

November Employee of the Month Cornell Stallworth Serves and Uplifts

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THE CONNECTOR

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

#TEAMHCDE EDUCATORS PRIORITIZE WELL-BEING AT 'BE SELFISH' WORKSHOP

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TRUSTEES DAVIS, JOSHI-MALIK RE-ELECTED TO HCDE BOARD IN NOVEMBER ELECTION

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OF NOTE

Superintendent Colbert and assistant superintendents Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers participated in the Sheldon ISD Education Foundation Legacy Golf Tournament on Nov. 4.

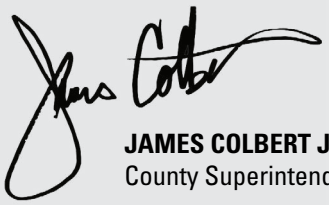
One of the things I appreciate most about HCDE is that our impact is only possible because of strong leadership and a shared commitment to public service. That commitment was reaffirmed this week as we recognized the re-election of HCDE trustees Dr. Erica Davis and Silky Joshi-Malik. I congratulate both trustees on earning the continued trust of Harris County voters and thank them for their dedication.

Serving as an elected trustee is not always easy. It requires balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders while maintaining a focus on educational outcomes and responsible stewardship of public resources. I am grateful for the dedication of our board members. Their service provides stability, experience and leadership as HCDE continues to be a strong partner to the students, educators and communities of Harris County.

HCDE's success has always been rooted in people who are committed to making a difference. Our trustees, staff and district partners each play a vital role in helping us identify challenges, develop solutions and deliver services that make a difference for students and educators across Harris County. This week, we recognize Cornell Stallworth as HCDE's November Employee of the Month. Cornell's journey from Navy veteran to foster parent, adoptive father and educator reflects the heart of HCDE's mission. His belief in building relationships with students and helping them see their own potential is making a lasting impact at ABS West. As Cornell's story reminds us, some of the most important outcomes in education will never appear on a dashboard or report. They are found in the relationships that help students believe in themselves and succeed long after they leave our classrooms.

I began the week with UIL SEC meetings and standing meetings on Monday. On Tuesday, I met with the ELT and Leadership Team, spent time with a mentee and attended several standing meetings. On Wednesday, I enjoyed connecting with education and community partners at the Sheldon ISD Golf Tournament. On Thursday, I participated in the agenda review meeting for the November board meeting. On Friday, I attended the Aldine State of the District Breakfast before finishing the day at Irvington with meetings and discussions with staff.

