

Harris County Department of Education Blog Archive

January 1, 2021 - December 31, 2021



Harris County
Department of
Education

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1. 2021

1.1 January

2 New Trustees Davis, Brown Welcomed as Harris County Department of Education At-Large Board Members (2021-01-01 14:38)

Jan. 1, 2021 - Two at-large, Harris County Department of Education trustees were sworn into office Jan. 1, 2021. Erica Davis replaces Michael Wolfe for Position 5 At-Large and David W. Brown was elected for Don Sumner's Position 7 At-Large seat.

[1]



“We are all so excited you are here,” said Board President Eric Dick. “We are looking forward to you being a part of the team.”

“Now more than ever, HCDE’s services provide critical support for area school districts,” HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said. “As the districts’ needs change, we evolve to bring them the resources they need. During the pandemic and in its aftermath, we’re here for our education community.”

Davis currently serves as chief of staff for Precinct 1 Constable Alan Rosen. Brown is an educator who works for Change Happens, a nonprofit headquartered in the Third Ward that provides mentoring, drug prevention and other services to low-income youth.

The ceremony taking place in HCDE's Board Room at 6300 Irvington Blvd. was presided over by Judge Rabeea Sultan Collier.

The new board members will officially preside over HCDE Board matters at the Jan. 20 board meeting. January is official Board Appreciation Month, whereby the entire board of seven members will be recognized for its public service. Find out more about HCDE services and programs at [2]www.hcde-texas.org .

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/20210101_oath_0229.jpg
 2. <http://www.hcde-texas.org/>
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1.2 February

HCDE Announces 2021 Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awardees

(2021-02-01 10:43)

This year, more than 100,000 teens submitted their best art and writing in more than 100 regions across the country. A total of 8,874 works were submitted for adjudication in Harris County. From these submissions, over 2,400 creative teens from Harris County received regional honors, including Gold Key, Silver Key, Honorable Mention, and American Visions & Voices nominations from HCDE, including:

[1]



Landen Tran-Nguyen, 8th grade, League City Intermediate School ISD, "Power"

Gold Key Awards - Art, American Visions Nominees

- **Landen Tran-Nguyen**, 8th grade, League City Intermediate School, work title:

"Power"

- **Sofia Liu**, 11th grade, Kinkaid School, work title: "Undeclared: All Hands on Deck"
- **Zariah Parker**, 12th grade, Cypress Ridge High School, work title: "Help Me Out"
- **Ivan Payton**, 11th grade, Klein Collins High School, work title: "Digital Prey"
- **Katherine Xie**, 7th grade, Berry Miller Junior High School, work title: "You and Me"

Gold Key Awards - Writing, American Voices Nominees

- **Natalie Dinh**, 11th grade, Kerr High School, work title: "Mother"
- **Alena Haney**, 10th grade, Episcopal High School, work title: "Excerpt from "Hunt""
- **Sai Kaushik**, 10th grade, Glenda Dawson High School, work title: "Martin and Bobby"
- **Alex Watson**, 11th grade, Kinkaid School, work title: "Daddy Dearest"
- **Avani Yaltho**, 7th grade, Veritas Christian Academy, work title: "Paper Swan"



Ivan Payton, 11th grade, Klein Collins High School, Klein ISD, "Digital Prey"



Katherine Xie, 7th grade, Berry Miller Junior High School, Pearland ISD, "You and Me"



- Sofia Liu, 10th grade, Kinkaid School (private),
"Undeclared: All Hands on Deck"



• Zariah Parker, 12th grade, Cypress Ridge High School, Cy-Fair ISD, "Help Me Out"

An award signifies to parents, teachers, the community, and colleges that a student is an accomplished artist or writer and offers creative teens the opportunity to earn recognition, exhibition, publication, and up to \$10,000 in scholarships. Works that receive Gold Key recognition at the regional level are automatically submitted for national adjudication.

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, no regional in-person ceremonies, receptions or exhibitions will take place this year. A virtual gallery with the art and written works will be made public at a later date. Additionally, a virtual ceremony recognizing the regional awardees will take place in late March. For the full list of 2021 awardees, updates and more information about the regional awards, please visit [2]hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards.

The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards National Medalists will be announced on March 17, 2021. The national ceremony will be live-streamed on June 9.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/landen-tran-nguyen-league-city-intermediate-powerr-1.jpg>
 2. <http://hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards/>
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Veteran Teacher Delights in Students' Success (2021-02-12 16:01)

“Oh, I love to swim!” exclaimed Fortis Academy science teacher Lopamudra Gupta. “I think I used to be pretty good. I was on the cover of sports magazines.”

A Harris County Department of Education employee for nearly 18 years, Gupta first started working for the Department as a teacher at the former High Point School North before it was reimagined into what is now Fortis Academy.

[1]



Lopamudra Gupta poses for a photograph in her classroom at Fortis Academy, April 23, 2018.

“I was a competitive swimmer and I represented my state, [West Bengal, India], in the national games,” said Gupta. “I do have a competitive nature. Not in the sense that I would compete with somebody in a negative way, but for myself. I want to always do better than what I did before, and I think I bring that to teaching. I always want to do more for the kids.”

Her supervisor, Fortis Academy Principal Anthony Moten couldn't agree more.

"She's an exceptional teacher," he said. "She has an uncanny ability to connect with our kids and get them engaged in science. That's a yeoman's task, even with exceptional young students. For her to be able to have our kids gravitate towards that content and excel in it says a lot about her."

Gupta emphasizes that her love of teaching isn't so much about the subject matter as it is about how much she loves her students.

"It's not just about teaching science, it's about opening their minds," she said. "It's not that they cannot, it's that no one has taken them the time to show them the possibilities. Sometimes their family settings are not conducive to learning. Sometimes things happen at home, and I have to understand that biology is not the priority for them in that moment."

Moten describes Gupta as the "quintessential mother on campus" who shies away from attention.

"She could be our teacher of the year, but she doesn't want it. She doesn't want the attention," said Moten. "She's not in it for that. She's very unselfish. She's truly here for the kids."

As a testimony to her efforts, Gupta saw six of her students graduate in the midst of the pandemic last year.

"I was so ecstatic!" she exclaimed. "If they were at a traditional school, they might have dropped out. We drove all over the city to all of their homes to do drive-by graduations. Watching them celebrate made my heart sing."

Moten, to whom Gupta credits much of her success, is determined to recognize her contributions at the school.

“When she leaves, I’m going to name a hallway after her,” Moten jokes. “She’s not only a one-of-kind person, she’s the hallmark of what an exceptional teacher looks like.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that!” Gupta responds. “I always give him ‘the look’ so he stops talking about the hallway. I really like working at Fortis. My coworkers are not coworkers anymore. They are family. But I don’t know about the hallway.”

In the meantime, Moten will have to make do with her presence.

“Mrs. Gupta is going to be at Fortis for as long as I am here,” said Moten. “And I don’t have plans to go anywhere.”

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/gupta-hub-20180423_fortis_0042.jpg

1.3 March

Grant writer uses the power of the pen to propel HCDE forward (2021-03-05 14:50)

Sharvon D. Pipkins Kamaya is the development coordinator for HCDE's Center for Grants Development, a position she has held since she was hired in 2009.

Her dedication to her work is so strong that she worked on a grant proposal right up until her due date, giving birth to her baby girl only hours later.

"HCDE was recently awarded more than \$4 million in Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership and Early Head Start Expansion in grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as a result of a proposal that I wrote," said Pipkins Kamaya. "My baby girl knew how important this grant was to me, so she waited until after I hit the 'submit' button to make her debut. She started making her way that night and was born the next day, September 22, 2020, which is also my birthday. What an awesome gift!"

[1]



Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya and her husband, Gino Kamaya, who also works at HCDE.

For over 11 years, Pipkins Kamaya has been a key member of the Center for Grants Development, working to secure funding for nine HCDE divisions, surrounding school districts, and local nonprofits. For the Gretna, Louisiana native, grant writing is ingrained into her sense of community – though it wasn't always a clear path.

While attending Xavier University to pursue a degree in political science, Pipkins Kamaya planned on becoming an attorney in environmental law.

“My dad has been the president of our neighborhood watch association in Gretna since the beginning of time,” Pipkins Kamaya said jokingly. “He would organize community cleanups in areas that needed it. I learned about how littering affects a community – its perception, how the people in that community feel about where they live, how other people treat that community, and how neighborhoods with this issue obtain funding to address the problem. That was a big thing that my dad instilled in me: waking up on Saturday mornings to go clean up the neighborhood and serve my community.”

While learning about nonprofit fundraising through American Humanics (now called the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance) at Xavier, she earned the opportunity to intern for the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, a nonprofit that helps families living in neighborhoods near superfund sites. As an intern, she was tasked with writing a grant proposal for a cleanup project in one of the affected communities.

“We were awarded the grant, and it really sparked something in me. I thought, ‘this is it!’” Pipkins Kamaya said. “I was no longer interested in sitting in a stuffy courtroom. I wanted to be in the office advocating for others through my grant writing. It was a no-brainer for me. I enjoyed writing and writing about issues that could be addressed with proper funding really excited me. It still does. The feeling I get knowing that there are people who will benefit from my work is just amazing.”

Pipkins Kamaya has been instrumental in growing the Center for Grants Development and is credited for securing the 2014 grant that started the first Early Head Start programs at HCDE.

“HCDE is very fortunate to have Sharvon as an employee,” said Gayla Rawlinson Maynard, Director of the Center for Grants Development. “She is a shining light; someone who is dependable, loyal, and a self-starter. Sharvon works well with other people and has a fantastic ability to capture the clients’ real needs. She’s contributed to our ability to raise \$23 million during the first three months of the current fiscal year.”

With the grant awarded to the Department in September to expand Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership and Early Head Start programs, HCDE will add 64 new traditional Early Head Start (EHS) slots at two of its Head Start campuses, Barrett Station and Humble.

This expansion grant will also allow HCDE to collaborate with three local child care centers to offer comprehensive, high-quality services to 40 eligible infants and toddlers in Baytown, Deer Park, and Pasadena.

Pipkins Kamaya, who undoubtedly uses the power of the pen to serve others, “pays it forward” by sharing her passion. She offers grant writing workshops hosted by HCDE that are open to the public. To learn more about these workshops, contact Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya at 713-696-3106 or [2]spipkins@hcde-texas.org.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/hub-graphic-sharvon-pipkins-4.jpg>
 2. <mailto:spipkins@hcde-texas.org>
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HCDE to be closed March 15-19 for Spring Break (2021-03-11 15:01)





All HCDE campuses and offices will be closed for Spring Break from Monday, March 15, through Friday, March 19, 2021.

Schools and offices will reopen for normal business on Monday, March 22, 2020.

To view HCDE's 2020-2021 work/holiday calendar, visit [2]<https://bit.ly/3t4PuJI>.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/communications_spring-break-2021-graphics_jw_sp21_website.jpg
2. <https://bit.ly/3t4PuJI>

HCDE's Center for Safe and Secure Schools hosts first-ever equity symposium to address implicit bias in school discipline (2021-03-12 11:26)



Equity for area public school students was the focus of HCDE's first-ever "Pulling Together - Equity Symposium" last week coordinated by the Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS) as a continuation of efforts in Houston and Harris County to address implicit bias in school discipline.

Six local and national experts on equity and unconscious biases held sessions during the symposium. They led over 160 virtual attendees in discussions about how to maintain high expectations for students of color; develop, implement, and deal with the pitfalls of implementing equity policies; bolster awareness of implicit biases; rethink school culture and decriminalize school discipline, and move forward with restorative practices.



“We know that implicit biases contribute to the inequitable outcomes that exist in our school districts,” said Cierra Nickerson, Climate and Culture Specialist for the CSSS, who led the event. “We have to do the work [inside ourselves] before we do the work [with our students]. The more we are aware of our own biases, the better we’re able to look at school policies and see what needs to change in order to serve students better. Equity is a blanket that covers the entire school community, and we have to eat the elephant one bite at a time.”

These experts were key players in Houston’s Citywide Implicit Bias Effort for School Discipline Reform, a series of workgroup sessions to develop actionable policy and practice recommendations for school discipline reform. Nine recommendations were presented to area school districts on what they should do to continue working towards equitable school environments, which are often influenced by external factors.

“Our teachers and students were impacted by last summer’s Black Lives Matter protests when we had all of these different racially-driven society issues that were

taking place in our country,” said Nickerson. “When things happen in society, it directly impacts what happens inside of our school buildings. We have to address it in our schools as well to make sure we are supporting our community and their social and emotional needs.”

Among the speakers were Dr. Bryant Marks, the Founder and Chief Equity Officer of the National Training Institute on Race and Equity, a key player in the Obama Administration’s development of My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) and 21st Century Policing programs; Paul Forbes, the Executive Director of Educational Equity in the Anti-Bias and Diversity in the Office of Equity & Access for the New York City Department of Education; and Dr. LaTonya Goffney, Aldine ISD Superintendent.

As with other HCDE events, which have transitioned to a virtual setting, the symposium offered educators from across the county the opportunity to participate. School leaders and educators from as close as Houston ISD and Katy ISD and as far away as Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York attended.

The CSSS will continue addressing implicit bias in school settings this summer when it hosts a three-day equity boot camp on school discipline.


1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/equity-symposium-pics-1.jpg>

“America’s Educator” will be keynote speaker at HCDE’s second annual “A Day of Educational Innovation” (2021-03-26 10:20)

“America’s Educator,” two-time New York Times Bestselling author, friend to Oprah, and subject of a film about his unique and acclaimed approach to education, Ron Clark will be the keynote speaker at “A Day of Educational Innovation,” a one-day virtual conference on April 10 hosted by Harris County Department of Education’s Teaching and Learning Center.

[1]

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION






RON CLARK

SAT APR 10TH
9AM-3PM


Theme: Reimagining The Possibilities
for Urban Education

Embracing Our New Reality By
Sparkling Creativity





\$75 For individual
\$1000 For your entire campus staff



SCAN ME

REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN | [HTTP://BIT.LY/DEIFRC](http://bit.ly/deifrc)

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The event will shine a light on innovative educational practices during Covid by offering out-of-the-box ideas to keep kids engaged and help teachers maneuver between in-person and virtual instruction.

“I hope that attendees walk away with practices they can implement the following Monday that will help to engage students in unique ways as well as connect with families and parents,” said event organizer Errica Dotson-Hooper.

Clark brings charisma, energy, and devotion to the education profession. He has worked with disadvantaged students in rural North Carolina and Harlem and founded the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia.

Clark started his teaching career at a challenging school. To engage its disaffected students, he rapped his lessons, dressed in costumes, and stood on his head, doing everything he could to make learning exciting. He brought joy to the classroom, and test scores soared. After five years at this school, during which time he was invited to the White House three times, Ron saw a TV show about challenges in New York City’s school system. He was compelled to move there and soon began teaching in Harlem. Within a year, all his students were at or above grade level.

“Ron Clark is out-of-the-box with all of his ideas and strategies for reaching students, and he has been able to transition that to virtual learning seamlessly,” said Dotson-Hooper. “I want teachers to hear from an expert who has been doing this work for a long time. Everyone became new teachers this year. Even the most veteran educator had to start from scratch doing things they had never done before. With that experience in mind, as we prepare for the next school year, I want to make educational innovators accessible to educators. I hope that this will re-energize them at a time when they are beginning to think about next school year.”

Other notable event speakers include Dr. Shaun Woodly, Too Dope Teachers, LaVondia Menephee, and Dr. Kiana Day Williams.

A DAY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

FEATURING RON CLARK

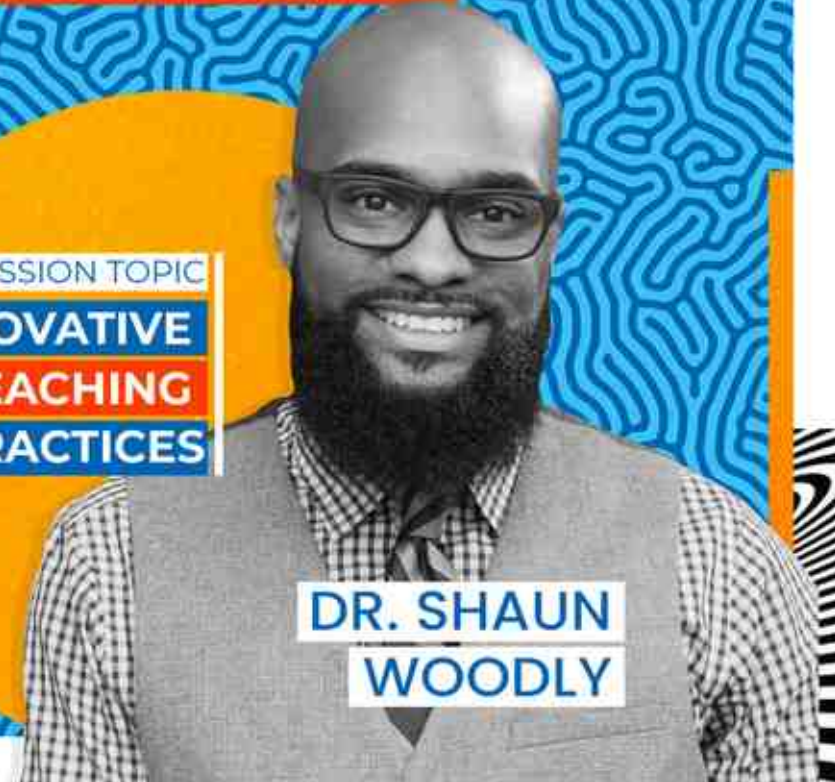


RON
CLARK

SESSION TOPIC

INNOVATIVE
TEACHING
PRACTICES

DR. SHAUN
WOODLY



A DAY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

FEATURING RON CLARK



SESSION TOPIC

INNOVATIVE WAYS
TO CONNECT &
ENGAGE STUDENTS



AUDRI & CALLIE
WHAT'S POPPIN?!

A DAY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

FEATURING RON CLARK



SESSION TOPIC

**TEACHER
LEADERSHIP**

LEVERAGING TEACHER
INNOVATION DURING THE
TIMES OF COVID19



**CELESTE
BARRETTO**

A DAY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

FEATURING RON CLARK



SESSION TOPIC

RETHINKING EQUITY INITIATIVES

RETHINKING EQUITY
INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT
CHILDREN OF COLOR



DESMOND
WILLIAMS

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A DAY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

FEATURING RON CLARK



RON
CLARK

SESSION TOPIC

MUSIC CLASS IS L.I.T

LESSONS IN CREATIVE
TEACHING IN THE GENERAL
MUSIC CLASSROOM



DR. KIANA DAY
WILLIAMS

A DAY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

FEATURING RON CLARK



SESSION TOPIC

EXPLORING
STEAM: OUR
JOURNEY



KRANTI SINGH &
LISA RUBIO

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A DAY OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

FEATURING RON CLARK



RON
CLARK

SESSION TOPIC

CREATE JOY!

MOVING FROM
COLLECTIVE TRAUMA TO
COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

LAVONDIA
MENEPHEE





To register for the event, visit [2]<http://bit.ly/DEIFRC>. The registration fee is \$75 per person or \$1,000 for a campus team of up to 20 people.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/ron-clark.jpg>
2. <http://bit.ly/DEIFRC>

Hobby ES, Alcott ES named 'Culture Cultivator Campuses' by Harris County Department of Education | News Blog (2021-04-08 08:47:00)

[...] More information on A Day of Educational Innovation Conference with Ron Clark 2021, where both campuses will be featured, can be found online here. [...]

Teaching and Learning Center offers in-person event amid increase in vaccination rates (2021-03-26 10:32)



This week, The Learning and Teaching Center held an in-person workshop, “Capturing Kids’ Hearts,” led by instructor Anna Beth Garrison.

The 2-day immersive seminar focused on improving student performance by teaching culture-building behaviors that transform classrooms into high-achieving centers of learning where kids feel a sense of belonging.



“What we teach is a process, not a program,” said Garrison. “It’s a process designed to create high-performing teams in classrooms, campuses, and school districts. It’s a teaching model, but it’s also a relationship-building and leadership model based on the EXCEL model: engage, excel, communicate, empower, and launch. Social and emotional learning is a big component of this.”

Garrison kicked off the workshop by applying the first step of the EXCEL model, ‘engage,’ on the seventeen Cypress-Fairbanks and Katy ISD educators in attendance, addressing their anxieties about attending an in-person event and engaging them in a positive welcome exercise for a successful rest of the day.

“I know many of you had anxieties about attending today,” said Garrison to the socially distanced room of teachers. “What, if anything, have I done to make you feel better to ease your anxieties about attending today?”

Attendees took turns expressing concern over leaving their classrooms unattended, leaving their partners by themselves to care for their own kids, and attending the workshop in person.

"I'm eight months pregnant, and I'm terrified," said Emery Elementary School teacher Jalisa Jenkins. "I haven't been this close to anybody in a long time. I have chronic asthma and bronchitis. My doctor told me if I get [Covid], the likelihood of me making it, even without being pregnant, is low. My fiancée's asthma is worse than mine, and we have a six-year-old, so my anxiety throughout the entire pandemic has been elevated. I personally know four people who have passed away from Covid. It's nerve-wracking because I don't want to die."

Despite her concerns, Jenkins said attending in-person is invigorating.

"I'm a type-A person. I'm going to show up and do my job," said Jenkins. "Even though it's fear-inducing, it feels nice. I miss being in-person. I am a very social person – I'm the happy hour queen. It's refreshing to be this close to people and see their facial expressions – even with masks on."



Harris County Department of Education Teaching and Learning Center workshop "Capturing Kids' Hearts", March 23, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education Teaching and Learning Center workshop
"Capturing Kids' Hearts", March 23, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education Teaching and Learning Center workshop "Capturing Kids' Hearts", March 23, 2021.

Additional opportunities to take upcoming workshops of "Capturing Kids' Hearts" will be offered both online and in-person.

"We do offer this seminar virtually right now," said Garrison. "The virtual training is very good. I just don't think it's as good as the in-person training because there is less interaction. It's harder to build trust in a group. Many people are opting to take it online, and we want to meet their needs however we can, but we started offering these trainings in person again as soon as we could. We know a lot of people will choose to take them in person starting in the summer."

For information about upcoming HCDE workshops, visit [2]<https://b2j.short.gy/hcdeworkshops>.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/20210323_tlc_176.jpg

2. <https://b2j.short.gy/hcdeworkshops>

1.4 April

Harris County teen writers, artists earn 80 National Scholastic Art & Writing Medals, Scholarships (2021-04-01 14:18)

Creative teen writers and artists from 13 Harris County school districts and 10 private schools were recognized this month through the nonprofit Scholastic Art & Writing Awards in New York City. Seventy-five national medalists and five scholarship awardees were announced from the approximate 15,000 national entries.

Harris County Department of Education is the regional sponsor of the Awards. Students in grades 7-12 who earned Gold Key Awards earlier this year through HCDE advanced to the national level to be judged in the 98th annual Scholastic Art & Writing Awards 2021 in New York City.

The national medalists come from the following Harris County districts: Alief, Clear Creek, Cy-Fair, Deer Park, Pasadena, Pearland, Houston, Humble, Katy, Klein, Spring, Spring Branch and Tomball. Private schools include Emery Weiner, Episcopal High, Kinkaid School, River Oaks Baptist, St. Agnes Academy, St. John's School, Veritas Christian Academy and the Village School.

View list of area teen recipients at [1]<https://www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards>.



Natalie Dinh, Kerr High School, Alief ISD, American Voices and Gold Key Medalist, short story "Mother" submitted through teacher Kathleen Harrison

*Again at the harbor,
I scrunched my nose at the
odor of fish. I held tightly onto
Cô Thao's hand that night
and I watched my mother
as she slowly walked away
without turning back once...*

excerpt from
"Mother" Natalie Dinh
11th grade, Kerr High School



**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**

**American Voices
Nominee
(Writing)**

Special awards earned include the American Voices and American Visions Awards, two medalists chosen from five student nominees in each region in art and writing categories. Honorees each earn \$1,000 scholarships as "best of show" in their local programs. Awardees include:

- Natalie Dinh, Kerr High School, Alief ISD, American Voices and Gold Key Medalist, short story "Mother" submitted through teacher Kathleen Harrison

- Landen Tran-Nguyen, League City Intermediate, Clear Creek ISD, American Visions and Gold Key Medalist, illustration and drawing “Power,” submitted through teacher Sherry White

The \$1,000 New York Life Award sponsored by the New York Life Foundation is given to six students across the country who explore personal grief and loss through their works.

- La’Zavia Joseph, Hastings High School, Alief ISD, New York Life Award, poem “Am I Next?” submitted through teacher Mashayla Nash

Two “Best in Grade” awards of \$500 go to 24 Gold Medalists competing throughout the nation in each grade level in art and writing categories:

- Jerry Tong, Pearland Junior High West, Pearland ISD, (writing) personal essay and memoir “Our Anthem,” submitted through teacher Olivia Cole
- Mikayla Villafuerte, Veritas Christian Academy, (writing) science fiction and fantasy “Stars in the Dark,” submitted through teacher Laura Arrazolo



Landen Tran-Nguyen, League City Intermediate, Clear Creek ISD, American Visions and Gold Key Medalist, illustration and drawing "Power," submitted through teacher Sherry White



Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

American Visions Nominee (Art)



“Power”

Landen Tran-Nguyen

8th grade

League City Intermediate School

Clear Creek ISD

Teacher: Sherry White

**Category: Drawing
& Illustration**

Clear Creek ISD artist Tran-Nguyen, 14, admits that art helps him with his identity. He was particularly inspired to complete his drawing/illustration called “Power,” which earned him the American Visions Medal.

“I had realized it was a piece I had liked especially because I had insane amounts of motivation to finish it,” he said.

In questioning his sense of purpose and identity of who and what he is, he often turns to art.

“I can never answer the question, but in some ways, art answers it for me,” the eighth-grader said.

American Voices Medalist Natalie Dinh, 17, turns to writing as a form of expression and enjoyment.

“I take inspiration from real experiences around me and from my observations of universal issues,” Dinh said.

Her short story “Mother” deals with family dynamics. She gives due credit to her teacher for online support and encouragement during the pandemic.

This year, challenges resulting from the pandemic required the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards to be 100 percent virtual – from submissions to judging to celebrations.

“We understand that young people may not have had access to the same resources they had in previous years due to COVID-19,” HCDE Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Coordinator Andrea Segraves said. “Our jurors were in awe of the resilience and talent that shone through each piece in light of these challenges.”

Segraves said she was impressed by the quality of the entries submitted by teen artists and writers which was encouraged and orchestrated through area teachers.

“This year, we received a high volume of competitive entries, and judges had to make difficult decisions based on three criteria which included originality, technical skill and the emergency of personal voice or vision.

Medalists traditionally invited to New York City’s Carnegie Hall will be recognized through an awards ceremony via YouTube. More details about national recipients and the link to the celebration may be found at [2]www.artandwriting.org.

For more information about entering, judging or supporting HCDE's Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, access [3]www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards or email: [4]asegraves@hcde-texas.org.

1. <https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hcde-texas.org%2Fscholastic-awards&data=04%7C01%7C1cozzari%40hcde-texas.org%7C395822bffd7f>
 2. <http://www.artandwriting.org/>
 3. <http://www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards>
 4. <mailto:asegraves@hcde-texas.org>
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CSSS trainings prepare educators to prevent and respond to active shooter incidents (2021-04-01 14:25)

This week, two virtual training events – Civilian Response to an Active Shooter Event (CRASE) and Youth Mental Health First Aid – were held by Harris County Department of Education’s Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS).

Both trainings, made possible through the Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grant from the Department of Justice’s School Violence Prevention Program, are designed to improve school security by providing students and teachers with the tools they need to recognize, respond quickly to, and help prevent acts of violence. The grant was created under the (STOP) School Violence Act after the Parkland school shooting in Florida in 2018.



Recording

View Options

Sandy Hook Elementary

- ▶ Sandy Hook, Connecticut
- ▶ December 14, 2012
- ▶ School shooting, murder-suicide
- ▶ Bushmaster XM15, Glock 20SF and Sig Sauer P226
- ▶ Deaths: 28; 27 at school plus mother
- ▶ Injured: 2
- ▶ Adam Lanza

Participants

Chat

Share Screen

Screen

Settings

Leave

Recording

View Options

...until Virginia Tech...

- ▶ Seung Hui Cho's shooting spree in Norris Hall, which lasted 11 minutes.
- ▶ He fired 174 rounds and killed 30 people in Norris Hall plus himself and wounded 17.



The CRASE course, designed and built on the “Avoid, Deny, Defend” strategy developed by the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) at Texas State University in 2004, provides strategies, guidance, and a proven plan for surviving an active shooter/active aggressor event or other critical incidents. Sgt. Jeffery McGowen from the Harris County Sheriff’s Office led a group of over 30 educators in the 2-hour training.

“We hope that this training will help people think about active shooter events and be aware that it can happen in any work or school environment,” said Dennis Calloway with the CSSS. “The challenge is that when we’re sitting at our desk when it’s nice and quiet when you can think calmly, you think you might know what to do, but when you hear something [like gunfire], you have to be a little bit more aware of where you are, and you have to take action quickly.”

However, responding to acts of violence is just as important as preventing acts of violence. For this reason, the STOP School Violence grant also calls for school officials to intervene when mentally ill individuals threaten school safety.

“We all go through times of emotional distress,” said Cierra Nickerson, Climate and Culture Specialist with the CSSS. “We want to make sure that our teachers are

equipped, especially now Covid-19. Our students are being asked to be very flexible. Their learning environments have changed, their home environments may have changed, and they may be going through some challenging situations. When we equip our teachers to recognize and be able to respond appropriately, we're helping to mitigate harm and promote safety within our schools."

Offered in partnership with the Texas Institute for Excellence in Mental Health for the first time this school year, Youth Mental Health First Aid training teaches caring professionals and caregivers who regularly interact with young people how to identify, support, and respond to a young person in crisis and non-crisis mental health situations.

"Think of what physical first aid looks like," said Nickerson. "When you cut yourself or fall and hurt yourself on campus, there are people who can patch you up and put a Band-Aid on you, but you may still need to have the school nurse look at you for further evaluation. That's what this training is. Individuals who obtain a Youth Mental Health First Aid certification are the Band-Aids who can intervene before you get professional help. They don't get certified as counselors, but they're able to assist and respond before the counselor is available."

Due to the pandemic, this course was carefully adapted so that caregivers could identify mental health warning signs when interacting with youth in virtual spaces. This in-demand training is offered several times during the year.

Adult Mental Health First Aid training will be offered on April 28. The Youth Mental Health First Aid training will be offered again on May 19. To enroll, visit [1]<https://b2j.short.gy/hcdeworkshops>.

1. <https://b2j.short.gy/hcdeworkshops>

HCDE's Parent Engagement Liaison is an indispensable resource for parents (2021-04-09 09:14)

Harris County Department of Education's sole Parent Engagement Liaison, Gabriela Hernandez-Aguilera, has been with the Department for nearly two years and has already made herself an indispensable resource for students and their families.

[1]



Gabriela Hernandez poses for a photograph, August 20, 2019.

Hernandez-Aguilera supports students with autism, intellectual disabilities and emotional disorders, and advocates for them within the community. Specifically, she educates parents on how to reinforce what special needs students learn at school. She also helps them address non-academic issues like food and housing insecurity that may impact students' ability to learn by bringing together community partners and resources that support the whole family.

"Nothing beats getting a phone call from a parent saying, 'what you did really made a difference,'" she said. "In special education, if something works in the classroom but isn't being applied at home, it's going to be difficult behavior to change. We realized that to provide a better education, we need to support our students."

As the daughter of Mexican immigrants, Hernandez-Aguilera shares a special bond with families who struggle to obtain the support they need.

"Both my parents worked really hard for the American dream," said Hernandez-Aguilera. "I know what it's like to go from having everything to then having difficulties and not knowing where to reach out for help – whether it's because of a language barrier or because you are not aware of how the system works. We have a lot of parents right now that don't know where to look for help or what that help looks like. It takes a lot of explaining and letting them know they are not alone, that we're here to support them and be a guide for them. Parent burnout is real."



Members of the Harris County Department of Education Schools Division participate in the Autism Speaks Walk at the University of Houston, October 19, 2019.

Dr. Charles Ned, HCDE's senior director schools, explains that the key to Hernandez-Aguilera's success is her passion for helping children.

"She is a true asset to this division," said Ned. "She takes pride in her work and has a great personality. She's a people person, and that's so important when you're working with parents and members of the community."

Yet, Hernandez-Aguilera feels like to she has so much more to accomplish. “The hardest part of my job is trying to help everyone but feeling like I didn’t do enough,” she said.

To learn more about how HCDE’s Parent Engagement Liaison can help you, email Gabriela Hernandez-Aguilera at [3]ghernandez@hcde-texas.org.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/20190820_schools_0021_r.jpg
 2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/20191019_autism_0030.jpg
 3. <mailto:ghernandez@hcde-texas.org>
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Leaders from far-flung school districts share lessons learned during coronavirus pandemic (2021-04-09 09:19)

As educators and school districts prepare for the 2021-2022 school year, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools held its second "Chat with the Chiefs" event. Leaders from four outlying Harris County school districts participated in the virtual discussion panel to discuss how to move schools forward safely after a year of teaching during a global pandemic.

The hourlong roundtable featured Bennie Mayes, Secondary Chief of Schools for Waller ISD; Hector Herrera, Assistant Superintendent of Support Services for Dayton ISD; Steve Corry, Assistant Superintendent for Administration at Deer Park ISD; and Robert Cobb, Assistant Superintendent for Administration at Dickinson ISD.

[1]



Janice Owolabi leads school leaders participating in the April 7, 2021, virtual "Chat with the Chiefs" discussion panel.

"The benefit of bringing school leaders from different districts is that they can share their lived experiences," said Janice Owolabi from the CSSS. "All school districts are under the same coronavirus restrictions, but each school district has responded differently to them. The leaders who participated in this discussion panel represent

districts in the outer rim of Harris County. They often don't get a lot of support and have to pull magic tricks out of their hat to cover a lot of territory – they make it happen. They don't have a big staff like Cy-Fair, Katy, or Houston ISD. It was important to us to have these school districts share their perspectives on what it's been like for them so others can learn from it, but also so that HCDE can find where we can add value and give them the support they need to help them build a safe school environment."

Fifty-seven attendees from local nonprofits, Region 4, and public, private and charter schools listened as the four school leaders discussed the challenges that arose at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the lessons learned in the year after, and what they will do to keep students and staff safe next year.

"As we look back, we learned how to be flexible and how to listen," said Cobb. "[Before the pandemic], we were very focused on physical safety – things that we could see and things that we had seen before – and what we were dealing with [last March] were things that we could not see and had not really experienced before."

Panelists expressed that not making assumptions and building trust in their relationships with parents, students, and staff was crucial.

"As a district, we felt it was important not to let anyone make assumptions about what protocols they had to follow or what their obligations were." Said Mayes. "We didn't want to have any major issues because of poor communication; we wanted to make sure everyone was on the same page. We didn't want to make assumptions that they knew what they had to do."

The most important consideration that school leaders expressed is their desire for students and staff to feel safe upon returning to campus.

"Everyone wants to be in a place where they feel safe, and it's hard to define what a feeling is," said Cobb. "But when you are there, you know it."

For more information, check out HCDE's Center for Safe and Secure Schools main page: [2]<https://www.hcde-texas.org/safe-secure-schools>

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/chat-with-the-chiefs-2.jpg>
 2. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/safe-secure-schools>
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HCDE Autism Conference for Teachers, Parents Builds Student Support, Inspiration (2021-04-23 15:09)

Teacher Nicholas Guillerman doesn't like the implications of diagnostic labels. As a child with autism, Guillerman recounts the story of a counselor telling his mom that he would never be independent.

"He won't be able to take care of himself," the counselor told his mother.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/dXv0REaY6BE>

Watch a recap of the 2021 Autism Event.

Today, Guillerman is a successful high school teacher in Katy ISD who boasts two degrees and eight teacher certifications. In addition to teaching engineering, he is a lead robotics coach and Black Belt martial arts instructor.

"When I look at the fact that I have no debt, am living independently and paid for graduate school completed out-of-pocket, I see myself in students who have challenges with the curriculum and otherwise, including language barriers," Guillerman said.

The 33-year-old Katy ISD teacher shared his story with educators and parents at the annual Autism Event held April 21-22 at Harris County Department of Education. The hybrid, in-person and virtual event held with collaborators Frontiers Integrated focused on reading issues on day one and communications skills on day two. Specialists Llewelyn "Cissy" Carter and Tisha Gonzalez supplied sage instruction and research, along with take-away classroom activities.

An estimated 1 in 50 babies in our country are born with some degree of autism. HCDE's Teaching and Learning Center continues to hold the annual conference in support of the goal to serve students with autism spectrum disorder through teachers and parents.

"Our biggest takeaway is the literacy piece as we help students move up academically," HCDE's Director of Special Populations Brenda Arteaga said, "Second is

communications as we work to diminish behaviors that deter students from learning.”

As a former assistant principal, Arteaga observed teachers working with children along the autism spectrum and was amazed at the range of student skills.

“The teacher had to differentiate instruction for each one of those students,” she said.

Teacher JoAnna Lee works with teenagers at Academic and Behavior School (ABS) West, an HCDE school serving students with special needs from multiple area districts. Her own child, age 6, is high functioning on the autism spectrum.

Last year Lee taught a student with autism who was an avid University of Houston sports fan. As a motivator, she continued to introduce lessons with a hook to the college and invited a UH athlete to talk to her student. Eventually, the student filled out his college entrance application.

“It’s important to find out what inspires each student on the spectrum,” Lee noted.

Helping students with autism gain confidence is key as Frontiers Integrated specialist Carter provides educators with “error-less” activities which help build student confidence. Learning exercises include introducing favorite colors or cartoon characters as building blocks to controlling student understanding and interest. Concentrating on colors and shapes and their patterns are predecessors to introducing number and letter patterns.

“Practice, practice, practice,” Carter said.

As a teacher and through his own personal experiences with autism, Guillerman urges educators to practice patience and enthusiasm with struggling students. He once inherited a student with Ds and Fs who was routinely sent to detention. The teen discovered a passion for engineering in Guillerman’s class, eventually creating professional-level designs.

“Many students struggle in the classroom, with different backgrounds,” he said. “The ones who struggle the most, ironically, often become the most skilled at their trade, over time.”

Watch an excerpt of Guillerman’s keynote address at [1][YouTube.com/watch?v=10PEPRv2sbs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10PEPRv2sbs).

Recordings of the two-day Autism Event are available for purchase by contacting HCDE’s Teaching and Learning Center through Arteaga: [2]barteaga@hcde-texas.org. For future workshops, access the HCDE website at [3][hcde-texas.org](https://www.hcde-texas.org/).

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10PEPRv2sbs>
 2. <mailto:barteaga@hcde-texas.org>
 3. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/>
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HCDE hosts first virtual Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards ceremony (2021-04-23 15:18)



“Brilliant, talented, creative, gifted, skilled.” These are adjectives used by Harris County Department of Education’s Teaching and Learning Center Director Andrea Segraves to describe this year’s Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards honorees.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/95MydO9NKWo>

Over 2,500 Harris County students were recognized during HCDE’s Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards virtual ceremony Thursday evening. Thirty-two special awards

were presented to students valued at a total of \$12,000 in prizes and scholarships, and Gold and Silver Key award recipients saw their names displayed on the screen as their families and friends looked on.

In March, 85 Harris County students were selected for National Medals after receiving regional Gold Key Awards.

A recording of HCDE's 2021 Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards virtual ceremony is embedded above and can be viewed at [1][YouTube.com/HCDETV](https://www.youtube.com/c/HCDetv).

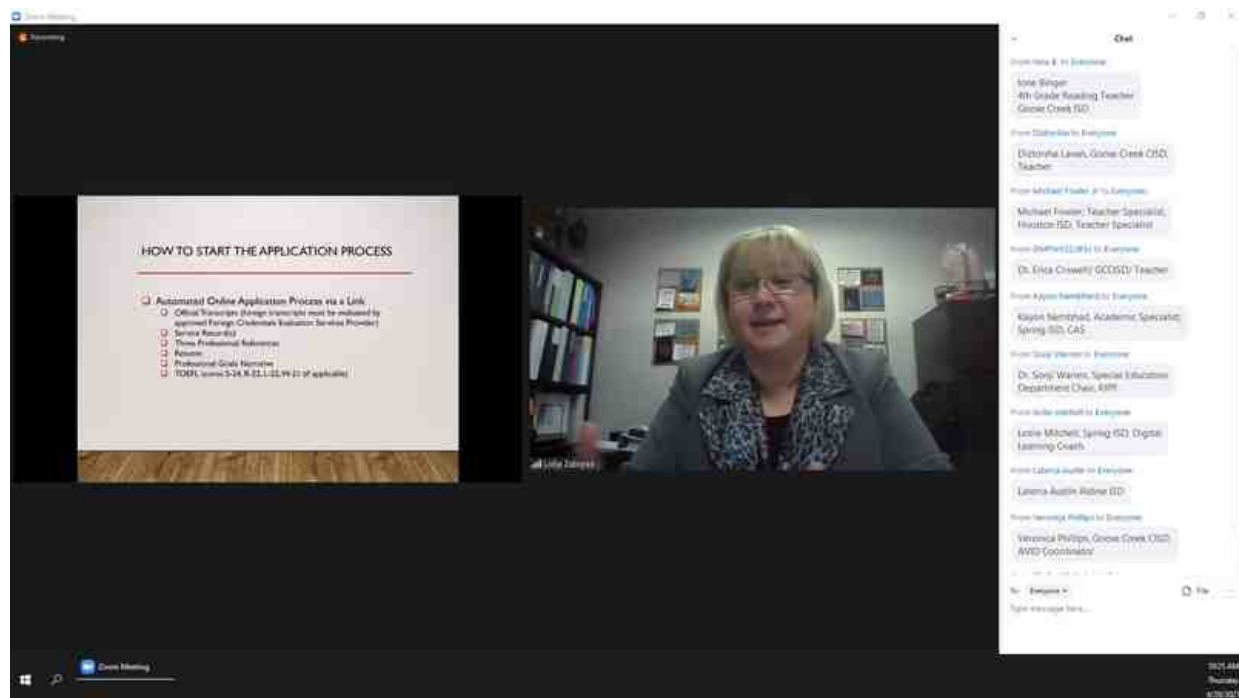
To view the Regional Gold and Silver Key Scholastic Art and Writing Award virtual exhibits, visit [2][hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards](https://www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards).

1. <https://www.youtube.com/c/HCDetv/featured>
 2. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards>
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Educator Certification and Advancement division kicks off educator preparation program recruitment, offers scholarships for teacher and principal candidates (2021-04-29 16:15)

HCDE's Educator Certification and Advancement (ECA) division held its first series of educator preparation information sessions this week.

The free sessions, which will be held virtually through the end of June, offer aspiring teachers and principals the opportunity to learn about Harris County Department of Education's competitive teacher and principal preparation programs.





“What is unique about the program is the comprehensive support given to each candidate,” said Lidia Zatopek, director of ECA. “We know every single student by name and give individualized support to ensure candidates are successful. In addition to the courses, we do benchmark assessments to gauge how well they are doing throughout the year. Based on their results, we’ll offer tutorials in their areas of need at convenient times for their busy schedules.”

Assistance is also provided in securing teaching assignments in elementary or secondary education classrooms.

“We have a great record of passing rates on the state certification exams,” said Zatopek. “While passing the test is a major focus, we also make sure that we help support students throughout the beginning years of their careers as school leaders.”

This year, the ECA teacher and principal preparation programs are offering scholarships to individuals admitted into the program. These scholarships provide candidates with the opportunity to participate in a premier educator preparation program at a competitive price. Tuition for in-county residents is \$2,500, and out-of-county tuition is \$2,750.

“We decided to truly invest in our future teachers and educational leaders by reducing cost-prohibitive barriers, especially now in the pandemic,” said Zatopek. “There are wonderful individuals who would make awesome teachers or administrators, but they are not able to do that because it is cost-prohibitive. This is an opportunity for those individuals to take advantage of our program at the best value possible.”

