

FORTIS ACADEMY GRAD JERRY GARZA JOINS #TEAMHCDE

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THE CONNECTOR

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

NATIONAL PHYSICAL THERAPY MONTH: JENNIFER FARMER WORKS EVERY DAY TO IMPACT STUDENTS

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FAMILIES CELEBRATE THE 'MAGIC OF EARLY LEARNING' AT HEAD START AWARENESS EVENT

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OF NOTE

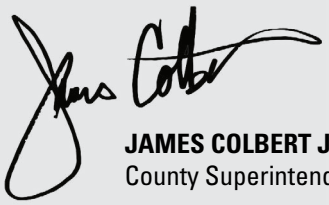
Superintendent James Colbert Jr. joins Education Foundation Director Trina Silva, left, and Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz at the Sheldon Independent School District State of the District luncheon on Oct 28.

HCDE IS A TOP WORKPLACE FOR MANY REASONS. Employees cite our culture and climate as key reasons they recommend the organization to friends and family who are looking for jobs. But employees are not the only people who see the special nature of HCDE. Our former students sometimes see us as a catalyst to their future too.

This week, we meet Jerry Garza, the new parking attendant at the Irvington building. But Jerry is not just a new HCDE employee. He is the fifth student from Fortis Academy to find employment after graduation with HCDE. It was gratifying to read about how Jerry credits HCDE with giving him a new perspective on his future. I loved reading about how HCDE is demonstrating our commitment to students and showing we mean what we say when we tell students we believe in them. And seeing how that commitment translates to students believing in themselves and seeing their future as bright with possibilities is awesome. This is just one more example of how HCDE is truly Unrivaled in all we do!

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by meetings with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. On Tuesday, I met with staff for my standard weekly meetings. Wednesday, I attended the Sheldon ISD State of the District Luncheon. I started the day Thursday fulfilling my duties as Vice Chair of the UIL State Executive Committee followed by standing meetings and the Head Start Awareness event. Today, I met with staff at my NPO office.

Enjoy the Halloween weekend.



JAMES COLBERT JR.
County Superintendent



HCDE Parking Attendant Jerry Garza helps keep staff and visitor vehicles safe, secures the building at the end of the day and directs traffic out of the garage during major events.

FORTIS ACADEMY

HCDE GIVES FORTIS ACADEMY STUDENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GROW AFTER GRADUATION

Six months ago, Jerry Garza received his high school diploma a year early, surrounded by friends and family who once questioned if he would ever reach the milestone. Today, he puts on a Harris County Department of Education shirt and clips on his employee badge to work as a parking attendant for the same organization that helped him see a future beyond his past.

What might seem like an ordinary first job to many means something much bigger to Garza. It's "a blessing" - a chance to build a life for himself, prove that change is possible and become the person even he once struggled to imagine.

He's also the latest of five Fortis Academy graduates to join #TeamHCDE since 2020 after crossing the stage, reinforcing the Department's commitment to its students.

"This place has lifted my whole personality and whole demeanor as a person," he explained. "It's given me another point of view on life and proven to me that no matter my background or mistake, that doesn't define me."

That's a message he first heard as a student at Fortis Academy. Aldine Independent School District staff referred Garza to the campus as an eighth-grader because of his challenges with drugs and alcohol, but what he found was more than a classroom. Through the connections he built with Fortis administrators and staff, Garza found people who not only supported him on his sobriety journey but also helped him recognize his own potential. He fully embraced the campus's rehabilitation methods, participating in the culinary arts program, writing poems through the Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say partnership and eventually becoming a mentor for incoming students.

"Jerry showed so much perseverance and commitment throughout his time at Fortis, which is vital in a recovery journey," Principal Travita Godfrey said. "He worked two jobs through school and managed to graduate a year early, which is a testament to his focus. When Jerry sets a goal, no matter the obstacle, he will pivot to reach it. Seeing him blossom as a full-time employee is amazing! He's learning so much and is surrounded by the guys on the Facilities team who can be



Facilities staff like Adrian Ortiz, right, have been instrumental in helping Garza learn about his new role and serve as a positive influence.

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Garza graduated a year early from Fortis Academy in May. He fully embraced the campus's rehabilitation methods and has become an inspiration and mentor for incoming students across HCDE campuses.

positive influences for him. I know this is only the beginning of his success."

