

HCDE, Community Partners Tee off to Support Harris County Schools at Topgolf Tournament

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THE CONNECTOR

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

FORTIS STUDENTS SERVE UP HOLIDAY CHEER TO BOARD WITH THANKSGIVING MEAL

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OF NOTE

Supt. Colbert, assistant superintendents Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers, and Choice Partners Senior Director Jeff Drury at the Humble ISD Education Foundation Annual Golf Tournament on Nov. 18.

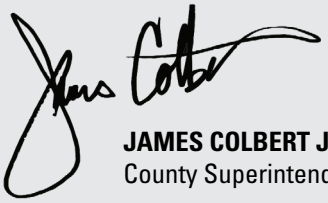
WHEN WE LAUNCHED the Partners in Education initiative with the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) a few years ago, our intention was to support programs and projects that districts cannot always fund. Throughout the last four years we have awarded more than 121 grants, totaling more than $1.2 million, to school districts in Harris County. These grants have funded a variety of projects including drones, classroom supplies and AEDs at football stadiums.

This week we see how those grant dollars are impacting students personally with the opening of the Waller Care Closet. Using funds from EFHC, Waller ISD was able to expand the space this program occupied, allowing it to offer even greater support for at-risk students. This new space allows the district to support more families with clothing, hygiene and other types of assistance. What a gratifying feeling to know that HCDE and the foundation are directly impacting students and their quality of life. And during the holiday season, gratitude is the attitude we should all have. So, this is especially relevant right now.

I started the week representing HCDE and the Education Foundation of Harris County at the Humble ISD and Klein ISD Golf Tournaments. On Wednesday, I attended the Thanksgiving feast prepared for the board and ELT by students at Fortis Academy. This was an extraordinary meal, prepared and served with skill. Thank you to the students and Chef from Fortis for taking time to bring Thanksgiving to HCDE a few days early!

On Wednesday, I also participated in the Governmental Relations committee and attended the regular Board Meeting. On Thursday, I met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives and today, we sent out a video informing staff of the Retention Incentive the Board approved last month. Thank you for your generosity with our employees. I know this little bit of extra cash will go a long way in making the holidays memorable for their families.

HCDE facilities will be closed next Thursday and Friday for Thanksgiving. Have a wonderful holiday with your family and friends.



JAMES COLBERT JR.
County Superintendent

EDUCATION FOUNDATION OF HARRIS COUNTY

STAFFORD HIGH SCHOOL WELDING STUDENTS USE EFHC FUNDING TO TURN RAW MATERIALS INTO REAL OPPORTUNITIES



The Stafford High School welding program was asked to create custom trophies for the 2nd Annual EFHC Topgolf Fundraiser on Nov. 13. Students spent weeks developing a design for four different pieces that were awarded to the tournament and auction winners.

A piece of metal might not look like much at first, but in the hands of a skilled craftsman, it can become something extraordinary.

For high school students enrolled in Stafford Municipal School District's welding program, that transformation is part of the learning experience. It's also what made their work stand out to the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC), which invited the students back for a second year to create custom trophies for its annual Topgolf Tournament on Nov. 13.

The students' creations were more than an opportunity to recognize tournament winners. They showcased the technical skills, creativity and confidence students develop daily through a program that has grown significantly with the support of EFHC. Last year, the foundation awarded Stafford High School a $10,000 grant to purchase two new welding machines, expanding the school's capacity to provide hands-on instruction and prepare students for potential careers in skilled trades.

"Our committee was looking for sustainable programs that focused on the need for tradesmen and women," Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva said. "We give what we can, where we can, but most importantly, we want to make sure that our money is going somewhere that will make a difference in the lives of students and educators, and we found that in the Stafford High School welding program."

Since receiving the funds, the program has expanded from six to eight workstations that students rotate through during class to practice various welding techniques, complete class projects and express their creativity through unique designs. The added machines and increased opportunities for practice opened the door for 20 students to earn nearly 40 combined American Welding Society certifications, which verify their ability to produce welds that meet specific industry codes and standards.

"I'm blessed beyond measure because without these machines and without the grant we received, we'd still be out there with six machines, and it would have been a lot harder for these kids," Stafford welding instructor Frank Alderete said.

Fina Cortez is one of those students who has thrived in the program. Looking to get her hands dirty and try something new, the junior enrolled in welding classes last year and quickly found herself drawn to the process of creating something from scratch.

"It was a very surreal moment when I had the welding gun in my hand for the first time," Cortez recalled. "I felt the power of the flame and knew how serious it was. I love learning and feel like every project we have brings a different experience."

CONTINUE ON P.5



EFHC awarded Stafford High School a $10,000 grant to purchase two new welding machines, which have helped expand the school's capacity to prepare students for careers in skilled trades.