To register for an upcoming teacher or principal information session, visit [1]<https://b2j.short.gy/hcdeworkshops>. A complete list of dates and times can be found on [2]hcde-texas.org/educator-certification.



Ready to Teach? Ready to Lead?

Scholarships Available



Our GOAL is YOUR SUCCESS
Be Part of Our Premier Teacher or Principal Certification Program

Teacher Program Info Meetings Via Zoom	Principal Program Info Meetings Via Zoom
April 27 at 10 a.m. - Workshop #13109	April 27 at 2 p.m. - Workshop #13111
April 29 at 2 p.m. - Workshop #13110	April 29 at 10 a.m. - Workshop #13112
May 18 at 10 a.m. - Workshop #13125	May 18 at 2 p.m. - Workshop #13114
May 20 at 2 p.m. - Workshop #13126	May 20 at 5:30 p.m. - Workshop #13115
June 8 at 10 a.m. - Workshop #13127	June 8 at 2 p.m. - Workshop #13116
June 10 at 5:30 p.m. - Workshop #13128	June 10 at 10 a.m. - Workshop #13122
June 22 at 10 a.m. - Workshop #13129	June 22 at 2 p.m. - Workshop #13123
June 24 at 2 p.m. - Workshop #13130	June 24 at 10 a.m. - Workshop #13124

Go to www.hcde-texas.org to register



#SeeTheImpact

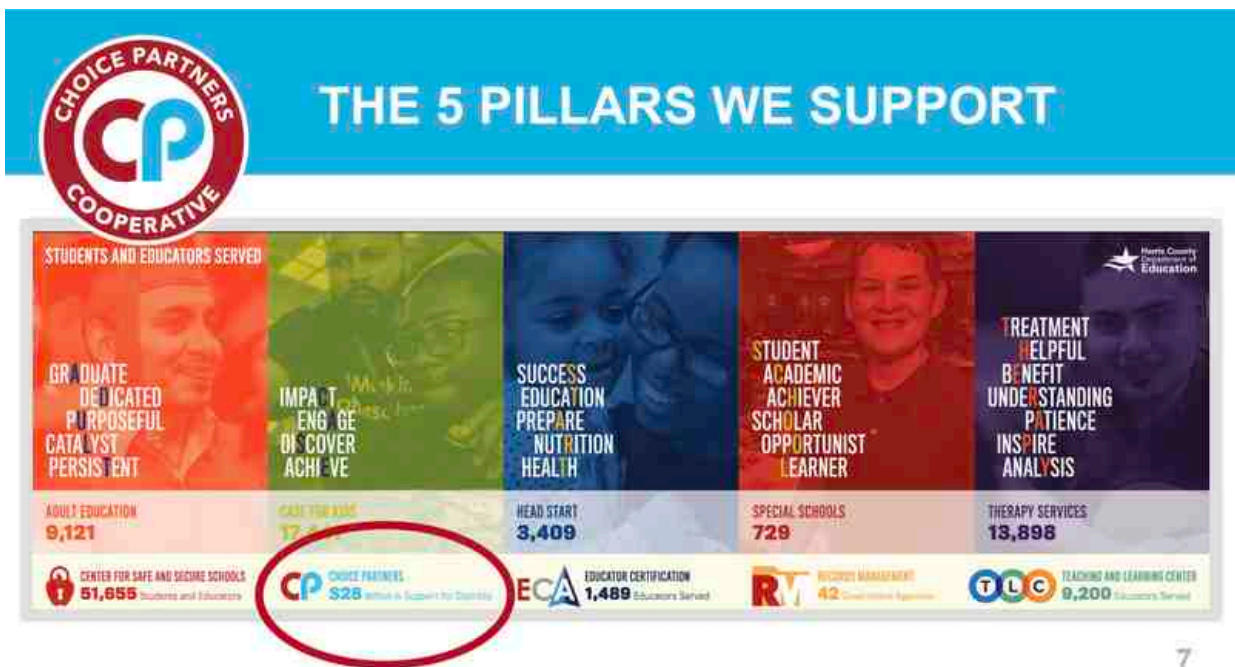
1. <https://b2j.short.gy/hcdeworkshops>
2. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/educator-certification>
3. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/revisedecatrainig3.png>

Choice Partners engages members nationwide in virtual workshop (2021-04-29 16:22)



The Choice Partners co-op hosted a virtual, members-only workshop on April 14 for its largest recorded audience to date with more than 400 registrants. Training was provided to explore the details of using the job order contracting (JOC) process, navigating the Choice Partners website, and learning how the co-op legally and competitively bids contracts that are compliant with federal, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) requirements.

[1]



7

The information presented in the virtual workshop demonstrated to all members how they could maximize their member benefits for a faster, easier procurement process.

Attendees from across the country represented all membership venues, from municipalities and counties to school districts, universities, and colleges.

After the presentation, participants were provided with a survey that provided suggestions for future topics such as shortcuts to use the supply catalog, tutorial/instructional videos on various topics, and child nutrition contract information.

Any member that completed the survey had the opportunity to receive CEU credits by requesting them in the comment section of the survey. No-cost credits from training are a win-win for all. If you missed the workshop, you may find the PowerPoint and video on the Choice Partners website at [2]choicepartners.org/presentations.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/prospective_vendor_webinar.final_2dd-7.jpg
2. <https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fr20.rs6.net%2Ftn.jsp%3Ff%3D001HPjHb5MdeLEzNtf045Zf37GTXq016XuuYRLVYagLb2QVqaW1UiBIoQfgmzmpPwn3>

1.5 May

Former educator continues to impact Harris County students
(2021-05-07 15:39)



Andrea Segraves misses teaching in a classroom every day but continues to have a positive impact on students through her work.

Segraves is an educator with nearly 20 years of experience and currently serves as Harris County Department of Education's Director of Special Projects for the Teaching and Learning Center.



Members of the Harris County Department of Education Scholastic Arts Leadership Team meet at the Houston Arboretum, September 28, 2017.



Steve Spangler conducts a demonstration with Andrea Sagraves during the R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference, January 26, 2019.



She is best recognized for being the organizer of two of the Department's most prominent projects, the annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference and the prestigious Scholastic Art and Writing Awards for the Greater Houston region. Segraves also oversees a national leadership speaker series and provides coaching and professional learning for school leaders across Harris County.

"I've always been really inspired by professional learning," said Segraves. "[Before coming to HCDE, I was a] principal at Clear Creek ISD [and was] an instructional leader for four years. I was deep in the work, and I was sure that I would retire as a principal, but an opportunity became available at HCDE where I would be able to lead at the next level, just as the leaders that came before me had tapped me on my shoulder and said 'hey, you can do more, you can reach further.'"

The Oklahoma native, who has an identical twin sister and an older brother, wasn't a stranger to education.

"My mom was an educator for 38 years. It wasn't that she didn't encourage me to be a teacher. I just think that she knew the struggle of being an educator. [When my mom was a teacher,] I remember knowing when payday was because that's when our kitchen was restocked, and I remember her coming home tired every day and noticing the stress of the job on her. It was just kind of unspoken that she had wanted something different for us, and so I was the only one of her three kids that chose to go into education."

But Segraves' plan wasn't always to be a teacher. After her freshman year of college, she took a job as a counselor at a summer youth camp and found her calling to be a teacher. She realized she could connect with students easily and was encouraged by their parents to continue working with children.

"The things that shape you are when people see something in you that you don't see," said Segraves. "So that summer, I changed my degree path from dental hygiene to education because I just knew that that's what I was called to do."





When Segraves became a mother in 2008, she understood why her mother allowed her to decide her own path.

“Being a mom has absolutely helped me be a better educator. My son, Rodney, is my whole world and my whole heart,” she said. “I think it’s pretty interesting to know that I have a biracial child, and that brings another perspective to my life as a human, a mom, and an educator, especially in current times.”

When asked what she believes her mentors saw in her, Segraves says, “something I teach my son when I look back on my career and my life is to be uncommon. Those are very simple words, but they are very powerful. I have a deep passion for the underdog.”

“I was chosen and born to be a mom and an educator. Having chosen a career path as a public servant, reaching the underdog, the one that is struggling the most, is

my ultimate responsibility,” she said. “The greater the responsibility, the greater the reward – and that’s why I do this.”

Jim Schul (2021-05-09 12:25:33)

Andrea is a dedicated educator with the best interest of students and staff alike! Awesome article, congratulations!

19th Annual Manuel H. Gallegos Young Women's Leadership Conference comes to HCDE (2021-05-07 15:49)



Harris County Department of Education will host the 19th annual Manuel H. Gallegos Young Women's Leadership Conference for the first time at 8:15 a.m. on Friday, May 14.

[1]



The conference, which will also be held virtually for the first time, is organized by HCDE Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Jesús Amezcua and has historically taken place at Texas A &M International University in Laredo, Texas, for students from area school districts.

Under its new virtual format, young women in grades 9 through 12 from Harris County and the state will be able to participate regardless of their location.

Featured presenters include HCDE leaders Venetia Peacock, Senior Director of Head Start; Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Director of CASE for Kids; Danielle Bartz, Chief of Staff; and Celina Cereceres Miller from accounting firm Whitley Penn.

The free conference aims to empower young girls to seek positions of leadership in professional environments.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/gallegos-young-womens-conference-web-slider.jpg>

Gupta, Anderson named HCDE's 2021 Teacher of the Year and Educational Aide of the Year (2021-05-19 16:18)

Two veteran staff members, Ta'Keia Anderson and Lopamudra Gupta, were named Harris County Department of Education's 2020-2021 educators of the year this week.

On Monday, Dr. Charles Ned, Senior Director of Schools, made visits to each of the winners' campuses, stopping first at Academic and Behavior School East to surprise Educational Aide of the Year, Ta'Keia Anderson.

[1]



Instructional Aide of the Year Ta'Keia Anderson and Teacher of the Year Lopamudra Gupta are honored during a meeting of the Harris County Department of Education Board of Trustees, May 19, 2021.

"I feel honored," said Anderson. "You know, hard work pays off. It doesn't matter what I have going on, I come through those doors, and I prepare myself for [my students]. They are the most important."

As part of her recognition, Anderson, who has served students at ABS East for the past 12 years, was presented with an \$800 check by Dr. Ned. Insights to Behavior sponsored the prize.

“She doesn’t realize what an impact she has on our students and staff,” said ABS East Principal Donna Treviño-Jones. “Without Ms. Anderson, I can definitely say [our campus] would be different.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4ysKI-kGbQ>

Dr. Ned’s second stop on Monday was at Fortis Academy, where he surprised Teacher of the Year Lopamudra Gupta.

“I know firsthand about what you bring to Fortis Academy every day,” Dr. Ned said to Gupta. “Your dedication, your commitment to students, your willingness to never give up on any student that’s in your classroom. That makes you stand out among all of our employees.”

Gupta, who has been an HCDE employee for nearly 18 years, was presented with a \$1,000 check underwritten by Edgenuity.

“It feels overwhelming. I didn’t expect this much,” said Gupta. “I want to thank everyone that’s helped me to become successful, everyone that lets me do what I do. The thing is, I love what I do. That’s the best thing – to be acknowledged for what you love. That’s the greatest feeling.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX09C7A2sP8>

Gupta was also HCDE’s February employee of the month. To read her profile, click [2]here.

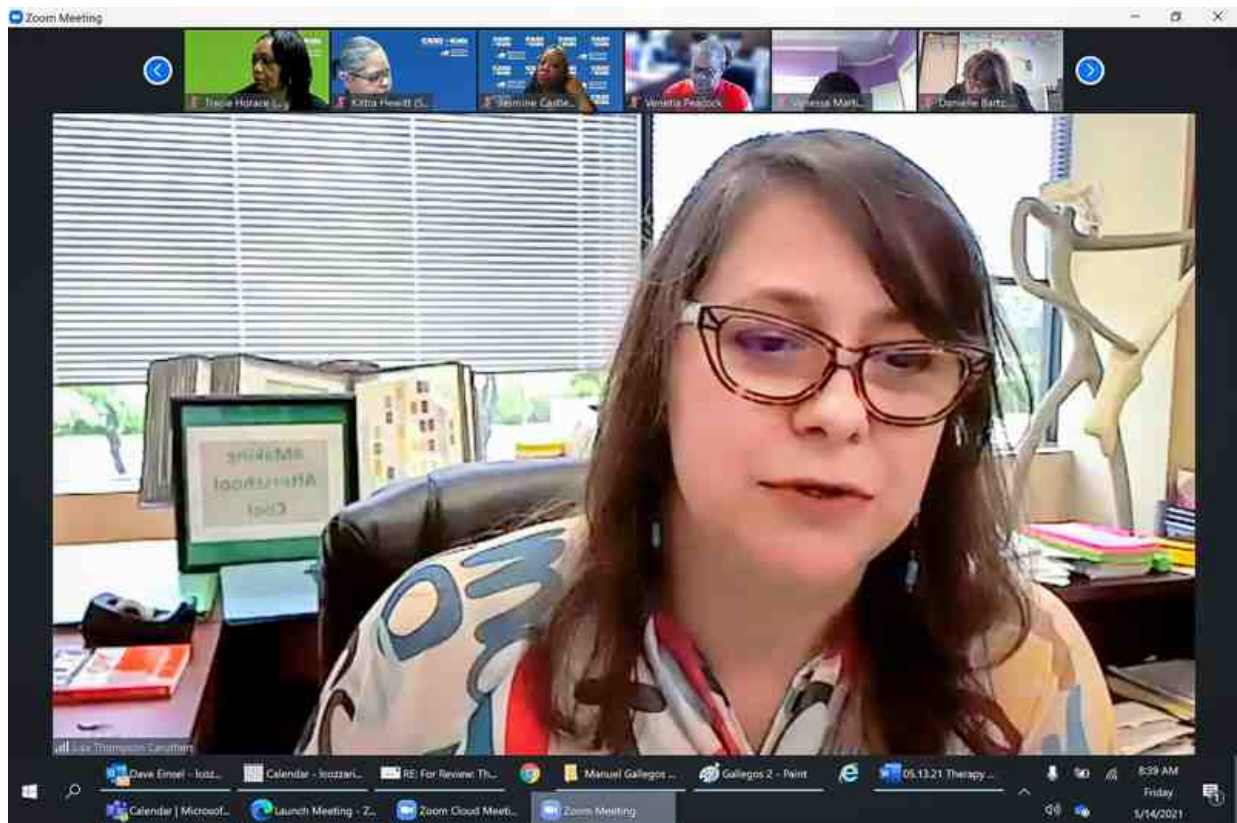
Both educators were invited to attend the Department's regular monthly board meeting on Wednesday, where the board and superintendent recognized them with awards.

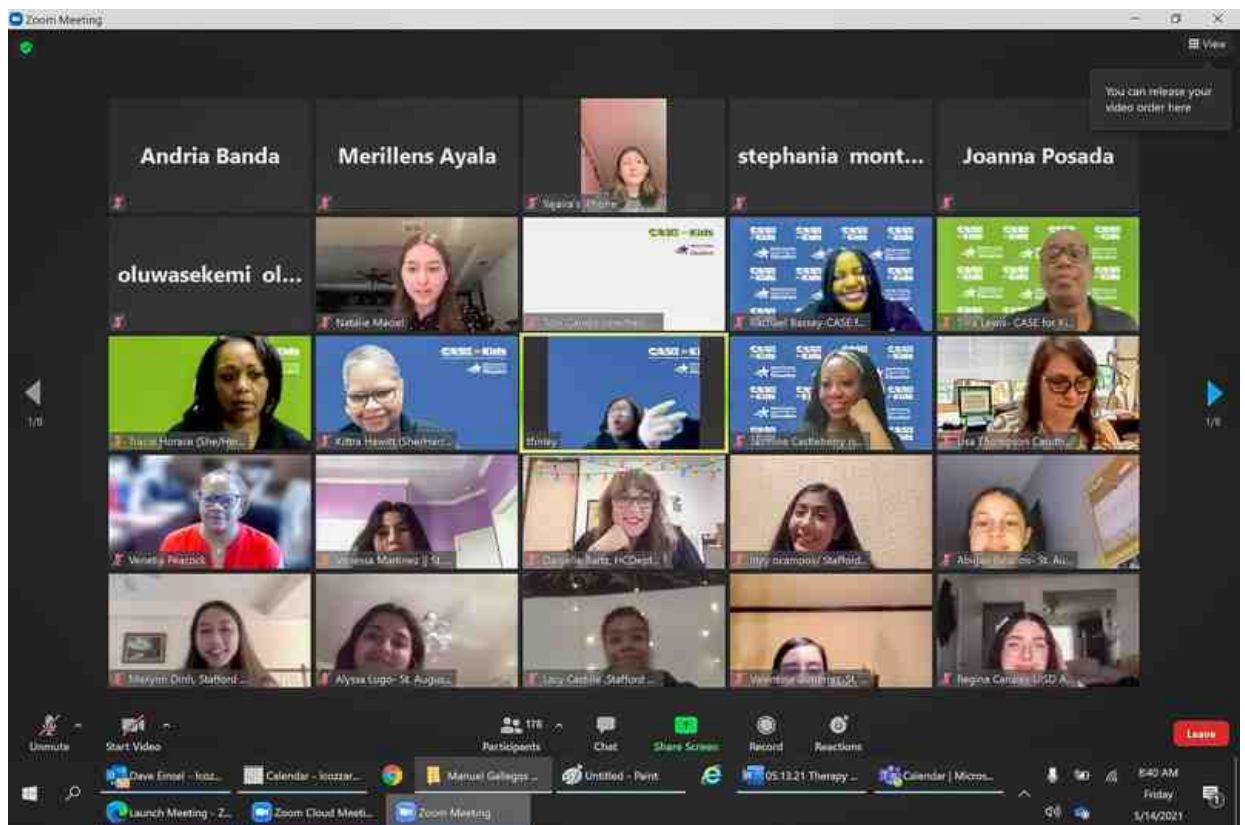
1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/20210519_board_071.jpg
 2. <https://blog.hcde-texas.org/2021/02/12/veteran-teacher-delights-in-students-success/>
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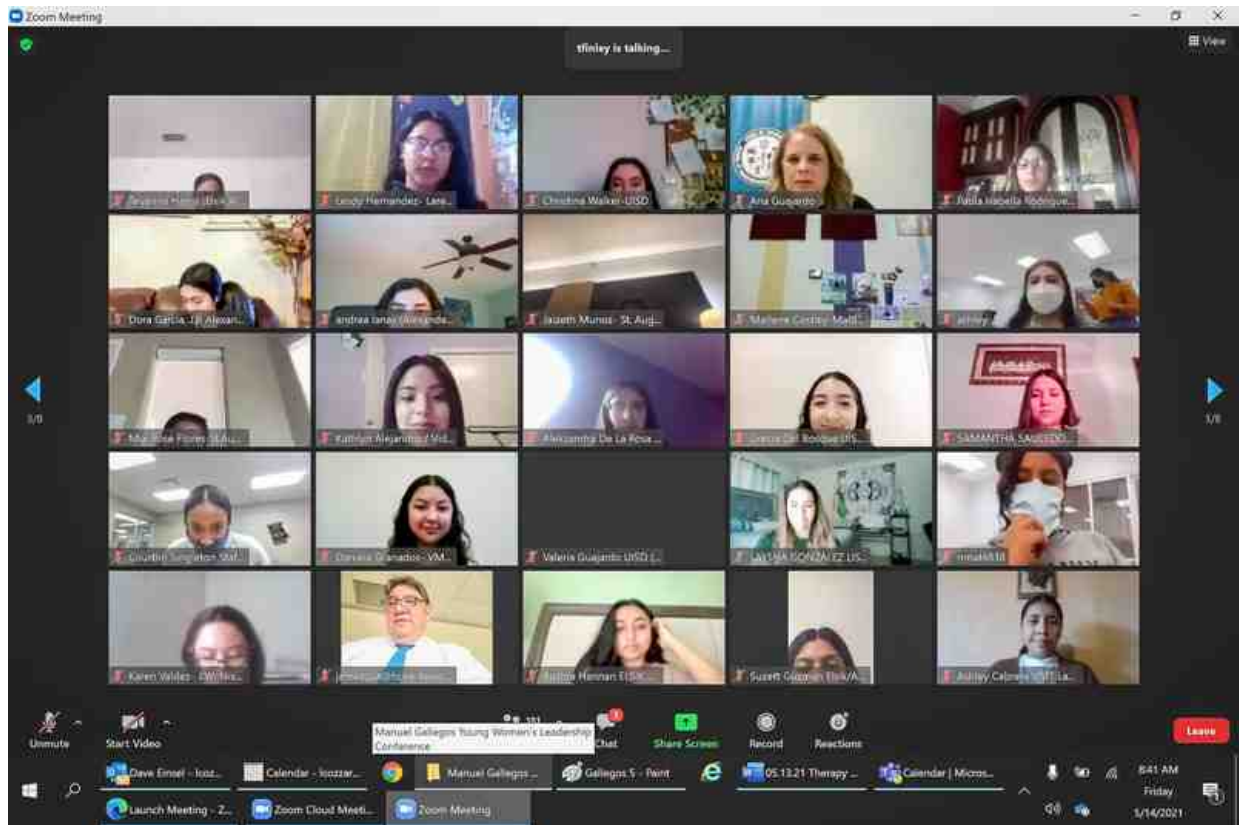
Over 180 students attend 19th annual Manuel H. Gallegos Young Women's Leadership Conference (2021-05-20 14:03)

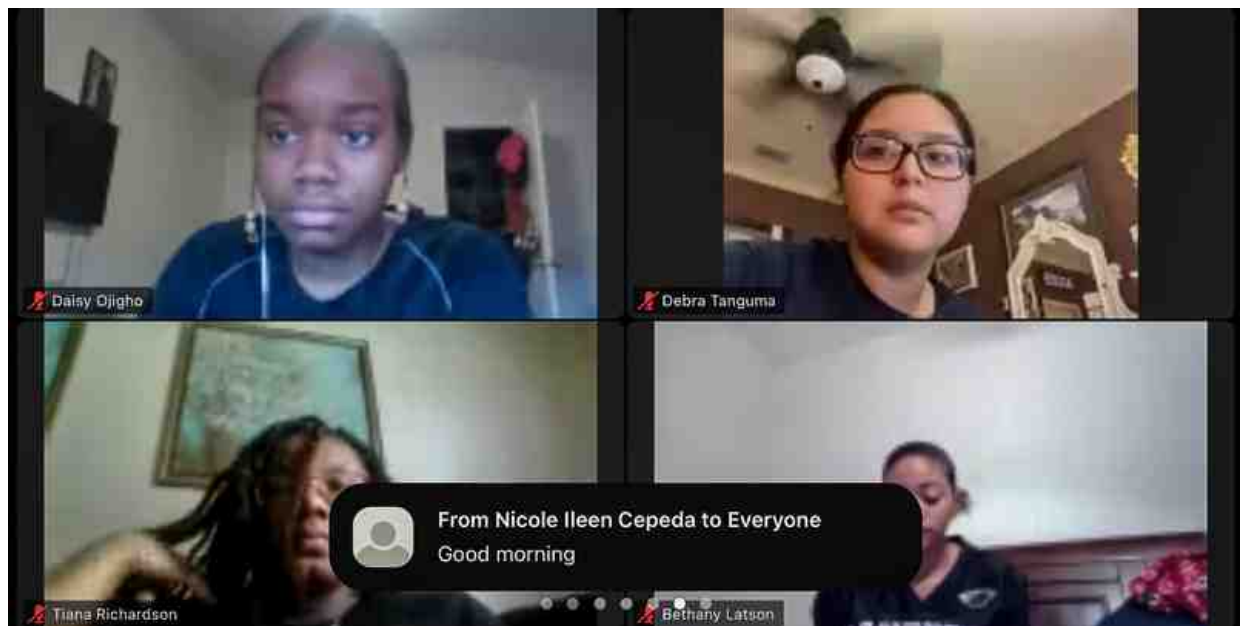
Over 180 young women from Harris County and South Texas participated in the 19th annual Manuel H. Gallegos Young Women's Leadership Conference, held virtually on Friday, May 14.

The free conference, hosted for the first time by Harris County Department of Education and organized by Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Dr. Jesús Amezcua and CASE for Kids, empowers young girls to seek leadership positions in professional environments.









“We did not have a conference last year due to Covid, but we were determined to continue this conference,” said Amezcua. “I think it’s important to provide an opportunity for students to participate in leadership activities, network, and see examples of successful community members that can be someone they can look up

to and follow their path.”

Named after its creator, South Texas youth advocate Manuel “Manny” Gallegos, the conference had historically taken place at Texas A &M International University in Laredo, Texas. After his passing, Amezcua, a former colleague, took on the responsibility of continuing the conference.

[1]



Manuel Gallegos

As a virtual event, young women in grades 9 through 12 from Harris County and across the state were able to participate, regardless of their location. Students who participated in the conference are from public, charter, and parochial schools from HCDE, Stafford MSD and Alief, Laredo, Spring Branch, United, and Houston ISDs.

Presenters included HCDE leaders Venetia Peacock, Senior Director of Head Start; Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Director of CASE for Kids; Danielle Bartz, Chief of Staff; and Celina Cereceres Miller from accounting firm Whitley Penn.

HCDE will host the Graciela Ramirez Young Men's Leadership Conference in December.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/gallegos.jpg>

HCDE student art displayed at Irvington building as part of contest (2021-05-20 14:05)



Student art projects from Harris County Department of Education's four campuses were displayed in the Irvington building Wednesday as part of a contest held by the Schools division.

In March and April, students from the Academic and Behavior Schools were tasked with decorating a t-shirt to depict their interpretation of Earth Day (April 22) or their concerns about Earth. Students from Fortis Academy were encouraged to create 3-D printed objects, and students from Highpoint School created drawings.



Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



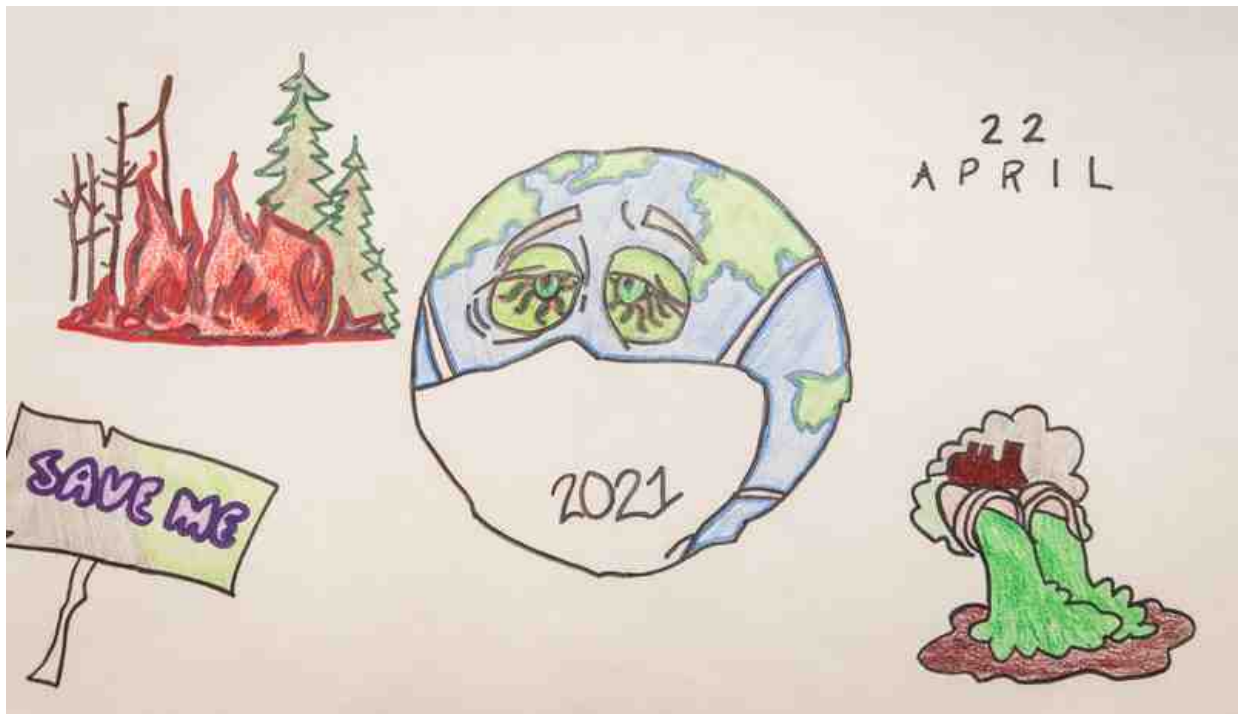
Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



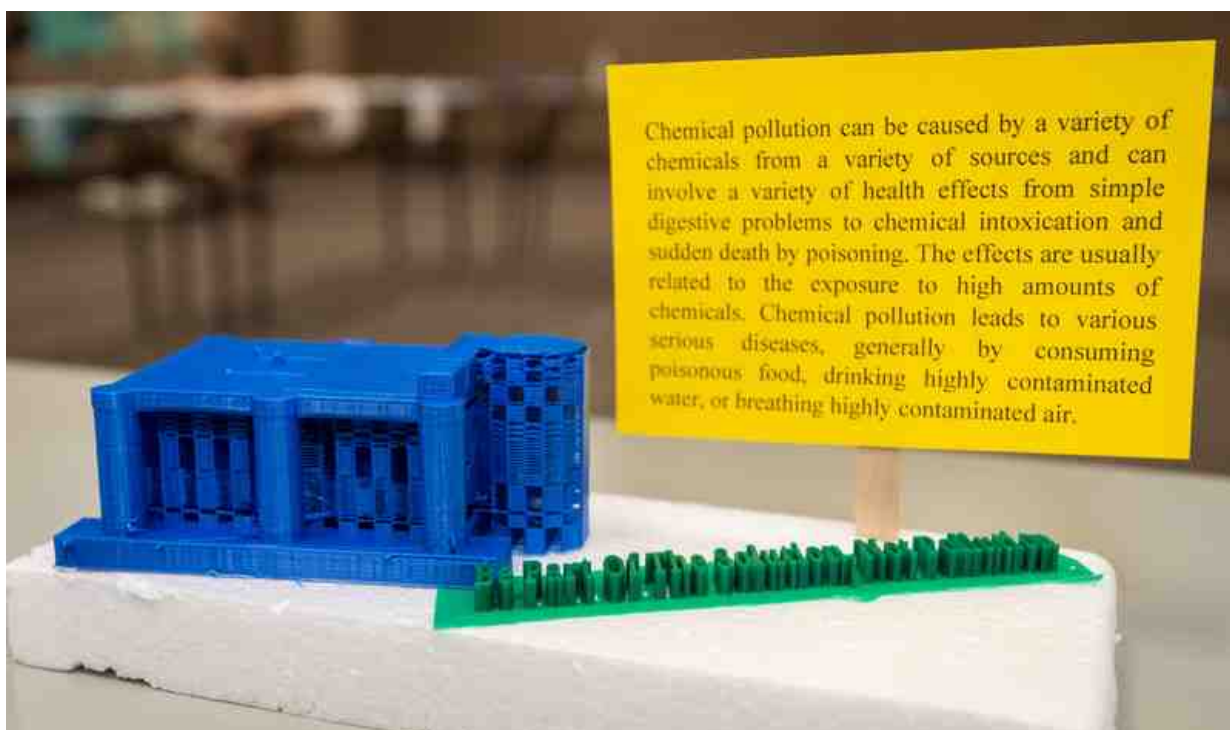
Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education Parent Engagement Liaison Gabriela Hernandez-Aguilera displays art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education trustee Richard Cantu reviews art created by HCDE Schools students in recognition of Earth Day is displayed, May 19, 2021.

Students submitted their works at the end of April, and the art was put on display in May to coincide with the May monthly board meeting.

“The students did a great job,” said contest organizer and HCDE Parent Engagement Liaison Gabriela Hernandez. “They weren’t given strict guidelines, and they showed off how they wanted to represent the idea of earth.”

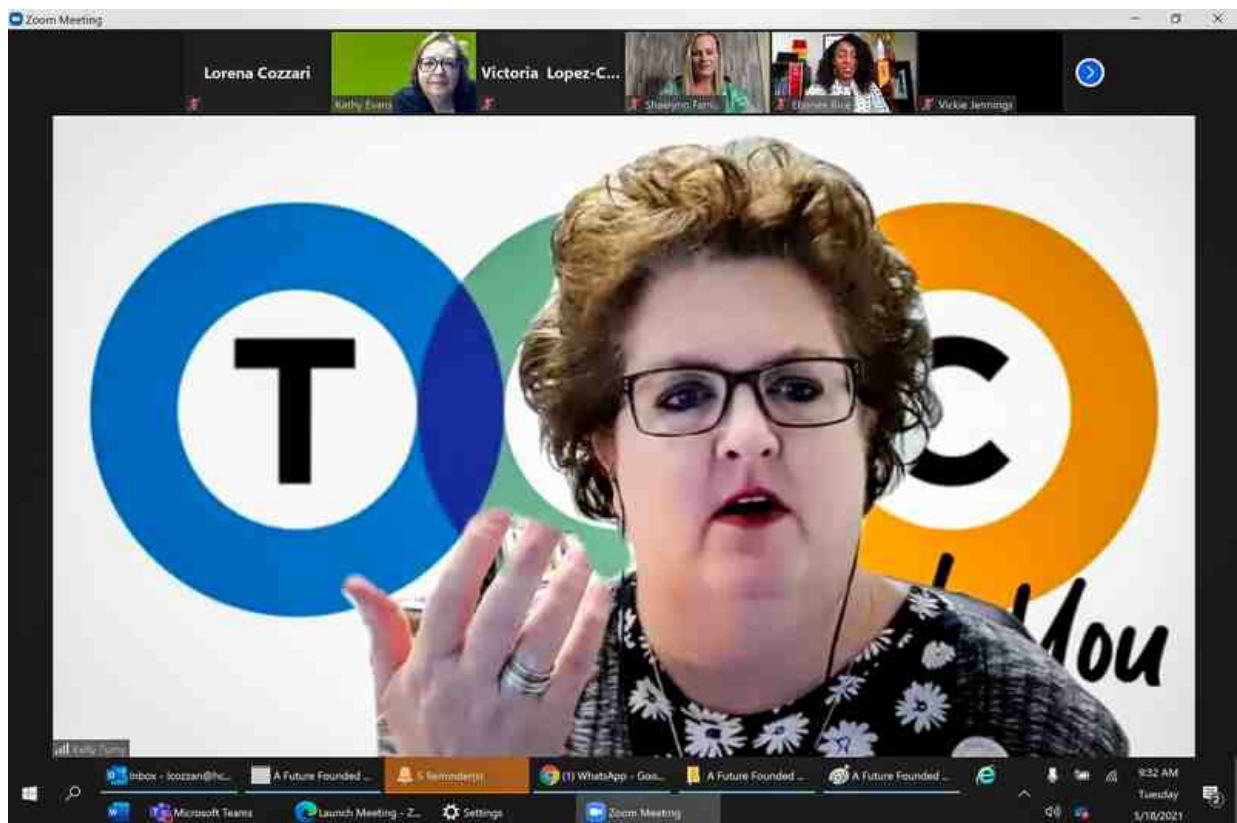
The objective of the art contest was to offer students an opportunity to show off their skills outside of the classroom and earn a reward. Hands-on activities and external learning environments support students' learning.

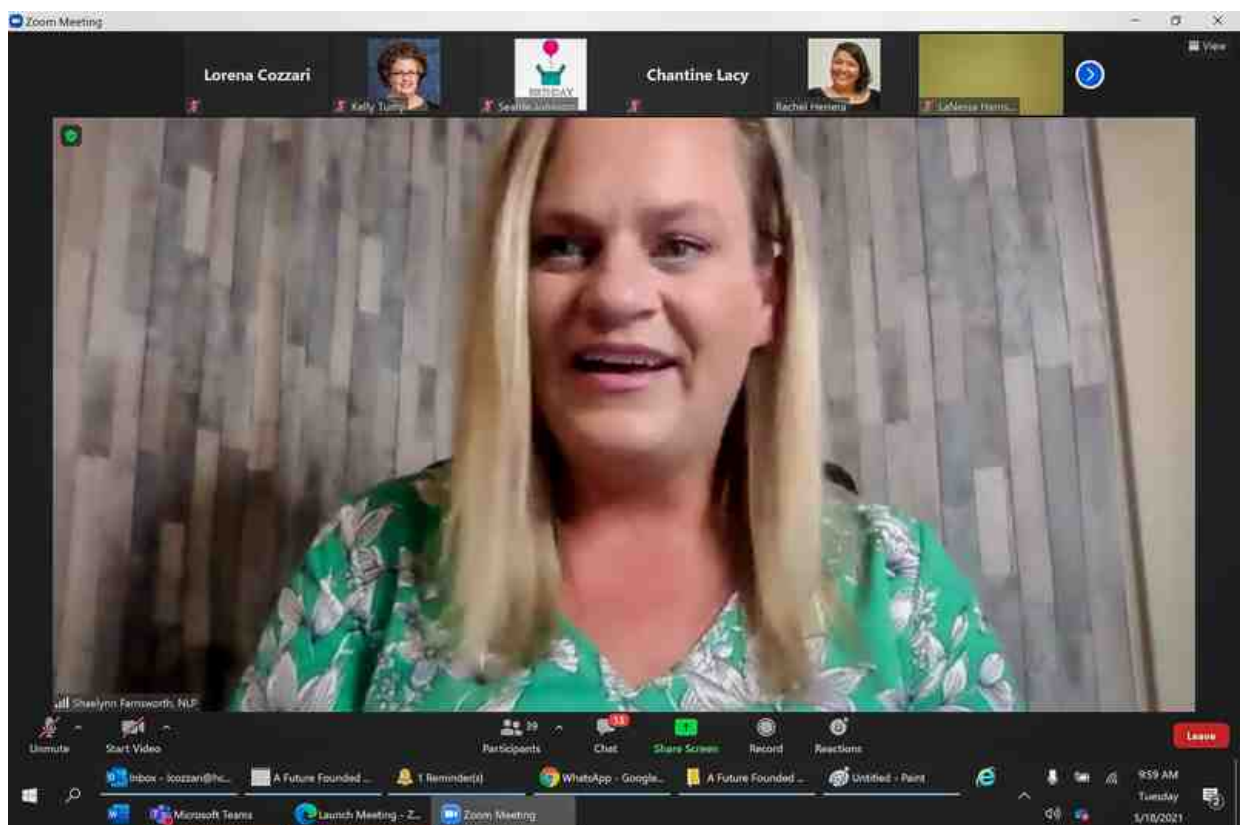
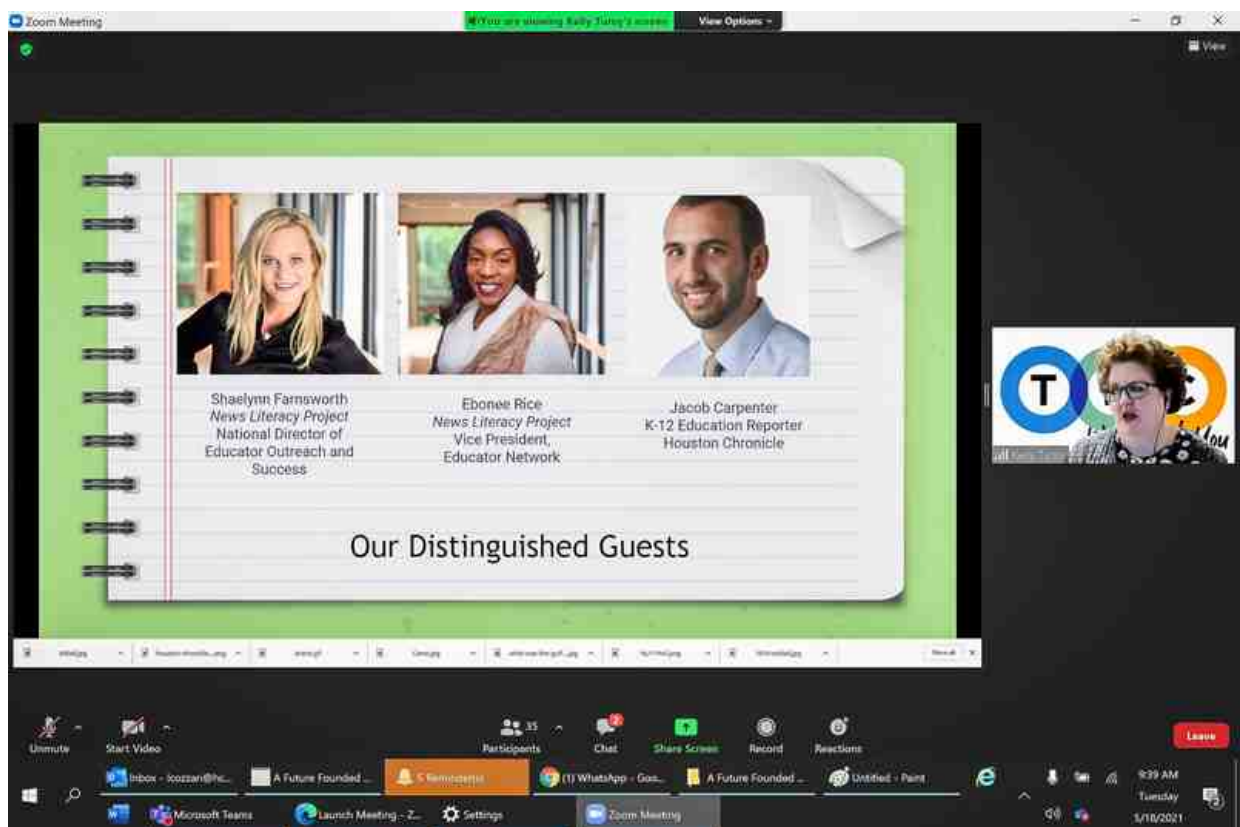
Two classrooms from ABS East, two classrooms from ABS West, a student from Highpoint, and a student from Fortis were named winners. Winners from the AB schools will be taken on field trips to the Houston Aquarium next week. Students from Highpoint and Fortis will be rewarded with a pizza party.

Educators attend workshop to support learning in the era of misinformation (2021-05-20 14:07)

On Tuesday, Kelly Tumy from Harris County Department of Education's Teaching and Learning Center led educators in a workshop focusing on the media and misinformation.

The timely workshop, hosted in partnership with CASE for Kids and The News Literacy Project, titled "A Future Founded on Facts," was designed to help educators develop strategies to help students recognize misinformation online and on social media and provide reliable resources for fact-based decision making.







“Teachers don’t always have time to curate new materials,” said Tummy, who is a News Literacy Project Ambassador and HCDE’s curriculum director for English language arts and social studies. “As a county curriculum director, I feel like it’s my job to put vetted resources in front of teachers and say, ‘Use this resource, and this is how you use it.’ By putting on this workshop, I feel like I have said, ‘this is why this resource is valuable.’”

During the workshop, participants were given an overview of Checkology, a news and media literacy learning platform created by the News Literacy Project, a nonpartisan national education nonprofit that provides programs and resources for educators and the public to teach, learn and share the ability to determine the credibility of news and other content.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational landscape has changed, and districts must now consider if and how to expand virtual learning while teachers contend with misinformation spread online.

“[The News Literacy Project] reaches a new digital component that classrooms need. Four area school districts will have a virtual school next year (New Caney, Cy-Fair, Houston, and Conroe ISD), and so this is a new digital option for teachers to put into a virtual school.”

Participants also heard from Houston Chronicle Education Reporter Jacob Carpenter, who spoke about journalistic objectivity and how he discerns what is reliable news.

Attendees included librarians, teachers, and volunteers for the CASE Debates program, which sparks and nurtures critical thinking in students.

1.6 June

Employee Profile: Hembree Uses Decades of Technology Problem-Solving To Aid Students, Employees (2021-06-10 12:46)

HCDE technology network analyst George Hembree likes to explain the complexity of his job in ones and zeros.

Everything in a computer's brain comes down to the two digits used in the binary system of counting, so it's the simplest means to explain his complex trade.

[1]



Harris County Department of Education network analyst George Hembree poses for a photograph, June 9, 2021.