Since joining #TeamHCDE in June, Garza has become a valuable member of Facilities. He helps keep staff and visitor vehicles safe, secures the building at the end of the day and pitches in with event setup and various facility needs. All the while, he has become more confident in himself and his role within the Department.

"Jerry has really come out of his shell and become a great addition to our team," said Julie Carson, the operations coordinator and Garza's immediate supervisor. "He may be right out of high school, but he takes his job seriously. I can leave and know that he's going to lock up the building correctly and everything will be alright."

Garza is not the first Fortis Academy graduate to find a professional foothold at HCDE. In 2020, Karen Espinosa worked in Records Management as a clerk before starting her family, and in 2022, Julian Guerrero worked as a technician before transitioning to university classes. Tristan Sowders and Lyric Lawrence spent the past year working as culinary assistants at Fortis before moving out of state and going back to Lamar University, respectively.

Each graduate found an opportunity to keep moving forward with support from the same organization that helped them navigate challenges in school. Whether pursuing college, exploring a career or stepping into another full-time role, their position on #TeamHCDE serves as a reminder that our commitment to Harris County students doesn't end at graduation.



Lyric Lawrence, second from left, and Tristan Sowders, right, are two of five Fortis graduates to have found a professional foothold on #TeamHCDE.

"Hiring our own students shows that we are not lying when we say, 'I see something in you,'" Carson said. "When these kids graduate, they need to know that they still have a place at HCDE, no matter what. They might leave our campuses, but they will never be without our support should they need it."

Added Garza: "Since I started working here, I've learned how to be more patient, to never give up on myself and that there is still love and generosity in the world. This job fuels my fire to keep pushing for more in my life. Every day I watch people who enjoy their job come to work and want to help kids, and I want to do that too."

Garza is already paying it forward. He joined Fortis Academy's Recovery Coach Lakesha Hemphill at Highpoint School to share his story with adjudicated youth facing similar challenges as part of Red Ribbon Week. By speaking openly about his past, the choices that shaped his journey and the help that made a difference, Garza hopes students will recognize they have options and that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

"I don't want these kids to think I'm better than them, because I'm not," he explained. "I want them to see that playing with drugs or messing around with gang members and guns is just propaganda that will lead them to the grave or prison. I want them to know there's a way out of that life if they ask for help. Fortis helped me see that, HCDE continues to help me escape that life, and I'm forever grateful."

What's next? Garza is considering joining the Coast Guard or continuing his education, with a long-term goal of supporting himself and providing for the family he hopes to start one day. Until then, when you enter the parking garage at HCDE's Irvington location, roll down your window and tell Jerry, "Hello."

NATIONAL PHYSICAL THERAPY MONTH



JENNIFER FARMER EMPOWERS STUDENTS THROUGH HEALING, MOVEMENT

No two days are the same for Jennifer Farmer, a physical therapist with Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), but each is truly valued by the students she serves in Spring Branch Independent School District.

In observance of National Physical Therapy Month, celebrated every October, HCDE recognizes and appreciates the many physical therapists and physical therapist assistants in its School-Based Therapy Division. These professionals are vital in supporting students with disabilities and assisting their classroom mobility and function.

School-Based Therapy currently serves nearly 1,800 students for the 2025-2026 fiscal year. It includes 30 physical therapists and five physical therapy assistants on staff.

Among them are Farmer, who shapes her motivation in helping students overcome challenges and making their school experience like others.

Who or what drew you into the field of physical therapy?

Gosh, you're going way back in time. So, I always wanted to do something in the medical field and always thought either medical school, PT (physical therapy) school or PA (physician assistant) school.

In college, you have to get volunteer hours, so I went and saw lots of physical therapy and in talking to those therapists, I knew that was what I wanted to do. And I grew up with an aunt that was disabled and who had had therapy as a child.

What is it about physical therapy, especially within the education setting where students may be as young as three years old?

It's funny – I always have to explain to people who think, 'You're doing therapy in school? I can get it there?' It's more about access.

It's making sure they can physically get in the building, around the building and everywhere they have to go. It's making sure they have the right equipment, like in their classroom.

If they're in a wheelchair, can it fit at their desk? If they're walking and need something to walk with, can they get onto the playground?

A lot of times, people don't realize all these kids can do. But yes, he or she can stand up. He or she can walk.