The new machines completely changed how she approaches her work. Compared with the older equipment, Cortez said the newer models are lighter and easier to control, making her welding experience more comfortable and accessible as one of two female students in the class. They've also given her the confidence to turn a once unfamiliar skill into a career.

"I want to be a travel welder after high school and maybe even have my own welding company," she said excitedly. "I always want to try new things, and I feel like trying welding was the really big part of a new journey for me."

While Cortez didn't contribute to the EFHC Topgolf Tournament trophies this year, Torrin Calloway put his experience to work again. He also gravitated toward the program because he wanted a more hands-on learning experience and enjoyed the idea of turning a thought into something tangible.

VIEW VIDEO



Silva recently stopped by Stafford High School to meet with Welding Instructor Frank Alderete and students to discuss the trophy designs, check on the progress and view the machines purchased with grant money.

VIEW PHOTO GALLERY



"It's really cool that Stafford has a welding program because I know other schools don't have this opportunity and it's a pretty unique skill to have," Calloway explained. "My favorite part is making and building stuff. We've done projects like firepits, Christmas trees or even a pair of dice I made on my own. I still have those hanging in my room."

To create the EFHC trophies, Calloway worked closely with Alderete to learn how to operate the lab's CNC Plasma Cutter, a computer-controlled device that uses plasma to slice through scrap metal sheets at high speeds.

"I worked with Mr. Alderete to create the design, and we uploaded the file into the computer. Once you put the scrap metal in, it makes whatever you want," Calloway said.

This year, Silva invited the welding students who created the trophies to participate in the golf tournament, placing each on a team comprised of school district leaders and community partners across Harris County.

"I wanted to make sure the people who are participating, sponsoring or donating money could see where their money is actually going," Silva explained. "They loved getting to meet those students and connect with them while the kids worked on their soft skills. Who knows, maybe this opportunity could lead to a job for them in the future."

As the trophies found their way into the hands of tournament winners, the skills and opportunities behind their creation will stay with Stafford High School students long after the final stroke. With new equipment, hands-on experience and connections to community leaders, the teens gained more than the ability to turn metal into something meaningful. They discovered their potential and laid the foundation for futures they may not have imagined before. For EFHC, that's exactly what makes investing worthwhile.

EDUCATION FOUNDATION OF HARRIS COUNTY

TOPGOLF TOURNAMENT DRIVES A HOLE LOT OF GOOD FOR HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICTS



Education Foundation and Community Partnerships Director Trina Silva and HCDE Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz honored Anne Sung, a former teacher and Houston Independent School District trustee who now serves as chief policy and innovation officer for Harris County Precinct 4. A representative from Sung's office accepted the award on her behalf.

A little friendly competition can make a big difference!

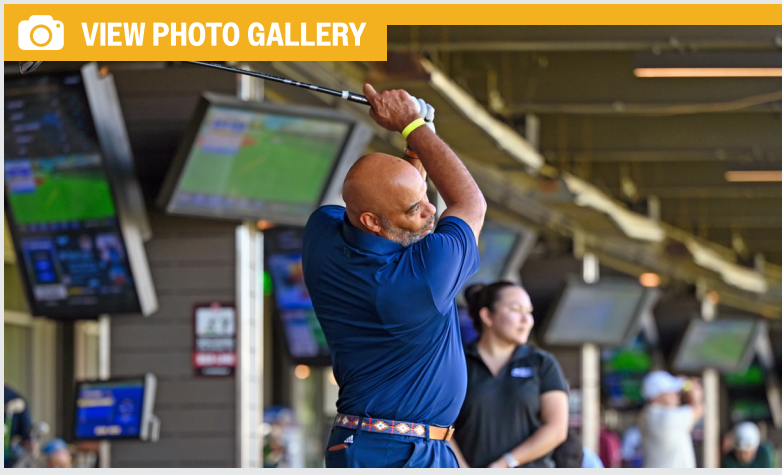
The Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) teed up a successful afternoon of giving back during its second annual Topgolf Tournament, bringing together nearly 100 school district representatives, community partners and business owners for networking, fun and a shared commitment to education.

The event raised more than $47,000, a 9% increase over last year, with proceeds helping fund programs, scholarships and grants that benefit students and educators across 25 Harris County school districts. Putting that number into perspective, the funds could sponsor five grants for innovative programs, provide 19 student scholarships or supply 475 Tools for Teachers vouchers to help educators stock their classrooms.

"I come from a small town in Mississippi, and I've seen how a lack of resources impacts literacy levels and test scores," said Stellar/Prosperity Bank Community Development Officer Demetrius Morgan explained. "Having the resources like those provided by the Education Foundation is vital to increasing test scores, morale among teachers and the positive overall experience of education, and we are really proud to be a part of that."