"It's not easy to tell people what I do, but I usually just tell them that I make the ones and the zeros pass on the network," said the low-key, congenial employee who has worked at HCDE for nine years.

Hembree's computer experience is rooted in his military career. He joined the Army National Guard in high school and spent one summer in basic training and another

in advanced individual training, moving from infantry to artillery. In artillery training, he used computers and developed a keen interest in electronic communication equipment.

After six years of active duty and two years of inactive reserve, he became an IT contractor, installing and configuring equipment for both military and civilian support.

“I did not serve in the Iraq war directly, but I was there starting in 2003 supporting the troops that were serving as warfighters,” he said. “I lived through many attacks from rockets, mortars, bombs and gunfire but did not fight.”

As a senior network engineer, he installed and configured equipment for both the military and civilians, including radio towers and antennas.

“Communications is a big deal in a war zone,” he said. “I thank God every day that I made it home safely.”

In the Middle East, Hembree met his current boss as they worked together in Kuwait, HCDE ITS Operations Manager Chris Hoesel. They’ve stayed connected as co-workers and friends over the years. Hembree let Hoesel know about a job opening at HCDE, and the rest is history. Hembree even stood at his friend’s side at his wedding as his best man.

“George is the epitome of professionalism in his field,” Hoesel said. “I always admired his insatiable thirst for knowledge and the need to improve his technical ability through experience, training and love of the job.”

Helping the students HCDE serves is particularly humbling for Hembree, he said. He also believes each employee is his client and is avowed to help all his customers be more productive through IT services.

Hembree is married to Yaritza Roman in the HCDE Purchasing Division. The couple are parents to five children and one dog. As a private pilot, Hembree shares his love for travel and aeronautics with his family.

"I took my family to the SpaceX facility in Starbase, Texas, a few months ago to see the Starships and spaceport," he said.

As his boss, Hoesel says he can always depend on Hembree to be a team player. He has helped the IT team persevere through disasters ranging from Hurricane Harvey to the winter freeze to the pandemic, keeping HCDE on track with computer operations.

"I can rely on him 100 percent when things go south," Hoesel said. "We're all fortunate to have George as part of this team and hope he receives the recognition he truly deserves."

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/20210609_hembree_011.jpg

Stafford MSD students “take flight” with new drones (2021-06-10 13:26)

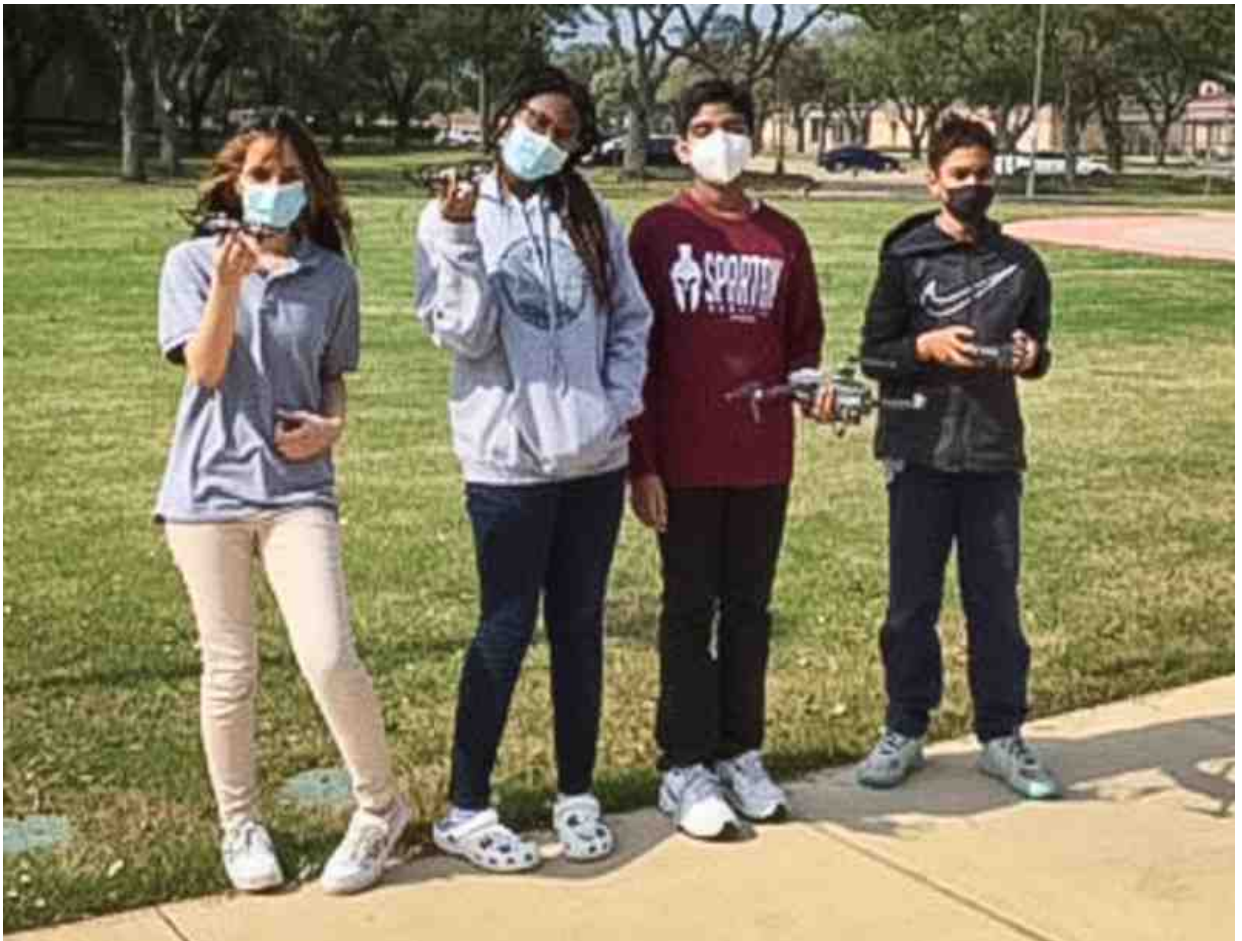


Stafford Middle School students participating in the school’s STEM, drones, and robotics program finished the school year with new equipment.

Stafford Municipal School District, which received both first- and second-round Education Foundation of Harris County Partners in Education grants, used second-round funds to expand their STEM program and purchase additional drones.







The second grant of \$9,377 positively impacts the ability of approximately 15 middle school students to engage in math and science by allowing them to learn how to operate commercial-grade drones.

With their new knowledge, students teamed up with the yearbook club for photography projects. Program leaders report high participation rates. In addition, many students are exploring possible training on AutoCAD software, a computer-aided design and drafting software used by architects, engineers, graphic designers, project managers, and other professionals to create two- and three-dimensional models. AutoCAD is widely used, and it helps in preventing product failures and warranty issues.

Students learn safety, maneuvers, flight rules, situational awareness, and managing the advanced features of the drones. More importantly, students learn the drones' real-world applications, including traveling to inaccessible areas, transporting items, and aerial filming. As a result, students have started to explore the importance of the

FAA drone license and have developed career aspirations as drone operators.

HCDE senior director of therapy services leads practitioners in workshop during statewide conference (2021-06-10 14:02)



School-Based Therapy Services

Nearly 500 occupational and physical therapists working in school-based environments from across the state attended the 2nd biennial Texas Occupational Therapy Association's (TOTA) OT and PT Service Delivery in Schools: Policy, Research, and Best Practices conference virtually on June 4-5.



School-Based Therapy Services

TOTA is the state-run professional association for occupational therapists in Texas. The conference, hosted by TOTA's School Focus Group Advisory Board, was held for the first time three years ago and was postponed last year because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Carie Crabb, Harris County Department of Education's senior director of school-based therapy services, serves on TOTA's School Focus Group Advisory Board and led participants in a session to discuss Section 504 – a federal civil rights law banning disability discrimination in public schools. Crabb provided an overview of the history behind the law, recent changes to the law, and how those changes have impacted eligibility.

"This was an opportunity to make an impact and help therapists who work in school-based practice all over the state of Texas who don't necessarily have a Harris County Department of Education like our therapists do to keep them up on best practices," said Crabb. "It was an honor to present alongside state and national leaders in special education and school-based therapy practice."

HCDE Therapy Services Manager Leah Alba and physical therapist assistant Nora Contreras, assigned to Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, served as panelists in a session that examined the importance of providing therapy in natural contexts. Gloria Frolek Clark, an occupational therapist, also spoke and is a national leader in school-based practice.

Other notable event speakers included Justin Porter, Director of Special Education for the Texas Education Agency; famed special education attorney Jim Walsh; nationally recognized occupational therapist and speaker Yvonne Swinth; and Susan Effgen, a nationally recognized leader and researcher in pediatrics and school-based practice.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/therapy-logo.jpg>

CASE for Kids Coordinator Izaguirre takes, then gives back through afterschool (2021-06-16 16:52)



Afterschool activities became the change agent for a timid, young boy named Adrian Izaguirre, who grew up in a low socioeconomic neighborhood in southeast Houston.

The 27-year-old is a program coordinator for City Connections at the Center for After-school, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids). Izaguirre helps facilitate grants in 11 Houston City Council districts to nonprofits that provide afterschool programs for at-risk, urban youth.



Adrian Izaquirre poses for a photograph, March 5, 2018.



CASE City Connections, February 4, 2019.





A jovial Izaguirre wears a natural smile as he works with people from all walks of life. He navigates complicated contracts with ease. He uses his people skills to network with elected officials and a bounty of nonprofit afterschool service providers.

No one today would call Izaguirre reluctant or bashful but rather fluid, lively and resourceful.

“I was a shy kid, but when I reached high school, I grew out of it a bit,” he said. “I was asked to share my afterschool experiences, and it helped me create a voice for myself which I carried on from high school to college to my current career.”

Still, it is afterschool which has been the constant in his life since second grade as he stayed after for tutorials. In middle school, he was diagnosed with adolescent type 1 diabetes. Through afterschool, he learned healthy eating habits and found sports.

By high school, he was enlisted as a CASE Ambassador through a high school afterschool program, which built leadership skills at Chavez High School in Houston ISD.

When CASE for Kids Director Lisa Thompson-Caruthers met Izaguirre, he was the featured youth speaker at a national conference, the Afterschool Alliance Breakfast of Champions in Washington, D.C.

“He was a confident young man who was interested in serving as an advocate for afterschool and sharing his experiences while honing his voice and making a difference in the world,” she recalled.

Izaguirre earned a scholarship to the University of North Texas in Denton and majored in radio/TV. He remained attached to afterschool endeavors and was named an innovative afterschool mover and shaker in the “30 Under 30” awards through the National Afterschool Association.

Once he graduated, he was recruited for the CASE for Kids City Connections job.

“He is civic-minded and great for City Connections,” Thompson-Caruthers said. “He makes sure both sides are being supported, from the elected city officials to supporting the nonprofit clients receiving the funds.”

As the challenges of the pandemic ensued, Izaguirre helped afterschool service providers transform their in-person programs into virtual offerings and communicated the opportunities throughout the council districts.

Manager Mary Glover recalls how Izaguirre helped approximately 70 service providers post their links and lessons online so that children and their families could get the resources they needed.

“This provided immediate online learning to the thousands of children registered in the City Connections programs,” she said.

A few months shy of his fifth anniversary with HCDE and CASE for Kids, Izaguirre is taking on a new challenge as he accepts a job at NALEO Education Fund. NALEO provides national leadership on key issues that affect Latino participation in the political process, including immigration and naturalization, voting rights, election reform, the Census, and the appointment of qualified Latinos to top executive and judicial positions. From helping his constituents with issues ranging from voting rights to naturalization to health issues, Izaguirre knows his experience with CASE for Kids and afterschool has served him well.

“I learned how to create great relationships with community and local government, which is not always an easy task,” he said. “You have to knock on doors and make them your friends.”

What he will miss most about his job at CASE for Kids are the kids. From theater performances to rocket launches to homework tutorials, the kids made it worthwhile, he insists.

“I believe a lot in afterschool because it helps kids expand their horizons,” he said. “I lived it. I know it works because it worked for my classmates and me.”

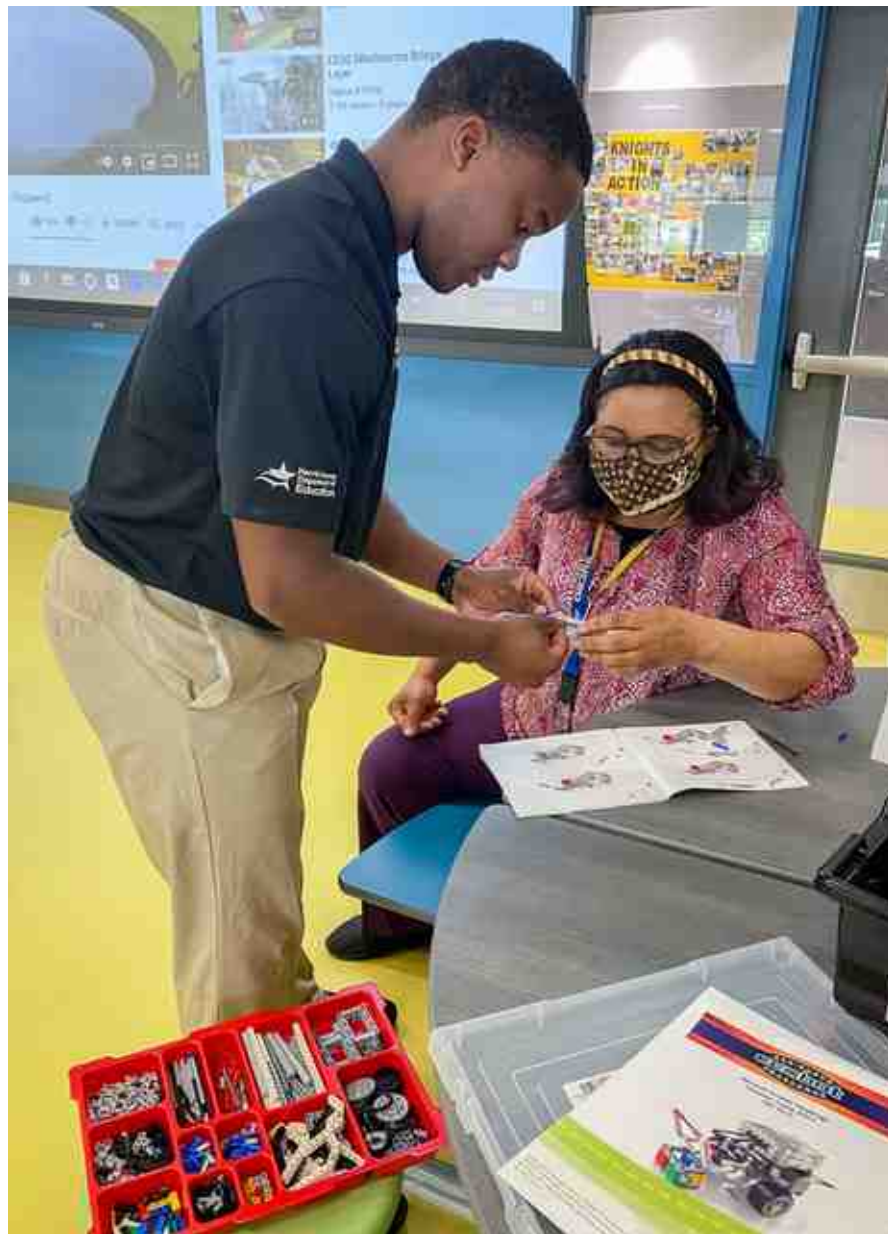
5 things you might not know about CASE for Kids employee Adrian Izaguirre:

- Proud to be the “dad dog” to six chihuahua-mix breeds.
 - Since 2017, the huge Astros fan has attended all the post-season games, including the World Series.
 - He has been dating Iris Lopez for five years (and she loves to accompany Adrian and his dad Jose to the games).
 - Serves on the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Alumni Committee to recruit rodeo scholarship recipients as future volunteers.
 - Currently volunteers as promotions coordinator for the Go Tejano Rodeo Committee.
-

First-ever Ecobot Challenge hosted by ABS West taking shape (2021-06-17 16:54)

Harris County Department of Education is gearing up for the first-ever Ecobot Challenge Robotic Competition hosted by Academic and Behavioral School West in collaboration with CASE for Kids.









The challenge, which began this week, will offer approximately 47 students with intellectual, developmental and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorder, and other significant health impairments enrolled at ABS West the opportunity to build, code, and learn to maneuver Lego Mindstorms EV3 robot kits.

Students from the fourth grade to age 22 will participate in seven teams, which will compete against one another in the culminating Ecobot Challenge Day at ABS West at 12:30 p.m. on July 15.

Over the next month, the students will work on the robots while following a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) curriculum. For each lesson they complete, the teams are awarded points.

Historically, the Ecobot Challenge is held during the school year for student teams from Harris County school districts. The students, who attend traditional public schools and do not have special needs, work on their robots throughout the school year leading up to a Challenge Day during the spring semester.

This summer's Ecobot Challenge will be the first time that special needs students enrolled at ABS West will have the opportunity to participate in the popular STEM-focused competition.

Courtney Waters Named Principal of Highpoint School East **(2021-06-24 11:44)**

Harris County Department of Education proudly announced Courtney Waters as the new principal of Highpoint School East during the June regular monthly board meeting.

Waters, who served the last three years as the assistant principal at HCDE's Highpoint School, brings over 25 years of experience in education. A proud Prairie View A & M University graduate, she holds a Bachelor of Science in interdisciplinary studies and a Master of Education in curriculum and instruction.



Courtney Waters poses for a photograph, June 24, 2021.

Prior to working for HCDE, she worked for multiple district administrations, including San Diego City Schools, Spring ISD, and Cy-Fair ISD in roles ranging from district behavior support specialist to assistant principal. She also spent multiple years as a life skills teacher and behavior adjustment class (BAC) program teacher for Houston ISD and a resource teacher and positive approach to student success (PASS) teacher for Galena Park ISD.

When asked what drew her to her original position at Highpoint, Waters shared the

school and its mission hit close to home. The school is centrally located in her community. Not only is she familiar with many of the students and families it serves, but she approaches them with the empathy gained through personal experience.

“I have always desired to work with students with behavioral challenges because they remind me of myself,” she said. “I feel connected to my students on many levels. My personal experience serves as the catalyst for the work that I do.”

Genuinely invested in the growth and success of both students and staff, Waters aims to create a climate and culture that supports both. She said she hopes to develop a fully comprehensive service delivery model that addresses the needs of the whole child.

“Highpoint will be known for restoring and reforming our young scholars by way of preparing them for a more productive future in a safe and loving environment,” she said.

What most excites Waters about this role, however, is the opportunity to change lives and be in the prime position to lead those efforts.

“Everything that I have done the last 25 years has prepared me for this moment,” she said. “I consider myself to be a change agent who is passionate about saving lives. All of our children matter, and I want to make sure that every student who enters our building leaves with a better vision, attitude, and path for their future.”

Waters is a mother to two children, Taylor and Xavier, and contributes much of her success to her family for supporting her every step of the way.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/20210624_waters_014_r.jpg

In a first, CASE Debates team takes top prize at 2021 National Speech & Debate Championships (2021-06-24 12:09)

For Rodrigo Trujillo, it was the perfect culmination of his high school debate career—taking top team honors at one of the largest and most prestigious debate championships in the United States.

Not only that, it was the first time ever that a CASE Debates team took top honors in the World Schools Debate event at the 2021 National Speech and Debate Championship.

[1]



Rodrigo Trujillo, Diego Castillo, Ebenezer Appiah, and Anthony Hoang attend the 2021 National Speech and Debate Championship, held virtually.

“Debate taught me that if you do not prepare or do your research, you’re probably wrong,” said Trujillo. “When we finally won first place, it felt relieving, like all of our hard work, determination, and passion was finally being recognized by the world.”

Trujillo and his teammates from Alief ISD’s Elsie High School’s speech and debate team—Diego Castillo, Ebenezer Appiah and Anthony Hoang—wowed the judges with their rebuttal, or “opposition” as it’s known in debate leagues, to the belief that the benefits of expanding the U.S. Supreme Court outweigh the harms.

Elsik's Space City Violet beat out 219 teams from the United States, China, and Canada in the World Schools Debate event.

The event's format combines prepared topics with impromptu topics, encouraging debaters to focus on specific issues rather than debate theory or procedural arguments.

Harris County Department of Education funds debate for inner-city youth through CASE Debates, an afterschool collaboration between HCDE's Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids) and the Houston Urban Debate League (HUDL).

Tournaments scheduled throughout the year give teens the access and opportunity to compete locally and nationally. Teams who win HUDL competitions at the local level receive funds to pay for entry fees, meals, and transportation to national competitions.

Through CASE Debates, a free program for students, debaters receive training and access to coaches. More importantly, CASE Debates offers them the opportunity to build self-esteem, expand their horizons, meet other like-minded students locally and nationally, and creates scholarship opportunities.

"Without a single doubt, debate has played a crucial role in preparing me for a future in government and education through strengthening my research skills, broadening my academic horizons, and deepening my interests in sociology and government," affirms Trujillo. "Debate did an amazing job at growing my confidence, but more importantly, it humbled me."

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/case-debates-1-2-1.jpg>

You may see ones and zeros, but Rizwan Hussain sees a way forward for students (2021-06-30 17:33)

Where most see numbers, Rizwan Hussain sees a map to the past, present, and future.

“Data tell a story,” he said. “When you research and look at the data, there are always new insights you didn’t have before.”

Hussain, a research coordinator for the Harris County Department of Education Research and Evaluation Institute (REI), turns data evaluation into an art form. He is currently the lead on the Texas Data Dashboard Project, an REI special project commissioned by HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr., which compiles information on students, teachers, schools, and superintendents together in a comprehensive visualization that highlights disparities and areas of need.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxK_xgRuJLo

Dashboard data visualization is a well-known and popular concept among research and evaluation professionals and teams. It is a widely incorporated practice because of its usefulness in making sense of large amounts of data and drawing attention to areas that indicate errors, needs, and progress.

During Hussain’s time at the University of Punjab in Pakistan, where he is from, he took a sincere interest in public policy.

“Public administration is so vast as a field. I love it,” he said. “I loved studying about policies and how they impact populations. I always read the reports and [learned] how they impacted different sectors of society.”

He ultimately received a Bachelor of Science in Marketing Research with a minor in Public Administration before earning a Master of Public Administration from Texas Southern University.

After graduating, Hussain sought to work for a public sector organization. Searching for the right position, he came across an opening with HCDE in the summer of 2019. It was a perfect fit, he shared, highlighting that the job description matched not only his portfolio but what he felt he needed in a job.

[1]



Rizwan Hussain poses for a photograph in his office on June 30, 2021

REI Director Darlene Breaux illuminates just how well-suited Hussain is to the work her team is entrusted with.

“If there is an assignment, he is going to work extremely hard to ensure he gets it done and gets it done right,” she said. “He actually seeks feedback and he goes on his own to seek additional training. Many of [the trainings] happen after hours or on his own time, but he does it to better himself, which I find very impressive.”

Breaux went on to describe how Hussain has been instrumental in the ongoing Texas Data Dashboard Project. When the initiative was first commissioned to REI, no one on the team was trained in dashboard visualization. However, all members received training during the work-from-home period last year. By the time the team returned to the office, Hussain had already strengthened his own skills through additional professional development, which he applied to his work.

To Breaux, Hussain is a “great example of the type of employee directors would love to have.”

“He may not be the lead on a project, but you would never know,” she said. “He’ll seek out additional resources, and he always comes prepared with additional ideas and suggestions. Ultimately, he always tries to ensure the end product is better than what we thought it would be.”

REI provides needs-based and other research-based services for HCDE and surrounding educational communities so HCDE and school districts can utilize data to plan and strengthen programs, making them more cost-effective and tailored to specific research goals. A few recent research projects include “Restorative Justice? A Brief Overview” and “Priorities in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).”

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/423a5104.jpg>

GED student Madison overcomes health, academic roadblocks along the path to success (2021-06-30 17:37)

Rhanda Madison's quest to earn her GED was anything but easy. The determined grandmother started her journey five years ago, dealing with setbacks along the way.

Already in remission from multiple sclerosis, she suffers from congestive heart failure and now has a pacemaker. In addition, she is a cancer survivor. Several years ago, she was attacked by a pair of pit bulls who broke and mauled her leg. She received 187 stitches to repair the damage.



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Still, nothing could stop Madison from realizing her dream and proving to her children and grandchildren that education matters.

Madison enrolled in Harris County Department of Education GED classes in Baytown during the 2017-18 school year. She passed the social studies and science sections but failed reading and math. With remediation, she passed reading, but math was her Achilles heel. After four attempts and many hours of practice and instruction, she passed her math test this year.

She credits her cadre of GED teachers and strong faith in God for helping her through her journey. As she continues her education at Lee College in Baytown, she reflects on the people and experiences that helped her succeed.

“Don’t ever think you are too old to accomplish your goals,” said the 57-year-old mother of three and foster mother to 23 children. “It’s never too late to dream. I just put God first and he lights the way.”

Teacher Elsa Kleiman remembers her untraditional student’s struggles with math in both in-person and virtual classes after the pandemic hit.

“Learning math took every bit of determination she had, but she never gave up on her goal,” said Kleiman, a veteran teacher of 46 years who retired and came to teach math at HCDE 10 years ago. “She wanted to be validated as both a mother and a learner.”

The model student sat in the front row, focused on the prize and encouraged other classmates to never give up, Kleiman related. She was so impressed with Madison that she nominated her for the National Adult Education Honor Society, an elite award given to select HCDE students each year.

“She would tell us about her foster kids and her grandchildren,” she said. “She was very proud of her three children because they were all professionals and had good careers. She had taught them to value education.”

Madison had dropped out of high school three months before graduation after finding out she was pregnant.

“I gave into peer pressure,” she said.

As she enrolled in math class 38 years later, she likened algebra to learning a foreign language.

“Math was the most challenging thing I have ever done in my life,” Madison said. “Even with my extensive health struggles.”

Of conquering equations and word problems one by one, Madison admits to being “a lot of scared.” With the help of patient teachers, copious notes and extensive study sessions, she prevailed.

On April 21, 2021, everybody on Facebook knew that Rhanda Madison had received her GED. Her prized Mother’s Day gift in May was a bracelet with three charms: a mother, a grandmother and a diploma.

“I’m a great notetaker, and the next day I gave all my notes to a classmate who hadn’t passed the test,” she said. “I asked her to return them so we could pass them on to the next GED student who needed them.”

She encourages other late-life achievers to never give up on their dreams.

“I’m living my best life right now,” she said. “I’m happy, and it’s going great.”

For information about free upcoming adult education classes at HCDE, go to [1]www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education.

1. <http://www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education>

Iola Duncan (2021-07-01 17:26:58)

This is a beautiful testament of the benefits of hard work and dedication. Congratulations on your success!!

Rosalind Howard (2021-07-03 21:45:45)

Great job!! I’m so proud of you!! ☺ and still standing in your corner..☺☺

Reynaldo Mendez (2021-07-27 19:44:59)

Buenas tardes estoy interesado en el curso de ged en español mi esposa es Maricruz Mendez y esta tomando clases de ged y quisiera que me tomaran en cuenta para el curso ya que

quiero superarme gracias por su atencion.

HCDE-Texas (2021-08-05 10:05:28)

Hola Reynaldo, para inscribirse, por favor comuníquese con nuestra division de educación adulta por teléfono 713-692-6216 or por email a AdultEd-Recruitment@hcde-texas.org. También puede visitar nuestra página web, www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education. ¡Gracias!

1.7 July

Harris County Commissioners present first-ever County Connections Youth Summer Initiative awardees with checks (2021-07-01 11:35)

Over the past two weeks, Harris County commissioners from all four precincts presented checks to County Connections Youth Summer initiative awardees during ceremonies held at Harris County Department of Education's North Post Oak office.

Nonprofits offering engaging summer activities to sites across the county submitted proposals in early May for the grant created in a partnership between Harris County and the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids).



Precinct 3 Commissioner Tom Ramsey joins Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert and members of the Board of Trustees during an awards event for County Connections, July 1, 2021.



Precinct 1 Commissioner Rodney Ellis joins Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert and members of the Board of Trustees during an awards event for County Connections, July 1, 2021.



Precinct 4 Commissioner R. Jack Cagle joins Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert and members of the Board of Trustees during

an awards event for County Connections, July 1, 2021.



Harris County Commissioner Adrian Garcia meets grantees of the CASE for Kids County Connections grants, June 24, 2021.

“We developed County Connections to ensure that our children, especially those in traditionally underserved communities, have opportunities to thrive this summer through social, emotional and educational enrichment,” said Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis. “In the past year, families experienced sickness, job loss, and uncertainty during the pandemic, and this had a major impact on children who were dealing with these challenges while trying to learn. I am incredibly proud of all of the organizations that received grants through this program that will be providing fun and educational programming for the children of Harris County.”

More than \$600,000 were awarded to over 50 nonprofits in amounts ranging from \$3,500 to \$20,000. The awarded nonprofits will offer programming through Aug. 15, assisting nearly 2,000 families of children in elementary through high school.

The diverse activities offered include fine arts, academic enrichment, college exploration, and youth mentoring. Grant awardees will also provide synchronous or asynchronous college and career readiness initiatives for older youth delivered

virtually through the CASE for Kids LevelUp online learning platform.

View the full photo gallery of the awardees [1]**here**, and the complete list of County Connections grant awardees [2]**here**.

1. <https://hcdetexas.photoshelter.com/gallery/2021-CountyConnections/G0000ciHyWrdVWBE>
 2. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/cms/lib/TX50000649/Centricity/Shared/Afterschool%20Zone/CASE%20for%20Kids/2021-County-Connections-Award-List.pdf>
-

Highpoint student gets ultimate wish-list item from HCDE teacher: adoption (2021-07-09 11:53)

Three years ago, HCDE Highpoint School student Isaac Devin Courtney was in reading class with teacher Maria McLean, stuck on an essay topic that would end up changing his life.

The topic was “what do you want for Christmas?”

“He said that he could not get what he wanted for Christmas because he was too old,” McLean said, recalling the raw conversation.







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When McLean suggested the seventh grader talk to his parents, he shrugged.

“That’s just it, I don’t have parents,” he said. “I live in a group home. All I ever wanted was a family that wanted me.”

Today, Isaac is in high school, ready to begin the 10th grade, and he has a new last name, Courtney-McLean. After fostering Isaac, the Highpoint teacher and her husband, John, invited him to join their family of eight children, 30 grandchildren and 29 great-grandchildren.

“The finale was Nov. 30, 2020,” said McLean. “The adoption was final, and Isaac is our permanent son.”

McLean worked at Highpoint School for 11 years before retiring this summer. Highpoint is a school for troubled and adjudicated youth who come from their home schools

to address behavior issues. Classes are small, and students work to catch up on their academics and behavioral problems. Students typically return to their home schools.

“At Highpoint, teachers honestly care about the kids and form relationships with them by reaching out to them or being open and real when students do the reaching out, and students do a lot of that on our campus,” McLean said. “Students come first on our campus. They are the reason why we are here.”

Highpoint Principal Courtney Waters witnessed the heart that McLean had for her students. Often students would return to visit her, a sure sign of the impact she made upon them.

“She possesses a certain nurturing spirit that lets her students know that she genuinely cares about them, and she will do everything in her power to advocate for them,” Waters said.

McLean remembers the class clown whom she saved after he got wound up in an encounter with another teacher. As the pair walked down the hall, she asked the young man to hold her hand, and some of his anger dissipated. Five years later, she was in the local library when she heard someone shout, “Hey grandma!”

The student and his pregnant wife rushed toward her with wide smiles, and he was in a military uniform.

“You’re the one,” his wife said. “He said you talked to him often, but you listened as much as you talked and always told him that only he had the right and responsibility to control himself... He said you’d always be his special grandma.”

Even though Isaac is McLean’s adopted son, he prefers to call her his grandma, an endearing name she earned from many Highpoint students. Isaac now has a large, extended family who loves him.

“Now I have my own room and get to play sports, and I am in Taekwondo,” he said.

Like most teens, the 16-year-old has a sloppy room and must respond to the demands of his parents, who ask him to straighten it, feed the dog and take out the trash.

"I just grew, I guess," he said.

Thanks to Highpoint School and the big hearts of two adults Grandma and Grandpa, Isaac now has his Christmas dream come true.

Recovery high school Fortis Academy welcomes new principal
(2021-07-09 11:55)



An unconventional school requires a multifaceted leader, someone with a caring, service-orientated nature. Travita Slay Godfrey brings those qualities to her new role as principal of Fortis Academy, where she will use her counseling experience and leadership skills to guide the school recovery community—students, their families, and her school staff.

Counselors and teachers team up to help students at Fortis Academy, who come from their home schools for individualized recovery and academic programs. A low student-to-teacher ratio is a hallmark of the high school.

[1]



Travita Godfrey poses for a photograph, July 6, 2021.

Godfrey brings an extensive background in counseling to her new role at Fortis Academy. The former coordinator of secondary counseling at Humble Independent School District has vast experience and certifications in youth behavioral intervention.

“Ms. Godfrey is an innovative, forward-thinking leader,” said Dr. Charles Ned, director for Harris County Department of Education’s Schools Division. “She has an outstanding record of success in maximizing the effect of social-emotional, behavioral and academic programs so that all students reach their maximum potential.”

After receiving her undergraduate and graduate degrees at Dillard University in New Orleans, Godfrey went on to earn a Master of Education in Counseling from Houston Baptist University.

The 22-year educator began her career in Teach for America as a science teacher in Houston Independent School District. She served as a lead counselor in Clear Creek ISD and career and technical education specialist, and college and career readiness coordinator in Goose Creek Consolidated ISD. In 2010, she gained her principal certification.

While in college, she developed an affinity for working with at-risk youth. She mentored a young girl in Big Brothers Big Sisters of America whose parents were in and out of prison and rehab due to drug addiction.

“It affects the whole family because the (family) structure is broken,” she said.

Oftentimes families compensate by enabling the child they are trying to save, she said. Recognizing and discontinuing the cycle of enabling is key to student and family recovery.

Godfrey acknowledges the “wear and tear” that addiction can have on school staff, and one of her priorities is to keep up the morale of the professionals at Fortis.

“People who haven’t been in the world of addiction might not understand the cycle of addiction,” she said. “It’s not zero to 10 but sometimes zero to 0.1—it’s very difficult and challenging.”

Godfrey says she hopes to create a safe, supported space at Fortis where all feel valued.

“My goal is for students to see Fortis as a place where [students] learn the skills to live out their dreams and become the best version of themselves,” she said. “As principal, I hope that others will see me as someone who leads with empathy and speaks from the heart.”

5 Things to Know about new Fortis Academy Principal Travita Slay Godfrey:

- She’s the oldest of four children.
- The married mother of five has children ranging from 13 to 32 years old.
- She parents two miniature schnauzer fur babies.
- Traveling with her hubby, she likes to experience new cultures and cuisines.
- She loves word-search puzzles, reading and listening to music.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/20210706_godfrey_008_4x5-1.jpg

Victor m villatoro (2021-07-15 15:04:21)
Para Ingless clases

HCDE-Texas (2021-08-05 10:06:18)

Hola Victor, para inscribirse, por favor comuníquese con nuestra division de educación adulta por teléfono 713-692-6216 or por email AdultEd-Recruitment@hcde-texas.org. También puede visitar nuestra página web, www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education. ¡Gracias!

Tech-loving student competes in first-ever All-Earth Ecobot Challenge hosted by ABS West and CASE for Kids (2021-07-20 09:36)

For tech-savvy special education students like Cameron King, the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge hosted by Academic and Behavior School West in collaboration with the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE for Kids) is a summer learning game-changer. This competition is the first time that special needs students enrolled at the school have the opportunity to participate in the popular STEM-focused challenge.

[1]



Cameron King at ABS West's All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Day on July 15, 2021.

“It’s made him enjoy the summer program more,” said Cameron’s mother, Tanya King. “It’s given him something new to do and [is] a different challenge rather than [the typical] classroom routine.”

For the last month, nearly 40 students from the fourth grade to age 22 have worked together in teams to assemble, code, operate and maneuver Lego Mindstorms EV3 robots. The teams spent this final week preparing to face off in the much-anticipated All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Day on Thursday.

Both Cameron’s mother and teacher shared that the incoming twelfth-grader, who is on the autism spectrum, has an affinity for computers, researching, and consuming informative tutorials and technical videos.

“I call him our computer student,” said ABS West life skills teacher Angela Ugo. “He is very good with electronics and computers, so when we introduced this project, [those skills] really helped him.”

Cameron’s true love, however, is airplanes. His mother explained how he spends time researching flight schedules at different airports, types of aircrafts, and their purposes. Thus, it was no surprise to teachers and peers when Cameron naturally assumed the befitting role of “pilot” for his Ecobot team. Though he was slightly apprehensive, Cameron expertly maneuvered his team’s robot through the challenge mat, a floor covering with a designated route that teams must successfully guide their robot through.





Hands-on projects like the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge lend several benefits to participants, but especially for life skills students in the summer when school hours are shorter and peer interaction is limited.

Though the project follows a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) curriculum, staff agree that it also utilizes many soft skills ABS West curricula help students develop, including creativity, collaboration, and communication.

Ugo describes the sense of pride she feels to see Cameron cooperating with—and even leading—his peers.

“Just watching them work with each other is very rewarding,” she said. “I hope to see projects like this in the future.”

Cameron’s mother, too, noted this change, believing the experience has strengthened his friendship with his classmate.

“It seems like a good opportunity for any child to be able to participate in building teamwork skills, but especially kids at schools like [ABS West] who may struggle working with others,” she said. “I think it’s brought them closer, working as a team.”

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/dsc9554a.jpg>

Gaylynn Sanders (2021-07-21 12:52:25)

I am so proud of our ABS West ESY Team. It is no surprise that our staff and students "Rocked the Earth Ecobot Challenge!" As I say, "EXCELLENT!"

ABS West's inaugural All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Day caps off with big smiles (2021-07-20 09:40)

On July 15, Academic and Behavior School West celebrated the culmination of the school's very first All-Earth Ecobot Challenge with a Challenge Day.

Seven student teams faced off on the challenge mat to accomplish specific tasks on a competition table. For each task completed, teams were awarded points. All forty students received a certificate of participation and the top three teams received medallions.













Joe Paneitz, the curriculum director and game designer for the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, has been involved with the competition for over ten years.

“It’s surreal [to see these students], he says. “It’s really exciting and a bit emotional because it’s been a rollercoaster of emotions and learning experiences getting to know the kids. You start to build a relationship with them and it’s exciting to see them smile. I’m seeing kids smile today, I’m seeing them get high-fives, and for this population, that is gold.”

The All-Earth Ecobot Challenge for general population students will proceed next school year with a recycling theme.

Gaylynn Sanders (2021-07-21 12:54:35)

I am so proud of our ABS West ESY Team. It is no surprise that our staff and students "Rocked the Earth Ecobot Challenge!" As I say, "EXCELLENT!"

HCDE's first-ever School Equity Boot Camp illuminates the path for educators (2021-07-20 09:46)

Last week, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools hosted its first-ever School Equity Boot Camp, a 4-day, in-person workshop series for educators designed to provide them with a framework to impact school safety and culture positively.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7oH55tx_Pk

"We hope to have made better educators this week," said HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. "Equity is an issue and a topic that we've talked about for quite some time as public [school] educators. We know that nationally, there's a disproportionate number of a specific demographic of students that tend to get suspended from school and get expelled. We hope that educators get a better perspective on how to address inequities in public education and be able to help the juveniles that they may come in contact with."

Nationally recognized speakers Cami Anderson, Paul Forbes, and Devon Horton, Ph.D., led forty educators and juvenile detention case managers from Harris County school districts, the University of Houston, My Brother's Keeper, and Harris County Juvenile Probation Department in intimate discussions addressing inequity, implicit bias, social-emotional learning, mental health, school discipline, restorative justice, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

The seminar, held at the historic Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, is a continuation of efforts in Houston and Harris County in recent years to address implicit biases in school discipline.



Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert, Jr. speaks at an Equity Bootcamp held at the Buffalo Soldier Museum, July 13, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert, Jr. speaks at an Equity Bootcamp held at the Buffalo Soldier Museum, July 13, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert, Jr. speaks at an Equity Bootcamp held at the Buffalo Soldier Museum, July 13, 2021.

“Equity is so complex,” said C.J. Rodgers, HCDE assistant superintendent of education and enrichment, who attended the boot camp. “There are a bunch of different meanings. People interpret it in a bunch of different ways, and it can also be very polarizing. I’ve seen teachers and principals who are struggling. Our kids are bringing all of [the childhood trauma stemming from inequities and hardships in their lives] to school, and they are dropping it at the feet of our educators. And in some cases, we just aren’t equipped and trained to handle that. We owe it to our kids to successfully educate them and prepare them for the world that they are getting ready to enter to

be global citizens.”

For Richard Evans, a caseworker at the Harris County Leadership Academy, a secure youth residential facility overseen by the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, a framework to address inequity means having the tools to help troubled youth.

“I’m a restorative justice trainer and practitioner. It’s important that teachers and all of the people who are stakeholders in working with our kids are all on the same page,” says Evans. “For us, everybody needs to know what the moving parts of restorative justice and restorative circles are so that everyone understands what the “assignment” is.

The “assignment,” he says, is rehabilitation.

“By attending this boot camp, we are hoping to get information on how to quell anger, deal with behavior issues, and encourage behavior modification so that kids have an opportunity to talk through what their issues are so they don’t have to continue to feel like everything needs to be handled with fists and guns.”

Teen Debaters Use Virtual Summer Camp to Hone Art of Persuasion

(2021-07-20 09:56)



Newbie debate student Emily Reyes is impassioned about issues like human rights and equal access for students with special needs. Her teachers encouraged her to attend the Houston Urban Debate League (HUDL) Summer Debate Institute this summer to better understand the fundamentals and basics of debate.

The weeklong camp funded by the nonprofit HUDL and supported by Harris County

Department of Education's CASE Debates program provides beginner to advanced support for area high school debate students. HUDL has operated the camp for 14 years, and the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids, or CASE for Kids, became a camp collaborator four years ago. The camp has been virtual for the past two summers.

[1]



Emily Reyes

Reyes, a spunky Dobie High School sophomore in Pasadena ISD, is banking on the

188

benefits of the virtual camp as she joins her school debate team next year.

“My teachers told me [debate] will help me in speaking and correlating my thoughts better for writing essays,” she said. “I’m grateful that I got to be a part of this camp.”

CASE Debates provides the yearlong debate program at Reyes’ school and will support up to 300 students in Harris County with debate services during the 2021-2022 school year. While HUDL supplies debate services in Houston ISD high schools, CASE Debates provides services in other area districts. Approximately 70 students from six districts and three charters are being served through the summer camp.

Toni Candis, CASE Debates project coordinator for HCDE, says CASE for Kids and HUDL used last year’s virtual camp prompted by the pandemic to make this year’s even better. Past attendees completed questionnaires about sessions. Less time is spent on lectures, and more hands-on experiences are offered through group activities, labs and special assignments. Afterhours, students have the option to participate in bingo and trivia games.

“We include lots of interaction,” Candis said. “Students go in breakout rooms and have time to share ideas and get to know one another.”

Four camp instructors and interns are former students in the CASE Debates program who are on summer break from college. Ahmad Howard, a graduate from Spring ISD, attends the University of Chicago. Rodrigo Trujillo from Alief ISD attends Bradley University. Mohammed Hemeida from Spring ISD goes to Columbia University.



Queen Eche

Queen Eche, an Alief ISD grad who is attending Dartmouth College, is teaching the advanced class on the Policy Debate style and serves as a cross-examination lab instructor.

The rising sophomore at the Ivy League college believes debate helped her get into her dream school. She is a member of the Dartmouth Debate Team, which won the national debate tournament this year.

“I gained valuable communication and writing skills through debate,” said Eche, who is co-editor of the Black Praxis Magazine at Dartmouth.

By giving back to youth at the camp, Eche hopes to share her passion and expertise with both novice and experienced teen debaters.