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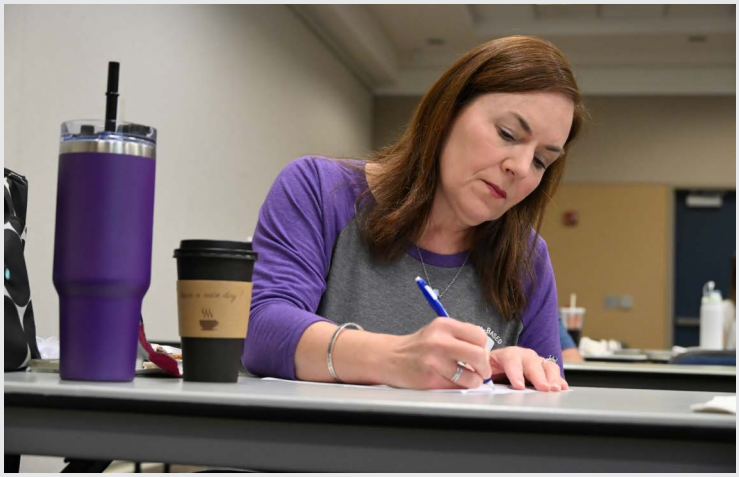
What about working with the campus staff and teachers in the classrooms?

That's the most eye-opening thing because these teachers are doing so much. They're helping as nurses, therapists, counselors – they have to also know how to safely move the kid if the kid can't move himself or herself. We help them learn how to put students in different pieces of equipment.

So why not the clinical route?

I'd heard about therapy in education for years and spent time talking with more therapists that worked in schools. They kept telling my how much they liked it. So, when some opportunities came up to interview, I tried it.

And I like it. My mom was a teacher and I thought about being a teacher before medical and PT, and so this is really cool because you're in that setting, you're in that education teacher world, but you're doing the therapy that's helping the teacher.



Often, I think about, oh, my day – what did I get to do today? I went to PE. I went to recess because for physical therapy that's where I catch a lot of kids for movement. Can they get on the playground? Are they just sitting on the bench or did they try to go use the slide?

It's fun because you get to really help them participate in their full school day.

How can you plan when no two days are the same?

You work with the staff to learn what everyone's daily schedules are. So, if a teacher says the best time for this student to stand is when we're doing calendar, then I try to get there early in the morning when that is going on. And if another student has recess or PE at a certain time of the day, I'm catching them at that time.

I'm going between campuses and different schedules, so lots of communication with teachers.

It can vary. If there are multiple kids at one campus, you may stay there for most of the day. Or if you just have one, you may be going to three or five different places in a day

What's your why and motivates you up every day?

Basically, helping the kids be able to do something that might not be easy for them, but to make it easier and to also show the staff, 'Hey, this kiddo can do this.'

For example, there's one little girl who transferred into the district and she comes in a wheelchair but can walk. So just to get her to be able to do more things. That's why I do what I do.



STUDENTS, FAMILIES HELP 'BRING STORYBOOKS TO LIFE' AT HEAD START AWARENESS EVENT

Literature is a place where children's imagination starts to develop. What seems like a simple story can teach young learners to dream for a better life, dare to do something audacious and build a vocabulary that opens new doors. In observance of Head Start Awareness Month, celebrated annually in October, staff welcomed families and students to a special event exploring the power of literacy, creativity and family engagement in early childhood education.

"Bringing Storybooks to Life" featured books like, Pete the Cat: Rocking in my School Shoes, Magic School Bus: Inside the Human Body and One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish Blue Fish. Staff used colorful characters and exciting adventures to build academic skills like reading comprehension, letter knowledge and pattern recognition within 3- to 5-year-olds. Meanwhile, parents received information about Head Start services like wellness checks, nutritional supplements and various comprehensive services offered to families.

Unique educational experiences align with Head Start's goal to support children from birth to age 5 as they develop language, social-emotional and early learning skills. By bringing play into learning and involving families to be part of the experience, the division helps children build confidence, curiosity and the foundational skills needed for a successful future.

VIEW VIDEO







VIEW VIDEO

TRENT MANUEL'S LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY IS ROOTED IN STUDENT SUCCESS



When the music starts to play over the loudspeaker, teachers and students come out of their classrooms with smiles on their faces and sounds of cheerful applause fill the halls at Academic and Behavior School East. It can only mean one thing – a student is returning to his or her home campus. That moment is what every teacher is advocating for, and every student on campus is working toward.