This year's tournament also honored Anne Sung, a former teacher and Houston Independent School District trustee who now serves as chief policy and innovation officer for Harris County Precinct 4. From the golf bays to the classroom, every swing helped move opportunities forward for the students and educators who make our community stronger.

VIEW PHOTO GALLERY



VIEW VIDEO





FORTIS ACADEMY WHIPS UP A HOLIDAY MEAL TO REMEMBER

The season of giving at HCDE featured a healthy helping of Cajun turkey and plenty of holiday cheer as Fortis Academy students stepped out of the classroom and into the kitchen, taking on the role of chefs ahead of the board meeting on Nov. 18. Under the guidance of new Culinary Instructor Labria Lanaux and Food Service Clerk Christopher Nix, students prepared a three-course meal for Superintendent James Colbert Jr., HCDE board members and members of the Executive Leadership Team.

Ana Lopez and Rhilee Love from Aldine Independent School District, and Justice Siwel from LaPorte ISD, pitched in to toss the cranberry crunch salad before plating the Cajun turkey with gravy. The main entrée also featured a four-cheese macaroni, parmesan green beans, mashed sweet potatoes and honey butter cornbread. Guests praised the culinary team's plate presentation before diving in for a taste and even asking for second helpings. The meal came to a perfect close with helpings of Biscoff pudding.



More than simply a festive meal, the luncheon gave students a chance to showcase their culinary talents, practice hospitality and experience the teamwork and attention to detail that go into serving a large group. For these young chefs, it was a chance to shine, share their hard work and give HCDE leaders a taste of what they're learning at Fortis Academy.

HCDE OFFICES, SCHOOLS TO CLOSE FOR THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

HCDE is taking a short break to enjoy the Thanksgiving season! Special Schools and Head Start campuses will enjoy an extended holiday starting Monday, Nov. 23, while HCDE administration offices will close on Thursday, Nov. 26. All classes will resume, and offices reopen on Monday, Nov. 30. View the HCDE Work/Holiday Calendar and Academic Calendar for more information.





HIGHPOINT SCHOOL EXPLORES FUTURE CAREERS, HISTORICAL DISCOVERIES AT RECENT EVENTS

Harris County students are exploring the past and future ahead of the Thanksgiving break. On Nov. 13, Highpoint School welcomed college recruiters, career professionals and business representatives for its annual College and Career Day, giving students a chance to explore opportunities beyond the classroom. Representatives from San Jacinto College and Texas A&M University offered insight about pursuing higher education, while local welding companies and City of Houston firefighters introduced students to hands-on careers in skilled trades and public service. Fortis Academy students were also invited, learning about various career paths and making connections with professionals who could help them take their next steps.

Career conversations were put on the shelf as students traveled around the world and through history during Highpoint School's History Expo on Nov. 18. Students brought countries like Vietnam, Argentina, Australia and Ethiopia to life through taste tests, interactive activities and interesting facts. Others took a closer look at the stories behind everyday innovations, sharing how inventions such as bicycles, airplanes, black boxes and telephones have shaped the modern world. Together, the events allowed students a fresh way to put their knowledge into action, discover new interests and connect classroom lessons to the world around them.

VIEW VIDEO





SPECIAL SCHOOLS TAKE CARE OF HCDE STUDENTS WITH TURKEY GIVEAWAYS

This holiday season, Harris County Department of Education's Special Schools came together to make Thanksgiving a little brighter for their students and families.

Highpoint School hosted its third annual turkey giveaway. The event welcomes families to drive through and pick up Thanksgiving meals donated by generous community partners.

At Fortis Academy, staff continued its tradition of decorating boxes packed with turkeys and holiday favorites. Students were then given the boxes for their families.

These giveaways and acts of service not only help students enjoy a holiday meal with their loved ones but also alleviate some of the financial stress associated with the busy holiday season. It's a reminder of how HCDE staff truly supports students inside and outside the classroom.





CASE FOR KIDS BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS CONNECTS CITY COUNCIL OFFICES FOR AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMMING DISCUSSION

To continue meaningful conversations among out-of-school time professionals, stakeholders, and decision makers, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids leadership met with Houston City Council representatives for food and fellowship.

Breakfast of Champions began in the summer as low-pressure, informal networking opportunities, with community partners and CASE for Kids addressing current trends and challenges. Representatives from the offices of councilmembers Mario Castillo, Amy Peck and Edward Pollard joined CASE for Kids Senior Director Dr. Lisa Caruthers and Programs Coordinator Brandi Nichols on Nov. 13. They were also joined by members of the United Way of Greater Houston and HCDE's Civic Engagement Team to discuss afterschool programming and its role for the well-being and safety of local communities.