“These kids are amazing and know who they want to be in debate,” she said. “Explaining something to them and seeing them get it is just so rewarding, much more than winning a debate round or getting a trophy.”

Eche knows firsthand that debate makes teens smarter and more empathetic. Cultivating her logic and writing skills has helped her maintain a straight-A status as a Dartmouth freshman.



Chinh Le

Spring Branch ISD student Chinh Le is spending his second year at the virtual camp. The rising junior studies World Schools Debate and is becoming more proficient at transferring his knowledge into persuasion.

Le wants to attend Stanford or Columbia universities and become a lawyer to help others.

“Overall, debate helps me not only in speaking but also with research,” he said. “I’ve learned about problems with the environment, and I want to make a positive impact on my community.”

CASE Debates provides support for debate at his school along with access to CASE Debates tournaments. For that, Le is grateful.

“Even if you don’t think you like the idea of debate, pursue it,” he said. “It offers you the opportunity to network with other people and could really change your life and how you view the world today.”

For information about CASE Debates, go to [4][hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone](https://www.hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone).

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/emily-reyes.jpg>
 2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/queen-eche.jpg>
 3. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/chinh-le.jpg>
 4. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone>
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Former ABS East student transforms his life through the game of chess

(2021-07-20 15:29)



Many are familiar with the game of black and white squares, pawns, knights, kings, and queens, but only those who know it well understand its many benefits. Chess is played around the world and celebrated on July 20, International Chess Day.

When it comes to this renowned sport's advantages and integral life lessons—patience, fairness, and discipline—few can exemplify them more perfectly than 16-year-old amateur player and coach Michael Carley.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6yujnCyDkQ>

Michael, a former HCDE Academic and Behavioral School East student and incoming 194

eleventh-grader at Huffman ISD's Hargraves High School, struggles with behavioral challenges that stem from a mild form of autism spectrum disorder. Through his introduction to chess at ABS East, Michael has developed the tools and discipline which aid him in processing emotions and external variables.

Michael has come a long way from a difficult transition to the classroom. His mother, Brandy Pinson, recalls an emotional time when he was "hardly able to make it through a day" due to what she describes as severe emotional disruptions and combative outbursts. During first grade, his struggle to adjust to a classroom setting led to his enrollment at ABS East. After five years, Michael was re-introduced to his home school, but the change of environment still proved to be too difficult.

"He was only there for a couple of weeks before I started getting the calls [from the school] again," said Pinson.

Michael soon returned to ABS East, where he spent another three years. It was during this time when he developed a love and talent for chess. It was not long before Michael's teachers and family recognized a change in him.

"Once he started playing chess, we noticed a significant improvement in his ability to deal with stressful situations," said Pinson. "He developed patience and redirection. It was a complete 180. That's when I thought, 'Okay, he's ready.' He had learned all of those skills and problem-solving strategies from chess, and that's when I realized that [chess] basically saved his life."



• Academic and Behavioral School East student Michael "Jake" Carley poses for a photograph before the second round of the North/Central Texas Scholastic Chess Championship March 10, 2018.



• Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert plays chess

with a student during a tournament between ABS East and ABS West, May 22, 2019.



Michael Carley holds a trophy from the annual Schools Division chess tournament at ABS West, May 28, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert plays chess with Michael Carley during a tournament held at ABS West, May 28, 2021.

Today, Michael is as devoted to the game as ever. He now beats his coach, who taught him how to play, regularly competes at the state and national levels, and enjoys teaching younger students as a United States Chess Federation (USCF) Level I Certified Chess Coach.

The skills and strategies Michael learns from the game make him more successful on the chess board and in the classroom. Ultimately, chess is what helped Michael transition back to his home school in Huffman ISD.

Though Michael is a member of his school's chess club, it does not currently host competitions or events, so his family makes a roughly 60-mile round trip to a community center across town nearly every Saturday to take him to chess practices.

Pinson shares that she and Michael feel strongly about bringing more opportunities to learn and compete in chess to their school district and the northeast Houston area. While Michael currently coaches other students at the community center where he practices, he hopes to eventually coach one-on-one.

“I thought, ‘How cool would that be.’ He could start working with the kids over here and helping them [develop their skills].” she said. “I saw what it did for my son, and he might save another kid. This is something that anybody can do, and it teaches them the life skills that they use to grow and develop into problem-solving adults.”

Michael has his eyes set on his future, and chess is a big part of it. He plans to continue competing and teaching but also hopes to use his love of the game to earn college scholarships. Though Michael is still undecided about his area of study, he is considering architecture and medicine. Pinson believes whatever he chooses, he will succeed because of what he’s learned from the game.

This weekend, Michael will compete in the USCF 2021 U.S. Class Chess Championships in Houston. When asked how Michael would celebrate International Chess Day, Pinson says he will likely spend it how he spends most summer days—playing chess and honing his strategy.

Back-to-school tips for parents of special education students (2021-07-28 10:28)

The start of a new school year is a busy time for all parents, but even more so for parents of students with special needs or learning disabilities. As you waded through the sea of back-to-school tasks, here are a few tips to help you start the year off right:

[1]



Back-to-school tips for parents of special education students

Review your child's IEP

The individualized education program (IEP), or 504, is the cornerstone of your child's education. The IEP is the product of your meeting with your child's teacher, therapists, and other relevant school professionals. You discussed your child's needs and how to meet them, came to an agreement, and signed a formal plan for the next school year.

Review the agreed-upon accommodations and how they will be applied, and make sure they are still relevant to your child's needs. If you're unsure, contact the school about holding an IEP review meeting. Also, be sure to note when the IEP expires and if your child is due for reevaluation this year.

Organize paperwork

With special education comes many meetings and often substantial paperwork of which to keep track. If you haven't already, try creating a binder or folder to keep meeting notes, calendars, documentation, and other information in sequential order. Keep a calendar of school events and activities, meetings, and conferences and work on it with your child to model calendar-keeping skills. Set a time to organize daily—even if it is only five minutes in the evening—and designate a place in your home for paperwork and school items.

Start a communication log

Keeping a written account of all phone calls, e-mails, meetings, conferences, and notes sent home from your child's teachers is useful when it comes time to review your child's individualized education program (IEP). Keep your communication log accessible, and be sure to note the dates, times, and nature of the communications you have regarding school matters.

A great way to ensure frequent communication is to provide a quick checklist that goes back and forth with your child every day. Ask simple yes/no or short-answer questions that the teacher or aide can answer while your child gets ready to go home. For example:

- Johnny ate his lunch (yes/no)
- Janey earned stickers for good behavior in _____
- Billy had trouble with _____

Relieve back-to-school jitters

Talking about changes and the upcoming school year can help reduce some of that back-to-school anxiety! Talk to your child about exciting new classes, activities, and events they can participate in during the new school year. If attending a new school, try to schedule a visit before the first day. Help your child learn where their classes and lockers are if they have them. Discuss transition periods between classes as well as to and from lunch or school.

With older students, it is sometimes helpful to explain the services and accommodations in their IEP, so they know what to expect when school begins.

Connect with your child's teacher

You are your child's best advocate and support, so be sure to introduce yourself to their teacher and other staff who will be working with them. If you can, set up a meeting before school starts, but always take advantage of school events. Provide your child's teacher with information on your child's strengths, challenges, and tools to help them. You know best how to help your child stay calm and focused, manage difficult transitions, or interact with peers. However, let everyone know that you are available to talk and willing to consider options. Make it known that you are eager to be included in your child's educational experience. Provide your child's teacher with your preferred method of contact ask about the best way to connect with them.

Keep everyone informed

It is important that you and the school communicate early and often. If there is anything that you feel is important to share with the staff working with your child before school starts or during the year (concerns, changes, questions about the IEP), don't hesitate to contact them. The more proactive and honest you are, the better equipped the school staff will be to meet your child's needs.

Stay involved

Take advantage of opportunities to help you and your child get a feel for the school, teachers, staff, students, and families, such as Open Houses, parent nights, and parent-teacher conferences. Share positive information about working with your child with teachers, family members, and friends to teach your child to recognize personal strengths and positive traits within themselves.

Get plugged in

Being knowledgeable about your child's IEP and their learning disability can help you become a better advocate for your child. Subscribe to local newsletters and special needs community forums to stay in the know about events, legislative updates, training opportunities, family stories, and more.

Check out these great resources:

- [2]Texas Parent to Parent Newsletters
- [3]University of Houston Parent Education Project: Resources for Families and Children with Disabilities
- [4]Houston Family Magazine: Houston Area Special Needs Resource Guide

The more you know, the more prepared you will be to navigate the world of special education and successfully advocate for your child.

For additional back-to-school information and resources, visit the links below:

[5]Students with Learning Disabilities: Back to School Tips

[6]11 Back-to-School Tips for Parents of Children with Special Needs

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/backto1.png>
 2. <https://www.txp2p.org/resources/newsletters>
 3. <https://uh.edu/education/pep/resources/>
 4. <https://houstonfamilymagazine.com/family-wellness/houston-area-special-needs-resource-guide/>
 5. https://ldaamerica.org/lda_today/students-with-learning-disabilities-back-to-school-tips/
 6. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/back-to-school-tips-to-help-children-with-special-needs-4145702>
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HCDE, Education Foundation of Harris County partner to offer \$200,000 in classroom supplies for teachers (2021-07-29 14:00)

[1]



Tools for Teachers: Supplementing Success

Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) and the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) have partnered to create Tools for Teachers, a program designed to support Harris County independent school district teachers with classroom supplies for the start of the 2021-2022 school year.

Starting Monday, Aug. 2, up to 2,000 Harris County public school teachers will be able to register for a \$100 coupon from EFHC that can be used to purchase classroom supplies through a local online vendor. The \$100 credit will be offered on a first-come, first-serve basis. In total, the EFHC will offer \$200,000 for this initiative, which the HCDE Board of Education allocated from its annual budget. The program aims to mitigate the personal costs teachers incur as they purchase materials necessary to set up their classrooms for the first day of school.

"Teachers are facing very long hours, taking on the needs of all of their students, and reaching into their own pockets to sustain their classrooms," said HCDE Trustee Andrea Duhon, who represents Precinct 3. "A program like this will not only positively

affect the teachers that are receiving these supplies, but it's going to affect the students in those classrooms and the community surrounding them."

Eligible teachers who register will receive an email with a coupon code and instructions for buying the supplies online. The credit may not be used towards furniture, electronics, or clothing.

To qualify, educators must register with a valid work email from a Harris County independent school district. Teachers from charter schools, private schools, or schools outside of Harris County are not eligible for the credit.

Purchases over the \$100 credit will be the responsibility of the individual teacher. All supplies will be shipped directly to the teacher's school free of charge. Items will not be shipped to a residential address.

Eligible teachers may register from Aug. 2 to Sept. 7 at [2]hcde-texas.org/ToolsForTeachers.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/tools-for-teachers_background-01.jpg
 2. <https://hcde-texas.org/ToolsForTeachers>
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CASE for Kids seeks creative candidates for afterschool programs

(2021-07-29 18:06)

The Harris County Department of Education Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids) hosted an interview fair Tuesday to fill open grant-funded positions for its 2021-2022 afterschool programs. From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., staff reviewed the qualifications of several applicants with confirmed appointments in addition to walk-ins.







This week's interview fair is the first of two, the second of which is scheduled for Thursday, Aug. 5, to fill 30-50 part-time positions in which employees will work directly with students. Applicants participated in a typical interview session followed by an activity-based evaluation. Each applicant received a set of instructions and a few items with which they planned and presented a five-minute lesson. Interviewers scored the candidates on the age-appropriateness, active engagement, and creativity of their presentations.

"Most of the kids we're working with on this grant are older—sixth grade up to high school," said CASE for Kids Assistant Director Trina Finley. "So, we need to make sure the folks we bring on can think outside the box and get creative with the materials they have."

In addition to the part-time positions, CASE for Kids seeks two full-time regional program coordinators and eight project coordinators to manage the daily operations of the afterschool programs at its 10 partner campuses in school districts across Harris County. These campuses include two elementary schools, six middle schools,

one high school, and one charter school serving sixth through tenth-grade students.

The positions are funded by the five-year, 2021-2022 Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Texas ACE Cycle 11 grant. CASE for Kids applied for the grant in January and received its full ask of \$1.5 million. While the division also received funding from all the previous 21st CCLC cycles, Cycle 11 lends new opportunities.

“This grant will be different for us because we are hiring the site coordinators this time,” said CASE for Kids Assistant Director Jesselyn Arceneaux. “Normally, our district partners listed on the grant application hire the site coordinators, and we award those districts funds to pay them. We’re excited to bring them on and load them up with training.”

Site coordinators work closely with each campus’ administration to ensure their afterschool programs are fully operational and aim for the full potential of afterschool enrichment.

Cycle 11 also allows CASE for Kids to award each of its 10 afterschool campus partners roughly \$40,000 to hire teachers for tutorial services.

“Academic assistance is going to be a big deal for all of our campuses due to COVID-19 [setbacks],” she said. “A lot of our campuses are really concerned about learning loss and are using tutorials to help remedy some of that [loss].”

Arceneaux further explained CASE for Kids’ efforts to supplement tutorials and expand its reach through this year’s afterschool programs.

“The program itself will [supplement] whatever the campus has established with their tutorials and try to add new enrichment opportunities for the students,” she said. “CASE is trying to do a lot of project-based learning so that the kids can create something they can talk about with their friends, their communities, and people within their schools.”

For more information about CASE for Kids, visit [1]hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone.

1. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone>

Early Head Start construction expansion making progress

(2021-07-29 18:14)

Construction to expand Harris County Department of Education's Early Head Start program is making progress.

Three existing Head Start campuses—Humble, Barrett Station and La Porte—will be outfitted with new or renovated facilities to accommodate the youngest learners in Harris County. The Early Head Start program, which serves infants and toddlers under the age of 3, is tailored to provide intensive, comprehensive child development and family support. The Early Head Start program is also a program that allows infants and toddlers under the age of 3 to seamlessly transition into the Head Start program, which serves 3- to 5-year-olds.



Workers installing sheetrock at the La Porte Head Start campus.

At the Humble campus, Head Start classrooms are currently housed in 2 existing pre-manufactured buildings on the property of the Journey of Faith United Methodist Church. Under the Early Head Start expansion, an additional pre-manufactured structure will be assembled specifically to accommodate 4 Early Head Start classrooms.

Currently, two classrooms in the Journey of Faith United Methodist Church are being used to accommodate Early Head Start students. Once construction is complete, the new modular building will accommodate 32 Early Head Start students. Architectural firm English & Associates is currently in the schematic design phase of this project. Construction is anticipated to begin in early 2022.

Harris County Precinct 2 has partnered with HCDE to expand the Barrett Station campus and create Early Head Start facilities. Precinct 2 generously donated \$350,000 to HCDE to complete this project, allowing HCDE to fill a gap in the Crosby community. The funds supplement a grant that the Department received for the construction of this facility.

The existing Barret Station campus, which is located on the Riley Chambers Community Campus property, currently houses one modular building for Head Start classrooms. Under the expansion, an additional pre-manufactured building with four classrooms dedicated for Early Head Start will be added onto the community campus's property. The new building will accommodate 32 Early Head Start students. For the start of the 2021-2022 school year, Barrett Station's Early Head Start classrooms will be located at the Rock of Ages Church, located less than a mile away.

Renovations at the La Porte campus, which began in February 2021, are approximately 90 % complete. The property has two structures that previously only housed Head Start classrooms. Under the Early Head Start expansion, the main building has been repurposed for 4 Early Head Start classrooms, and the modular building has been repurposed to accommodate 2 Head Start classrooms.

Renovations on the property include updated air conditioning, electrical, fire alarm, video camera, and burglar alarm systems. New furniture has been purchased, and enhancements to the existing playground will be made this fall. The anticipated completion date for the La Porte campus is Aug. 16.

With the construction and renovation of the Humble, Barrett Station and La Porte Early Head Start campuses, HCDE will now have five locations in Harris County offering Early Head Start programming.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/0e9a50d3-be25-4b2c-9166-9c088ad33c29.jpg>

Back-to-School Tips for Teachers (2021-07-30 10:33)

[1]



Back-to-School Tips for Teachers

If you have a year or more of teaching experience, you likely understand how your neatly prioritized back-to-school to-do list quickly becomes a heap of sticky notes piling up in your workspace once the first day of class arrives. Here are a few small tips to help you save some trees—and your school year.

Get organized

Take stock of your space, both physical and digital. Look through those items you kept “just in case” and determine if they will truly be helpful this year or not.

- Get rid of any outdated materials, paperwork, or lessons plans in your desk.
- Repurpose and modify what materials and lessons you can.
- Declutter your computer and [2]restructure your digital files for ease of access to improve your workflow.

Decide on a classroom setup

A good classroom layout will set you up for success.

- Designate areas of your classroom for different activities or uses, if possible. Arrange desks in a way that allows for smooth transitions between individual, group, or center work, or perhaps even create a reading area or “class library.”
- Sketch out ideas for engaging bulletin boards, [3]anchor charts, or other tools to support units in your content area.
- If appropriate, set-aside a time in the first few weeks of school to have your students propose ideas for your classroom design. Get creative and turn it into a lesson by having your students learn to create a grid map. Asking for your students’ input is a great way to [4]incorporate youth voice into your classroom strategy.

Plan what you can

You cannot predict everything the school year will throw your way, but you can plan ahead for the few things that are certain.

- Make copies of your syllabus, classroom expectations, parent letters, and other materials going home with students in the first week. While you’re at it, make copies of any worksheets or handouts you plan to repurpose from previous years, too.

- Keep a few ideas in your back pocket for those five to 10 minutes at the end of class when your lesson wraps up early, or when your students just need a quick mental break. Find some [5]filler activities and modify them to fit the needs and interests of your students.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/tips-for-teachers_face-twitter.jpg
 2. <https://www.whatihavelearnedteaching.com/organizing-your-classroom/>
 3. <https://www.whatihavelearnedteaching.com/anchor-chart-tips/>
 4. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/site/Default.aspx?PageID=2&DomainID=4#calendar17/20210804/event/493>
 5. <https://www.whatihavelearnedteaching.com/80-sponge-activities/>
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1.8 August

HCDE Releases Comprehensive 2021-2022 School Calendar for 25 Harris County Districts (2021-08-04 11:15)

[1]



HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICTS 2021-2022 CALENDARS

Compiled by Harris County Department of Education

DISTRICT	CLASSES BEGIN	THANKSGIVING	WINTER BREAK	SPRING BREAK	EASTER	OTHER HOLIDAYS	CLASSES END
Aldine	Aug. 16	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/16, 1/3 - 1/4, 1/17, 2/21, 3/21	May 26
Alief	Aug. 10	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/6 - 10/8, 1/17, 2/21, 4/18	May 26
Channelview	Aug. 23	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/4 - 10/8, 1/3, 1/17, 2/7 - 2/11, 5/30	June 3
Clear Creek	Aug. 17	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Crosby	Aug. 12	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Cy-Fair	Aug. 23	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Dayton	Aug. 11	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 7-11	April 15-18	9/8, 10/20, 1/17, 2/18, 2/21, 5/20, 5/30	May 25
Deer Park	Aug. 18	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15-18	9/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Galena Park	Aug. 12	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Jan. 3	March 14-18	April 15-18	9/8, 10/8, 10/11, 1/17, 2/21, 5/30	May 27
Goose Creek	Aug. 18	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 7-11	April 15	9/8, 10/6 - 10/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 24
Houston	Aug. 23	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 9/16, 1/17, 3/28, 5/30	June 7
Huffman	Aug. 18	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/11, 1/17, 2/21, 5/30	May 27
Humble	Aug. 10	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/4 - 10/8, 1/17, 2/9 - 2/11, 5/30	May 27
Katy	Aug. 18	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/11, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Klein	Aug. 18	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/11, 1/17, 2/21, 5/30	May 27
La Porte	Aug. 18	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Jan. 4	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/11, 11/2, 1/17, 2/21, 5/30	May 26
New Caney	Aug. 9	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Jan. 7	April 11-15	April 15	9/8, 10/11 - 10/15, 1/17, 2/21 - 2/25, 5/30	May 26
Pasadena	Aug. 17	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Jan. 2	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Pearland	Aug. 18	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15-18	9/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Sheldon	Aug. 11	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Jan. 3	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/8, 1/17	May 25
Spring	Aug. 11	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Jan. 3	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 10/11, 11/2, 1/17, 2/21, 5/30	May 26
Spring Branch	Aug. 16	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15-18	9/8, 10/11, 1/17, 5/30	May 26
Stafford	Aug. 10	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 17 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15-18	9/8, 9/24, 1/17, 5/30	June 3
Tomball	Aug. 17	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 1/17, 2/21, 5/30	May 26
Waller	Aug. 23	Nov. 22-26	Dec. 20 - Dec. 31	March 14-18	April 15	9/8, 1/17, 5/30	May 26

Harris County Department of Education provides the compilation of district calendars as a public service. We are not responsible for changes in district calendars. Please consult your local school district for additional details concerning holidays/staff work days, etc.

Harris County Department of Education is a unique, school-based hybrid serving school districts, governmental agencies, universities and the public, in the field largest county in the U.S. HCDE annually serves a quarter-million students and educates through schools, the districts with personal special needs, the largest adult education program in Texas, Head Start early childhood education, school-based library services and after-school programs. Educator professional development and consultation, virtual safety, records management, and a publishing corporation are also provided.

www.hcde-texas.org

HCDE's comprehensive school districts calendar provides key dates for all 25 school districts in Harris County.

Key dates for the 2021-2022 school year for all 25 school districts in Harris County are available on the Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) comprehensive school district calendar.

The comprehensive calendar can be downloaded from [2]bit.ly/HCDSchoolDistrictsCalendar.

Harris County Department of Education compiles the calendar each year, which includes the school year's holidays and beginning and end dates for multiple districts.

Thanksgiving break will be observed by all districts Nov. 22-26. Winter break begins Dec. 20 in all districts except for Stafford Municipal School District, which begins Dec. 17. Most districts return to school by Jan. 3.

Most districts will observe spring break March 14-18, and all districts will be off for Easter break on April 15.

Staff workdays and other holidays differ. Districts begin wrapping up the year May 24-June 7.

Complete calendars from each district may also be found by clicking on the districts' tabs at [3][hcde-texas.org/district-calendars](https://www.hcde-texas.org/district-calendars).

Note: HCDE provides the compilation of district calendars as a public service. We are not responsible for changes in district calendars. Please consult your local school district for additional details concerning holidays/staff workdays, etc.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/hcde_2021-2022-calendar-poster_su21_web-social.jpg
 2. <https://bit.ly/HCDSchoolDistrictsCalendar>
 3. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/district-calendars>
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Five ways to Break the Ice with Your Students (2021-08-05 08:00)

Students often encounter many new experiences and uncertainties on the first day of school. As a teacher, here are a few fun ways you can set the expectations for your classroom and how students should interact with you and one another.

[1]



Interview

Group your students in pairs and have them spend a few minutes interviewing each other with a list of pre-determined questions or have them create their own. Afterward, let each pair introduce each other to the rest of the class. You can complete all the introductions on the first day or spread them out over the course of the week, depending on what works best for your students' age group.

Notes: Consider giving younger students a limited number of pre-determined questions to simplify the objective. Limit the time each student has to interview their partners to ensure enough time to complete the activity. Instead of giving students the chance to pair with someone they know, ask them to line up alphabetically by first name or by birthday and pair them that way.

What Am I?

Have the students get into a circle and give each student a post-it note. Have each person write down a noun and then stick the post-it on the forehead of the person to their left with the noun showing. Then, let each student take a turn to ask the group up to 10 “yes” or “no” questions that will help them guess the noun on their forehead. Move on if they do not guess correctly. Keep going until all of your students have had a turn or your time runs out.

Notes: Give the game an additional element of teamwork by allowing the student to ask for one or two hints from the person to their right. Take notice of which students volunteer answers easily and those who are more timid and consider building your seating chart to spread them throughout the room.

Find Someone Who...

Give each of your students a list of attributes such as “find someone who has been to a foreign country” or “find someone who has green eyes.” Modify your list based on your students’ age level, but generally, keep the attributes simple yet interesting. Students must work together to attribute each item on the list to one of their classmates. For example, when a student finds a classmate who has green eyes, that classmate will sign their name next to that attribute. Each student can only ask each classmate to sign next to one of the attributes on the list. Let students everyone has completed the list.

Notes: Make the attributes uncommon facts or easily identifiable physical traits such as eye color, curly hair, or freckles. Add a competitive element to the game and give a prize to the first one, two, or three students to complete the list.

Spider Web

Have your students get into a circle. Start with yourself, hold a ball of string or yarn and say your name and an interesting fact about you. Then, choose a student who is across the circle to roll or toss the ball to while holding the end of the string. Have the student repeat the process and pass the ball to another student across the circle

from them while holding onto the string. Play until all students have gotten a turn and there is a web of string filling the circle.

Notes: Reflect on how each person is part of the web and that without each person holding onto the string, the web wouldn't be complete.

Graffiti

In this activity, write a different prompt on four to six pieces of construction paper. Group students into as many groups as there are prompts and give each student a marker. Have the groups rotate and each student respond to the prompts on the paper. For the first day of school, keep the prompts simple, but as the year progresses, increase the complexity of the statements and even use academic questions to review content.

Here are some suggestions for topics at the beginning of the year:

- Favorite memory
- What I wonder about
- What I want to be when I grow up and why
- Things that excite me
- What I like about school
- What I dislike about school
- Things I find annoying
- Things I appreciate
- I feel sad when

Notes: View [2]more ideas for questions you can ask students at the beginning and throughout the year to promote critical thinking.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/5-ways-to-break-the-ice-twitter.jpg>

2. <https://www.whatihavelearnedteaching.com/67-questions-to-build-community-in-an-elementary-classroom/>

Employee of the Month: Cindy Tan sows the seeds for HCDE's IT learners (2021-08-05 09:13)

Enthusiasm, tenacity, and resourcefulness are only a few of the qualities coworkers attribute to the change agent transforming professional development for Harris County Department of Education (HCDE).

Cindy Tan, HCDE's information technology training coordinator and employee of the month for August 2021, began working at HCDE in December 2020. Her role was created out of the vital need to equip employees with the tools and knowledge necessary to work in a virtual environment.

[1]



Information Technology Training Coordinator Cindy Tan poses for a photograph, August 3, 2021.

She wasted no time, and just a month later, she kicked off her first Microsoft Teams training while leveraging HCDE's existing resources.

Since then, Tan has provided employees access to LinkedIn Learning and created several training series such as “Techie Thursday,” “IT You,” and “Munch & Learn.” She continuously seeks innovative ways to add value to these trainings through Microsoft subject matter experts, corporate-sponsored lunches, door prizes, and sessions hosted by executive leadership.

“To date, we’ve trained over 900 people at zero cost to HCDE,” said Tan.

Her most recent and ongoing project is the first-ever “Virtual Tech Day,” which will be held on Aug. 13 for over 150 teachers from HCDE’s special schools. Charles Ned, HCDE’s senior director of schools, noted Tan’s commitment and humility in seeing this plan through.

“Cindy Tan took full ownership of this project and constantly updates me on progress,” he said. “Working with Cindy on this project has allowed me to better understand how resourceful, creative, and reliable she is. She works well with staff from other divisions, takes pride in her work and shies away from accepting credit.”

Tan has 13 years of experience in education and corporate training. During her time with ExxonMobil, she worked with soon-to-be retirees during a six-month period to collect and preserve their knowledge in an “evergreen document” for future hires.



Information Technology Training Coordinator Cindy Tan poses for a photograph, August 3, 2021.

Before her journey into education and corporate training, Tan received a bachelor's degree in accounting and finance and worked as a financial analyst. However, the late hours made it too difficult to be present in her five children's lives.

Tan decided to pursue a teaching certification and eventually earned a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in integrating technology into the classroom from George Mason University.

“That’s when I found my niche,” said Tan. “I thought, ‘I really like this.’”

Since then, Tan has never looked back. She enjoys a fulfilling career that feeds her professional passions and, in her spare time, loves to play piano, cook for her family, travel, run marathons, and garden an array of vegetables which she often shares with coworkers.

While she is honored to be the employee of the month, Tan says the job is the real reward.

“Teaching students planted the seed, and now I’ve come full circle,” she said. “Now I get to do what I do, and I love it because I get to train teachers who in turn plant new seeds. I come to work full of zeal.”

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/20210803_tan_005-2.jpg

2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/20210803_tan_020-1.jpg

HCDE Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awardee Kechi Mbah Named National Student Poet (2021-08-05 10:41)

Hardworking Houston teen Kechi Mbah applied the constrictions of the pandemic to expanding her creative side.

The 17-year-old's poems that explore making the known "strange" and chronicle her culture as a Nigerian-American have earned her recognition as one of five 2021 National Student Poets, a program supported through the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers which represents The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Mbah will represent the southwest region.

[1]



Kechi Mbah poses for a photograph.

“My whole junior year [I] was in quarantine,” she said. “I would say that COVID has allowed me to grow a lot as a writer. I didn’t start writing poetry for the page until the quarantine.”

Oral poetry was Mbah’s initial love, but the slam competitions she excelled in were halted during the pandemic. After her younger sister wrote a short story for competition, she decided to follow suit and submit a poem leading her to discover the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Scholastic is the longest-running and most prestigious scholarship and recognition program in the nation for young artists and writers. Harris County Department of Education is the regional supporter for the Awards, judging thousands of Houston-area entries from teens in grades 7-12.

Scholastic Art & Writing Awards judging continues at the national level, and Mbah’s work was singled out among 10,000 Medalist entries from students in grades 10-11. As one of 40 semi-finalists, she was invited to submit additional entries and was selected as one of the five elite National Student Poets.

HCDE Regional Scholastic Art & Writing coordinator Andrea Segraves cited Mbah’s incredible achievement.

“We are exceptionally proud of Kechi,” she said. “She was selected as one in five National Student Poets from over 300,000 overall submissions. What an incredible honor.”

After being appointed as a Student Poet in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 21, Mbah will serve as a literary ambassador in her community and join service projects, workshops, and public readings. She will also receive a \$5,000 academic award.

Mbah, a rising senior at Houston ISD’s Carnegie Vanguard High School, learned of the top honor through a surprise Zoom call from IMLS Director Crosby Kemper on July 28 as she left her dentist’s office. With half her face anesthetized from the numbing shot, she did her best to exhibit her elation and a broad smile.

Excerpt from “My Great-grandfather Had Nine Wives” by Kechi Mbah (Scholastic

Art & Writing Awards Gold Medalist, 2021 National Student Poet)

My gre

at-grandfather's squinting eyes drew haze over the horizon belonging to my great-grandmother, creating a painting of African sun. She was a woman of the earth///the earth made woman of her dirt laced fingers and sand peppered knees spoke love to corn and cassava praying only to the god she held within her bosom.

At the rise of afternoon pestle etched callous as she pounded fufu into brown freckled mortar. Like all men----- my great-grandfather admired. His yellowed eyes enchanted by her flat nose and cow belly plump lips to her skin peeled ripe from ebony and hips swept wide for birth to the sweet smell of a hardworking woman.

So he grew chest and three goats to bring back to her village and she agreed to be his seventh wife.

Ideas for her poems stem from a dual process of writing, she explains. A notebook helps her collect the ideas and revisit them later.

"A lot of my poems are narrative-based whether it's about my culture or history of my family or ancestry or current events," she said.

A story about her great-grandfather living in pre-colonial Nigeria is told through the poem "My Grandfather Had Nine Wives." In addition to doing her research, she collected anecdotes and history from her parents.

Mbah also likes to write about applying new perspective to common subjects or ideas. An example is explaining soccer through basketball terms or the letting go of emotions with a poem entitled "Red-Eyed Woman."

When not writing, Mbah is active with soccer as a member of Carnegie's varsity team. She is also an avid reader and a STEM enthusiast.

"When I go to college, I want to major in industrial and mechanical engineering and minor in creative writing," she said.

Mbah points to her sophomore teacher Clarissa Fischer as the big supporter who encouraged her to pursue and write poetry. Eventually, Fischer helped her establish the poetry club at her school.

She also acknowledges English teacher Rachel Bohenick for sponsoring her poetry through the regional competition with Harris County Department of Education and family and friends who support her creative efforts.

Trustees will recognize Mbah's achievements publicly at the Aug. 18 HCDE Board of Trustees meeting scheduled at 1 p.m. HCDE begins accepting entries for Scholastic Art & Writing Awards each September, and entries are judged by December. To enter, judge, or support the Awards, contact Andrea Segraves, Scholastic Art & Writing Awards Regional Coordinator, at [2]asegraves@hcde-texas.org.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/updated-pic-1.jpg>

2. <mailto:asegraves@hcde-texas.org>

HCDE Back-to-School Tips: Set a Sleep Schedule (2021-08-09 10:13)

Getting a good night's sleep is important at any time of the year, but it's especially critical when making the transition from summer fun to structured learning. Brains need to be at optimum condition to net the best scores.

[1]



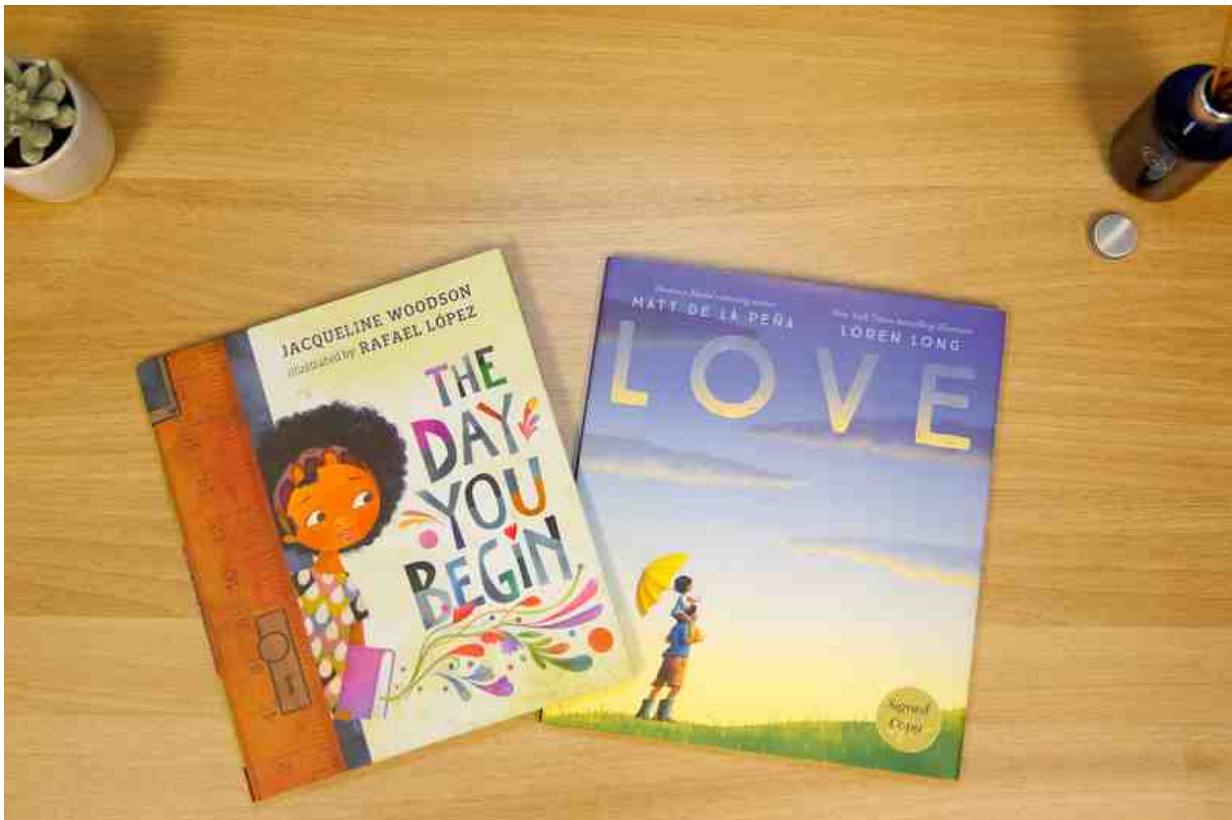
Set a sleep schedule.

Carl Hunt and [2]James B. Maas, of the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research ([3]NCSDR), offer the following tips for how to get a healthful night's sleep.

1. Establish a reasonable bedtime. Most elementary school children should be going to bed by 9 p.m. Some children who require more sleep might need to hit the hay earlier.

2. Avoid caffeinated beverages and foods high in sugar in the late afternoon and evening. This may be obvious to some, but withholding sugar and caffeine from kids can also lead to other health benefits.
3. Allow plenty of time to wind down before bed. Children should not be bringing their smartphones or tablets to bed with them. They need about an hour of down time to prepare to fall asleep. Such relaxing activities as taking a bath or reading a story can help children fall asleep more easily. Consider these recommended bedtime stories from [4]Kelly Tummy, HCDE's curriculum director for English language arts and social studies.

[5]



Two bedtime stories recommended by Kelly Tummy, HCDE's English language arts and social studies curriculum director.

- "The Day You Begin" by Jacqueline Woodson and illustrated by Rafael Lopez follows school-aged children who encounter and overcome feelings of difference from their peers and learn about the power of one's voice and the friendships that emerge when they are true to themselves.
- "Love" by Matt de la Pena and illustrated by Loren Long is a story about the strongest bond there is and the diverse and powerful ways it connects us all.

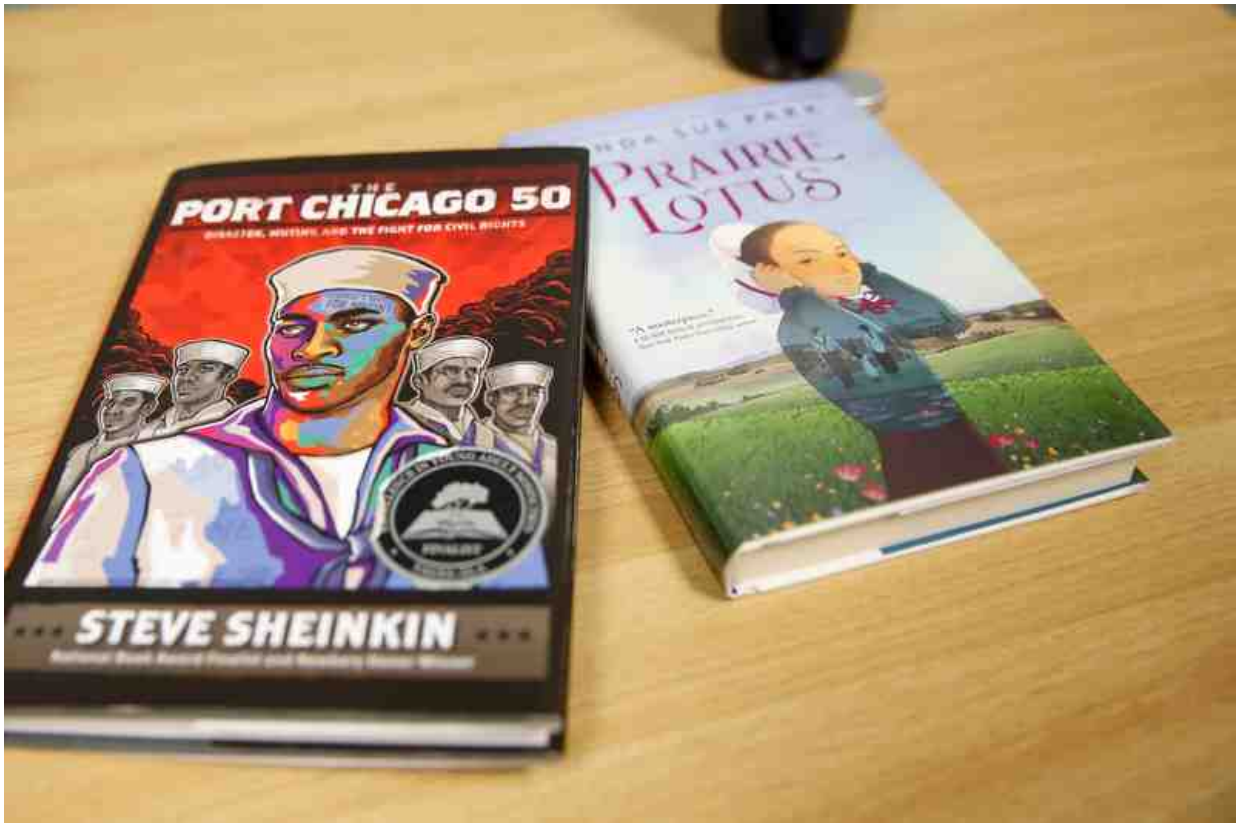
(Contributed by Andrea Segraves, HCDE's Teaching and Learning Center director)

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/1-sleep-schedule-1200x960-1.jpg>
2. <https://jamesmaas.com/>
3. <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/org/ncsdr/>
4. <https://www.instagram.com/hcdereads/>
5. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/20210809_131005000_ios.jpg

HCDE Recommended Reads for National Book Lover's Day (2021-08-09 14:09)

This year, book lovers, bookworms, and bibliophiles alike celebrate National Book Lover's Day on August 9. In honor of this holiday, Kelly Tummy, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) curriculum director for English language arts and social studies, shares some of her recommended summer reads for middle school and high school students.





Middle School

- "Black Boy Joy" edited by Kwame Mbalia is a vibrant collection of stories, comics, and poems which celebrate the joys of Black boyhood with stories from 17 best-selling, critically acclaimed Black authors.
- "Prairie Lotus" by Linda Sue Park is a multilayered book about a half-Asian girl, Hanna, in small-town America in 1880 who navigates prejudice and remains determined to realize her dreams—get an education, become a dressmaker in her father's shop, and make at least one friend.
- "The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the fight for Civil Rights" by Steve Sheinkin is a thoroughly-researched and documented story of the men who refused to work in unsafe conditions following a massive explosion in the segregated Navy base in 1944 Port Chicago, California and the 50 men charged with mutiny who faced decades in jail and even execution.

High School

- "All American Boys" by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely tells an explosive story from the alternating perspectives of two young men, one black and one white, as they grapple with the complications that spin out from an act of shocking violence and reverberate in their families, school, and a town divided by racial tension.
- "Thirteen Doorways, Wolves Behind Them All" by Laura Reynolds is an unforgettable story of two young women dealing with loss, desire, and the fragility of the American dream during WWII.

For more inspiring authors and thought-provoking stories, [1]@hcdereads on Instagram.

1. <https://www.instagram.com/hcdereads/>

HCDE Back-to-School Tips: Pack Smart (2021-08-10 10:40)

Every year, heavy and incorrectly worn backpacks cause children physical pain and strain. An article from the U.S. Consumer Product and Safety Commission says that from 2016-2018, an estimated 7,400 children less than 19 years old were treated in emergency rooms for backpack-related injuries annually. As students head back to school this week, physical and occupational therapists at Harris County Department of Education offer tips for backpack safety.

[1]



Pack smart.

Here are five tips you can practice to help prevent backpack strain with your child:

- Use the 10 percent rule. A backpack should weigh less than 10 percent of your child's weight when fully packed.
- Have compartments to secure items in place and pack heavier items closest to the child's back.
- Have a padded back that will provide cushioning against your child's spine.
- Have padded and adjustable shoulder straps. Make sure your child uses both shoulder straps when wearing the backpack to distribute the weight evenly.
- The bottom of the backpack should rest in the curve of the back and be no more than four inches below your child's waist.

"Make sure your child's backpack is adjusted and worn correctly and only necessary items are inside to prevent back strain and long-term effects on posture and the developing spine," said Carie Crabb, senior director of HCDE School-Based Therapy Services.

HCDE's therapy specialists work with students in school districts and charter schools throughout greater Harris County. Specialists include physical therapists and assistants, occupational therapists and assistants, and music therapists.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/backpak-1200x960-1.jpg>

HCDE Back-to-School Tips: Designate device-free time (2021-08-11 10:15)

In an ever more virtual world, it is increasingly important for parents to encourage children to break away from the screens. According to research, 36 % of American children under age 1 have interacted with a mobile device. ^[1] Meanwhile, 95 % of teens have access to a smartphone; 45 % of teens say they are online almost all the time. ^[2]

Prior to the explosion of apps and games aimed at young children, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) offered parents specific guidelines for managing children's screen time. Previous guidelines discouraged screen time for children under age 2 and recommended limiting "screen time" to two hours a day for children over age 2.

