. "They must follow procedures, but it's our job to make sure our customers receive the best service that we can offer. It starts with listening to the feedback we've received, making changes where necessary and making sure everyone is on the same page, so I'm excited for this new chapter."

Despite her initial plans to become a clinical psychologist, Hurricane Katrina forced her family to evacuate to Jasper, TX, where Rodney found a home in finance. She earned a degree in accounting while attending Sam Houston State University and went on to work in several service-based roles, including nonprofits supporting the environment and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. She brings nearly 20 years of experience to her new role as senior director and a belief that her work is more than refining procedures. Rodney is helping build a more efficient operation that allows those who depend on HCDE's services and resources to get the support they need.

"My parents always instilled in us to make a difference wherever we could," she said, smiling. "Giving back and watching something you've poured into bloom is the reward. When I look at HCDE, I know this is exactly where I need to be because the impact our work has on the community and the people we serve will last generations."

Outside of work, Rodney enjoys cycling, traveling, enjoying all that nature has to offer and trying new restaurants with her husband. They have passed on the value of service to their daughters, the eldest currently working in risk management, and the younger earning a doctorate with aspirations to become a college professor. ★

FOX 26 SHOWCASES CHOICE PARTNERS FOOD SHOW WITH MULTIPLE INTERVIEWS DURING MORNING TELECAST

VIEW ARTICLE



The annual Choice Partners Child Nutrition and Product Expo routinely draws attention from local media partners and this year's 21st edition was no different.

Fox 26 Houston Reporter Angie Rodriguez was onsite on Oct. 22 at the Humble Civic Center, where she not only spoke with Senior Director Jeff Drury and Assistant Director Trisha Prestigiacomo, but highlighted the many vendors and food offerings that make the show one of the industry's best.

Rodriguez went live three times, including the first at 9:30 a.m. during the station's "Houston's Morning Show 9AM." She interviewed both Drury and Prestigiacomo and discussed the benefits of vendors getting real-time feedback on products and samples from both students and school district nutrition representatives. Decisions made at the food show could help craft breakfast, lunch and snack choices as soon as next school year.

She welcomed Prestigiacomo back at 10:30 a.m. during "Houston Live & Local" before Drury joined for one final extended interview at 11 a.m. The trio even enjoyed some friendly banter with studio anchor Melissa Wilson on the expansive food offerings. ★

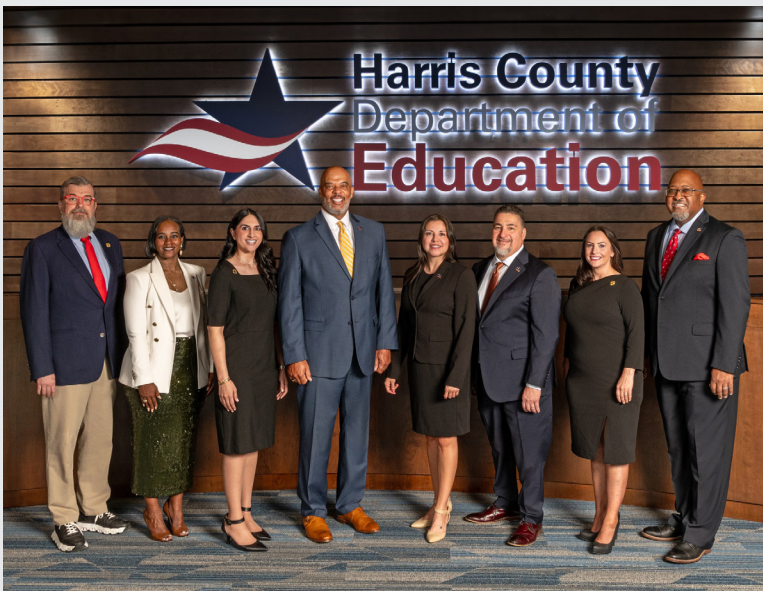
FOX 26
HOUSTON

HCDE BOARD UNANIMOUSLY APPROVES FISCAL YEAR 2026-27 TAX RATE

The Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Board of Trustees unanimously approved a tax rate of \$0.004797 per \$100 of assessed property value for Fiscal Year 2026-27 during its Oct. 21 regular board meeting, continuing a longstanding commitment to fiscal responsibility and taxpayer value.

The approved rate represents a slight decrease from last year's tax rate of \$0.004798, marking the 14th consecutive year HCDE has lowered its tax rate. Since 2012-13, HCDE has reduced its tax rate by 27.5% while continuing to provide educational services that benefit students, families and school districts throughout Harris County.