HCDE
IN THE NEWS



VIEW VIDEO

HEAD START FEATURED IN TELEMUNDO HOUSTON'S ANNUAL 'POR NUESTROS NIÑOS' SEGMENT

Local station Telemundo Houston recently highlighted Head Start and the division's many services for Harris County's youngest learners as part of an annual special to connect the Spanish-speaking community with valuable resources.

Established in 2023, Telemundo's "Por Nuestros Niños" (For Our Children) features interviews with Spanish-speaking experts, nonprofit organizations and community resources that provide information and assistances to viewers.

Head Start Family Servies Provider Yuridia Maldonado represented Harris County Department of Education and spoke on the division's mission to not only serve the young students but support their families as well. The three-minute interview also highlighted the importance of developing social-emotional and early learning skills as a foundation.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM DONATES SPANISH 'YO VOTÉ' BOOKS TO PRECINCT 4 'LITTLE LIBRARIES'



In helping support Spanish-speaking families throughout the county, Harris County Department of Education's Civic Engagement Team recently partnered with Precinct 4 on a new initiative to promote literacy. Precinct Commissioner Lesley Briones and her office began installing "Little Libraries" over the summer and fall near precinct community center most visited by Spanish-speaking families. Office staff met with HCDE Civic Engagement coordinators Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero and Austen Ross-Yorko on Nov. 17 to pick up the books.

EFHC GRANT OPENS OPPORTUNITY FOR WALLER ISD CARE CLOSET EXPANSION

Thanks to grant funding from the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) for the 2026 fiscal year, Waller Independent School District and its initiative to best serve its at-risk student population welcomed new space and new opportunities.

"This grant has been an answered prayer," said Dr. Dean Guerra, Waller ISD's liaison for at-risk and highly mobile students. "This CARE Closet has been a dream for so long."

CARE Closet opened the doors to its new location in September, moving to the Waller ISD's former administration building and expanding its space to now include multiple rooms filled with clothing, shoes, school supplies, hygiene kits, food toys and other essential items. Before receiving the funding, CARE Closet was confined to a single classroom.

Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva joined Guerra, family CARE team member Adela Cornejo and Director of State and Federal Programs Kim Seiley on Nov. 6 for a tour of the facility. Waller ISD received a $10,000 EFHC Partners in Education grant, which provided funding for critical infrastructure including shelving, hangers, wagons and other items to allow for the expansion.

CARE Closet officially opened Sept. 24 and will open once a month throughout the school year. Any family with children enrolled in Waller ISD is eligible to receive clothing assistance and other items. Appointments are available for emergency situations.

Through two dates, the initiative has served 107 students and their families with more than 400 clothing items and 250 hygiene kits.

The CARE team is also personalizing the space for the students it serves and creating a community space. Liaisons are collecting student artwork, working with student artists to decorate the building, and also developing a garden outside the front entrance.

CARE Closet illustrates the impact of an EFHC grant, helping turn a long-held dream into a tangible resource that meets immediate needs, builds community and gives students the support they need to thrive.





UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER

26-27
Thanksgiving Break (HCDE Closed)

DECEMBER

5
CASE for Kids' Day Entrepreneurship Winter Market

14
Holiday Reception – NPO

16
Holiday Reception – Irvington
Board Meeting

24
Winter Break Starts

BOARD OF TRUSTEES



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DYNAMIC STRATEGY: EXCEPTIONAL PROGRAMS





James Colbert, Jr.
Superintendent

One of the most satisfying things you experience as an educator is seeing students thrive after being given the tools to be successful. That's why part of our mission is to see those gaps in education and provide solutions to best serve students and families across Harris County.

At our 2nd Annual Topgolf Tournament, which supports the Education Foundation of Harris County and its initiatives, we again were joined by students in the Stafford High School welding program. A $10,000 EFHC grant awarded to the school district was used to purchase two new welding machines, expanding the program to eight workstations and increasing student participation. To date, 20 students have earned nearly 40 American Welding Society certifications.

These talented students once again created trophies for our tournament in addition to pieces featured in the raffle. The craftsmanship was stellar on these one-of-a-kind pieces, showing just what young people are capable of when you give them the tools and opportunities.

They also joined us in the friendly competition, networking with community partners and hopefully making connections for their futures. Skilled trades are valuable, and Stafford's welding program is ensuring students are provided the hands-on instruction and preparation for potential careers.

Thank you again to all who contributed and supported our tournament. The event raised more than $47,000, an increase from 2025, with proceeds directly benefitting students and educators across our 25 Harris County school districts.