Since observed changes in how media impacts children, the AAP has released ^[1]expanded and more relaxed guidelines.

Here are a few ideas you can implement to help your child make the most of this back-to-school season:

[2]



Designate device-free time

Create media-free times & areas in your home

It is important to preserve family time. Make meals or bedtime routine media-free. These limits encourage family time, healthier eating habits and healthier sleep.

Be a good role model

Limit your own media use, and model this behavior for your children. Attentive parenting requires you to spend quality time with your kids away from screens.

Content matters

The quality of content is more important than the platform or time spent with media. Prioritize how your child spends his or her screen time rather than just setting a timer.

Sources

1. Kemp C. [3]Babies as young as 6 months using mobile media. AAP News.2015; 36(10). doi:10.1542/aapnews.20150425-3
2. Pew Resaerch Center. [4]Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018. Updated May 31, 2018.

1. https://www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/digital_media_symposium_proceedings.pdf
 2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/1200x960.jpg>
 3. <https://www.aappublications.org/content/early/2015/04/25/aapnews.20150425-3>
 4. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>
-

HCDE Back-to-school tips: relieve back-to-school anxiety **(2021-08-12 11:40)**

Returning to school after extended breaks is often stressful for children and adolescents. The transition is emotionally complex in a typical school year, but the events of the last year have presented even more challenges for students to cope with. Muddled with common fear of the unknown—such as new faces and routines—are the consequences of the major disruptions many students have experienced due to COVID-19. By addressing these fears and challenges, you may be able to help your child have a more positive and productive back-to-school experience.

[1]



Relieve back-to-school anxiety

The American Occupational Therapy Association provides several [2]resources for families and educators to support students through this process, but here are a few

244

highlights to get you started:

- Talk through fears and stressors related to starting a new school year and teach your child strategies to help them feel better, or self-regulate
 - Pro tip: teach children take deep breaths by telling them to think about smelling a birthday cake and blowing out the candles.
- Take advantage of open houses or similar events to help your child preview their new environment and schedule
 - Pro tip: address potential challenges, such as lockers, ahead of time.
- Develop visual [3]schedules to support transitions from home to school each day or to virtual learning environments
 - Pro tip: make the schedule the “authority” on why and what your child is to be doing to avoid direct opposition
- Incorporate breaks and quiet moments (e.g., simply sitting still after awakening, meditation, mindfulness) into the time before starting activities before and after school
 - Pro tip: [4]create device-free spaces and times to allow your child these much needed breaks.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/1200x960-1.jpg>

2. <https://www.aota.org/Practice/Health-Wellness/COVID19/back-to-school.aspx>

3. <https://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/individual-visual-schedules/>

4. <https://blog.hcde-texas.org/2021/08/11/hcde-back-to-school-tips-designate-device-free-time/>

HCDE back-to-school tips: update your child's vaccinations (2021-08-13 11:00)

School immunization requirements are in effect for students for the 2021-2022 school year. All students must have up-to-date immunization records, be in the process of receiving vaccinations, or have a valid exemption on file when school starts.

[1]



There are several local resources to help ensure your child has a safe and healthy year, including the [2]Mayor's Back 2 School Festival on Saturday, Aug. 14 at NRG Park. This annual event provides Houston-area elementary school children and their families with free backpacks, basic school supplies, and food to help them prepare to return to school. This year's festival also offers free personal protection equipment for students and free COVID-19 vaccinations for anyone age 12 or older.

For more information on immunization requirements by grade and low-cost providers in your area, view the resources below.

- Check your district's health services website for specific admission protocols regarding immunizations
- For a complete list of state requirements for pre-K-12, visit the [3]Texas Health and Human Services website.
- For a list of providers offering low-cost vaccines, visit the [4]Texas Vaccines for Children Provider Locator.
- For a list of providers offering free COVID-19 vaccinations across the county, visit the [5]Harris County Public Health website.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/1200x960-2.jpg>
 2. <https://www.houstontx.gov/btsf/>
 3. <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/immunize/school/school-requirements.aspx>
 4. <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/immunize/tvfc/info-for-parents.aspx>
 5. <https://publichealth.harriscountytexas.gov/Resources/2019-Novel-Coronavirus/Register-for-COVID-19-Vaccine#COVID-vaccine-map-dashboard>
-

HCDE offers guidance for National Relaxation Day (2021-08-15 11:19)

Relaxation is defined as “the state of being free from tension or anxiety” and is synonymous with “calm” or “tranquility.” Annually on August 15, National Relaxation Day advocates finding balance through meditation and other stress-relieving techniques. This year, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) School Climate and Culture Specialist Cierra Nickerson provides some guidance to help you relax a little every day.

- [1]



Person meditating

Meditation and breathing

Meditation is an age-old consciousness-changing technique. It can take on different forms, but the most common today is focused or mindful meditation, which centers on remaining in the present moment rather than thinking of the future or past. Meditation can be led in silence, though most people find it easier to zero in on something auditory, such as a metronome or recording of waves, or constant, such as one's

breathing. [2]Box breathing, or the lengthening of the in-breath, out-breath, and pauses in between, is commonly used in meditation and stress-management practices.

Soothing space

[3]Creating a soothing space at home or in the office can help alleviate tension during and after work or school. Just a few simple additions will set the atmosphere, including aromatherapy diffusers, calming music, soft or warm lighting, pillows, and blankets.

What helps you

While there are widely used strategies to manage stress, everyone is different. Some may relax while reading a book, while others feel more centered after exercise. Nickerson emphasizes the importance of keeping an open mind, exploring new activities and techniques, and paying attention to what your body responds to.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/shutterstock_403132198.jpg
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27mvCsUsAeU>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg9JWQGw-d4>

HCDE compiles local and national resources for hurricane safety

(2021-08-17 11:15)

When it comes to hurricanes, Harris County is especially at risk. While some are closer to water than others, all Harris County residents are susceptible and vulnerable to the effects of a hurricane. Hurricane season runs from June 1 to Nov. 30, and this season is predicted to be [1]particularly active. With this in mind, it is important as ever to solidify your tropical storm preparedness knowledge. View the resources below to make sure you're ready.

Know Your Hurricane Risk

Keep an eye out for messages from local officials to understand your hurricane risk. Sign up for the Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management's (OHSEM) [2]Ready Harris Alerts or download the [3]FEMA app for text message updates on developing tropical storms. You can also view your local forecast by ZIP code on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) [4]National Hurricane Center website and follow [5]@NCH_Atlantic on Twitter.

Know Your Evacuation Zone

Hurricane evacuation zones are used to determine the extent of coastal storm surge, or water pushed inland by a tropical system. Learn your evacuation zone to determine whether you would need to evacuate when a hurricane threatens. Don't travel hundreds of miles, only far enough to avoid hurricane hazards such as flooding and tornadoes. Know your evacuation route but plan an alternate route and place to stay. Visit the Harris County OHSEM website, [6]ReadyHarris.org, and find the [7]Hurricane Evacuation ZIP Zone Map to find your zone and routes by ZIP code.



A sign directs hurricane evacuees to safety.

Assemble Disaster Supplies

Gather needed supplies for at least seven to 10 days. Don't forget your specific needs like meds, powered devices, or pets, and keep cash in your [9]emergency essentials kit.

Prepare Financially

If you don't have one already, start an emergency savings fund. An emergency fund should generally cover your living expenses for three to six months. Make sure your insurance policies and personal documents like ID are up to date and keep copies in a secure password-protected digital space. Review your policies to see if you have flood insurance, as flooding is the leading cause of damage from tropical storms. Take advantage the [10]Emergency Financial First Aid Kit, a joint publication from Operation Hope and FEMA which provides tips to reduce the financial impact of disasters and aid you in the recovery process. Learn more about flood insurance and tips for [11]financial preparedness to ensure that you're fully covered if disaster

strikes.

Strengthen Your Home

Make sure your home is in good repair and meets local hurricane building codes. Declutter drains and gutters, move all loose outdoor items inside, trim trees of any weak branches. Have the proper materials in place to board up your doors and windows to protect them from flying debris. Know a safe location to move your car during a hurricane, whether it's your garage or elsewhere. If you stay in your home during a hurricane and are not in a flood-prone area:

- Fill bathtubs and all available containers with water
- Turn off utilities, if requested
- Remain indoors in a closet, bathroom, or hallway on the lower level of your house,
- away from windows
- Cover yourself and family members with a mattress or a dining room table to protect yourself from falling debris

Help Your Neighbors

Get to know your neighbors before an emergency strikes and exchange contact information. Check with elderly neighbors, senior adults, or others [12]who may need additional help making a plan to see how you can assist.

Make an Emergency Plan

Once you've gathered all pertinent information, write down your hurricane plan, share it with neighbors and family members, and practice it. Be sure to [13]include your

pets and how you will get in touch with others when planning. Review Ready Harris' many resources for local assistance and tips from the NOAA for additional guidance on what to do [14]after a hurricane.

1. <https://www.noaa.gov/news-release/atlantic-hurricane-season-shows-no-signs-of-slowng>
 2. <https://member.everbridge.net/index/892807736729064#/signup>
 3. <https://www.fema.gov/about/news-multimedia/mobile-app-text-messages>
 4. <https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/>
 5. https://twitter.com/NHC_Atlantic
 6. <https://www.readyharris.org/#get-prepared>
 7. <http://www.gis.hctx.net/evacuationmap/>
 8. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/shutterstock_1146554429.jpg?w=1024
 9. <https://www.readyharris.org/Portals/60/documents/Get-Prepared/Emergency-Essentials/2020-EmergencyEssentialsKit-English.pdf?ver=2020-07-24-093900-000>
 10. https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/ready_emergency-financial-first-aid-toolkit.pdf
 11. <https://www.ready.gov/financial-preparedness>
 12. <https://www.ready.gov/disability>
 13. <https://www.readyharris.org/Portals/60/Images/Get-Prepared/Pet-Prep-Card.jpg>
 14. <https://www.weather.gov/safety/hurricane-after>
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HCDE's Adult Education division offers reimagined program
(2021-08-18 12:29)



The Adult Education division has revamped its program and kicked off its new academic year with the Contact to Careers: My Plan program. Under the reimagined plan, the needs of adult education students will be addressed holistically.



Adult Education

“Eighty-five percent of our adult education students want to improve their English skills or obtain their high school equivalency to secure a better job and advance themselves economically,” said Adult Education Senior Director Stephanie Ross. “We developed the My Plan program not only because we want our students to obtain literacy skills, but so they can gain knowledge and experience that will help them be successful alongside their literacy skills.”

Students will now complete a 12-week program, with the first six weeks dedicated to a literacy course such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or a high school equivalency degree (GED). Before students begin class, they will go through a one-day Leadership Ambassador Professional Development seminar that will encourage participants to become leaders in their communities and the workplace. These opportunities may increase their earning potential and assist them in building a career-building network.

Students will also be trained on computer literacy skills.

“When Covid pushed us into a digital environment, we realized that 90 % of our students did not have computer literacy skills,” said Ross. “Since the start of the pandemic, we’ve started to teach students basic skills like how to fill out electronic forms. Under the My Plan program, we will continue to develop their digital literacy skills with self-paced distance learning courses.”

The interactive distance learning courses, which will be offered through an online portal, will supplement the live virtual classes. Students will be able to advance beyond where they are in class or go back and look at previous lessons. The online management portal is expected to be launched in the fall.

Finally, students will be connected with community resources to address their non-academic needs, such as financial literacy education, food stamps, childcare, and medical care.

The second six-week block will provide students with career readiness classes for which they will earn a certificate in areas such as business office technology, work-force essentials, management essentials, and basic construction skills. At the end of the 12 weeks, the adult education division, in partnership with various employers and community partners, will connect students to opportunities for employment, internships, externships, and apprenticeships. For some students, the program will prepare them with study skills to enroll at a community college.

The My Plan program will offer interested individuals more opportunities to enroll with 14 12-week sessions scheduled throughout the year. Previously, only four sessions were offered annually.

For more information about the Contact to Careers: My Plan program, visit [2]hcdetexas.org/adult-education or contact HCDE’s Adult Education division at 713-692-6216 or [3]AdultEd-Recruitment@hcdetexas.org.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/adult-ed-logo-2019-1.png>
2. <http://www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education>
3. <mailto:AdultEd-Recruitment@hcdetexas.org>

Maria Herrera (2021-08-20 08:06:24)

It seems to me that it is an excellent opportunity for me, which I should take advantage of, thank you

Dinabel (2021-08-23 21:35:12)

i wanna learn more English!!!

HCDE's Adult Education division helps students turn dreams into goals | HCDE News Blog (2021-09-27 16:17:35)

[...] shares her anticipation for how adult learners will grow and thrive in the workplace under the new Contact to Careers: My Plan [...]

tiffany (2021-10-13 20:15:42)

I'm really looking forward to start on this next journey of my life. I'm ready!!!!

HCDE-Texas (2021-10-15 11:58:26)

We are so excited for you!

HCDE Teaching and Learning Center welcomes new senior director

(2021-08-25 12:30)

The Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) Teaching and Learning Center's (TLC) new senior director sets a high standard for innovative professional development in education. Cynthia Brunswick, Ed.D., brings the comprehensive experience and insight necessary to build a support system created for educators by educators.

She will apply her expertise and lead the TLC's endeavors to provide customized, relevant professional learning opportunities through content area specialists.



Cynthia Brunswick poses for a photograph, August 18, 2021.

Brunswick says she was drawn to HCDE by the leadership and talent and, mostly, the chance to shape a vision for professional learning for 25 districts.

“I’m humbled by the opportunity to work in a new environment,” she said. “I recognize

that I have a lot of work to do to build new relationships and to understand the Texas education system, but I think that I'll be able to make an impact here."

Before finding her calling in professional learning, Brunswick taught middle school for ten years in Chicago Public Schools. She says this experience motivates her every day.

"Working with [students], discovering myself as an educator, and understanding the role education plays and how critical it is in the lives of children is what grounded me in the values that I still hold dear today," she said.

Brunswick grasps this mindset as she acknowledges how educators have been presented with unique challenges and the need to remedy COVID-19 learning loss. The disruption to traditional learning has prompted a need for innovation in schools like nothing she has seen in her career, she says.

"There's an excitement right now in education in that we have the opportunity to think outside of the box and try things differently," said Brunswick. "We now have school systems in need of a strategy to close the opportunity gaps that we are even more aware of than before. It presents a challenge for the TLC team, in particular, to come up with real solutions in a space that, I think, is yet to be chartered."



[2] 5 facts about Cynthia.

Brunswick has nearly 30 years of combined experience in teaching and instructional leadership. The former director of curriculum, instruction, and talent development for the Academy for Urban School Leadership, a turnaround network that serves Chicago’s highest-needs schools, has an extensive background in envisioning and actualizing support systems for teachers and administrators.

Her roles lent the authority to enrich education communities in many ways, including founding the Chicago office of the New Teacher Center (NTC), a California-based nonprofit which specializes in new teacher support. There, she led the launch of a citywide teacher induction program—the first of its kind for the city.

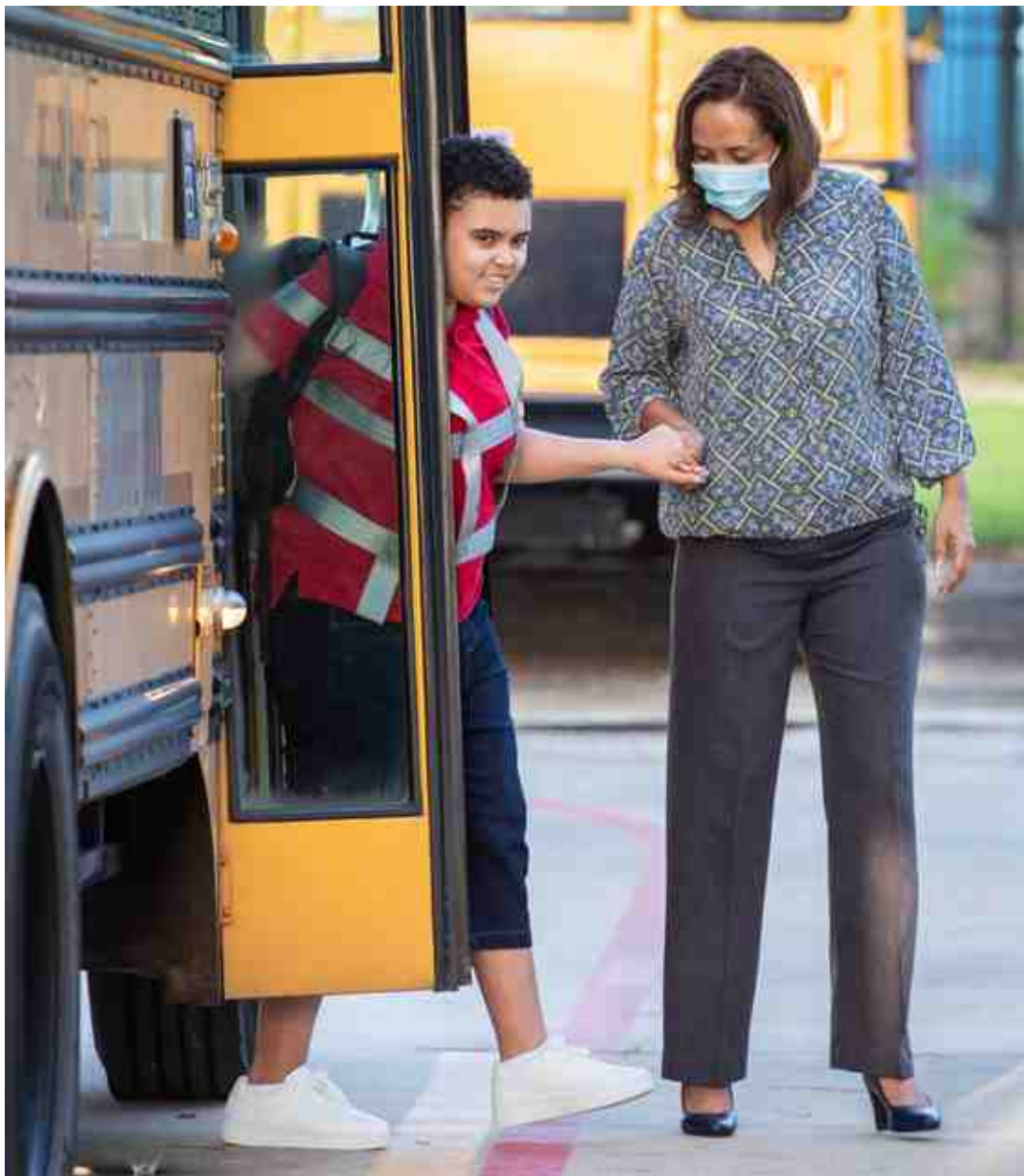
Brunswick was soon promoted to senior vice president of program strategy and delivery for the NTC. She partnered with districts across the country to design coaching systems supporting new and experienced teachers as well as school and district leaders and oversaw several large-scale federal grant-funded initiatives. This induction model gained What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) approval as a proven solution for teacher effectiveness and retention and its positive impact on student outcomes. The WWC is part of the statistics, research, and evaluation arm of the U.S. Department of Education which reviews evidence-based education programs to determine “what works.” Only three percent of all education models submitted for review receive this distinction.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/20210818_brunswick_009_r_c_4x5.jpg
 2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/cynthia.png>
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Bus safety rules urged by Center for Safe and Secure Schools to ensure smooth ride (2021-08-31 10:00)

Despite nationwide bus driver shortages and pandemic-related complications, the school bus remains the safest choice for student transportation. According to the National Safety Council, students are 70 times more likely to get to school safely when taking a school bus instead of traveling by car.

[1]



Students arrive for the first day of school at ABS East, August 23, 2021

Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS) says parents can ensure a smooth ride by talking to their children about bus safety rules and protocols.

"Riding a school bus is like taking any form of public transportation, so you have to know and abide by the rules," CSSS Director Julia Andrews said. "There is a school bus code of conduct in every school district. If you don't follow the rules, you might lose that privilege of riding the bus."

Rules can be found on the district website or in the code of ethics parents sign onto at the beginning of the year. Besides being a school safety expert, Andrews is a former assistant principal. She recommends a list of must dos to discuss with your children.

"When getting on the bus, find the first open seat and sit down quickly, just like boarding an airplane," Andrews said. "Buckle up. When getting off the bus, be sure you have all your items. Leave quickly and quietly so everyone can get to school or home on time."

While it's important for parents to go over rules with their children, it's also good to meet the bus driver, study the bus route and drive it.

"Doing dry-runs and giving children landscape markers like a local store or church can be helpful," Andrews said.

Younger students should know the name or number of their bus route, memorizing or tucking it into a backpack. Older students can save info on their phones along with emergency numbers in case of bus delays or accidents.

Encourage your child to read, start their homework or simply rest on the way home from a long day at school. Cell phones may be used but check district policies and remember sound should be muted. Pack an extra water for your child for the ride home. Although snacking on the bus is not generally allowed, most districts allow riders to bring along water, Andrews said.

While many districts are adapting to a shortage of drivers by making routes longer, some are shortening routes and asking parents to drive to central locations to pick up their children.

“Some districts are certifying coaches and administrators as bus drivers,” Andrews said. “There was a principal rolling up his sleeves getting on board as a bus driver.”

CSSS staff meet monthly with school law enforcement officials and operations managers from 26 local school districts in the greater Houston area to collaborate and work through school-related safety issues. Local and national safety experts provide workshops hosted for school district law enforcement and operations leaders. This year, pandemic matters continue to dominate discussions.

COVID-19 adds an extra layer to safety discussions with children riding the bus, Andrews said. Because the bus is an enclosed area, children and staff should follow district protocol about masks, but she encourages masking. District transportation uses a disinfection spray twice a day on the buses, before and after students come and go.

“Between spraying, bus drivers may be personally wiping down their buses,” Andrews said. “As parents, it’s important to reinforce good hygiene and hand-washing or hand-sanitizing with your children.”

Five health safety concerns top Andrew’s list of “must-dos” for students riding buses: 1) Keep hands to yourself. 2) Cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing. 3) Wear a mask. 4) Be alert of others around you. 5) Try to maintain a 3-foot rule from others if possible.

Lastly, Andrews reminds parents to listen to their children and monitor behavior which might include hesitation to ride the bus. Bullying can be the cause, and children may be afraid or ashamed to report it.

“The bullying code of conduct stretches to the bus because this is still school property,” she said.

Cameras are on board each bus to detect misconduct like bullying, Andrews explained.

“Bullying can be a safety hazard even for the bus driver,” she said. “Schools have discretion as to what happens when bullying is reported.

“With the shortage of bus drivers, I foresee there being little room for allowing misbehavior on the bus.”

General Bus Safety Rules (from the National Safety Council):

- Arrive at bus stop early, ideally five minutes early.
- Encourage children to never walk behind bus.
- Cross in front of bus at least 10 feet ahead of bus (or five giant steps in front), establishing eye contact with drive.
- If rider drops something when getting on/off bus, do not pick it up. Tell the bus driver instead.
- Look to the right before stepping off the bus.
- When walking to the bus stop, remember there is safety in numbers.

For more information about school safety measures, access [2]Center for Safe & Secure Schools / CSSS Main (hcde-texas.org).

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/20210823_fds_040-1.jpg
2. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/safe-secure-schools>

1.9 September

Stay cool: HCDE urges heat safety (2021-09-02 09:00)

The start of September sounds like a welcome relief from the sweltering summer, but it is important to stay prepared for extreme heat. The characteristically high temperatures of August show no sign of retreat yet. Certified meteorologist and Space City Weather Editor Eric Berger says, “Although September is here, it definitely will [1]feel like summer.” Here is what you need to know to beat the heat.

[2]



Extreme heat and why it is dangerous

Extreme heat is related to the heat index, which factors relative humidity with actual air temperature to measure how hot it feels. Many sources define extreme heat as an extended period where temperatures hover over 10 degrees or more above the average high temperature in a region. In Houston, the National Weather Service (NWS) issues a heat advisory when the heat index reaches 108 degrees Fahrenheit for two consecutive days.

Extreme heat forces the body to work harder to maintain a normal temperature, which can lead to heatstroke and even death.

How to recognize heat illness

In extreme heat, people are at risk for heat cramps and heat exhaustion. These conditions are identifiable by muscle pains or spasms in the stomach, legs or arms, heavy sweating, weakness, nausea, or vomiting. If not treated by cooling down the body, these conditions can lead to heatstroke.

Signs and symptoms of heat-related illness include:

- No sweating
- Dry, hot, and red skin
- Pinpoint pupils
- Dizziness, headache, confusion, or unconsciousness
- Rapid, strong pulse

In this situation, call 9-1-1 or get the person to a hospital immediately and cool down with whatever methods available until help arrives.

Who is most at risk

Children, athletes, seniors, and outdoor workers are at higher risk in extreme heat, which also affects more males than females.

How to practice extreme heat safety

There are many ways to keep yourself and others safe from the heat, but the primary methods are:

- Stay hydrated with water and avoid alcoholic, caffeinated, or sugary beverages
- Remain indoors or in otherwise cool, air-conditioned areas
- Wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing
- Avoid strenuous outdoor activity
- Never leave kids or pets unattended in hot cars

For more information and tips to stay cool, visit [3][ReadyHarris.org](https://www.readyharris.org).

1. <https://spacecityweather.com/august-is-over-but-sometimes-september-isnt-much-better/>
 2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/shutterstock_1739372702.jpg
 3. <https://www.readyharris.org/Beat-The-Heat>
-

HCDE offers tips for pet preparedness in emergencies (2021-09-03 11:15)

Making an emergency plan for your pets is as important as creating one for your family. In light of National Preparedness Month, follow these important tips to prepare your pets for the unexpected.

[1]



Elderly man in safety suit holds dog in his arms

- **Prepare to evacuate your pets:** Make sure your pest can stay with you if you and

your family must evacuate, whether it's a pet-friendly hotel, emergency shelter, or the house of friends or family.

- **Have a team in place:** If you are unable to reach your pets in an emergency, have a plan in place. Ask neighbors, friends, or relatives if they would be available to care for or evacuate them if you cannot. Make sure they have spare keys to your home, the name of a trusted vet, and other pertinent information.
- **Microchip your pet:** Have your pet microchipped by your vet or local shelter and keep your contact information current in the chip manufacturer's database, such as HomeAgain or PetLink. Be sure to also register your pet's microchip with [2]Found Animals, a free, universal registry run by the Michelson Found Animals Foundation, which was founded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- **Build an emergency kit for your pet:** Your pet should have a smaller version of the emergency kit you have for your family. Think first of the essentials, such as water, food, medicine, etc. Be sure to also think about other items such as collars, leashes, grooming and sanitation products, or familiar toys or blankets to comfort your pet. Also, have pictures of you and your pets together in case you become separated.

Learn more about the actions you can take to ensure your pets' safety in any disaster by visiting [3]ReadyHarris.org and [4]Ready.gov.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/shutterstock_154042202.jpg
 2. <https://www.foundanimals.org/microchip-registry/>
 3. <https://www.readyharris.org/Portals/60/Images/Get-Prepared/Pet-Prep-Card.jpg>
 4. <https://www.ready.gov/pets>
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Fortis Academy students introduced to restorative circles as part of new approach on campus (2021-09-03 11:42)

This week, new Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey, in partnership with the Center for Safe and Secure School's (CSSS) Climate and Culture Specialist Cierra Nickerson, introduced students to restorative circles.

The circles, a key component of restorative practices being implemented on campus this year, are a community-building strategy used to strengthen and restore relationships, resolve conflict, and repair harm. In them, participants sit in a circle to develop a sense of equality, co-create expectations for collaboration, participate as equals (including teachers and administrators), and take turns speaking.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/w4KtToCjbGg>

When put into practice, the effects are profound. In schools, students experience greater safety and a sense of belonging, resulting in improved behavior and greater accountability.

"What's so different about restorative practices is that traditional classroom management strategies have guided educators in having control over students," said Nickerson. "In restorative practices, we work with students collaboratively and acknowledge that misbehavior is a part of the learning process. If we are punitive, which is a form of exerting power over them, they may not learn from their mistakes. When we include them, we reintegrate them and restore our relationships with them."

Nickerson underscores that punitive approaches do not result in better outcomes.

"We have studies that show that when we implement punitive, exclusionary measures like suspension, there is no positive impact on school safety or students' academic success," she said.

- [1]



Fortis Academy students participate in a restorative practices session, August 31, 2021

- [2]

trust.

“For us, we’re really trying to increase sobriety in our students and reduce the amount of relapse that we see,” said Godfrey. “Having worked at a rehab facility and in schools for so long, I want students to trust me and come to me and know that I’m here so that they can be their best selves—not to dish out punishment or send them back to their home campus. You relapse. That’s going to happen. I want to get you through it, not punish you for it. Restorative practices really bridge the gap to strengthen relationships among students and between students and teachers.”

[3]



Fortis Academy students participate in a restorative practices session, August 31, 2021

During the 2-day workshop led by Nickerson, students became acquainted with restorative circles, created ground rules for circle members, and participated in relationship-building exercises. After the first two hours, the results were almost immediate.

“The activities we did helped me get to know more about my classmates because I don’t talk to some of them, like Miguel. I got to know what he was thinking and what he felt,” said Fortis student Yasmine Rivera. “The last question that [Cierra] asked about whether students from two-parent households are better off than students from single-parent households, I was thinking really hard about that because I don’t have any of my parents. So, whenever I heard [my classmate’s responses], I thought, ‘maybe one day I could try to talk to them to see how it is to have parents.’ I got to see how other people are living their lives.”





Fortis staff will receive ongoing training on restorative practices throughout the year. They will then lead periodic restorative circles with students to continually build trust and create a common culture that values collaboration, respect, openness, and honesty.

“The most important thing about restorative circles is the word ‘restorative,’ like restoring broken relationships,” said Godfrey. “Because, my goodness, they all have experienced that. When you are involved in that type of lifestyle, it’s inevitable that you are going to burn some bridges, but they don’t have to remain broken.”

To learn more about restorative practices, visit [4]<https://bit.ly/HCDE-CSSS> or contact Cierra Nickerson at [5]cnickerson@hcde-texas.org. To learn more about Fortis Academy, visit [6]<https://bit.ly/HCDE-Fortis> or call (713) 696-2195.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210831_fortis_106.jpg?w=1024
 2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210831_fortis_038.jpg?w=1024
 3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210831_fortis_158.jpg
 4. <https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fbit.ly%2FHCDE-CSSS&data=04%7C01%7C1cozzari%40hcde-texas.org%7C87906b8290b14a3ee3b008d96e2efb68>
 5. <mailto:cnickerson@hcde-texas.org>
 6. <https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fbit.ly%2FHCDE-Fortis&data=04%7C01%7C1cozzari%40hcde-texas.org%7C87906b8290b14a3ee3b008d96e2efb>
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Center for Safe and Secure Schools offers guidance in helping kids cope with disasters (2021-09-07 12:10)

Following a disaster, it is as essential to guard children's social and emotional health as their physical safety and security. The experience of a traumatic event such as a natural disaster can disrupt children's lives and cause them to be unable to focus in school or struggle with other mundane parts of life.

"Students that experience a traumatic event appreciate and thrive under the conditions of routine, strong relationships, and empowerment," said Center for Safe and Secure Schools Climate and Culture Specialist Cierra Nickerson.

Nickerson explains that, in the wake of a disaster, children benefit from:

- Predictable, structured, consistent routines
- Building strong relationships by practicing vulnerability as the adult (teacher or caregiver) and speaking and listening from the heart.
- Empowering children's agency by collaborating with children to problem-solve through challenges at home or in the classroom



Harris County Department of Education Head Start student hugs teacher.

Children react differently to life-altering events based on their developmental level and coping styles, but there are many ways to recognize disaster-related stress. Common reactions preschoolers may exhibit include crying more frequently, irritability, complaining often about stomachaches, or showing signs of separation anxiety. Elementary and middle school-aged kids are more capable of understanding the permanence of loss and may feel the need to talk about the event's details continually. They may also feel sad, angry, or have irrational fears in addition to fear of the disaster happening again. Teenagers preparing to make their way into the world may be overwhelmed by the sudden notion that it is unsafe. Some teens may take part in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors such as reckless driving. Others might lose interest in activities they previously enjoyed, pull away from personal relationships, or become fearful of leaving home.

Recovery from a disaster occurs in phases. Immediately following the event, families

should attend to everyone's physical needs first. Seek medical attention if necessary, and make sure everyone has enough to eat and drink and as private a place to rest as possible. In the absence of a physical home, restoring daily routines can provide a much-needed sense of normality. Resume everyday activities such as taking walks or reading bedtime stories and provide additional comfort by expressing familiar affection, giving news of home, and discussing emotions related to the event.

The second, longer recovery phase involves two steps, says the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The first is assessing all the physical and emotional losses your family has experienced. From a logistics standpoint, this will aid your family in rebuilding the quantifiable damages incurred. The second is developing an emotional understanding of the disaster and relocation experience as part of the natural healing process. Help your children verbalize their feelings and find support in family members, friends, your place of worship, or other groups in your community.

As you work through this process with your children, follow these specific guidelines:

- Encourage your children to talk and listen to their feelings. Let them know it is okay to ask questions and to feel the emotions they may experience. Ask them what they have heard and correct any misinformation.
- Explain in simple direct language what has happened and what you expect to happen. Take cues from your children as to how much information to provide and understand that older children may seek, and benefit from, more details.
- Limit media exposure, including television, radio, print, and social media. Focus instead on spending time together. If children are exposed to media, watch it with them and offer explanations to any questions.
- Take care of yourself. Children depend on the adults around them for security and are more likely to react to their actions or emotional state than their words. Seek support systems through family, friends, or faith-based organizations to make sense of your own feelings.
- Help your children help others to decrease your children's sense of powerlessness in times of crisis. Have them write letters to others displaced by the event or involve them in updating your family's emergency plan.
- Look for signs that suggest your children need additional help. They may benefit from a healthcare professional if they have continual emotional outbursts, show serious problems at school, withdraw from family and friends, or cannot cope with routine issues and daily activities. Seeking help from others can offer solutions that may be unfamiliar to you.

For additional resources to help kids cope with disaster, visit [2]Ready.gov, [3]Ready-Harris.org, and [4]AAP.org. Also, contact Cierra Nickerson at [5]cnickerson@hcde-texas.org for guidance in helping children return to school following a crisis.

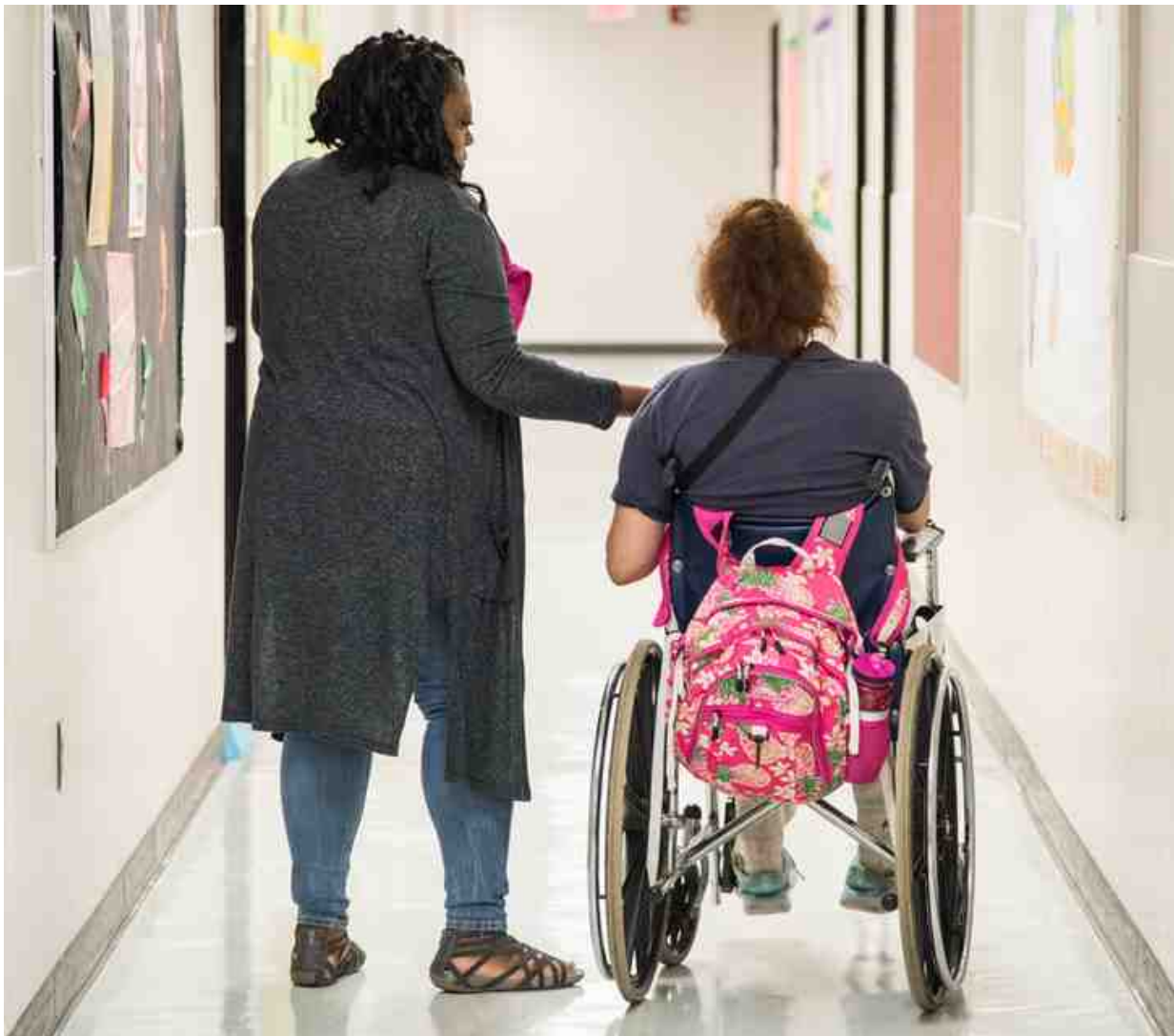
1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210824_headstart_273.jpg
 2. <https://ready.gov/kids>
 3. <https://readyharris.org/kids>
 4. <https://www.aap.org/en/search/?k=disaster&page=1>
 5. <mailto:cnickerson@hcde-texas.org>
-

Center for Safe and Secure Schools offers guidance to keep children with special needs safe in emergencies (2021-09-09 08:45)

Are children safe? This question is carefully considered for all children, but it requires a deeper analysis for parents and educators of students with special needs.

Additional preparation may be needed while planning for an emergency or disaster situation for children and youth with disabilities. For instance, children with disabilities may have a hard time moving from one location to another, have difficulty communicating, or have trouble adjusting to different situations. Emergency plans must cover the physical and emotional challenges required to make special needs children feel safe.

[1]



Academic and Behavioral School West teacher walks beside student in a wheelchair.

The key in an emergency for any family, especially those with special needs children, is to plan and prepare ahead of time. It is important to talk to them about what *can* happen and what *is* happening during emergencies.

Prepare a kit:

Keeping a routine in an emergency can help a child stay calm. Putting together a good kit is the first step. Be sure to include your children in the process. Let them pick things that make them feel secure, such as a favorite book or food—even if it is not healthy.

Basic Items:

- Flashlight
- Radio (hand-crank or battery-powered with extra batteries)
- Water
- First aid kit
- Snacks
- Child's unique needs
 - Medications
 - A small identification (ID) card or bracelet with information on key medications and emergency contacts to always keep with them.
 - Special foods or formulas
- Equipment or supplies, such as
 - Extra diapers
 - Extra batteries for small devices like hearing aids or assistive communication devices are helpful to have in a kit

- Alternate power source/generator. Parents of children who require power for medical or other assistive devices should consider how they will maintain the use of these devices if there are power outages. Consider obtaining a generator for home use (and be sure to learn how to use it safely). Sometimes medical insurance programs will provide resources for generators, particularly if a child has a constant need for breathing (respiratory) support. Keep a charger with you and when away from home, especially when loss of power may risk health or safety.

Make a plan:

Knowing what to do in an emergency is just as important as having a kit. While it is important for you to be ready, several steps can help keep the entire family safe.

- Make sure you have a way to reunite your family if separated at the time of the emergency.
- Teach your child important names, phone numbers, and addresses. Make sure he or she always has important contact information on them.
- Practice what to do in case of an emergency. For some children, using a picture or a written story may be helpful.
- Have both an electronic and written copy of their medical or other special needs history, daily care plan, important contacts, and other key information, such as the child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and/or Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).
- Have a copy of special legal documents (e.g., custody or guardianship) handy in case of evacuation, particularly if over the age of 18.
- Teach children about calling 911.
- And again, practice the plan!

Involve others:

Involving others helps protect the student and family.

- If phone lines get busy, pick an out-of-town family member or close friend to be a contact for everyone to call or text.
- Call your local police, fire department, and hospital to register your child's special needs.
- If someone else cares for your child during part of the day, make sure they know what to do and who to contact in an emergency, too. This includes people who care for your child at school.
- Be Informed. It's important to know what's happening with each family member and have a plan for when you are separated during the day.

Include the school:

- Make sure the school has a copy of the family's emergency plan.
- Create and maintain an open dialogue between your family and your child's school personnel since an emergency could occur while in the school's care.
- Review your child's IEP and/or BIP with the school.
- Keep your child's emergency contact information up to date.
- Have a close family friend as an extra person who could pick up your child if you cannot do so.
- Teach children to go only with someone who knows a secret "password" or "code word." This word can be anything, like a favorite color or food.

For questions regarding best practices to keep your student safe in an emergency, contact the Center for Safe and Secure Schools' Safety and Security Specialist, Janice Owolabi, at jowolabi@hcde-texas.org.

Reference Sites:

Emergency Preparedness Response

Generators

Emergency Kit Checklist

Ready Wrigley Checklists

[2]emergency.cdc.gov

[3]emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/cofacts.asp

[6]www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/checklists

[7]www.cdc.gov/cpr/readywrigley/checklists.htm

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20180716_robotics_0040.jpg
 2. <http://emergency.cdc.gov/>
 3. <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/cofacts.asp>
 4. <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/cofacts.asp>
 5. <http://emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/cofacts.asp>
 6. <http://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/checklists>
 7. <http://www.cdc.gov/cpr/readywrigley/checklists.htm>
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When former prison inmate Damon West speaks, Highpoint, Fortis students listen (2021-09-10 10:59)



Highpoint School East and Fortis Academy students heard some wise words from a special guest Tuesday. Former inmate Damon West shared his life story with a group of over 50 students during his hourlong visit at Highpoint.



Damon West speaks to Fortis Academy and Highpoint School East students on September 7, 2021.

"I thought it was going to be a normal assembly," said Highpoint student Alexandro Zuniga. "But then he started saying some really inspirational things and telling his back story. Then, he said that he was sitting in some abandoned apartments with his meth dealer. I thought, 'oh, he was involved in some stuff back then.' Coming from a white man, you do not expect to hear that."

A Port Arthur native, West is a product of the Port Arthur Independent School District.

He was a star athlete at Thomas Jefferson High School and a starting Division 1 quarterback at the University of North Texas. He has worked in Congress, has been a national fundraiser on a U.S. presidential campaign, and a stockbroker for one of the biggest Wall Street banks in the world.

He's also been an alcoholic, a drug addict, a thief, and the leader of a crime ring. As a homeless drug addict in Dallas, he became a serial burglar. His infamous crime spree became known as the "Uptown burglaries." In 2008, Dallas SWAT took him into sobriety at gunpoint. A Dallas jury took 10 minutes to sentence him to 65 years in prison less than a year later.

West was paroled in 2015. Since then, he has become a sought-after motivational speaker, a best-selling author, and a college professor teaching a class called "Prisons in America" at the University of Houston.

"Let my life be an example, a warning of what not to do," said West.

His message to Highpoint and Fortis students underscored that everyone has the power inside them to change their situation.