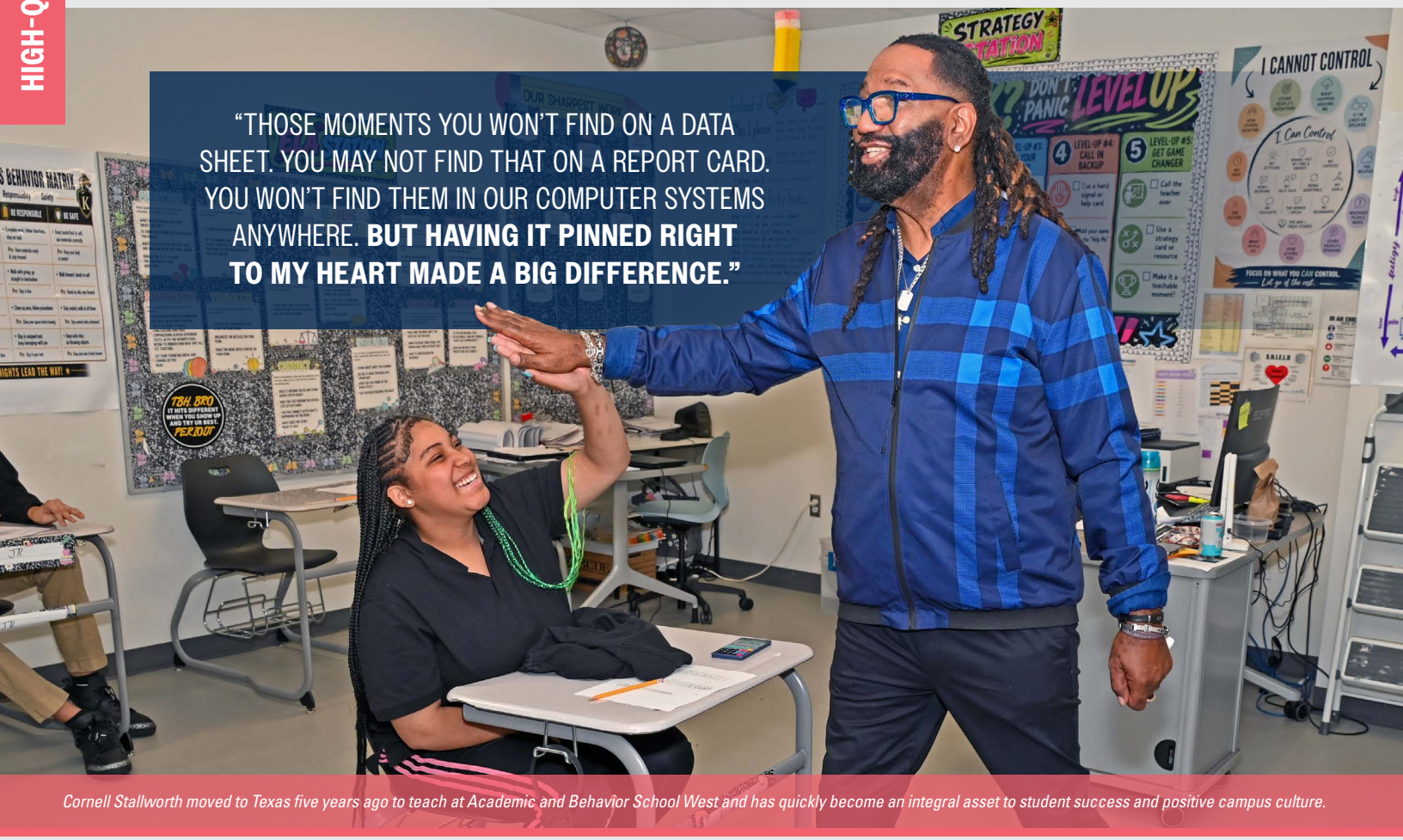
Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT JR.
County Superintendent

SUCCESS FOR ABS WEST COMMUNITY

CORNELL STALLWORTH USES RELATIONSHIPS TO CULTIVATE GROWTH



"THOSE MOMENTS YOU WON'T FIND ON A DATA SHEET. YOU MAY NOT FIND THAT ON A REPORT CARD. YOU WON'T FIND THEM IN OUR COMPUTER SYSTEMS ANYWHERE. **BUT HAVING IT PINNED RIGHT TO MY HEART MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE."**

Cornell Stallworth moved to Texas five years ago to teach at Academic and Behavior School West and has quickly become an integral asset to student success and positive campus culture.

ORIGINALLY FROM MILWAUKEE, CORNELL STALLWORTH FOUND HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND ITS SPECIAL SCHOOLS WHILE RESEARCHING ON THE INTERNET.

The opportunity came a lot faster than he originally thought. A special education teacher, Stallworth was relocating and wanted to work with students like the ones being served as HCDE's two Academic and Behaviors Schools. He was drawn to ABS West in his research.

"That was five years ago," said Stallworth, HCDE's November Employee of the Month. "I knew I wanted to live in Houston, wanted to stay at a behavior campus and this one stuck out. (ABS West) felt like an environment I wanted to work in."

An email inquiry to former ABS West Principal Victor Keys was quickly returned, and after sending his resume and references, Stallworth found himself on the phone the same day interviewing with Dr. Keys.

The interview led to mutual interest and an offer.

"He said I'd be a great fit, and that was the end of it," said Stallworth, who was also looking for a change after his mother passed away. "So, I packed up and here I am."

Milwaukee's loss is Houston's gain – Stallworth has become an integral member of the HCDE and ABS West teams.