"I'm excited that we get to give these kids that experience to celebrate their success, but I also want them to realize their progress won't always be visible," ABS East Principal Trent Manuel explained. "My mother used to say, 'Tough trees don't grow with ease,' and that's something I want our kids to understand. The wind may blow, but if you're rooted and grounded in what you do, and seeking opportunities to make yourself better, it's movement."

Manuel grew up in south central Louisiana watching his mother dedicate more than 30 years to the public school system serving special education students. Now in his first principalship, he draws on her example of leading with love, passion and a commitment to helping students thrive, no matter the challenge.

In honor of National Principals Month, the Communications and Creative Services team sat down with Manuel to learn more about his career journey from physical therapy to education, the school culture he's working to develop and overall vision for the future of ABS East.

CASE FOR KIDS CONNECTS WITH STEM ENTHUSIASTS AT RECENT COMMUNITY EVENTS

In recent weeks, HCDE's Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids staff have connected with science enthusiasts at community events and showcased the division's investment to support Harris County students.

The division had an exhibition booth on Oct. 17 at the Energy Day 2026 Festival at Sam Houston Park in downtown. The outdoor event allowed students and fellow attendees to explore hands-on activities in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). CASE for Kids showcased the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge and also teamed with Region 13 Education Service Center at its booth for an activity with the new Sphero Indi coding robot.

In addition, students from RYSS Middle School (Aldine Independent School District), Tice Elementary School (Galena Park ISD) and Lyons Elementary School (Houston ISD) received gift cards for their top finishes at the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge in April.

Oct. 24, CASE for Kids collaborated with Rice University's Center



for STEM Engagement for its Houston Code Jam. The one-day event featured 10 interactive computer science stations for students and families to explore coding and digital skills, among them creating and games through coding concepts and exploring micro:bit, the Microsoft web-based code editor.





FORTIS ACADEMY GETS 'SWEET ON READING' FOR ABS EAST STUDENTS

As a way to connect with their fellow Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) special school, Fortis Academy students and staff dressed in their Halloween costumes and traveled over to Academic and Behavior School (ABS) East to read to classes and enjoy some holiday sweet treats. Connections like these highlight HCDE's family-like atmosphere where students and staff routinely pour into their counterparts. Other examples include HCDE staff serving as SuperMENtors at Head Start centers and students coming together to compete in the annual Chess Tournament.



BUSINESS SERVICES RETURNS 'TRUNK OR TREAT' EVENT TO COMPTON HEAD START STUDENTS

Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Business Services team brought plenty of sweet treats and Halloween spirit to Compton Head Start students, who dressed as their favorite superheroes, ghosts and comic book characters for the "Trunk of Treat" event on Oct. 30. The division has been connected to Compton for years now, spanning back more than a decade through Thanksgiving meal donations, SuperMENtors and even holiday visits in December.



VIEW PHOTO GALLERY



UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER

3
Election Day

13
2nd Annual EFHC Topgolf Tournament

18
Board Meeting

26-27
Thanksgiving Break (HCDE Closed)

DECEMBER

5
CASE for Kids' Day Entrepreneurship Winter Market

9
Holiday Reception – NPO

16
Holiday Reception – Irvington

BOARD OF TRUSTEES



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Board President



Dr. Erica Davis
1st Vice President



Dr. John McGee
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Position 1, Precinct 2



Silky Joshi-Malik
Position 7, At-Large

DYNAMIC STRATEGY: HIGH-QUALITY STAFF





James Colbert, Jr.
Superintendent

Part of what makes Harris County Department of Education a "destination" rather than a stop along the journey is the value we place on our staff members and the care we place on everyone who walks through the doors of our buildings and campuses. When you treat everyone like they're valued, they will show up every day with a purpose to help students of all ages and their families here in Harris County.

This week is no better example of that. Jerry Garza is the latest Fortis graduate now working with HCDE. Part of our messaging to families when their children come to one of our Special Schools is the "village" they join that will look out for their sons and daughters even after they cross the stage or return to their home campus. We succeed when our students succeed. So, I find great joy in waving to Garza when I see him in the parking garage or around the Irvington Building.

Jennifer Farmer, a physical therapist working in Spring Branch ISD, is an example of HCDE impacting working with families across Harris County who may not even know our organization exists, but their children reap the benefits every day in the classroom and that's what matters most. Thank you to all our therapists working across greater Houston – we may only see them a handful of times a year at Convocation or professional development training, but they represent HCDE and all the good we aim to do for families.