"I don't believe that anybody is beyond reach," said West. "I think that sometimes we just need to see an example of someone that has been through something serious and has turned it around."



Damon West speaks to Fortis Academy and Highpoint School East students on September 7, 2021.

Highpoint is a school for troubled and adjudicated youth who come from their home schools to address behavior issues. Fortis is Harris County's first public high school for students recovering from alcohol and drug addiction.

Students listened as West explained how he turned to drugs to cope with unaddressed childhood trauma. He also shed light on the grim reality of prison life.

"I could not imagine what it's like being in prison for six years," said Zuniga. "I've been here [at Highpoint] since last school year, maybe for three or four months, and I cannot imagine doing anything worse than this. I cannot see myself being in prison for six years like he did. He didn't have a bad life. It's crazy to think one bad mistake led to something so life-changing for him."



Highpoint School East student Alexandro Zuniga reflects on Damon West's visit on Sept. 9, 2021.

West also shared his trademark “coffee bean” story, explaining that he wanted to honor his parents’ request not to join a prison gang. He did so by following the advice of a fellow inmate.

“An older black man, named Mr. Jackson, told me prison was like a pot of boiling water and that we have three choices in life,” said West. “We can choose to be like the carrot that turns soft, weak, and sad. We can choose to be like the egg, which turns hard, mad, and doesn’t let in love. Or, we can be like the coffee bean, which changes the water to coffee because the power is inside the coffee bean. Just like the power is inside of us.”

For Zuniga, the message hit close to home.

“My dad, he was in and out of prison a lot,” he said. “Gangs aren’t always there for you. Growing up, my dad told me the same thing. Gangs and friends won’t always be there, but family will always be forever. And that’s something that hit hard for me growing up.”

When asked if he would make different choices when he transitions back to his home school, Zuniga eagerly shared his plans.

“I was talking to one of my coaches about running track and trying sports out instead of [continuing] to do what I’m doing, smoking, and making bad decisions,” Zuniga said. “I want to better myself.”

West, who is on parole until 2073, hopes that students overcome the obstacles in their lives and don’t follow in his footsteps.

“I’ve been to a place where some of [these students] may end up, and I want them to know that no matter what they do, the past does not define them.”

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/draft-v1.00_03_32_10.still1004.jpg

Employee of the Month: Patches Mohammed teaches compassion beyond the classroom (2021-09-10 12:14)



Compassion for others is perhaps one of the most important lessons students can learn through their education. Patches Mohammed, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) September employee of the month, exemplifies compassion in ways that teach children and adults alike how acts of kindness can change lives.



Patches Mohammed poses for photograph, September 1, 2021

“If I can help just one student and make a difference, I’ve done my job,” said Mohammed. “I just have a love for children, and I think that every child can and should learn.”

Mohammed recently began her tenth year at HCDE’s Academic and Behavior School West (ABS West). She began substituting in life skills classes in 2011 and “took an interest” through the training process. Soon after, she became an educational aide and was named Educational Aide of the Year in 2020.

ABS West Principal Victor Keys, Ed.D., says he often relied on Mohammed’s “impeccable” classroom notes to answer parents’ questions. He also notes how she exceeded expectations in her new role created based on the needs of the school’s staff.

“Whenever I give Ms. Mohammed a task to complete, she goes well above and beyond the call of duty,” said Keys. “She volunteers for [most] of the committees that we have on our campus, and if we do not have a committee, Ms. Mohammed will take the initiative to [oversee] the event or activity.”

In her current capacity at ABS West, Mohammed manages the school's copy room. She established a highly efficient system that keeps copy orders running smoothly, allowing teachers to focus more time and energy on their students. She also assists with food service during lunch and generally sees that everyone at the school is cared for. In fact, that is what she does best: she cares.

Over the holidays, Mohammed assembled food boxes for four of the school's families with her own funds. Outside of work, she participates in Alzheimer's walks, volunteers with Baytown Habitat for Humanity, and with the help of her family, serves those in need in her community.

[2]



Patches Mohammed (right) poses with ABS West staff during a holiday event.

"Most of the time, we see people [in need] and we just give them something," she said. "I have a passion to try to help others."

This summer, Mohammed and her family donated \$500 worth of school supplies to students and teachers. In August, she and her twin sister, Patience, launched an organization called Community Cares, in which they buy and deliver groceries, teach art classes, and offer other resources.

A native of Baytown, Mohammed says her passion for helping others is one reason she chose her vocation long before arriving at HCDE. She began teaching her brothers and sisters at a young age by reading to them and helping them with their homework and handwriting.



Patches Mohammed (center right) poses for a photograph with her siblings.

Mohammed, a soon-to-be great-grandmother, has many goals for herself, including selling her artwork and publishing a book about her granddaughter, “Kennedy Bennedy.” Her “number one goal,” she says, is to complete her bachelor’s degree at the University of Houston and become an English Language Arts (ELA) special education teacher. Once certified, she plans to stay at ABS West because she “couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.”

“I love coming to my job and being a part of HCDE,” she said. “I love doing what God

put me here to do.”

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210901_eom_010.jpg
 2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/img_2553.jpg
 3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/img_3495.jpg
-

HCDE urges safety during power outages (2021-09-13 11:46)

Beyond the immediate threat to those living in its path, there is a potential for widespread power outages when a major storm strikes. Flooding, high winds, and falling trees threaten power lines and other critical infrastructure. During storms, it is normal for electricity to go out unexpectedly. Still, extended outages can have serious implications such as disruption of communications, food spoilage, water contamination, and prevention of medical devices.

As the 2021 hurricane season continues and Tropical Storm Nicholas looms over the Gulf Coast, preparing for power outages is as important as ever.

[1]



A fallen power line blocks a street.

How to prepare

Take inventory of the devices in your home that rely on electricity and keep a stock of batteries or other alternative power sources. Have a plan in place for any medical devices or refrigerated medicines if you lose power. Keep nonperishable food and water on hand. When a major storm approaches, [2]check power outages in your area frequently.

[3]



A gasoline-powered, portable generator sits outside of a home.

During outages

Keep all refrigerators and freezers closed to preserve food and use coolers full of ice if necessary. If you plan to use alternative power sources, install carbon monoxide

detectors with battery backup in your home. Avoid carbon monoxide poisoning and only use generators, camp stoves, and charcoal grills outside and at least 20 feet away from any structure. Read more [4]generator safety tips at Energy.gov.

After power returns

Throw away any food exposed to temperatures 40 degrees or higher for two hours or more or that has an unusual odor, color, or texture. If the power is out for more than a day, discard any medication that should be refrigerated unless the drug's label says otherwise and consult your doctor or pharmacist immediately for a new supply. For more information regarding safety in power outages, visit [5]Ready.gov. Sign up for [6]ReadyHarris Alerts to monitor developing storms and flood conditions in Harris County.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/shutterstock_1039306918.jpg
 2. [http://gis.centerpointenergy.com/outagetracker/?WT.ac=OC_Image_Callout&_ga=2.15127600.765839779.1568763466-2142585516.1568763466'](http://gis.centerpointenergy.com/outagetracker/?WT.ac=OC_Image_Callout&_ga=2.15127600.765839779.1568763466-2142585516.1568763466)
 3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/shutterstock_136621700.jpg
 4. <https://www.energy.gov/ceser/activities/energy-security/emergency-preparedness/using-portable-emergency-generators-safely>
 5. <https://www.ready.gov/power-outages>
 6. <https://member.everbridge.net/index/892807736729064#/signup>
-

HCDE Board of Trustees approves additional \$101,300 for Tools for Teachers program (2021-09-17 14:51)

This week, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Board of Trustees unanimously approved funding for an additional 1,013 \$100 credits for the Tools for Teachers program, raising the total investment from \$200,000 to \$301,300. Tools for Teachers, a program designed to support Harris County teachers with classroom supplies, is a project in partnership with the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC).

[1]



Tools for Teachers: Supplementing Success

This decision follows the overwhelmingly positive response the program received. Demand far exceeded the available credits, with the initial 2,000 slots filling within hours of the Tools for Teachers registration opening the morning of Aug. 2, 2021. A waitlist was created for an additional 1,000 teachers, which filled the same day.

Aldine ISD teacher Trevarus Williams shared, "Thanks to HCDE for helping ensure the students that enter my classroom this year have the tools they need to be successful!"

Eligible registrants received instructions to redeem their credits. Teachers have until Nov. 30 to purchase their classroom supplies online.

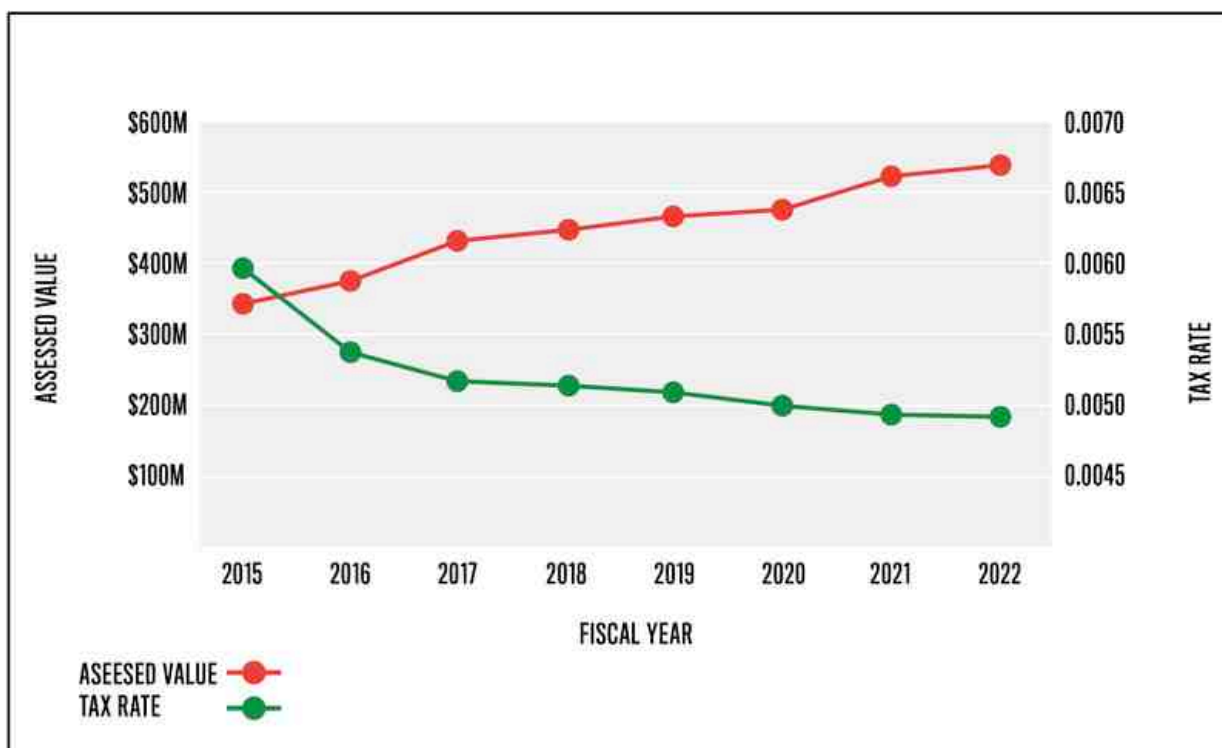
1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/tools-for-teachers_background-01.jpg

Harris County Department of Education board votes to lower tax rate for 7th consecutive year (2021-09-17 16:06)

Through a unanimous vote, Harris County Department of Education's Board of Trustees voted to lower the tax rate for a seventh consecutive year at its regular monthly September board meeting. The board adopted the recommended rate of \$0.004990 per \$100 of taxable property value, a slight decrease from the current \$0.004993 tax rate.

"We are proud to provide more services and continue to lower the tax rate," Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Jesus Amezcua, Ph.D., said. "We appreciate the support of our taxpayers, and we are mindful so we can be efficient every day."

[1]



A graph shows an seven-year increase in property values and decrease in the HCDE tax rate.

For a home valued at \$200,000, the adopted rate of \$0.004990 means the average Harris County homeowner would pay HCDE less than \$10 a year in property taxes for education services. For the average taxable value of a home in Harris County with a homestead exemption, or \$184,303, the tax equates to \$9.20 a year. For a home

valued at \$150,000, the yearly taxes are \$7.49. An individuals' taxes may still rise if the value of their property increases.

"HCDE continues to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars for Harris County residents," said Harris County Superintendent James Colbert Jr. "The opportunity to reduce our tax rate while meeting the needs of our community is a win for students, stakeholders, and HCDE."

HCDE provides educational support services to school districts and the public through afterschool programs, school-based therapy services, adult education, Head Start, and four specialty schools. Additional services such as a national purchasing cooperative give school districts buying power. Educators also benefit from professional development and leadership training supplied by HCDE. For more information, visit [2]hcde-texas.org/tax-rate.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/screen-shot-2021-09-17-at-3.29.56-pm.png>
2. <https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.hcde-texas.org%2Ftax-rate&data=04%7C01%7C1cozzari%40hcde-texas.org%7C4a3a6bfc68014049369e0>

20 years later, Head Start student returns as employee, reunites with former campus manager (2021-09-23 15:03)

A new job at the Baytown Head Start campus recently served as the catalyst for a heartwarming reunion between educator and student.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/P_jshhhyhZ0

Baytown Head Start's Carlos Martinez shares his Head Start journey that started at the age of 4

24-year-old Carlos Martinez, Baytown Head Start's new health services coordinator, didn't know he had been a Head Start student when he applied for the job.

"I graduated in 2019 from the University of Houston—Go Coogs! As soon as I graduated, Covid happened, and it was just so hard trying to find any position," Martinez said. "And then this popped up, and I was like, 'this is perfect!'"

Having wanted to always work in a health-related role where he could help people, Martinez applied and landed the job with Harris County Department of Education.



Carlos Martinez poses for a photograph at Baytown Head Start, September 22, 2021

“I called my mom to let her know I got the position, and she’s like, ‘you know you were a Head Start student, right?’,” said Martinez. “I was like, ‘man, this is crazy. I guess it was meant to be.’ I guess I just made my way back around, and now it’s my turn to be on the other side helping other people.”

Martinez’s parents chose to enroll him at Head Start after a family member recommended the program.

“[My family only spoke Spanish], so they needed something that could help meet our needs,” he said. “I think Head Start really helped me get involved and learn English.”



Copy photo of Carlos Martinez as a Head Start student, September 22, 2021

Taiwan Williams, the founding center manager of the Burnett Head Start campus, sits on the other side of Martinez's cubicle wall.

"I first met him in August of 2001 when his mom enrolled him at Burnett Head Start," said Williams. "This time, he's sitting next door to me in the cubicle, and he was talking on the phone, and when he got off, I was like, 'Baby, did I hear you say you went to Burnett?' He was like, 'yes.' I'm like, 'how old are you?' and he said '24,' and I'm like, 'oh god, you're one of our babies. If you went to pre-K at Burnett, you're one of our babies because we had the pre-K program.'"



Carlos Martinez poses for a photograph with Taiwan Williams at Baytown Head Start, September 22, 2021



Carlos Martinez and Taiwan Williams hold Martinez's Head Start certificate, signed by Williams in 2002

The Burnett Head Start campus opened in 2001 in a portable building through a partnership between the Pasadena Independent School District and HCDE.

When asked how Williams felt when she realized Martinez was one of her former students, visible tears started to form.

“Proud. Old,” Williams said as she laughed through the tears. “I feel like I played some kind of part in helping him to develop into a human being that has empathy for people that would want to work in this field to give back in whatever kind of capacity. So every time I talk about it, I cry now because I’m just happy. I feel almost like a proud mom, but a proud Head Start mom. I’m glad he’s here. He’s going to be successful. I’m going to make sure because he’s my baby.”

[5]



Taiwan Williams poses for a photograph at Baytown Head Start, September 22, 2021

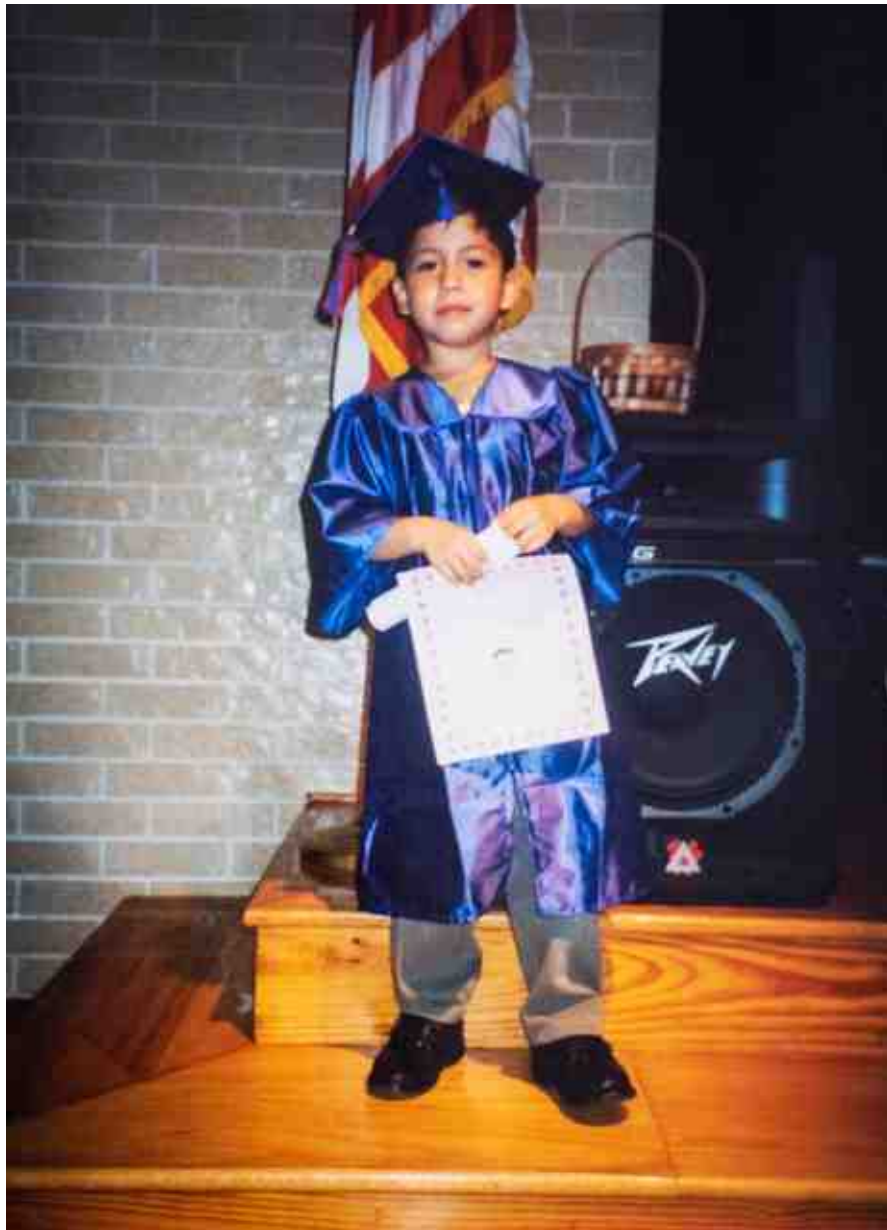
With only two weeks on the job, Martinez said the experience was ‘surreal’ and added that it made him happy to see Williams’ joyful tears.

“This person was in charge of me,” he said. “Now, I’ve grown as an adult, and now I get to work alongside her and help these families and kids. It’s great to be in a work environment where people actually care. That’s all I could really ask for—a team that respects one another and wants to help families and children have a better future.”

Williams believes that Head Start instilled lifelong lessons in Martinez, which she sees in him today.

“The love of learning. He’s going through his training session process right now. With every one of his sessions, he’s asking questions, he’s inquisitive,” said Williams. “You can tell he wants to learn everything that he needs to know to be successful, and I think that started with us because we don’t play, we teach through play, and we encourage the kids to ask questions.”

[6]



Copy photo of Carlos Martinez as a Head Start student, September 22, 2021

“It makes me feel great. I hope I can be on the other side one day and watch someone

I've helped grow and make me as emotional," he says.

Taiwan replies, "You're going to do it, baby. You had a great start."

"I had a Head Start," responds Martinez.

To enroll your child in an Early Head Start or Head Start program, visit [7]hcde-texas.org/head-start.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210922_headstart_003.jpg
 2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210922_headstart_010.jpg
 3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210922_headstart_017.jpg?w=1024
 4. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210922_headstart_004.jpg?w=1024
 5. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210922_headstart_021.jpg
 6. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20210922_headstart_012.jpg
 7. <https://www.hcde-texas.org/head-start>
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Teaching and Learning Center keeps two feet in the present, one eye on the future (2021-09-27 07:00)

As teachers and students resume in-person learning, representatives from divisions of Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) provide inside perspectives about their work and what it means to them in a back-to-school series. Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) director, Andrea Segraves, shares her outlook for new and continuous projects from the division in the year ahead.

[1]



Andrea Segraves speaks to members of the Harris County Department of Education Scholastic Arts Leadership Team at the Houston Arboretum, September 28, 2017.

How has the TLC been preparing for the new year?

AS: “The TLC team has worked hard to expand our thinking and our services. We spent an extensive amount of time meeting and talking with educators across the state to determine what professional learning options for teachers would create the

most impact for students. We have many exciting plans to offer targeted, effective, ongoing, and relevant professional development.”

What programs or collaborations in the works this year?

AS: “We remain committed to strengthening relationships with districts across the county and responding to real-time needs. Right now, we’re working with Goose Creek CISD and Alief, Aldine, and Dayton independent school districts to support first-year principals through a program we kicked off this summer called Leadership Matters. We look forward to seeing the sustained impact it creates. Of course, we are excited for our annual Early Childhood Winter Conference—the second largest of its kind in the state—and we hope to build on its success by launching cohorts of ongoing learning from this year’s event. We’re also keeping an eye on national trends. This year, our goal is to ensure educators have the knowledge, skills, and support they need to genuinely accelerate learning and stop the widening ‘COVID achievement gap.’ At the same time, we want to ensure we tend to teachers’ and students’ social and emotional needs as much as their academic needs. Our curriculum directors are leading several collaborations to provide districts with the resources they need in the current environment, including more flexible professional learning opportunities.”

From your perspective as a former principal and instructional leader, how are the services TLC provides critical to the districts HCDE serves?

AS: “As a principal, I would have loved to have had a team like ours meeting with me to say, ‘How can we fill in the gaps? Where can we provide support?’ Being a teacher and an educational leader is extremely hard work, but it brings the richness of life experience. The personalized professional development TLC provides takes this into account and weaves opportunities for real-life application. That level of support would have lightened my load so I could give more of myself to my campus, students, and teachers.”

What are you most excited about for the new school year?

AS: “I am most excited about the work we are doing collectively as a team to plan and build out new programs that open possibilities for new learning in new spaces. It is so rewarding when we work with district-level teams, campus teams, or campus leaders to create customized plans and see the successful outcomes that impact their work in significant ways.”

Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/20170928_scholastic_157.jpg

CASE for Kids brings youth voice into afterschool program design

(2021-09-27 09:00)

As part of Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) back-to-school perspectives series, Center for Afterschool, Summer, and Enrichment (CASE for Kids) Outreach Coordinator Mike Wilson shed light on his hopes for the future of CASE for Kids' reach within the communities it serves. Wilson, the former director of Communities In Schools Baytown, combines his passion for student support services with his knowledge of the afterschool community to invest in opportunities for youth.

[1]



Mike Wilson poses for a photograph September 1, 2021.

Tell me about your role with CASE for Kids.

MW: "My role involves reaching out and making sure that people within our community

320

are aware of CASE for Kids and promoting visibility. My main [task] is producing the “Making After-School Cool” podcast, which explains what CASE for Kids is and brings up some topics used for staff development, awareness, and things that influence or impact the afterschool time arena. We started it about two and a half years ago, and we recently uploaded our 65th [episode].”

Are you leading or developing any new or ongoing projects?

MW: “I am, of course, continuing to develop the podcast. My goal is to be able to publish one [episode] per week. I also hope to continue to increase our [podcast] downloads and followers. Right now, we’ve had over 2,000 downloads, so by the end of the year, I’d like to have at least another 1,000 downloads and continue to promote CASE for Kids. This year I had the opportunity to facilitate some training and staff development regarding diversity, equity, and social justice, which are hot topics. I want to make sure that people who are involved with the afterschool scene have access to some of those things and are [aware] of current events.”

We heard of a new program you are leading called the Youth Ambassador Initiative. Can you describe what it is, how it works, and who is involved?

MW: “It’s in its infancy, but we hope to get a group of students together and get their perspective on some of the issues I mentioned. It allows us to hear from young people and what they would like to have more access to or feel like they need. Also, I’d like for them to play a role in future podcasts. The Youth Ambassadors will [consist of] approximately 10 to 12 students within the schools we serve from late junior high to early high school, to start. I’ll be working with the campuses and several afterschool program site coordinators to identify the right students who can express their thoughts and opinions. For now, we’ll likely set up a [virtual] format since the students will be on different campuses, but there will be some projects for which I’d like to get together [in-person]. Some ideas include a conference or possibly doing presentations to City Council or the Commissioner’s Court so people in leadership positions can hear from the students within the precincts they serve regarding the services available in their communities. Hopefully, we’ll be able to design some programs or incorporate what they suggest to the programs we currently offer.”

What are you most looking forward to this school year with CASE for Kids?

MW: “I look forward to continue developing the podcast and interviewing local and national experts in various fields pertaining to education issues and out-of-school

time. Additionally, I'm excited about assisting with the development of our Youth Ambassadors group. It gives me an opportunity to work with young people to expand their youth voice and learn more about the types of support they still need from adults and community leaders to help prepare them for the future. It's refreshing and energizing to hear youth voices and hear their opinions."

We know that in addition to keeping afterschool cool, you also are a father to two young girls. What excites you about this year as a parent?

MW: "Being reunited with some of their friends has been good [for them]. Last year they started school virtually, and they really didn't get the opportunity to interact physically with as many of their friends until they returned to school. This summer was very similar because of social distancing. I believe for young people, part of social development is to get out and [interact] with others. In the last two years or so, [my] kids are growing up with, I think for the first time in their lives, some influential historical things going on. It [has resulted in] some lively discussion and has allowed them to develop their own opinions while [learning to] respect the opinions of others. It definitely has sparked an interest in them talking to their grandparents about what life was like when they were younger and how much things have changed within three generations."

Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/mike-podcast-photo.jpg>

HCDE's Adult Education division helps students turn dreams into goals **(2021-09-27 16:17)**

Access to quality education can change futures, no matter where students are in their life journey. HCDE Adult Education Program Manager Denise Johnson shares her anticipation for how adult learners will grow and thrive in the workplace under the new [1]Contact to Careers: My Plan model.

[2]



Denise Johnson poses for a photograph, September 8, 2021.

Tell me about your role with HCDE Adult Education.

DJ: “I have been here for about 14 years. Before that, I was an instructor at Houston Community College (HCC). Prior to [education], I was a project manager for IBM, so I came out of corporate America. I needed a job that would allow me to parent my son the way I wanted to because I am a single mother. I came into the program as a part-time instructor and [advanced] from a program assistant to my current role as

a program manager. Right now, I manage our data entry for all the data that comes into Adult Ed, and the career component of the [3]Contact to Careers: My Plan model. [This component] is what we call Integrated Education and Training (IET) courses, which are our workplace courses.”

How do you think the new model will benefit future Adult Ed students?

DJ: “Students are either placed in soft skills courses where they talk about how to set up an interview, how to dress for success—things like that—or they go into career certificate programs, like medical assistant training. We look at their qualifications [for placement] because our goal is to make sure that we provide them with an opportunity to advance into a workplace environment, even if they don’t have the credentials to work right now. That’s the ultimate goal.”

Will you oversee any new courses?

DJ: “We just started about 20 courses [this week], including business office technologies, entry-level management, front office specialists, and a safety course for construction provided by the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER).”

What positive impact have you seen Adult Ed create so far this year?

DJ: “We are going into more of a community college mindset, so there’s more rigor in the program, and it’s encouraging and supporting our students to push themselves to the next level. Our true goal in Adult Ed is to make lifelong learners. The skills we teach in the classroom transition to their personal lives and into their children’s lives, leaving a legacy of education. We’re trying to change the trajectory of people’s lives because, without education, it’s very difficult to make a livable wage without having multiple jobs. We’re trying to give them an opportunity to have a more balanced life where they can spend more time with their children and their families. When I came into the building, this was supposed to be a [temporary] part-time job. What keeps me in Adult Ed is [seeing] the changes that we are helping people make. They tell us how it’s impacting their children or how the conversations at the dinner table have now changed from [everyday] things to college. So, to me, not only is it my job, but it’s also a part of my purpose here on earth as a human to help someone get to a better place and strive to be at the next level. It’s helping me serve my purpose from a spiritual standpoint.”

What are you most looking forward to in the next year for Adult Ed?

DJ: “I think the thing that I’m most looking forward to is helping people understand that in this new normal, it’s okay to move forward and still have goals and dreams. I think that’s a part of what we do. We help people go from having dreams to having goals that give them a tool set to be successful. If we truly walk in our purpose as we plant little nuggets of wisdom around us, then you may not see the transformation immediately, but you will begin to eventually. The manifestation of where we are with Contact to Careers is the result of all that planning last year. I think that’s important because you have to be able to celebrate the small successes as well as the large ones. We’ve gone through session one and are beginning to see this goal on a larger scale, so the fact that we’re here—because it’s not been easy, it’s been hard work—is rewarding. We are seeing our foundation get stronger.”

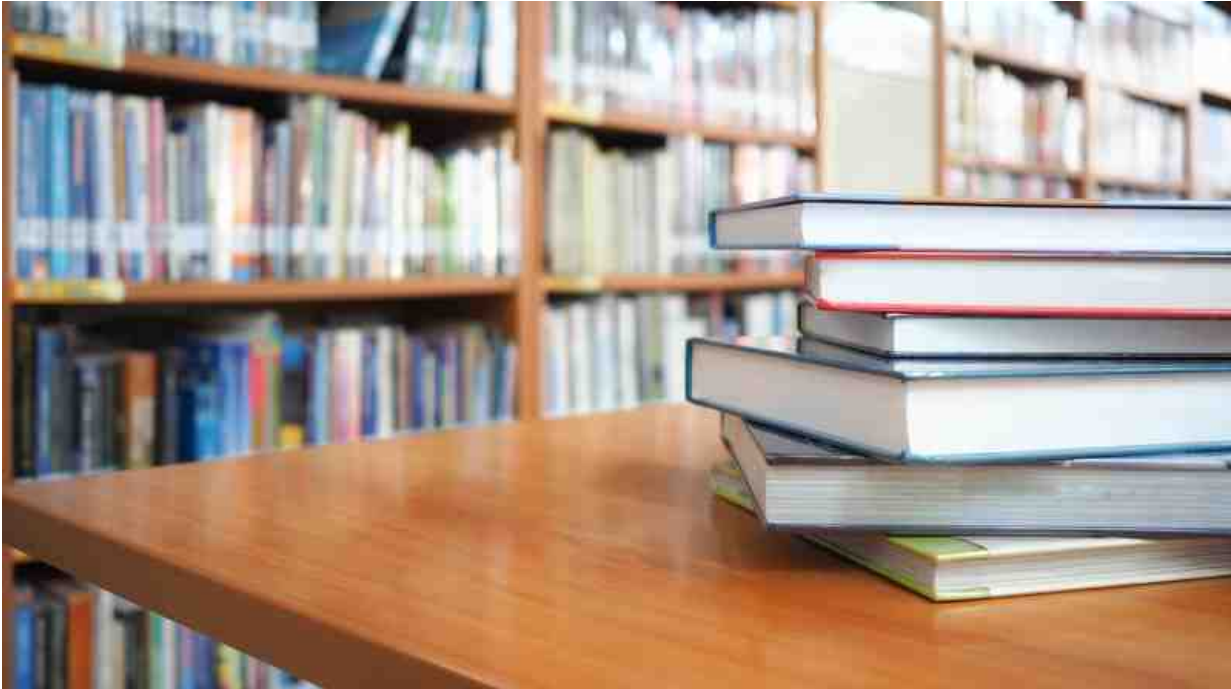
Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

1. <https://blog.hcde-texas.org/2021/08/18/hcde-adult-education-division-offers-reimagined-program/>
2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/denise-johnson.jpg>
3. <https://blog.hcde-texas.org/2021/08/18/hcde-adult-education-division-offers-reimagined-program/>

Unlock a world of knowledge with a library card (2021-09-28 10:11)

There are few things more empowering than a library card, but many do not realize the power it wields. Library cards grant access to technology, resources, and services and enable people to further their education, explore their creativity, and pursue their passions and dreams.

[1]



Books stacked on a wooden desk and a blurred bookshelf in the background.

September is Library Card Sign up Month and is the perfect time to apply for one of your own. Harris County Public Library (HPCL) offers a number of [2]innovative services that enrich and strengthen communities and has no shortage of ways to put a [3]library card to good use. In addition to a repository of books for every reader at nearly 30 branches, HPCL provides valuable resources such as writing groups, craft workshops, interlibrary loans, and meeting spaces.

There is a world of information and creative possibility at the fingertips of those with a library card. Visit your HCPL branch or local branch today and unlock the potential within yourself.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/shutterstock_1017025384.jpg
 2. <https://www.hcpl.net/services>
 3. <https://www.hcpl.net/blog/2021/09/3-cool-things-your-library-card-good-other-books>
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HCDE Therapy Services division helps students tap into their educational potential (2021-09-28 12:12)

Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) school-based Physical Therapist Sara Goeke shares her passion for helping students with mobility and physical disabilities to empower them in their education. Goeke, who brings years of experience in orthopedic and Early Child Intervention (ECI) therapy, says the support and appreciation of HCDE's Therapy Services division allow her "to help people and make a difference" in what she describes as "the best job in the world."

[1]



Sara Goeke (left) poses for a photo with Willbern Elementary School student William

Tell me about your role with Therapy Services.

SG: “This is my twelfth year working part-time with HCDE, and I currently cover 12 campuses. Our primary goal with school-based physical therapy is to make sure the school is accessible for our students. We make sure they can physically get around their school environment and access their desks, the music room, the cafeteria, [etc.]. For instance, we make sure they can get adaptive seating so they can sit at the cafeteria table with their friends, and we adapt whatever is needed for them to access their education. I check in on all my students regularly and try to be on every campus every week, if not every other week. Even if I don’t work with them one-on-one at that time, I always put my eyes on them and check their equipment to make sure it’s still safe and that their teachers don’t have any questions or problems.”

Why did you choose a career in school-based therapy?

SG: “I did sports medicine prior to this and worked in different areas such as orthopedics and ECI. When my oldest started kindergarten, I ran into a friend of mine who worked for Harris County as an OT, and she said, ‘You might want to look into working for the school because you have summer off with your kids.’ That was a pretty good motivator. It was a big jump from sports medicine to school-based [therapy], but I love it! Now, I wouldn’t go back to doing sports medicine even after my kids get out of high school. I love the ability to be creative. No two kids are the same. Every student is unique, and every school situation is different. We get to be creative in problem-solving. ‘Okay, this kiddo can’t do this. How can I enable them to do this in their school so they can be successful and be with their peers?’ I just love the students and getting to see them succeed and be happy and mobile.”

What positive impact have you seen school-based therapy contribute to the lives of students?

SG: “It’s very fulfilling to work with not only the students but their parents; you get to impact a family. It can be hard on a family when their child can’t walk, talk or communicate. Figuring out what they can do and sharing that with their parents and teachers is such a joy. Another piece of what we do is education. We help ‘bridge the gap’ between students and their peers and teachers to help them understand their

differences and, more importantly, their similarities. [We also] educate the teachers and staff so they can fully understand the student and their different abilities, not disabilities. Nobody wants pity, and nobody wants sympathy; they want to be treated like all the other kids.”

What are your hopes or anticipations for the year?

SG: “My primary goal is always to help each of my students get the most out of their education by providing the best accessibility possible. One of my personal goals is to focus on figuring out what my students’ goals are. What is something important to them, and how can I help them achieve it? I get to collaborate and work with such an amazing group of occupational, physical, and music therapists to understand students and help them succeed in the school setting and beyond. Simply put, we seek to make their lives better.”

Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/sara-goeke-with-media-released-student.jpg>

HCDE Special Schools prepare students for success beyond the classroom (2021-09-28 12:20)

A defining characteristic of educators is the innate drive to exceed expectations, and the educators of Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Special Schools division are no exception. Fortis Academy Educational Aide Esteban Ibarra shares what this principle looks like in action at Harris County's first public recovery high school.

[1]



Esteban Ibarra (center) poses for a photograph with a Fortis Academy student.

Tell me about your role with Fortis Academy and your experience as an educator.

EI: “I have been [an educator] for almost 30 years. I spent 22 years teaching English at the middle school, high school, and college levels, three years as an academic counselor, and two years as a high school assistant principal in Venezuela. I began working at Fortis as a substitute teacher in 2018. Now, I am an aide in the Edgenuity Lab where students earn credits through a leading in K-12 provider in online courses in order to graduate on track with their peers. I try to participate in all the activities that I can and become integrated with the students because you learn more about them the more you work with them.”

Why did you choose a role at a recovery high school?

EI: “I chose this school because I love working with young people. I love challenges, and I always see hope where others may not. Working with young people, I have [learned] that you bring excellent results when you do anything with passion and love, especially if it is something you really like. I enjoy working with [the students] because every student has a different life. Through talking with them, [I see] that everyone has different stories and trauma, and I take that experience and help them confront each situation. They often see you as a [parental figure] or as a friend because they see that you listen to them and try to [help them] solve their problems. It is special. It makes me want to be better every day.”

What are some of the positives or victories you’ve witnessed at Fortis?

EI: “There are many positive aspects. And it makes me a person who wishes the best for others. I have seen real changes in young people who arrived here from bad situations with negative attitudes. Through the teamwork and support that Fortis Academy provides, they change. They begin to arrive each day and say, ‘Good morning, Mr. Ibarra.’ You can see that change. Many even graduated from their home school[s]. One of the greatest challenges is getting our older students to graduation. For me, that certificate is nothing compared to the support and the tools we give them to succeed throughout life. I have heard students say that they love how Fortis loves them and how we treat them and that they like coming here because they feel good in this place. We have a lot to give. It’s not only [about] teaching them a particular subject, it’s about providing them with support and friendship.”

How does it make you feel to be a part of Fortis' mission and HCDE?

EI: "It makes me proud of the work I am doing. The profession of teaching is one of the most important in the world, and it [feels] good when somebody sees something in you. I applied to be a substitute, but [HCDE] saw my work and trusted me to do this job. It is so important to feel good in the place you work and to be able to work together. For that reason, I feel fortunate to be a part of the Fortis and HCDE team."

What are your hopes for this year?

EI: "I have many hopes for this year. Among them is the hope that the current students keep working in a positive way throughout the school year. If they stay and work hard, three of our students will graduate this year. I would [also] like for more young people, schools, districts, to know about Fortis Academy. We have a lot of tools to help them be successful, including good teachers, a good team, and a good principal. I think that with the excellent staff we have and with Ms. Godfrey [leading us], many good things are going to happen in Fortis Academy."

Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/esteban-ibarra-fortis-academy-educational-aide-4-1.jpeg>

Maritza Urdaneta (2021-09-29 20:00:55)
Excelente

1.10 October

Head Start fuels students' futures (2021-10-01 08:21)

Head Start and Early Head Start programs support children's growth in a positive learning environment through various services, including early learning and development, family well-being, and health. HCDE Head Start Nutrition Services Coordinator Monica Niles highlights the benefits of children's nourishment through a balanced diet.

[1]



Monica Niles poses for a photograph, September 29, 2021

Tell me about your role with Head Start.

MN: "I've been here about a year, and my role is to ensure that we're providing nutritious meals and engaging in other nutritional services. When families need accommodation or [other] resources, I work with our team to ensure we give them the best quality services and advice. Twice a year, we do what's called a growth assessment. We take each student's height and weight, and based on that information, we

take what is called a body mass index (BMI). We will reach out to families and inform them of [potential] reasons their student scored as obese or malnourished, discuss whether it's hereditary, or if there are some lifestyle changes they can make. We may suggest more outside play, incorporating fruits and vegetables, and minimizing [things like] soda intake."

Why did you choose this role at HCDE Head Start?

MN: "I started my career in hospitals working as a patient services manager in the nutrition department. I worked closely with the dietitians and nutritionists to ensure patient satisfaction and nutritional needs. I spent about four or five years in healthcare, but, in my time there, I saw a need for culturally integrating nutrition early on in our lives. That guided my interest in [exploring] how nutrition can be combined with education in early childhood. That got the ball rolling for my interest in HCDE. I love that no matter what the day looks like or how overwhelming it can be, it's still rooted in my ability to provide a service that will impact a generation nutritionally."

What are your primary goals for the year?

MN: "Bringing it back to some of the challenges we had in the past with our outreach, I hope to obtain more parent and community involvement during these nutrition assessments to discuss lifestyle recommendations. When we go back to in-person meetings, parent involvement could very well be showing up to all nutritional informative zoom classes or meetings, or even [hearing] their feedback [on] what seems to be the need. Also, [I want to] make sure that they are going to their doctors' appointments, talking with the nutritionist at their WIC appointments, and staying on top of their all-around holistic needs and resources for that child's growth."

What positive impact have you seen nutrition services contribute to students' lives, and how does it make you feel to be a part of this?

MN: "During COVID, it was really rewarding to still be able to provide meals, even if [it was not] in a classroom setting or didn't look like family-style meal services. We did a drive-up service of to-go meals. Even though [students] were learning virtually, we still ensured that they received a nutritious meal three times a day: breakfast, lunch, and a snack according to their nutritional restrictions or needs. It's been very rewarding to know that whatever the circumstances, we're here to play a major role in their ability to grow and develop and achieve and maintain a healthy weight."

What are you most looking forward to this year?

MN: “I’m really excited about getting back to family-style meal services. As things progress, we’ll take safety measures to get back to observing them during meal services, seeing their fine motor skills [put] to [use when] making their plates, and [seeing them] engage in conversation about the food. Specifically at our Early Head Start centers, because many more of our centers have the younger babies now.”

Note: This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20210929_niles_002.jpg

Fortis Academy principal fortifies trust in recovery school community

(2021-10-01 11:09)

The term “Fortis” in Latin means “strong.” Used figuratively, it can also mean “courageous” or “steadfast.” When describing Fortis Academy, Harris County’s first public high school for students recovering from alcohol and drug addiction, it means a safe place for students to find the strength and courage to confront their challenges with the support of people they can trust.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/Sx0TK4P5Ty0>

Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey uses her experience as a counselor to build that trust.

“I feel like this is a place of refuge for them,” said Godfrey. “It takes so much courage to admit that you have a problem and then to get help at [a] young age. For them to want to do that as teenagers is phenomenal to me. If they don’t trust us and feel like we’re going to support them, they don’t tell us when they’re having issues, and we can’t rally around them. I want to have that open-door policy so when they’re struggling, they will come to me.”

Godfrey, a licensed chemical dependency counselor, possesses a more comprehensive understanding of Fortis students’ challenges than a typical administrator. She hopes that students will see her as someone they can confide in and enjoy being with rather than associate her with punitive discipline.

“I’ll sit on the floor or the bean bag chairs with them. I don’t mind. I just want them to know that we’re a team,” said Godfrey. “It’s not the principal or teachers versus the students. It’s a Fortis family.”



Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey, September 20, 2021

Godfrey works hard to build rapport with the entire recovery school community, including families and school staff. She aims to create a supportive space where all feel valued.

Since her arrival less than three months ago, Godfrey has implemented restorative practices on her campus and ongoing staff training such as trauma intervention.

Sometimes, students experiment with substances because they're trying to forget something traumatic that happened to them. Trauma intervention training helps teachers recognize triggers and how trauma affects the brain. Godfrey's goal is to prepare her teachers for any situation and make them feel they have the tools to navigate it.



Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey, September 20, 2021

Fortis Academy Academic Counselor Nakia Francis shares her appreciation for her new principal.