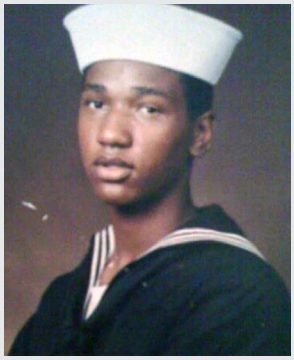
Now among three lead teachers who oversee campus culture and climate at ABS West, Stallworth helps champion students and staff with activities and initiatives throughout the year. He also established a staff choir, which not only performs at ABS West ceremonies and programs but was featured at HCDE's staff-wide Celebration of Excellence in May.

"He's a guy who looks to unite people and I did see that early on," said Principal Jatata Hutton, who took over ABS in June 2023. "He likes to celebrate and he likes for people to feel valued and be seen."

Added fellow lead teacher Torrey Zimmer: "One thing I admire so much about Mr. Stallworth is how much time, dedication and effort he puts into any little thing he does. He always says he kind of 'bougie' too and he is because everything has to be fabulous."

Stallworth's journey began as an ambitious teenager with big dreams. After graduating high school a year early, he joined the U.S. Navy at 17 years old and served four years. Across three deployments, Stallworth traveled the world, including ports of call in Africa and Asia. He was in Seoul, South Korea during the 1988 Summer Olympics and deployed on the U.S.S. Nimitz – the first

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Stallworth joined the U.S. Navy at 17 years old, serving four years and three deployments that took him all over the world.

"THOSE KIDS ARE THE REASON WHY I'M HERE RIGHT NOW. WE'RE NOT JUST TEACHING THEM – WE'RE LEARNING FROM THEM."

nuclear-powered aircraft carrier of its ship class.

"We're talking about experiences some people will never have and places you only hear about on the news," he said. "But while that experience was amazing, I was homesick. I was away from my family so much and we're close knit. It was mentally taxing."

Back home, Stallworth had his family but still no clear path. He did cut hair – first, his male friends and then female clients. That opened a door to cosmetology school, where he graduated in 1997 and opened three salons over the next three years. All three remained open until he moved to Houston five years ago.

It was listening to stories from clients – mothers struggling to make ends meet, social workers fretting over child placements and young ladies in and out of foster care – that opened his heart to his next venture.

Stallworth became a foster parent, specifically fostering teenage African American boys.

"Nobody really wanted the older boys," he said. "Not only was it great for them, but it was great for me."

More than 400,000 children are in foster care on any given day in the United States. Black children make up 25% of foster care population according to the Child Welfare League of America, while boys represent 60% of foster care placement according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey.

It wasn't easy. There were so many appointments to make and court appearances to attend. There was mischievous behavior.

But Stallworth and many of the boys built tight bonds and a



Among Stallworth's initiatives at ABS West was helping create a staff choir. The group has performed at campus functions and even showcased its talent at Harris County Department of Education's Celebration of Excellence in May.

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stable home. He's fostered more than 50 children and even became an adoptive parent to four boys. Two moved with him to Houston and are raising their families with 'Grandpa' Stallworth very involved.

"We had moments, but I still wouldn't change it for the world," Stallworth said. "Those kids are the reason why I'm here right now. It's because of them. It's because of what they taught me. We're not just teaching them – we're learning from them."

Stallworth has taken that mantra into the classroom and hallways at ABS West. He learns from those around him just as much as he's teaching and leading.

"Working here is all about relationships with your students, and Cornell is always encouraging us to build those relationships," science teacher Stephanie Lewis-Stamps said. "The kids all love him and respect him, and he goes the extra mile for his students."

The payoff doesn't come right away – patience is a key component for staff members at HCDE's campuses. But so is persistence. Stallworth had those traits from not his teaching experience, but as a foster care parent and adoptive father.

No matter the new teaching strategies and engaging activities, it comes down to relationships for Stallworth.

He remembers a former high school student – a "challenging" student – who one day asked Stallworth to help him learn to read. The two went to work and made progress before the student returned to his home district.

A month later, a teacher from his home school visited ABS West to deliver a note to Stallworth from the student. He thanked Stallworth for teaching him to read.

Five months later, Stallworth's phone rang at 6 a.m. It was the same student, and Stallworth immediately thought the worst.

Instead, the student wanted to meet him at ABS West. He was carrying his diploma to show Stallworth. He turned on his phone to show off home improvement projects and other work he'd been doing. He pointed to the car and told Stallworth he'd paid for it on his own. The two then walked to the car where Stallworth met the student's fiancé.