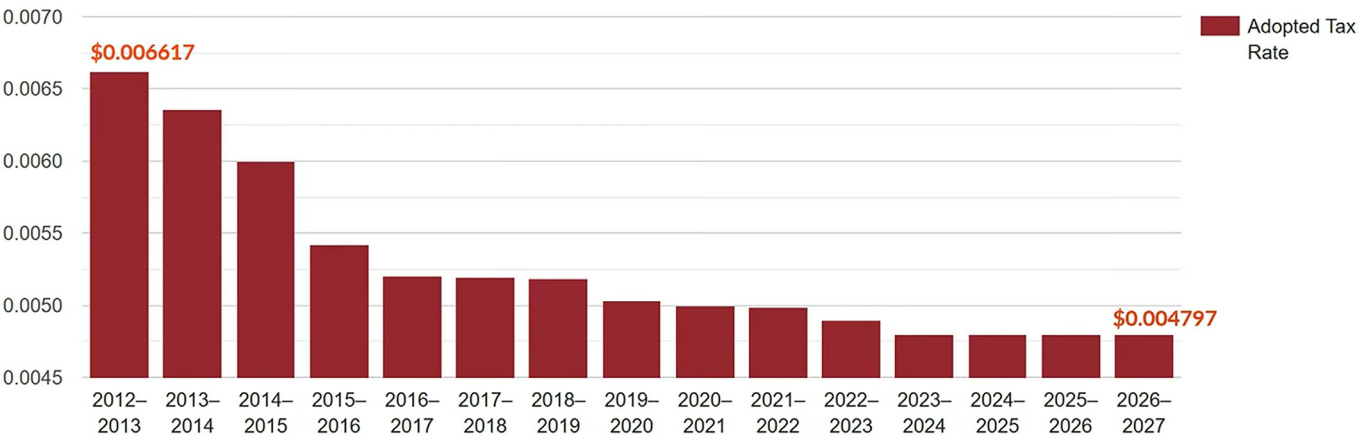
Following a public hearing, trustees voted 6-0 to adopt the tax rate.



14 Years of Tax Rate Decreases

Source: HCDE

HCDE Tax Rate by Tax Year (per \$100 valuation)



Tax Rate Decreased by 27.5%



The approved tax rate remains below both the no-new-revenue tax rate of \$0.004805 and the voter approval tax rate of \$0.005062, reflecting HCDE's continued focus on responsible stewardship of public funds.

HCDE's tax rate remains well below the statutory maximum rate of \$0.01 per \$100 assessed property value. Through efficient operations and strategic partnerships, HCDE supports 25 school districts and provides services including specialized schools, school-based therapy services, Head Start, adult education and after-school programs. ★



COMMUNITY GATHERS TO STRENGTHEN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT TOWNHALL

More than 125 community members gathered on Oct. 20 for the inaugural “A Civil Dialogue: Your Role in Our Democracy” townhall event, co-hosted by the Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) Civic Engagement team and Civil Dialogues, a local non-profit organization, in anticipation of the November election.

The nonpartisan event began with a panel discussion featuring former Big Brothers Big Sisters Lone Star CEO and President Pierce Bush, Houston Voting Initiative Founder and President Annie Benifield, Greater Houston Partnership Public Policy

Manager Scout Odegard, and League of Women Voters Houston President Priscila True.

Smaller table discussions followed among the community members and high school students for networking and strategic discussions.

HCDE partnered with Civil Dialogues, which was founded by Jean Becker (former Chief of Staff to President George HW Bush) and Linda Lorelle (former journalist for Houston’s KPRC Channel 2). ★

SUPT. COLBERT REPRESENTS HCDE IN SUPPORTING AREA DISTRICT, AGENCY GOLF TOURNAMENTS

Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and Executive Leadership Team members represented the Department and Education Foundation of Harris County at three golf tournaments this week. The partnerships with area school districts and local agencies help HCDE best serve Harris County students and families.

Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz and assistant superintendents Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers placed second at the Spring ISD Education Foundation Charity Golf Tournament on Oct. 19. Colbert then joined Parker and Rodgers on Oct. 22 at the Aldine ISD Education Foundation Donaldson Golf Tournament and Oct. 23 at the inaugural Greater Northside Chamber of Commerce Golf Tournament. ★



UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER

3

Election Day

13

2nd Annual EFHC Topgolf Tournament

18

Board Meeting

26-27

Thanksgiving Break (HCDE Closed)

DECEMBER

3

CASE for Kids' Day Entrepreneurship Winter Market

9

Holiday Reception – NPO

16

Holiday Reception – Irvington

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DYNAMIC STRATEGY: EXCEPTIONAL PROGRAMS



James Colbert, Jr.
Superintendent

► I have always called Choice Partners our “Excalibur” here at HCDE as the national purchasing cooperative allows us to best serve Harris County students and families while being fiscally responsible. Its reach goes well beyond the county and greater Houston of course – Choice Partners works with vendors, members and partners nationwide.

Which is why a Choice Partners event such as the annual Nutrition and Product Expo draws so many people. More than 150 vendors were on hand showcasing meal options, snacks and the latest drinks trending in the world of school nutrition. Area school district representatives attended, networking with vendors and crafting future school menus, but so did more than 200 students, who were also able to taste-test and provide feedback in real time. For vendors, hearing from both sides is vital. I always enjoy walking around and seeing the faces of the students light up when they find a treat they love. Nutrition is part of the overall education experience so I’m proud of how Choice Partners is able to bring everyone together under the same roof to move school nutrition forward.

The event even drew media coverage – thank you to Fox 26 Houston’s Angie Rodriguez for stopping by the expo and bringing HCDE to the station’s audience during the morning. These partnerships allow us to best support Harris County students and families, so I thank each one in recognizing the work HCDE is doing. ★