“Mrs. Godfrey is a wonderful person to work for,” said Francis. “She’s very compassionate and thoughtful, and she’s made a great impact on the students and staff here. Her care and concern, the way she talks to people and gets them to interact, and the way she keeps the campus focused are really special.”

Francis thinks highly of the experience Godfrey brings to the school.

“We kind of share a bond because she’s been a counselor, and I’ve been a counselor,” said Francis. “Counselors look through a different lens. We try to make kids whole.”

Godfrey wants her student's parents, or any families struggling with substance abuse, to know that the open-door policy extends to them. The fear of the stigma surrounding addiction prevents some families from coming forward when their students need help, but Godfrey wants to dismantle that ideology.

[3]



Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey, September 20, 2021

"Addiction can happen to any person. It doesn't matter who your parents are, where you live, or how much money you have or don't have," she said. "It can affect any family. So, we hope that every family in Harris County would feel comfortable enough to send their students to Fortis."

Beyond the recovery community, Godfrey hopes to bolster Fortis' reputation for preparing students for life beyond graduation. When talking about her current students' potential, she described them as "the cream of the crop."

“I hope we’re known not just as a treatment center or a place to get sober, but a place to learn, grow and prepare for life outside of high school,” she said. “We’re helping them look at different careers, and we have a few students interested in going to college. So, we ask what that path looks like and how we can personalize that for each student so that when they graduate, they have whatever tools and skills they need to be successful in whatever path they choose.”

[4]



Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey, September 20, 2021

Being a new principal is not without challenges, but Godfrey says the level of accessibility and personal support she receives from HCDE makes her feel that anything is possible.

“I feel like my growth and potential is unlimited because I’m so connected with people who are great leaders,” she said. “I’m ready to grow. I’m being watered.”

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20210920_godfrey_006-1.jpg
2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20210920_godfrey_001-1.jpg
3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20210920_godfrey_002-4.jpg
4. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20210920_godfrey_005-2.jpg

Cecia Orellana (2021-10-06 07:52:41)
Academy students

Fortis Academy teacher and October Employee of the Month helps students reclaim victory in chess, life (2021-10-08 08:10)

Not everyone has the fortune of knowing what they want to dedicate their life to at a young age. However, Fortis Academy social studies teacher and October Employee of the Month James Hilton says his passion for counseling adolescents began long before his arrival to HCDE.

Hilton, who graduated from Southwestern Assemblies of God University, pastors a church of the First Assembly of God in Shepherd, Texas, and draws on both his professional and spiritual vocations to aid Fortis students in their journey to sobriety.

“It’s just a call, you know. Some people have a call in different areas, and mine is dealing with youth,” said Hilton. “My first degree is in church and youth ministries, and I’ve been working with youth since I was 16 years old in one form or fashion.”

<https://youtu.be/ktApjFT6kIA>

Fortis Principal Travita Godfrey says Hilton’s greatest strength is building relationships with students that repair harm and foster learning.

“Mr. Hilton does not easily get frustrated, he has a lot of patience, and he doesn’t take anything personally. For him, it’s whatever [he] can do to build a relationship with these kids,” she said. “[He] is really fun and full of surprises. He finds ways to sneak in historical lessons all day long. With the kids, I notice he engages them in the conversation, and they like it. I’ve been very excited and impressed by that.”

In one of his many efforts to energize his students, Hilton brought a chessboard to lunch. The students only showed mild interest until one student challenged him to a game. As mentor and mentee dueled, two other students slowly gravitated toward them and soon became hooked. Their next goal is to win a game against Hilton.

“Kids really enjoy beating their teachers in chess,” he said with visible mirth.

Chess is now a daily routine during lunch, and Hilton regularly observes, coaches, and plays the games that ensue. The school hopes that students will compete in the annual chess tournament hosted by Academic and Behavior School West in January.

[1]



Fortis Academy student Jasmine, center, makes a move against her opponent in chess as social studies teacher James Hilton, right, coaches, October 4, 2021

Hilton, a 15-year educator and history buff, still finds ways to incorporate lessons into the fun. When he brings out his chessboard from Israel, he talks about his travels and the importance of experiencing different cultures. When the students play with his Battle-of-the-Alamo-themed chess set, he discusses the significance of the event and the motives of the opposing forces.

“I love Texas history,” said Hilton. “I’ve gone to the Alamo for teacher training since about 2004. They don’t know my name, but they know my face when I walk in.”

He first began his career in education in 2004 at Channelview Independent School District, teaching eighth-grade social studies. After six years, he landed a position at the Al Price State Juvenile Correctional Facility High School in Beaumont, Texas, where he worked with adjudicated youth.

There, he learned skills that “taught [him] how to teach kids without looking at the problem that got them to that situation.” Having grown up with parents who included their children in their work as pastors, he spoke to the merit of his experiences in ministry as well.

“The training I’ve had through the years has helped me to be understanding of people,” he said. “You have to be there for them when they don’t do what you think they should do and have to live with consequences. You have to love the person [despite] the choices they make in order to have an opportunity to help them further. I think that directly relates to what we do here at Fortis Academy.”



Fortis Academy social studies teacher and HCDE employee of the month James Hilton poses for a photograph, October 4, 2021

The 15-year educator has plans to become a licensed chemical dependency counselor to allow him to be more involved in the counseling at Fortis. He believes that having staff who understand more about the “treatment side” of Fortis would be beneficial for everyone involved with the campus. Barring a few final courses and a 300 hour practicum, Hilton hopes to obtain his license by the end of summer 2022.

“I feel like since I’ve had the training, moving forward in that area would help the school and help me help kids better,” he said.

Hilton hopes his students will retain the knowledge he imparts in the classroom and chess. However, there is one lesson the game offers which he hopes students remember above all others. That is, even if they blunder, they are the ones who determine their chance for redemption.

“Even if you lose your queen, if you’re patient, you can still win,” he said.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/23a6525.jpg>
 2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/23a6486.jpg>
-

Keys champions students, staff (2021-10-08 08:13)

A school like Academic and Behavioral School West (ABS West) needs more than an authority figure in a principal. It needs someone who champions its students' and employees' success—someone like Victor Keys.

"I tell a lot of people I would do this job for nothing, [but] my daughter and my wife said I need gas money," he said with a grin. "This job is really something that I take to heart. It's not a job to me. It's more like a passion and mission."

<https://youtu.be/I5etoFDI8I8>

A military veteran and former deputy sheriff, Keys says he always knew he wanted to teach. Even in the military, he found himself mentoring individuals. Though he had not anticipated where education would lead him, he says he loves being a principal and is profoundly grateful to be at ABS West.

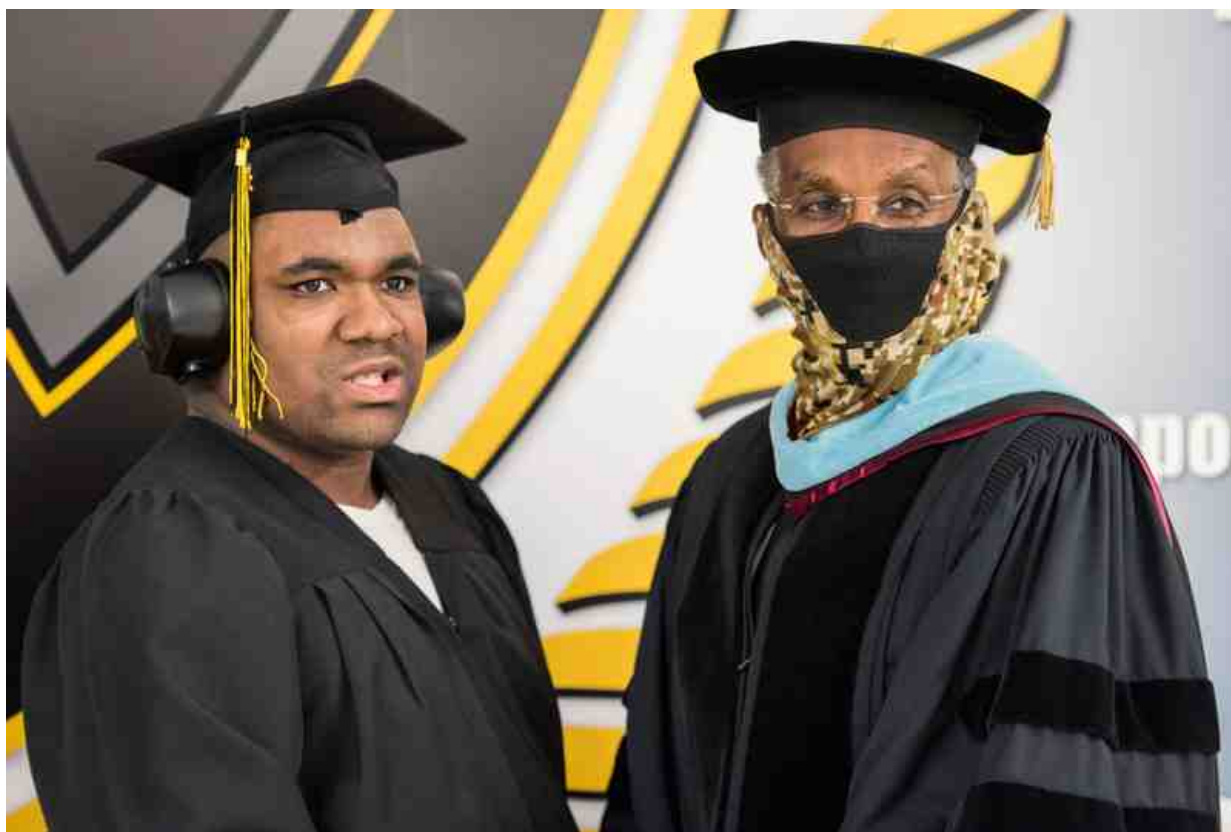
"These youngsters need somebody that's going to care for them and help them grow and mature, and teach them to be successful not only as students but as productive citizens," said Keys. "I want us to be the best at what it is that we do. I want to make sure my teachers and staff members are fully trained to be successful so, when people think about students with challenging behaviors, the first thing that comes to mind is ABS West."

Keys is always moving on his campus where situations can arise quickly, and he relies on his staff's ability to deescalate students. He looks for certain qualities in prospective employees, such as an "even keel," but most importantly, they must love working with young people.

"Not everybody can do this; only a chosen few," he said. "Those who really excel at what we do here are special people."

ABS West employees say one of the greatest things about working for their principal is feeling appreciated and valued.

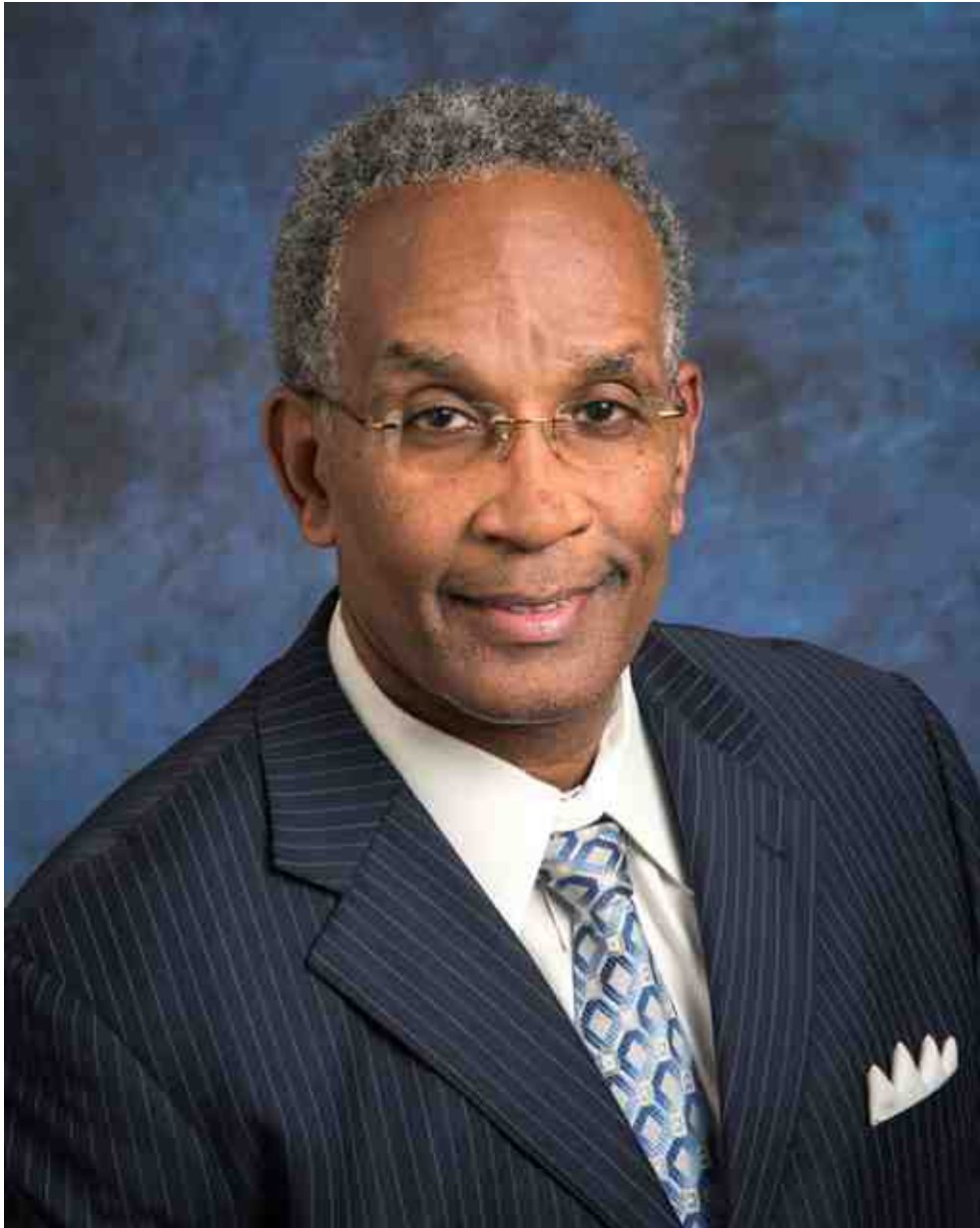
"He says every day, 'Without you, there is no us,' and he means that," said Educational Aide Davietta Ford.



Graduation ceremony at ABS West, June 2, 2021.



Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert leads a tour of ABS West for trustees Danny Norris, Eric Dick and David W. Brown, May 25, 2021.



•

Victor Keys poses for a photograph, January 24, 2018

Keys supports his staff in many ways. He's the first person to arrive in the mornings, after facilities staff, and the last to leave at night. Assistant Principal Gaylynn Sanders remarks how his compassion and great sense of humor bring much-needed energy.

"Working in a school like ours, we have to have humor," said Sanders. "We need that support, and Dr. Keys is always there to support us."

The principal's care is felt by students as well. Keys connects with each student by asking them about their day or even what they had for dinner and stops by each classroom every day to say good morning. By many accounts, his care for his students and staff extends beyond school hours. When employees are sick, they say they can expect a call from Keys just to see how they're feeling. He also often takes parents' phone calls as late as 10 p.m.

Though ABS West's goal is to prepare students to be successful in their home schools and in life after they leave, it comes as no surprise that some say they want to stay. When asked how he feels to be a part of such a mission, he replies with only humble gratitude.

"I'm truly blessed to be here. I thank God for this opportunity. This place, this organization, these students—they're priceless."

HCDE Director, Alief Trustee Darlene Breaux elected to Texas Association of School Boards Board of Directors (2021-10-14 15:00)

[1] ✕

Darlene Breaux, Harris County Department of Education's Director of Research and Evaluation, was recently elected to a two-year term on the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) Board of Directors, representing TASB Region 4, Position B.

Breaux joined HCDE in 2016 and leads the research division, which serves HCDE divisions and supports local school districts.

Breaux, who serves her community as vice president and policy committee chair for the Alief Independent School District Board of Trustees, holds a bachelor's degree from Texas Southern University, a master's degree in educational leadership from the University of Houston-Clear Lake, and a doctorate in organizational leadership from Abilene Christian University.

TASB is a voluntary, nonprofit association established in 1949 to serve local Texas school boards.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/dr.-breauxs-headshot-warm-welcome.jpg>

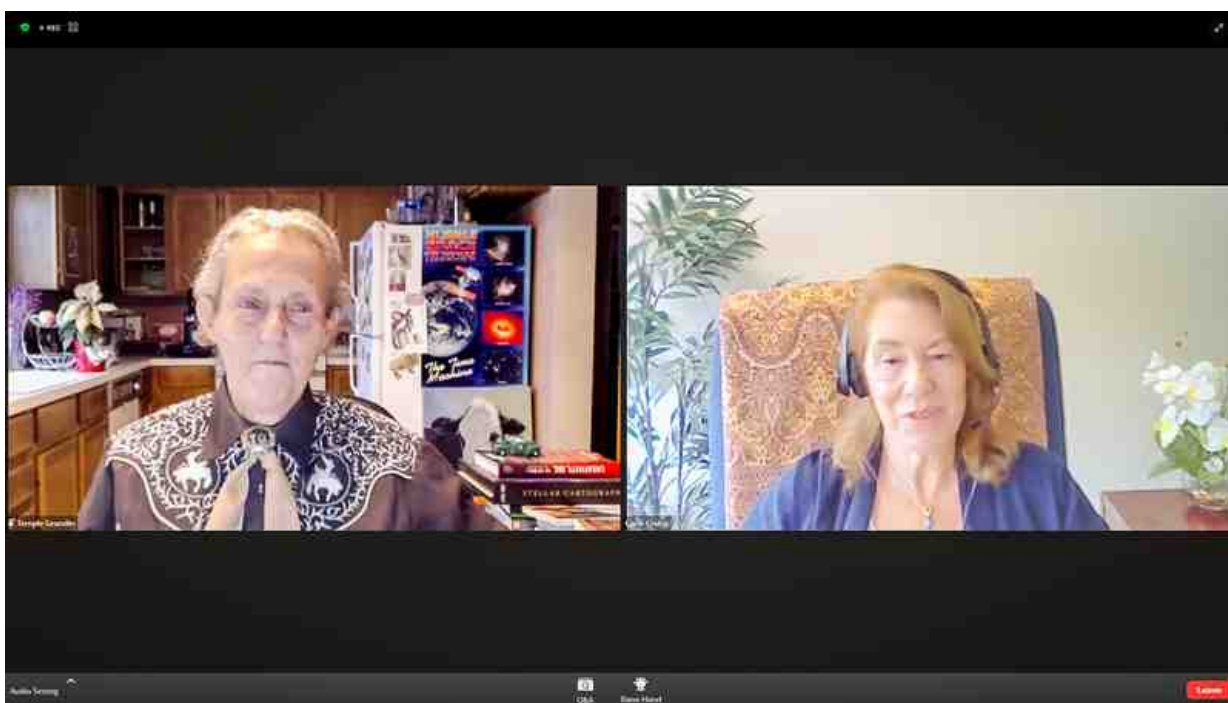
Autism advocate Temple Grandin speaks to HCDE occupational and physical therapists (2021-10-14 16:20)



Over 260 therapists, teachers, specialists, and school psychologists logged on to their computers this week to hear renowned animal behaviorist and autism activist Temple Grandin, Ph.D., speak about her autism diagnosis and what steps she believes should be taken to ensure autistic students can thrive in educational and professional environments.

Grandin's keynote speech was part of a 2-day professional development workshop hosted by School-Based Therapy Services titled "Great Minds Think Differently."

As Grandin began her hourlong presentation, teachers, school personnel, and occupational, physical, speech, and music therapists from Harris County and across the state began flooding the virtual workshop chat window with questions hoping to gain unique insights from one of the disorder's most well-known spokespeople.



A screenshot of Temple Grandin, Ph.D., and School-Based Therapy Services Senior Director Carie Crabb taken on Oct. 12, 2021.

In response, Grandin gave examples of how those with autism and related disabilities might think and how to encourage people with those issues to pursue their interests.

“You’ve got to get exposed to stuff to get interested. A lot of autistic kids will get fixated on one thing and what you want to do is broaden that fixation,” affirmed Grandin. “One of the things that motivated me in my twenties is that I wanted to prove to people that I was not stupid. I’m kind of a NASA geek. I always loved outer space, but I couldn’t become an aeronautical engineer because I couldn’t do the math—but I could find the area of a circle—that kind of practical stuff I could do. So, I went into the cattle industry, and I’ve done a lot of good things. Half the cattle in this country are processed in a piece of equipment that I developed called the center track restrainer system. I think that’s doing pretty good for a kid they thought was retarded.”

Other event speakers included Paula Kluth, Ph.D., who presented “You’re Going to Love This Kid,” a creative approach to teaching students in an inclusive classroom, and Susan Catlett, Ph.D., a board-certified behavior analyst and consultant who shared evidence-based practical strategies with participants.



Therapy staff attend a "Great Minds Think Differently" workshop, October 13, 2021

"Anytime you see Temple Grandin's name on something, the excitement level just goes up," says Harris County Department of Education Occupational Therapist Thelma "Tina" Banks, who works as an occupational therapist in the Houston Independent School District through a partnership between the district and HCDE. "Learning about different thinkers and her struggles with math but [having] other great abilities, it really speaks to us [occupational therapists and guides us to] rethinking how we set up our programs for people who have other abilities like autism. It doesn't have to be the thing that keeps them from getting to their true giftedness, whatever that is."

The objective of the workshop was to provide attendees with applied skills, tools, and resources that can be easily replicated in the classroom.

“I have wanted to bring Temple Grandin and Paula Kluth to our staff for a long time. I would say they are ‘bucket list’ speakers for me,” said School-Based Therapy Services Senior Director Carie Crabb. “We want to bring the best professional development possible to those working with kids with disabilities to help them be the best practitioners they can be. When we are our best, our kids reap the benefits.”

Banks agrees and looks forward to attending future professional development events to learn additional practical skills to implement with her students.

“The focus of giving us strategies that we can take back to the campuses, that’s spot-on,” Banks said. “You’re going to get a cheer from every therapist here when you do that because we are always wanting to be better and get better at what we do so that our students are better, and that’s the bottom line.”

The 2-day virtual workshop was recorded and will be available on-demand via the Whova platform through November 30. For access, register at [3]<https://bit.ly/HCDEGreatMinds>.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/great-minds-16.jpg>

2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211013_therapy_009.jpg

3. <https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fbit.ly%2FHCDEGreatMinds&data=04%7C01%7C1cozzari%40hcde-texas.org%7C29be12e9948f43871a2f08d98f3>

HCDE school-based physical therapists, CFISD carpenters provide accessibility to students (2021-10-15 08:50)

A team of expert craftsmen in Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District's maintenance department plays a unique role in students' everyday lives. Harris County Department of Education school-based physical therapists collaborate with CFISD's carpentry department to design and build custom equipment for students who receive physical therapy services.

"Cy-Fair does a really nice job at providing the equipment that is needed for students to reach their functional potential at school and access their school environment," said Nora Contreras, an HCDE Physical Therapist Assistant who is embedded in CFISD.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jsWdN2QS_U

However, she explains that some students only need minimal support or need something specific to their campus. This is where CFISD's carpenters come in.

"Let's say a student can sit in a regular classroom chair and doesn't need a manufactured, orthopedically supportive chair. They just need a little help so they don't lean to the side too much," said Contreras. "We would come in, take measurements, and have the carpenters attach lateral supports to the regular classroom chair. By adding lateral support, the student is safe from falling and is sitting in a classroom chair like his peers."

School-based physical therapists everywhere support students' ability to access their school environments. However, the partnership between HCDE physical therapists and CFISD affords a new level of customized care and is "unheard of" by several accounts.

"The accessibility that these gentlemen provide for our kids—I can't say enough," said Contreras.

[1]



HCDE Physical Therapist Assistant Nora Contreras with Lamkin Elementary School student Kingston Nguyen, October 13, 2021

A 25-year employee of HCDE, Contreras says CFISD has provided this service since before she was contracted to the district in 2001. Over the years, physical therapists and the carpentry department have collaborated to design various types of equipment, including custom-made cafeteria and classroom chairs for students who use wheelchairs, wooden bases to prevent chair tipping, and skid-free footrests for additional support when sitting.

Each piece of equipment is created out of a need identified by the students' teachers or therapists. When Contreras learns of an accessibility issue, she and her physical therapy supervisors take the relevant measurements and helpful photos and submits a work order, often including drawings or clip art to depict the idea.

"Most of the time, I can just go off of the measurements they give me and build it to those specs," said CFISD carpenter Don Schippers, although he sometimes meets Contreras on campus to talk through the solution.

[2]



HCDE Physical Therapist Assistant Nora Contreras with Lamkin Elementary School student Kingston Nguyen, October 13, 2021

Through decades of hands-on experience, Contreras has created standards for special education changing tables required for any campus where students receive physical or occupational therapy services. Among other specifications, Contreras included a standard height, an opening for a mechanical lift, storage cabinets, and lock rolling casters for both stability and mobility.

“It’s been very well thought out,” said CFISD Carpentry Foreman Bill Maxfield.

Contreras, who serves students across 13 campuses, explains the difference some of the equipment makes for her students’ school experience. She and the carpenters designed a cafeteria chair that slides over the stools attached to the tables in many CFISD cafeterias.

“[The chair] offers the back, arm, and feet support for a student who uses a wheelchair to be able to sit anywhere along the table with their classmates and not be forced to sit at the end of the table,” she said.

Some solutions resolve specific barriers, such as one project for a fifth-grader named Kingston Nguyen.

Nguyen, who refuses to be slowed down by his cerebral palsy, uses a reverse rolling walker, which rolls behind him as he supports himself using bars on either side of his thighs. It also has a small seat, which allows him to take breaks as needed while walking around the campus with his class.

Nguyen gets through most of his school day with little to no help from his teachers or therapists, but until recently, he required assistance in the cafeteria. Nguyen needed help carrying his lunch back to the table to sit with his friends, so Contreras and Schippers created a foldable tray attachment for his walker. It took some trial and error to create a base that would support the weight of a cafeteria tray, but with a bit of persistence, they succeeded.



CFISD carpenter Don Schippers poses for a photograph, October 13, 2021



CFISD carpenter Don Schippers adjusts a custom-made attachment to Lamkin

"[Schippers] was patient, detailed, and creative," said Contreras. "Kingston told us what he wanted, so he had a part in it, and his teacher had a part in it. He is now 100 % independent at school."

Being part of a team that supports students and supports teachers and staff with the knowledge to provide access for their students is what Contreras calls "the best job."

"When it comes down to it, they're little kids. They don't need to be worried about where their body is in space. Being able to relieve that worry by putting them in a position and equipment so that they can have a good day at school means a lot," said Contreras.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/23a6566.jpg>
2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/23a6543.jpg>

Rita Starz (2021-10-15 10:49:39)

Great to see everyone working together to make it happen for our kids! Nora, you are tops!

Treviño-Jones, the pillar of strength at ABS East (2021-10-15 10:41)

Academic and Behavioral School East (ABS East) Principal Donna Treviño Jones' vision for her school is to establish an environment where students succeed academically while learning to overcome obstacles in their lives.

"My word for this year is legacy. Legacy, to me, is to leave a place better than you found it," said Treviño-Jones. "I see the growth in our kids. By the time they're leaving, they are using the skills we have taught them on how to respond [to difficult situations]. They're also ready to go back to their schools on grade level."

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/5lko7FAgdbQ>

With bilingual and special education certifications, Treviño-Jones ensures her staff is equipped to create a fun, engaging learning environment that places as much value on instruction as behavioral support. By celebrating students' progress regardless of magnitude, she fosters a culture of positivity felt by students, parents, and educators alike.

Treviño-Jones says her job is very different from any other school leadership position she has held. Like traditional schools, ABS East values academic achievement, but its primary goal is preparing its students to be self-sufficient, productive contributors in their communities. It is a great responsibility, but she says she sleeps well at night knowing that goal is attainable with the help of her team.

"I have a great group of people around me," she said. "I have two of the most amazing assistant principals I've ever had the opportunity to work with. The patience, the love, the knowledge, the skill set, the intellect—everything that they have is suited for these children."

The true difference, she says, between being principal at ABS East and her previous roles is the alignment of the vision and goals for schools and students between campus leadership and executive leadership in HCDE's Schools division. The support she receives from the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and divisions such as the Center for Grants Development is unlike any she has had before.

[1]



Donna Trevino-Jones poses for a photograph, June 20, 2019.

“If changes need to be made or if we need certain programs or to buy certain things, we have an alignment to make that happen,” said Treviño-Jones.

When building her team, she looks for people who have the students’ best interests at heart, seek to make connections, and display flexibility and agility. In an environment

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dealing with adaptive behavior, teachers must be able to help a student in distress and address the instructional needs of their classrooms.

“It’s a combination of instructional and behavior support, so I’m looking for staff that have a high stamina and, more importantly, are open to building those relationships with students and staff,” said Treviño-Jones.

Assistant Principal Cherissa Jordan attests to the culture her principal promotes. When talking about her school’s leader, Jordan describes an “inspirational” woman.

“She’s a good advocate not only for her staff but for the students,” said Jordan. “I know I don’t look at the kids here as ‘at risk.’ They’re ‘at promise’ because we have to make sure they look at that positive aspect, and that’s what she’s always striving and pushing for.”



Students arrive for the first day of school at ABS East, August 23, 2021



Students arrive for the first day of school at ABS East, August 23, 2021

Treviño-Jones encourages each of her employees to reach their full potential and often asks them what they are doing to achieve their career goals.

“I like that drive because I’m the same way with the staff members. I’m driving them, too,” said Jordan.

Every day brings new challenges when working at ABS East. However, Educational Aide Thomas Wilson shares that he has grown as an instructor and as an individual under the support of Treviño-Jones.

“She is the glue to this group because she likes to pull people together,” said Wilson. “She would probably be the coach of the team. The coach [has] their playbook, and they want you to run and keep running the plays over and over again until it’s second
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nature, but she's there for you to help you through. She has a vision of making sure that we're all on one team."

The greatest testament to any leader is the trust placed in them by their team. Wilson, among others, demonstrates the confidence his principal inspires.

"Dr. Jones, just keep doing what you're doing, and we're going to follow you," he said. "We're on your side. We're with you all the way."

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20190620_jones_0001_r_f.jpg

CASE for Kids hiring for afterschool programs (2021-10-21 16:34)

Students slowly trickle into the library at Humble Middle School on a Friday afternoon, curious to see what the afternoon's activities are. They are met by Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids) Director Lisa Caruthers, Ph.D., who will lead them in a series of interactive exercises.

Caruthers, who oversees Harris County Department of Education's afterschool division, CASE for Kids, volunteered to spend an afternoon with students at the Title I school while the school and CASE work to get the afterschool program running at full capacity.

The challenge, Caruthers explains, lies in hiring afterschool program specialists to facilitate the activities in the post-pandemic era.

[1]



Dr. Lisa Caruthers leads an afterschool program at Humble Middle School, October 15, 2021.

"Because we are Harris County Department of Education, people think we only run school day programs," says Caruthers. "People don't know HCDE has an afterschool
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program, but we still have about 15 more afterschool program specialist jobs available, and we pay \$15 an hour, which is higher than the standard in the field.”

Afterschool program specialists work 15 hours a week in afterschool programs across Harris County.

As the recipient of a \$1.5 million Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Center grant from the Texas Education Agency, HCDE is tasked with facilitating funds and afterschool curriculum to campuses who were co-applicants to the grant. Ten campuses from various Harris County school districts will benefit from the grant, which will allow the program to continue at the schools for the next five years.

[2]



Dr. Lisa Caruthers leads an afterschool program at Humble Middle School, October 15, 2021.

The grant will be awarded to HCDE and its partners over the course of the five years, with HCDE receiving \$300,000 annually. An estimated 1,000 students will be served by the program during the school year.

“This grant is an evolution for us because we are hiring the staff ourselves,” said CASE for Kids Assistant Director Jesselyn Arceneaux. “With this grant, we get to build on

our afterschool expertise by designing cool afterschool activities and projects. We're excited to bring the after-school specialists on and load them up with training."

According to the nonprofit organization Afterschool Alliance, most juvenile crimes occur between the hours of 3-6 p.m. when children are left home alone after school.

[3]



A Humble Middle School student and CASE for Kids Afterschool Program Specialist Kasandra Barrientos celebrate after winning a team building game on October 15, 2021.

"Afterschool programs are critical for keeping kids safe and engaged while families work. They offer fun, structured, engaging play through project-based learning," says Caruthers.

Afterschool programs also provide an opportunity for students to improve academic skills, explore new hobbies, engage with positive role models, and exercise creativity.

“These programs are important because they provide each child with the balance of having an enriching environment where they can pursue their hobbies and interests and get a chance to socialize and reconnect with their peers.”

[4]



Dr. Lisa Caruthers leads an afterschool program at Humble Middle School, October 15, 2021.

Humble Middle School is one of the sites served through the grant. Abbi Hershey, a paraeducator at the school who also serves as the site's CASE Quality Assurance Liaison, says that the opportunity to be involved after school with students has been rewarding.

“It's a lot of fun and gives you a chance to get to know the students in your community and be involved directly with them and with their learning. It gives you a chance to

give back to your community in such a huge way. The hours are great if you're a college student."

Hershey facilitated the program during Caruthers' visit. She says the program has already become popular with students, even though it has only been in effect at the school since September.

"The kids are now reaching out to their friends and getting them to join the afterschool program," says Hershey. "They are here because they want to be, not because they have to be."

To view employment opportunities with CASE for Kids and apply, visit [5]hcdetexas.tedk12.com/hire.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211015_case_022.jpg
 2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211015_case_034.jpg
 3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211015_case_045-1.jpg
 4. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211015_case_076.jpg
 5. <https://hcdetexas.tedk12.com/hire/index.aspx>
-

Courtney Waters puts the 'point' in Highpoint (2021-10-22 10:22)

A highly structured learning environment for adjudicated or expelled youth such as Highpoint School East requires strong educators who choose positivity daily. Highpoint Principal Courtney Waters helps her team reinforce their mindset by reminding them of their purpose—to help students envision and achieve their future.

“The kids are our ‘why.’ Every day we come to work is about the why,” said Waters. “My job is to make them understand that we’re all worthy. We can all change. We all have made mistakes. We all have fallen short. It’s how we responded to the things that have happened in our lives that is the difference.”



Courtney Waters poses for a photograph, June 24, 2021.

Waters, who brings years of experience as an adaptive behavior teacher and a district behavior specialist, sees potential in Highpoint students where some do not, consumed by the ideas of their past actions. Part of Waters' job is changing this perception from others and students' perceptions of themselves.

"I'm working with future doctors. I'm working with future lawyers and educators," she said. "I have kids who someday will be standing in a classroom teaching your children or your grandchildren. That's who I'm working with."

Waters sets the tone for her campus. She is “a person of excellence,” as one teacher describes her. She places high importance on both instruction and social skills and outlines clear, specific expectations for staff and students. While she is firm, she leads with kindness and leaves room for growth.

Highpoint staff in various roles say that though they know precisely what their principal looks for in lesson plans, classroom objectives, and student development, they still have room for creativity. Teacher Thaddeus Olivier goes so far as to say that Waters “breathes life” into her team.

“What I like most about Ms. Waters is her honesty and the way that she packages it,” says Olivier. “She’ll tell you what you need to do in a way that makes you want to go out and give it your best. It’s all motivating. When she’s correcting you [or] when she’s giving you the information you need to be your best, she’s giving it in a way that is sort of like a parent that wants to see you be successful.”

By many accounts, Waters brings a potent presence to her role that many school leaders spend years honing. Her manner commands respect but remains one of optimism and fairness.

Transition Specialist Raphael Montgomery says Waters is rarely seen without a smile on her face and “always look[s] for and can see the good even in the midst of the worst of situations.” He admires her ability and willingness to meet students where they are and help them realize their personal agency.

“I’ve seen her connect with students that most people would deem unconnectable and get those students who never smile to smile,” said Montgomery. “[She] get[s] those students who can never see anything good happening to them to start feeling good about themselves and recognizing that regardless of where they come from or what they’ve been through, they have within them the ability to be successful.”



Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert visits staff at Highpoint for Teacher Appreciation, May 7, 2021.



Waters and staff during a team-building staff development day, August, 2021.



Waters poses with a student.

Waters also fuels her team in many ways. On Highpoint staff's first day back to campus after the summer, she instructed them to grab their belongings and head to the bus because they were going on a field trip. Much to everyone's surprise, they ended up in a bowling alley for an afternoon of "family, fun, and friendship." Waters told staff there would be plenty of time to focus on the work, but they would focus on each other for an afternoon.

“It’s important for me to show my people how much I love and care for them,” said Waters.

It was a perfect introduction to her philosophy and the culture of family she instills, staff say. It is evident that Highpoint employees benefit from the energy Waters brings to the campus.

“I’m looking forward to seeing what the future has for her,” said LIFE Skills Teacher and Case Manager April Lawson. “I know that this campus will be better because of her leadership.”

Waters reverently reflects that she now leads the same school she served for the past three years as an assistant principal.

“Being able to sit in a leadership role and continue the work is phenomenal,” she said. “It has been so fulfilling. I cannot explain how happy I am when I get up in the morning and go to work. It’s not really a job for me. It’s a calling.”

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20210624_waters_014_r.jpg

How to recognize substance abuse in teenagers (2021-10-25 10:00)

If you are the parent of a teenager or “tweenager,” you are aware of the roller coaster of emotions they go through due to hormonal changes, peer pressure, and the struggle for independence. Being the parent of a teenager can be challenging, but that challenge becomes even greater when alcohol or drugs are involved.

The reality is that many teens try drugs or alcohol at some point. Research from the [1]National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics shows:

- Drug use among eighth-graders increased 61 % between 2016 and 2020.
- By twelfth grade, 62 % of teenagers have abused alcohol.
- 50 % of teenagers have misused a drug at least once.
- 43 % of college students use illicit drugs.
- 86 % of teenagers know someone who smokes, drinks, or uses drugs during the school day.

Parents need to know that substance misuse can happen in any family, and the best course of action is early detection and being proactive. Remember to use your senses if you suspect that your tween or teen is using drugs or alcohol:

- **Use your sense of smell.** If your tween or teen has been drinking or smoking, you can smell it on their breath, hair, or clothes.
- **Use your eyes.** Look for red, heavy-lidded eyes with small pupils. This may be a sign of drug use. Large pupils can be a sign of alcohol use.
- **Observe behavior.** Look for behavior that is not typical for your child. Changes in mood and personality, such as your teen acting withdrawn, depressed, silent, hostile, angry, or secretive regularly. They may seem unusually unfocused, uninhibited, or hyperactive.

- Look for changes in normal behavior, especially loss of interest in their normal activities or friends or secrecy about where they go and what they are doing. They might lose interest in classes and grades, begin skipping class, or even begin getting into trouble at school. You may notice extended periods of sleeplessness followed by high energy before long periods of catch-up sleep, unusual clumsiness, or silliness.
- Other signs include changes in personal appearance and hygiene, such as being unusually messy, forgetting to shower, wearing unwashed clothes, or wearing the same clothes repeatedly.
- You may also see changes in physical health, such as fatigue, nausea, a sudden or dramatic change in weight, or slurred speech.

All of these signs can point to drug or alcohol use. However, they also may indicate other issues, so it is best to take your child to see a medical professional to find out the root cause or confirm your suspicions. Make notes of any behaviors or signs you've observed and bring them with you to the appointment. For questions about your child's suspected substance abuse, contact a physician.



Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey, September 20, 2021

For questions about Harris County's first public high school for students recovering from alcohol and drug abuse addiction, contact Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey.

1. <https://drugabusestatistics.org/teen-drug-use/>
2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20210920_godfrey_002-4.jpg

Amezcuca receives Pinnacle of Achievement Award from ASBO (2021-10-25 15:16)

During its annual conference in Milwaukee on Oct. 13-15, the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO) recognized HCDE Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Jesus Amezcuca as a 2021 Pinnacle of Achievement Award recipient—one of only four selected from North America.

“Anytime that you get recognized by a national entity, it says a lot about our organization and the commitment to excel at Harris County Department of Education,” said Amezcuca. “HCDE encourages that kind of recognition.”



Association of School Business Officials conference October 14, 2021, in Milwaukee, WI.

The award is part of the Pinnacle Awards, which celebrates the work of outstanding individuals whose original solutions maximize resources and enhance student achievement.

Amezcu's submission, "Adapting Our Reach to Meet the Greatest Need," highlights how the construction of the new ABS West campus was financed with negotiated lease revenue bonds through the district's Public Facilities Corporation. Amezcu secured a

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bank-qualified bond at a low rate and used a combination of one-time fund balance money and new debt to pay for the \$11 million school.

ASBO is an educational association that supports school business professionals passionate about quality education and is committed to providing programs and services that promote the highest standards of school business management, professional growth, and the effective use of educational resources.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211014_asbo_071.jpg

ABS East celebrates groundbreaking ceremony (2021-10-28 16:59)

Harris County Department of Education and Academic and Behavior School East leaders, students, and staff gathered Tuesday to celebrate the start of construction on their new school.

The groundbreaking ceremony for the new 43,000 square foot structure was held just beyond the site where the current school stands and adjacent to where construction crews have started work on the foundation for the new school.

<https://youtu.be/9XwPDY9M6YE>

“Look at this pretty dirty behind us,” said County Superintendent James Colbert Jr. “Today is a great day because it is another step towards what we aspire to be.”

The school, specifically designed for students with intellectual, developmental, and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorder, and other significant health impairments, will serve up to 184 students aged 5-22.

“This building will look like exactly [like] what we are aspiring to be,” Colbert said. “It’s going to be a building that is 100 % designed for special needs students. I challenge anybody in this audience to find a facility that will rival the one we are about to build.”



Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.



Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.



• Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.



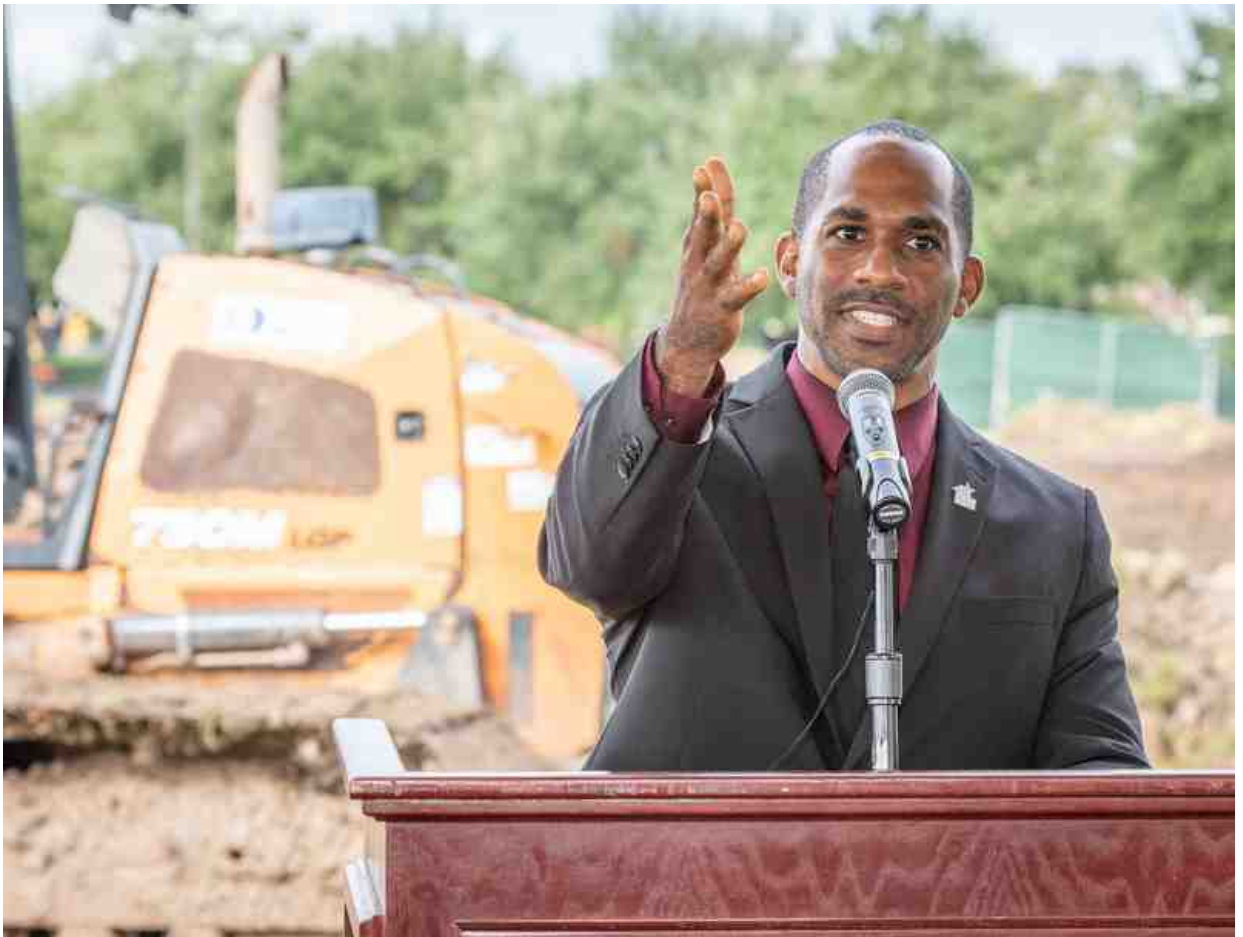
• Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.



Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.

Designed by Houston architectural firm Cre8 Architects, the new facility is largely based on its sister school, Academic and Behavior School West, whose new campus opened in August 2020.

The \$12.6 million project calls for rounded corners, a soothing color palette, a sensory room, a domestic learning lab with a commercial kitchen, laundry facilities, and an inclusive and sensory-rich playground featuring a zipline and special structures that will allow non-ambulatory students to participate in outdoor play.



Board President Danny Norris speaks during groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.



Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.

“I’m extremely excited to see the progress that will happen [on these grounds] and that you will have a facility that matches the work that is going on in this building,” said Board President Danny Norris.

The new structure will also call for a new address, 7710 Office City Drive, which will allow for the main entrance to be on a quiet residential street. ABS East borders the I-45 Gulf Freeway and the 610 South Loop East Freeway in southeast Harris County.

Currently, students and staff are housed in a structure that was converted from a commercial office building into a school.



Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.

“It doesn’t really look like a school. The building wasn’t designed for children,” Colbert said. “We are trying to break the barriers for our kids in alternative programs to [construct] a building that is specifically for special needs students to help them aspire and be what they want to be.”

During the ceremony, ABS East student Christopher Morrison presented Colbert with a hand-drawn portrait.

“He just looked at a picture of Mr. Colbert and he was able to do that, and that is very reflective of the talent we have at our school,” said ABS East Principal Donna Treviño-Jones. “A new building is going to mean that they can take their teaching and everything they do to the next level. Our kids, they function by visuals. What we are going to get really allows for our students to comprehend, understand, and really be able to [take in] the learning.”



Groundbreaking ceremony for new ABS East campus, October 26, 2021.

Colbert, a former special education teacher, used the moment to emphasize the significance of this construction project.

“You see what I’m talking about? This is what I’m talking about,” said Colbert. “Why is it that [these] kids need to be in an office building? They need to be in a school. It’s the staff that sees the potential in them. It’s the parents that appreciate us for being able to help them actualize that. They need a facility that does the same thing.”

Two additional groundbreaking ceremonies are anticipated this school year for HCDE’s new Adult Learning Center and Coolwood Head Start campus.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211026_abseast_177.jpg?w=1024
2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211026_abseast_136-1.jpg?w=1024
3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211026_abseast_057-1.jpg
4. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/20211026_abseast_194.jpg

Vida Avery receives distinguished honor for advancement of philanthropy (2021-10-28 17:05)

[1]



Vida L. Avery, Ph.D.

Vida L. Avery, Ph.D., a resource development specialist for HCDE's Center for Grants Development, will receive the Association for Fundraising Professionals – Greater Houston Chapter's (AFP-GHC) M. Anne Murphy Award for Professional Advancement on Nov. 12.

The award will be one of 11 presented at AFP-GCH's annual Philanthropy Day Awards Luncheon honoring individuals, corporations, foundations, and nonprofit organizations whose philanthropy creates a significant impact on the quality of life in the greater Houston area.

Avery, a 15-year employee of HCDE and an adjunct professor at Rice University, has secured over \$70 million in grant funding for Harris County organizations. As a member of AFP-GHC, she has served on the board and has chaired multiple committees. She also received an award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education for her book, "Philanthropy in Black Higher Education: A Fateful Hour Creating the Atlanta University System."

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/vlavery-002.jpg>

1.11 November

TLC Leadership Matters Cohort helps principals foster growth in culture, people (2021-11-01 09:15)

On Saturday, members of the Teaching and Learning Center's (TLC) Leadership Matters inaugural cohort met for its first in-person "community of practice" session at HCDE's Irvington office.

"This is Harris County Department of Education's attempt to fill a need for [first-year] principals," said Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment CJ Rodgers. "One thing that we know about principals is that the shelf life of a principal is very short, and in low-income schools, it's even shorter. We had to do some research ourselves to [find] the cause of that. What we found was it's just a lack of support. We felt if we could fill that gap and equip principals with those leadership nuances that the district just doesn't have the time to provide, we could really equip the school to be [sustainably] successful."



Educational leadership development expert Tammy Rodney leads the cohort in a discussion, Oct. 23, 2021.

Harris County principals and assistant principals from schools in Aldine, Alief, and Goose Creek school districts engaged in the practice segment of the cohort's three-pronged approach to creating highly effective campus leaders.

"The value that Harris County Department of [Education's] Leadership Matters [program] has instilled in me is paramount," said Chester W. Nimitz High School Associate Principal Sukari Stredit-Thomas, Ed.D. "What it has done is provide that support

mechanism for leaders to continue to grow in their craft. It makes it a safe haven for you to troubleshoot ideas, get that support, and get that coaching so that you can become a better leader for your educators and for the community that you serve.”

Saturday’s meeting, facilitated by educational leadership development expert Tammy Rodney, was the last session of Learning Cycle 1 for the cohort, which focused on people and culture.

The cohort approaches each learning cycle through three phases—practice and implementation, measurement, and evaluation. In the “Saturday community of practice” sessions, cohort members gather to network, discuss high-quality practices and develop implementation plans.

During “learning walks,” TLC staff visit each principal’s campus and observe the techniques in action, analyze patterns, and identify opportunities for coaching and improvement.





George Washington Carver Elementary Principal Erica Davis describes the value the cohort provides.

“The impact I think it will make [will] move through me into my teachers [and] into my kids. It’s a top-down effect,” said Smith. “The guidance that Harris County Department of Ed is providing to me will make me a better, stronger leader.”

At the end of each cycle, members compile a portfolio of their plans, accomplishments, and the personal and professional growth they experienced throughout the process. The cohort will conclude the first Leadership Matters learning cycle by evaluating the impact of their implementation plans regarding the goals centered around the people and culture of their campuses.

Learning Cycle 2, “Coaching for Change,” will begin on January 8, 2022. Learning Cycle 3 will run from March to May 2022.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/screen-shot-2021-10-28-at-12.20.49-pm.png>

Where to find support for military-connected students (2021-11-03 07:00)

November is Military Family Month, which honors the commitment and dedication with which these families support their service members. The sacrifices they make are what keep our military strong. However, these sacrifices can pose unique challenges for the children of military families. A 2020 study by the [1]Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) found that the children of U.S. service members are struggling to keep their education on track.

[2]



Attentive mother in military uniform sitting near daughter writing in a notebook.

The MCEC reports that the average military-connected student can expect to move six to nine times between kindergarten and high school graduation. The study, which surveyed more than 5,100 military-connected children ages 13 and older, parents, and educators, showed ongoing issues for students transitioning between schools. The primary academic challenges reported include:

- 73 percent of families with a special education student reported difficulties implementing a child's individualized education plan (IEP) at a new school
- 97 percent of educators reported they believe military-connected students experienced more stress than their civilian peers, while 40 percent also reported low confidence in their ability to advocate for policy on the students' behalves
- 67 percent of school professionals tasked with managing transitions reported uncertainty in how to address graduation waivers for students moving in their senior year, and 44 percent reported low confidence in assessing transcripts from other schools
- Only 41 percent of military families felt that schools met their students' needs

“The survey also identified several social-emotional concerns for military students who regularly transition in and out of schools,” said the MCEC. “The top concerns included: the challenge of making friends in a new school; difficulties feeling accepted and fitting in with a new school and its culture; finding ways to build self-confidence; and, dealing with the deployment of a parent.”

The entirety of the findings and study parameters can be found [3]here.

To combat these challenges, Texas offers several programs and initiatives accessible to military-connected students and their families both on and off military installations within their communities. These resources, such as [4]School Liaison Officers, [5]Child and Youth Behavioral Military Family Life Counselors, and the [6]Exceptional Family Member Program, exist to help students and families cope with the academic, logistical, and social-emotional impacts of a family member’s national service.

For a complete list of resources available to military-connected students and families, visit TEA.Texas.gov or email [7]militaryconnectedstudents@tea.texas.gov.

1. <https://www.militarychild.org/news/press-releases/2020/mcec-survey-reveals-significant-concerns-for-militaryconnected-students>
2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/shutterstock_1842062566-1-e1635886890122.jpg
3. https://www.militarychild.org/upload/files/MCEC_2020EdSurvey_digital.pdf
4. <https://www.dodea.edu/Partnership/schoolLiaisonOfficers.cfm>
5. <http://www.militaryonesource.mil/-/child-and-youth-behavioral-military-and-family-life-counselor-2>
6. <http://www.militaryonesource.mil/-/the-exceptional-family-member-program-for-families-with-special-needs>
7. <mailto:militaryconnectedstudents@tea.texas.gov>

Wisdom and positivity: cornerstones of Employee of the Month Janny Leiva (2021-11-04 16:33)

It's early on a Monday morning. Her feet move quickly, and she's already sweeping the entryway, wiping down windows and toys, rolling lunch carts into classrooms, and chatting with colleagues.

La Porte Head Start custodian Janny Leiva, Harris County Department of Education's November Employee of the Month, wastes no time. "The day is too short," she affirms.

https://youtu.be/2PvXLI_I99o

"It's amazing! It's like she's a robot!" exclaims La Porte Head Start Campus Manager Nadia Epps. "She's busy all the time! I'm always looking for her. I go all over the building looking for Ms. Leiva, and she's always doing something. I can imagine when she gets home that she is exhausted because she's moving so much."

But Leiva is so much more than a hard worker.

"Ms. Leiva is just awesome. She is the La Porte Head Start grandma!" says Epps. "She is the heart and soul of this center. I think she is a rare, rare breed. She just reminds me of my grandmother—I think I'm going to get emotional."

Leiva, a breast cancer survivor and a political asylee from Nicaragua, moves through the world with the wisdom of experience and the optimism of faith.



Janny Leiva poses for a photo with her grandchildren.

She emigrated 33 years ago while pregnant with her second child and with her 20-month-old son and 14-year-old brother to flee the violence spurred by the Sandinista revolution.

“God has given me many second chances. [When I was diagnosed] with cancer 10 years ago, they gave me six months to live,” she said. “I know God gave this time to make the world different for all people.”

Though she was not in favor of the regime, Leiva worked for a regional office of the *Casa Nacional de Apoyo al Combatiente*, the National House of Support to the Combatant, during Nicaragua's civil war. There, she worked for the program for the fallen.

"I have seen death in the eyes. We were at war [and the morgues were overwhelmed]," she said. "I would accompany the director to collect the bodies of the fallen. If they were decomposed or dismembered, you cleaned them up, put them in a tin-lined chest, sealed it, put the flag on it, and would then present the body to the family. It was the last time that those parents, their wife, or their children would see them, so we wanted to return the body to the family in the best condition possible. That was the last memory they would have of them, and we wanted it to be a dignified one."

Later on, Leiva worked for the woman who would become the current vice president and first lady of Nicaragua, Rosario Murillo. At the time, Murillo led the *Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores de la Cultura*, the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers, a government agency.

"Every time we went out, we had no guarantee that we might be able to return because there was a civil war between the former national guards and the Sandinista front," said Leiva. "There was always fighting, and you might not come back [alive]. So, whatever you do every day, you only have that moment to do it."

This philosophy—and her desire to continue making the world better for others—is what propels her second lease on life.

"I am happy seeing other people happy. Happiness is not selfishly in oneself," affirms Leiva.

With this in mind, her sister-in-law, Marcia Leiva, HCDE's chief accounting officer, suggested she apply for a job at Head Start.



A pregnant Janny Leiva (right) poses with her brother Dale (left) and her neighbor (center), who is holding her eldest son, Alexander, shortly before emigrating to the U.S., November 1987.

“She was the one who said, ‘I have the perfect job for you,’ because she knows that I like working with children and with children’s programs. For the past 12 years, I have worked in youth catechism programs.”

For Leiva, the experience working in Catholic faith formation programs mirrors the goals of Head Start.

“If the prayers were not learned, [the parents] would say, ‘it is the fault of the catechist who is teaching you.’ My motto is, ‘if you are going to criticize, also give me the solution.’ The problem was that the parents also had to be trained. That is the same vision that the Head Start program has. We help parents to educate their children.”

Leiva was hired in January. After Winter Storm Uri, the La Porte Head Start campus sustained flooding damage and Leiva was temporarily reassigned to the Baytown center.

“They told me I was doing a good job, but I told them that I belonged to La Porte. You have to help those in need, and I knew there was a greater need there,” says Leiva. “Because of COVID, they were short-staffed, so when I returned, I had to start from zero. You had to learn how to do a little bit of everything.”

Epps attributes the positive culture on the campus largely to the love and care that Leiva puts into her work and bestows onto others.

“Ms. Leiva makes us feel like we are her children. We are her family. She just comes into the building and is like, ‘Good morning Ms. Nadia, how are you? Is everything ok? How was your day?’ It’s just warmth!” Epps laughs. “She always hugs and then gets right to her job. If she’s brought maybe some cookies or some cupcakes, or she makes coffee first thing in the morning, it’s just those little things that make coming to work so special. For me, it feels like I am coming from home to home.”

Drawing on the obstacles she has faced in her own life, Leyva recognizes the responsibility the center’s leaders bear.

“They need someone who will support them,” says Leiva. “This is our center. This is our home. You have to make life easier for people, more comfortable so they can give 100 %. If they are happy, the children are happy. If they are stressed, the children absorb the stress. I try to create a positive environment so that the children and staff want to return the next day.”

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/20211103_170114416_ios-1.jpg

2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/janny-7-1.jpg>

Healthy Minds, Healthy Families Conference equips educators to better serve students, families (2021-11-05 16:25)

HCDE Head Start hosted its seventh annual Healthy Minds, Healthy Families Conference. Head Start teachers, teaching assistants, family service providers, and campus staff participated in various dynamic sessions designed to attend to mental health.



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.

The annual event's goal is to help Head Start employees tune in to their mental,
414

physical, and emotional wellbeing. By learning to be aware of the challenges they may face in their professions and how to cope with them, employees, in turn, can better serve the students and families in their communities.

“It’s critically important that the people in the caring profession care for themselves so that we can optimize our service to our children and families,” said Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock. “Today focuses on two things. The training promotes awareness of different social-emotional and mental health concerns [in children], but we’re also addressing those same concerns for our staff. We’re very grateful to be able to offer this conference and give our people an opportunity to re-center.”

In past years, the conference has welcomed both professionals and families. However, due to safety concerns, this year’s sessions were only offered to staff to allow more room for social distancing in accordance with CDC guidelines.

As a precursor to the event, Head Start staff received a virtual keynote address from Shana D. Lewis, Ph.D., a licensed professional counselor turned executive wellness coach, author, and TEDx speaker. Lewis, who brings 20 years of experience working with high-achieving professional women, emphasized the need to “own what’s yours, and give away what’s not” to free one’s life from unnecessary burdens and undue stress.



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.

During the two-day conference sponsored by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, attendees participated in a hybrid of virtual and in-person interactive sessions. The trainings included topics and activities such as yoga, physical fitness, art, healthy dishes on a budget, and the benefits of laughter and how to add humor to everyday life.

“It’s helpful because it helps you when you have that one child in your class that’s pushing you to your [limit] for stress. Just sitting down for a moment and taking a deep breath can help,” said Sheffield Head Start Teacher Yudalchia Hodge. “I’ll even do it with my kids. We’ll lay on our back on the carpet and just stretch to give them a break because sometimes, they might have a little stress as well, and they don’t know it because they’re babies.”

[1]



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.

Registered yoga teacher and co-founder of Phee-nomenal Coaching LaVondia Menephee helped participants experience mindful movement and develop personal self-care plans. Menephee, who has facilitated several virtual training for Head Start, acknowledged the division's commitment to its employees.

"In education, no person is an island. I respect that [Head Start is] so committed to making sure that the people who work with the children feel seen, loved on, and supported," said Menefee. "Academic achievement will come, but those basic needs come first."

In addition to conference speakers, several Head Start community partners attended the event, including Harris County Public Health's Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. The partners in attendance reminded Head Start staff of the valuable resources available to students and families and that many of the same services are available to them as well.



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.



Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.



• Head Start Healthy Minds conference, October 28, 2021.

Employees stated that they would use the knowledge gained and techniques learned in their jobs and in everyday life. Peacock reiterated the joy she finds in helping her caregivers find and maintain balance.

“I hope it demonstrates to them how important they are to us and how invested we are in their wellbeing,” said Peacock.

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/20211028_healthyinds_088.jpg

Mental Health the focus of 2021 School Safety Forum (2021-11-11 16:05)

For the second year in a row, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS) held its annual School Safety Forum virtually on Nov. 5.

"The School Safety Forum is an opportunity for our center to share expertise from our national and local partners as it relates to school safety," said CSSS Security Specialist Janice Owolabi. "It's a place to come and get some information about how to keep your school safe."

This year's forum centered on the holistic approach to emergencies, from planning to recovery, with a special focus on mental and emotional wellness.

[1]



Dr. Frank DeAngelis (top left), Janice Owolabi (top right), and Dr. Shannon Devlin (bottom) participate in a Q &A session during the School Safety Forum, November 5, 2021.

"Over the last four years, the [safety forums] have really been about physical safety, the mechanics of what safety is, talking about active shooters, and the tactics and nuts and bolts behind what you need to do," said Owolabi. "This year, we knew that emotional safety needed to come into it, but we still couldn't leave out the tactical."

So, our goal this year was to connect emotional safety into the emergency safety planning.”

Three nationally recognized speakers led participants through sessions that built on each other.

“The biggest takeaway that I wanted them to get as attendees is how [the speakers] all connect,” said Owolabi.

The forum began with Shannon, Devlin, Ph.D., a school psychologist and Army National Guard veteran who discussed emergency response plans for emotional issues that impact students, staff, and the community.

Devlin, who has been a first responder in various high-profile emergency incidents, including the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shooting in 2012, emphasized the importance of developing detailed plans that include psychological first aid, putting it into action, and practicing drills.

“One of the biggest barriers [to school safety] is overcoming that mindset that ‘it won’t happen here.’ This mindset is just not a reality anymore,” said Devlin. “Unfortunately, sometimes it takes a tragedy to change that mentality. One of the things we’ve come to know is that being prepared and being the least reactive as possible really minimize the impact of trauma and its related stressors.”

Frank DeAngelis, Ph.D., the former principal of Columbine High School, followed Devlin. In June of 2014, after 35 years leading Columbine, DeAngelis retired and currently works as a consultant in safety and emergency management.

DeAngelis shared a detailed and vulnerable account of the shooting on his campus, including the struggles he and his community faced in the aftermath of the incident.

“If you had told me that a Columbine would have happened in Columbine, I wouldn’t have believed you,” said DeAngelis. “Like Shannon said, [I thought], ‘it won’t happen here [in Columbine],’ but it did. Now what? How do you rebuild school, community, and life in general?”

He acknowledged that as part of his ongoing recovery, he sought the help of a mental health professional.

“Counseling is so important. Even today, 22 years later, I’m still in counseling,” said DeAngelis. “Whenever these events happen, it could be in Parkland, it could be in Sandy Hook, it could be in Houston, it takes me back. What I have now are skills and the techniques to deal with it. So, counseling is not a sign of weakness. It’s a sign of strength.”

DeAngelis says he sees a similar emotional toll in educators from the COVID-19 pandemic that he saw in the emotional aftermath of Columbine.

“Many times, teachers enjoy a great, great career, and then there is burnout. With the pandemic, we are seeing teachers that are very near retirement saying, ‘I’ve had enough’ and retiring a few years earlier than normal. I saw that after Columbine. Many people said, ‘I could have gone a few extra years, but the toll on us was very difficult.’”

His notice to educators and emergency management personnel to exercise self-care led into the last speaker of the day, Courtney Busby, Ph.D., the program lead for the youth depression and suicide prevention clinic at Baylor College of Medicine at Texas Children’s Hospital.

She began with the reminder to attendees that “self-care is not selfish” and subsequently offered participants an abundance of self-care strategies and tools.

Owolabi, the School Safety Forum organizer, explains that self-care is the first step in being able to heal a community.

“Dr. Busby’s message was driven from Frank’s conversation about how you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself before you can help anybody else,” said Owolabi. “If you’re not in good shape, you’re not going to be good to anybody else.”

In January, the CSSS will host an in-person Digital Threat Assessment workshop in partnership with Safer Schools Together. During the workshop, participants will be taught how to investigate and monitor threats made on social media and other electronic media.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/school-safety-forum-11.jpg>

For third year in a row, HCDE Named a Houston Chronicle Top Workplace (2021-11-16 12:23)

[1]



For the third year in a row, Harris County Department of Education has been named a 2021 Houston Chronicle Top Workplace. Of the 3,011 companies in the Houston area who participated in the nomination process, only 175 companies were included in the Top Workplaces list. HCDE ranked 17 out of the 43 largest organizations.

“Once again, this award reaffirms the synergy between our staff and the mission of Harris County Department of Education to have a positive impact on public education,” said County Superintendent James Colbert Jr. “It is ultimately about the collaborative efforts by a group of dedicated people to do great things for the children of Harris County.”

[2]



Staff enjoy cupcakes in recognition of Harris County Department of Education being named a Top Workplace for the third consecutive year, November 15, 2021.

The Houston Chronicle released its twelfth annual Top Workplaces report Sunday, November 14. The list is based solely on employee feedback gathered through a third-party survey provided by Energage, an independent research company partnering with the Chronicle for the past 12 years. Seventy-five percent of HCDE's employees responded to the survey.

The anonymous survey uniquely measures 15 culture drivers that are critical to the success of any organization, including leadership, work-life balance, training, cooperation, pay, and benefits. Companies are judged in three categories: small, medium, and large.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/screen-shot-2021-11-11-at-4.17.43-pm-1.png>
2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/20211115_twp_017.jpg

Recovery school culinary students serve Board of Trustees Thanksgiving lunch (2021-11-19 10:00)



On Wednesday, master chefs-in-training from Fortis Academy served the HCDE Board of Trustees and executive leadership team a Thanksgiving feast which they planned, prepped, and cooked themselves. The students prepared the meal using the skills learned in Harris County's first public recovery high school's culinary arts program.

"I think everyone is going to enjoy the food," said Fortis senior Julian Guerrero. "I know it's going to be good. We made it with love."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rAkkUCatkQ>

From concept to creation, the menu was a product of the aspiring culinary students

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and featured an oven-roasted turkey, gouda macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie from scratch, and chocolate-covered Oreos with hand-made designs. Chef Tiara Guard Marenco, affectionately known as “Chef T,” says her mentees undertook “hours upon hours” of work preparing the meal.

“We talked about the mathematics behind it—the cost per person and staying within budget. That’s important,” said Guard Marenco. “Once we got it together and decided on the menu, we worked on the recipes. Monday and Tuesday, we [did] nothing in class but prep and get everything ready.”

[1]



Culinary students from Fortis Academy serve lunch to Harris County Department of Education trustees and executive staff prior to a board meeting, November 17, 2021.

Wednesday morning, the students focused on “mise en place,” or ensuring everything is in its place, from ingredients and equipment to table settings and decorations.

The students were able to serve the lunch thanks to their recently acquired ServSafe

Food Handler Certificates, which verify basic food safety knowledge. Upon successful completion of the Food Handler course and the 40-question exam, the students received a certificate of achievement from the National Restaurant Association.

Student Jasmin Flores describes what the program has offered her in addition to a sense of pride and accomplishment.

“To be honest, I didn’t think I would be able to get this far, but I did. It means a lot to me that I actually have it on paperwork that I was able to do it,” said Flores. “To be certified [gives] me better opportunities for [the] job that I want to do in the restaurant business.”

[2]



Culinary students from Fortis Academy serve lunch to Harris County Department of
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Education trustees and executive staff prior to a board meeting, November 17, 2021.

Since the start of the semester, Flores and her peers have worked diligently to complete the training modules, rotating from weeks of classroom-based instruction to hands-on, on-the-job training in the school's fully-equipped teaching kitchen. They learned everything from sanitation and kitchen hazards to best practices.

Guard Marengo explains how she tries to make the process as fun and interesting as possible.

"We spend that time and we talk about all the possibilities of what could go wrong, and we do it in a very humorous way so that they remember it," said Guard Marengo. "Then we take off a few weeks, and we work on recipes learning basic knife cuts. It gives them the time to implement some of what they've learned in the kitchen so that when they go back to that paper and it's black and white, it's no longer confusing."

The students unanimously agree that their lessons from Guard Marengo, while fun, lend more than cooking skills. Guerrero says the most useful things he's learned are hardly related to food. Though he was slightly nervous about serving the trustees, he knew "Chef T" had his back.

"She's big on if you make a mistake, that's okay, because we could always make it again," he said. "Sometimes, with other people, you kind of feel pressured, like you've got to do it right the first time."



Culinary students from Fortis Academy serve lunch to Harris County Department of Education trustees and executive staff prior to a board meeting, November 17, 2021.

Guard Marenco, who began working at Fortis in 2021, says that in her 25 years in the industry, she's learned that the kitchen is not about success.

"It's imperative that they find a comfort zone in not producing the most perfect product. It's more important in the kitchen to learn how to correct the mistake than never to make the mistake, which then translates into the real world," she said. "Go out there, make your mistakes, learn from them, fix them, utilize what you have now, and then progress forward."

1. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/20211117_board_026.jpg
2. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/20211117_board_003.jpg
3. https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/20211117_board_022.jpg

Highpoint students explore trades and career pathways at annual College and Career Day (2021-11-19 10:00)



Trade professions and various career pathways were on full display this week as Highpoint School East held its annual College and Career Day.

Over 100 adjudicated or expelled youth enrolled at the school had the opportunity to explore and develop career plans during the all-day event.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwWUWi61XAk>

“I was looking forward to [this day] because I’m a senior and I’m a little bit behind in school, so I was trying to find out things for my career plan,” said Rosalie Jaimes, a senior from Goose Creek Memorial High School. “I found a lot of good help. I got the answers that I wanted today for college because I don’t know where to start yet. I really want to be [an EMT]! I’m going to put my mindset to be one.”

The event featured nearly two dozen vendors, including first responders, military recruiters, trade professionals such as barbers, welders and roofers, and universities and community colleges, who advised students on the opportunities certain career pathways or educational institutions could provide.



Highpoint School East students attend the school's annual College and Career Day, November 17, 2021



“I need my scholars to really be exposed to all that which is available to them. Having the opportunity to do that, it really melts my heart,” said Principal Courtney Waters. “They come to us with difficult and challenging pasts, and what we have found, a lot of times is that they really haven’t been exposed to the opportunities.”

The day also included guest speaker Sgt. Jeremy Lahar from Houston Police Department’s public affairs division who spoke about overcoming obstacles to success.

“I just wanted to let them know that somebody that looks like them, that may be from a neighborhood that they may be growing up in, has accomplished a couple of things,” said Lahar. “I want to let them know that they are more than capable of doing the same thing. I don’t want them to be a victim of their circumstances.”





Waters ensured that students had the opportunity to explore fields in which they had expressed interest.

“We focused a lot of our vendors on trades,” said Waters. “We surveyed our students, and not too many were really interested in a traditional four-year program. We really wanted to tailor our vendors based on their needs. We also want to ensure that we offered different opportunities.”

On Tori Cole’s STEM bus, a converted city passenger bus that houses STEM activities like computers and video games, including Oculus virtual reality headsets, Cole spoke to students about the prospect of developing video games and selling them for a profit.



• *Highpoint School East students attend the school's annual College and Career Day, November 17, 2021*



For some students, the day was a dignified reminder that their enrollment at Highpoint is only a steppingstone.

“[My favorite part of the day] was just the way people were talking to me. I’ve never really been talked to as an adult,” said Alan Guerrero, a junior from Barbers Hill ISD. “I really appreciate them doing this for us. It’s an alternative school, you know. We did a bunch of things to get in here, but I appreciate them still treating us like human beings and not like we’re in jail.”

Waters agrees.

“The sky is the limit. The sky is always the limit. Our past never defines our future. I tell my scholars that all the time,” she said.

1.12 December

HCDE Employee of the Month brings life, culture to out-of-school time (2021-12-03 11:04)



In 2021, CASE for Kids administered funding to over 80 nonprofits across hundreds of sites that offer afterschool activities and summer enrichment programs through the City Connections and County Connections grant initiatives. It's arguable that this accomplishment, while the product of the collaboration of many, is due to one woman's determination.

CASE for Kids Resources Manager Mary Glover, HCDE's December Employee of the Month, resolves to serve these community partners despite obstacles.

<https://youtu.be/6tUjto2js7M>

“I’m really proud of these programs, and I think my team and I, with the support of other divisions at HCDE, have been successful,” said Glover. “Each of those afterschool programs is part of the history of this whole city. So, to see what they’re doing in each of those scenarios and how they’re serving kids is really interesting to me.”

Glover, who has a long history with local nonprofits, describes her role as “making sure the community has what they need to serve the youth all over Harris County.” Upon successfully implementing the first-ever County Connections Youth Summer Initiative, a grant funded by Harris County, Glover turned her attention to managing the request for proposal (RFP) process for City Connections, a grant funded by the City of Houston.

Glover adapted the RFP to adhere to new state laws, a new HCDE procedure for background checks, and new procurement software even as her entire team moved into new roles within a six-week period. Without any full-time staff members on her team, she comprehensively reviewed, properly scored, and notified all awarded applicants of grant funding.



Case for Kids conference at the Hess Club, 2017.

CASE for Kids Director Lisa Caruthers, Ph.D., credits the success to Glover's dedication.

"We could have said no. We could have said that we don't have the capacity or that the timeline is too quick, but she knew that would mean that there would be over \$600,000 that wouldn't go out to the community through these nonprofits," said Caruthers. "So, she created a new system so that we could make sure it happened even in a difficult time frame."

While Caruthers values Glover's ability to identify and solve problems before they arise, she especially loves her creativity.

“Anytime you need a creative mind, you want to put her at the table,” said Caruthers. “She brings that ‘a-ha moment.’”

Though Glover began working for CASE for Kids in 2005, her experience in out-of-school time learning and enrichment dates back many years, colorfully woven into her passion for the arts.

After receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Southern Florida, Glover and her husband felt drawn to Houston’s exciting and developing arts landscape. They both got jobs right away, and she began teaching in a contract out-of-school time position with the Glassell Junior School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Over the years, Glover worked in various roles for the Children’s Museum of Houston, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and FotoFest, a Houston-based contemporary arts organization dedicated to advancing discourse surrounding photography and visual culture.

In her free time, Glover enjoys collecting art, making art, attending exhibitions and performances, playing the ukelele, and spending time with her “buddy,” her 96-year-old mother, who shares her love of the arts.



Mary Glover and her mother play ukuleles.

“The arts is definitely part of me,” said Glover.

Her heavy involvement in the arts community eventually led her to CASE for Kids through a collaboration with FotoFest, where she was the director of literacy and photography. After seeing CASE for Kids’ impact through the arts, she decided to apply to an open role hoping that she could serve more children and communities.

"I like CASE because we do a lot of different things. It's not the same job, ever," said Glover. "One of my favorite projects at CASE for Kids is Kids Day at The Hobby Center, [which] provides children the opportunity to go to a real theatre, work with artists, and then bring their talents and perform on a real stage in front of a real audience. An important player in that has been MECA."

Multicultural Education and Counseling Through the Arts (MECA) is a community-based nonprofit committed to the healthy development of under-served and under-represented families through arts and cultural programming, promoting academic excellence, support services, and community building.

"I've always come back to MECA because of what they provide to the community, and it's not just one thing," said Glover. "I've gotten to know them well over the years, and it's just amazing to see their talent and how they share that with kids, and how the kids take it and share themselves."

MECA Arts Program Director Armando Silva testifies that the support received from CASE for Kids and Glover is invaluable to their mission.

"MECA without CASE and the support of Harris County Department of Education would be difficult," said Silva. "Through this pandemic, they really have been the backbone for us to continue our work. With [the help of] Mary and her team, we figured out what we needed to do and found the communities that needed the support. They've been a lifeline for us."

Glover did not hesitate when asked where she imagines herself in the future.

"In the next five years, I see myself at CASE," she said. "Now, in the next 10 years, Hawaii maybe."

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/423a9113-1.jpg>

2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/image002-2.jpg>

CASE for Kids reveals 2021-2022 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge theme

(2021-12-14 08:30)

On Saturday, 31 out-of-school time robotics coaches from school districts across Harris County attended the Center for Afterschool, Summer, and Enrichment's 2021-2022 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Reveal Day at HCDE's Irvington office. The STEM-focused educators learned strategies to guide students through the project as well as the rules and theme of this year's challenge—"Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink."

"The reveal day is all about the coaches getting prepared," said CASE for Kids Project Coordinator Tracie Scales. "It teaches them the essential tools, resources, guidelines and strategies they'll need to implement the project so they can go back [to their afterschool programs] and help the students be successful in the competition."



Afterschool robotics coaches study the robotics kits during the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Reveal Day, December 4, 2021.



Afterschool robotics coaches study the robotics kits during the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Reveal Day, December 4, 2021.



All-Earth Ecobot Challenge staff explain the 2022 challenge theme to afterschool robotics coaches during the challenge reveal day, December 4, 2021.

During Reveal Day, the coaches focused on game-specific learning, including the overall game and mission-specific rules, game table set-up, and scoring criteria. This year's game is designed around the "Kingdom of Ecobot," an imaginary world where students determine how to build homes, harvest energy and handle trash in eco-friendly ways. The game table comprises four quadrants and features a different mission in each one, such as collecting and recycling waste.

The All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, a hands-on, project-based learning model that features robotics, invites students from fourth to eighth grade to navigate challenges based on real-world environmental issues using LEGO® MINDSTORMS® EV3 Core Set robotics kits. The theme aims to educate the next generation on the various methods and purposes of recycling, such as composting, alternative energy sources, and building homes from upcycled materials.

In addition to preparing for the competition, students have the opportunity to complete a grand challenge in which they design and implement recycling programs at their campuses.

CASE for Kids anticipates 300-400 students from afterschool programs across the county will compete in this year's game. The participating students and coaches will spend the following months gearing up for the practice days on Jan. 22 and Feb. 23 in preparation for the culminating Challenge Day on April 23.

Wishes for Wheels: Two Head Start moms to receive rehabbed cars from Bates Collision Centers (2021-12-14 08:45)

Next week, two deserving Head Start moms will be gifted an essential to daily life in Harris County: a car.

In its 23rd year, HCDE Head Start, in partnership with Bates Collision Centers, will be giving cars No. 41 and 42 to Destini Rhodes and Alionuska Montalvo Perez, who will be recognized with the Bates Responsible Parenting Award. Rhodes and Montalvo were nominated by Head Start staff.

Shop owners Lee and Leila Bates have made this annual giveaway a priority because they recognize the sacrifices parents often make to provide for their children.

“Transportation is life-changing, whether you have it or you don’t, and people want to help people that are helping themselves,” said Leila Bates. “This program doesn’t just focus on their needs; it focuses on their desire to go beyond.”

Throughout the year, the Bateses search for salvaged or donated vehicles that can be fixed up and given to deserving parents during the holiday season. Bates employees donate their time and skills to work on the cars and help fill them with gifts. Other community members and businesses donate gas, insurance, and materials needed to rehab the cars.



Sheffield Head Start teaching assistant Destini Rhodes poses for a photograph.

Twenty-eight-year-old Rhodes, a single mom of three, Serina, 12, Jo’el, 4, and Sofia, 3, is a full-time student and teaching assistant at Sheffield Head Start, says transportation is everything to her.

“Without it, I can’t take my kids to school nor get to work or anywhere else,” said Rhodes. “It’s just me and my kids, and I don’t have family that can give us a ride, especially to four different places in the morning and afternoon. Receiving this vehicle will take a lot of weight and stress from me because everything I do daily is already enough to go through.”

Rhodes currently relies on a vehicle that is loaned to her. She will graduate with an associate’s degree in early childhood education in May. After graduation, she hopes to go to a university and major in special education. Her son’s autism diagnosis inspired her journey into the education field.



Bates Responsible Parenting Award recipient and Sheffield Head Start teaching assistant Destini Rhodes works with a student.



Bates Responsible Parenting Award recipient and Sheffield Head Start teaching assistant Destini Rhodes works with a student.

Alionuska Montalvo Perez is a Cuban immigrant who arrived in Texas five years ago. Like many immigrants, Montalvo Perez came in search of a better life for her family and is mother to Adianet, 19, and Jencarlos, 3, who attends Pugh Head Start. Though she is currently employed as a cleaning lady at the City of Houston Bob Lanier Public Works Building downtown, she is a certified phlebotomist, but her inability to speak English is a barrier to higher employment. Montalvo Perez relies on public transportation but hopes that a car would allow her to participate in her son's school activities and spend time with him at the park and the zoo.

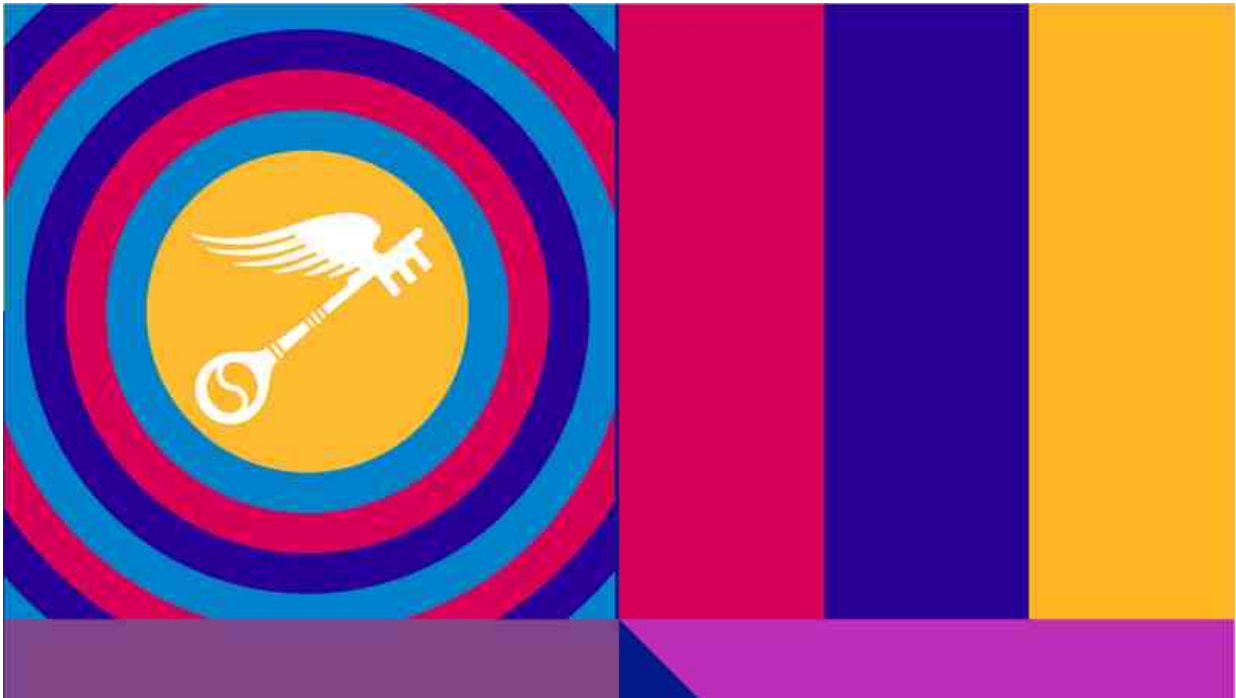
Rhodes will unwrap her mystery vehicle at 10 a.m. on Thursday, Dec. 16, at the Bates Collision Center in Channelview (15532 E. Freeway Service Road, Channelview, TX 77530). Montalvo Perez will be presented with her mystery vehicle at 10 a.m. on Friday, Dec. 17, at the Bates Collision Center in Baytown (3219 N. Main St., Baytown, TX 77521).



Bates Collision Center mechanic Trevor Bates works under the hood of a car.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/destiny-rhodes.jpg>

Record number of entries received for 2022 Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards (2021-12-14 09:00)



Harris County Department of Education, the regional sponsor for the Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, has received over 11,569 submissions from Harris County students for this year's awards. The record number is nearly 3,000 more than last year.

"It's really exciting to have this many entries," said Teaching and Learning Center Director Andrea Segraves. "This is a testament to how successful our program continues to be. We look forward to announcing regional award recipients in the coming weeks."

The deadline to submit works for consideration was earlier this month. Thirty judges participated in adjudication for artwork on Dec. 10. One hundred other judges are currently adjudicating over 6,600 writing submissions through Dec. 22.



Enter the Scholastic Awards.

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/screenshot-2021-12-14-084120.png>

New cars for two Head Start families make for a memorable holiday (2021-12-17 17:26)



Two wishes for wheels came true this week as Bates Collision Centers and Harris County Department of Education's Head Start division presented two special moms with rehabbed vehicles filled with presents as part of their annual Responsible Parenting Award.

<https://youtu.be/YC9t9rdq0nM>

In its 23rd year, Bates Collision Centers presented cars No. 41 and 42 to Destini Rhodes, a teaching assistant at Sheffield Head Start, and Alionuska Montalvo Perez, a Pugh Head Start mom. Both were nominated by Head Start staff.

Twenty-eight-year-old Rhodes is a full-time employee and student at San Jacinto College pursuing an associate's degree in early childhood education. She currently relies on a borrowed vehicle to shuttle her kids and herself to and from school and work. After unwrapping her new vehicle, a 2011 Chevy Equinox, she expressed disbelief over the generous gift.

"I feel very grateful," said Rhodes, a single mother of 3 children. "I've never been given anything in my life before. I've always had to work for everything. I can't even believe that I'm being recognized for being a good parent. It's something that you just do because you're a parent."

[1]



Destini Rhodes and her kids take a tour of their new car, Dec. 16, 2021

Throughout the year, the Bateses search for salvaged or donated vehicles that can be fixed up and given to deserving parents during the holiday season. Bates employees donate their time and skills to work on the cars and help fill them with gifts. Other community members and businesses donate gas, insurance, and materials needed to rehab the cars.

Shop owners Lee and Leila Bates have made this annual giveaway a priority because

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they recognize the sacrifices parents often make to provide for their children.

“Destini is an example of the kind of family that we are really searching to help with this project,” said Bates Collision Centers co-owner Leila Bates. “She’s not just sitting back waiting for good things to happen. She’s making good things happen for her family.”

[2]



Alionuska Montalvo Perez hugs Bates Collision Center co-owner Leila Bates, Dec. 17, 2021

Montalvo Perez, a Cuban immigrant who arrived in Texas five years ago in search of a better life for her family, also received a vehicle this week—a 2013 Mazda 3. Her 4-year-old son, Jencarlos Millan, is enrolled at the HCDE Pugh Head Start center.

"I am so grateful and relieved," she said. "Now I can go out with my son and go to the grocery store whenever I want. When I take the bus, it becomes a whole-day ordeal. This car is truly a blessing."

1. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/destini-rhodes-and-her-kids-take-a-tour-of-their-new-car.jpg>
 2. <https://hcdetexas.files.wordpress.com/2021/12/alionuska-montalvo-perez-hugs-bates-collision-center-co-owner-leila-bates-dec.-17-2021.jpg>
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