"There are no words big enough to express how I felt and how he felt at the same time," Stallworth said. "You may not see the results of your work right there in a classroom at that moment, you may think your words are falling on deaf ears, or you may think the student just may not be paying attention, but they are. They're listening, they're learning and they're absorbing exactly what you're teaching them.

"Not only was it a success for him, it was a success for me because I felt like, 'Wow, I did make a difference.' Those moments you won't find on a data sheet. You may not find that on a report card. You won't find them in our computer systems anywhere. But having it pinned right to my heart made a big difference."



Stallworth fostered more than 50 children, specifically teenage boys. He even adopted four, two who moved with him to Houston.





SPECIAL SCHOOLS ENCOURAGE HCDE EDUCATORS THAT IT'S OK TO 'BE SELFISH'

Educator turnover remains a persistent challenge across the United States as schools face new challenges inside and outside the classroom. According to the National Education Association, approximately 7-10% of K-12 public school teachers leave the profession annually, citing chronic stress and burnout. That's why Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Special Schools division is working to stop those feelings in their tracks.

On Nov. 3, division leaders launched the "Be Selfish" Workshop designed to encourage staff to prioritize their well-being, build resilience and develop practical strategies to manage stress. While selfish often carries negative connotations, the word served as an acronym for "socially and emotionally literate for individual sustainable health." The pilot program was created based on direct feedback from previous professional development days, during which employees sought information on de-escalation, emotional regulation and overall wellness.

"Our educators have been through a lot this year. We had several members who have lost loved ones or experienced some sort of trauma that may have even happened in the classroom," explained Dr. Margaret Patton, the Schools' director of curriculum and special services. "This workshop is an opportunity for them to heal. While that walk can be different for everyone, we have a plethora of options for them to explore, and we hope they can pull from some of these activities to improve their mental health."

Sixty educators, handpicked by their principals from HCDE campuses, kicked off the day with a mental health speed networking experience that explored stress-management techniques and self-care resources. Breakout sessions offered an opportunity to get your heart rate moving using rhythm and music, while others chose to relax and put on their creative hats in painting classes. Since mental wellness is also fueled by the food one consumes, nutritionists provided insight into quick, healthy meals that can be incorporated into daily meal preparation.

Members of the Center for Safe and Secure Schools, Information Technology and Head Start divisions led various sessions, while some members of the Schools division also showcased wellness activities that they currently use to improve their mental health.

By investing in the people who make HCDE campuses successful, Special Schools creates an environment where employee wellness is part of the conversation year-round, and workshops like "Be Selfish" are simply reminders that include additional wellness tips.



VIEW PHOTO GALLERY



TWO HCDE BOARD INCUMBENTS ELECTED DURING NOVEMBER ELECTION

With 623 voting centers reporting from the Nov. 3 election for two seats on the Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Board of Trustees, unofficial results indicate that Dr. Erica Davis was re-elected to Position 5, At-Large and Silky Joshi-Malik was re-elected to Position 7, At-Large.

For the Position 5, At-Large seat, incumbent **Dr. Erica Davis** received 850,302 votes (64.4%) over opponent Sartaj Bal, who drew 469,960 votes (35.6%). Davis, who currently serves as the Board First Vice President, will begin her second term of service to HCDE.

For the Position 7, At-Large seat, incumbent **Silky Joshi-Malik** received 825,317 votes (62.76%) over opponent Denise Dick, who drew 489,645 votes (37.24%). Malik has served on the HCDE Board of Trustees since April 2025, as she was unanimously appointed to fulfill the remainder of the term previously held by David Brown, who stepped down in January 2025. She will begin her first full term of service to HCDE.

Overall, early voting accounted for 75.4% of the ballots cast in each of the two races.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MAKES ELECTION DAY A TREAT

Election Day brought more than just ballots to HCDE's Irvington building. The Civic Engagement team celebrated the occasion by inviting employees to stop by the fourth-floor boardroom after casting their votes for an assortment of snacks, treats and stickers. Since HCDE served as a polling location on Nov. 3, the event offered a fun opportunity to encourage civic participation and remind employees that making their voices heard starts at the polls. Civic Engagement uses education and outreach to keep Harris County residents informed about democracy and recognize the impact their voices can have in shaping their communities.







TIDWELL HEAD START STUDENTS, COMMUNITY COME TOGETHER TO CELEBRATE RED RIBBON WEEK

It was a busy National Red Ribbon Week across Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Head Start centers and special schools. Celebrated annually Oct. 23-31, the week of observance is the nation's oldest and largest drug prevention awareness program.

At Tidwell Head Start, parents, community partners and SuperMENtors were involved in a number of activities and festivities during the week. The theme dress-up days for students and staff included Twin Day, Western Day and Book Character Day.

Volunteers read books to students among other fun activities, while also raising awareness and encouraging Harris County's youngest learners to make healthy, drug-free choices.

HCDE SUPPORTS SHELDON ISD AT ITS EDUCATION FOUNDATION GOLF TOURNAMENT

Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and Executive Leadership Team members Dr. CJ Rodgers and Jonathan Parker represented the Department and Education Foundation of Harris County at the Sheldon Legacy Golf Classic this week. Held Nov. 4 at the Clubs of Kingwood, the annual tournament supports Sheldon Independent School District and its Education Foundation.





ALDINE
Independent School District

DEPARTMENT LEADERSHIP ATTEND ALDINE ISD STATE OF THE DISTRICT BREAKFAST

Harris County Department of Education supported Aldine Independent School District at its annual State of the District event, with Department leadership networking with community partners while hearing Aldine's academic progress and key initiatives. HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr., Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment Dr. CJ Rodgers and Senior Director of the Center for Educator Success Andrea Seagraves attended the breakfast.

HCDE NEW FACES: OCTOBER

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for October! Eighteen new faces have joined our Adult Education, CASE for Kids, Head Start, Marketing & Client Engagement and Special Schools divisions.



KENDRICK DIXON
ABS East



ILLIANA GONZALEZ
Marketing & Client Engagement



HANNAH LINDLEY
School-Based Therapy Services



TAMESHA MITCHELL
Head Start



DESTINEE DAVIS
Head Start



DEDRIC HAWKINS
ABS East



RIDA KALEEM
CASE for Kids



SAVANNAH KENNERSON
Head Start



AMBER LLOYD
Head Start



SALATHIEL OLGUIN
Head Start



ANA OUELLETTE
Head Start



JOANNA SELVARAYAN
School-Based Therapy Services



MAVO STEED
Head Start



TENESHA TREJO
ABS East



RANDALL VILLA
Adult Education



DANA HINTON
Adult Education



GARY BERRY
Adult Education



SIMONE MCMAHON
Adult Education

UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER

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



Richard Cantu
Board President



Dr. Erica Davis
1st Vice President



Dr. John McGee
2nd Vice President



Andrea Duhon
Position 2, Precinct 4



Eric Dick
Position 4, Precinct 3



Amy Hinojosa
Position 1, Precinct 2



Silky Joshi-Malik
Position 7, At-Large

DYNAMIC STRATEGY: HIGH-QUALITY STAFF





James Colbert, Jr.
Superintendent

As educators, the key part of our mission is supporting students and putting them in positions to be successful. But as we've learned – and our Special Schools division showcased this week at its 'Be Selfish' workshop – supporting teachers and those leading our campuses is just as vital.

Now the perfect storm is when an organization is blessed with someone equally passionate about uplifting both.

Harris County Department of Education is fortunate to have many who live that every day, including Cornell Stallworth, a lead teacher at Academic and Behavior School West and this month's Employee of the Month.

Stallworth is an integral part of supporting ABS West students, which goes back to his time as a foster parent. He fostered more than 50 young men, adopting four and building lasting bonds.

He also champions his colleagues – Stallworth helps lead climate and culture on campus. Among those initiatives is creating a staff choir. This ensemble brings together common interest among staff members and highlights just how talented #TeamHCDE. The choir performed at our annual Celebration of Excellence in May and needless to say, we were all thoroughly impressed.

Congratulations to Stallworth on the honor. He represents the high-quality staff that allows HCDE to best support Harris County students and their families.