

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release



Media Contact:

Carol Vaughn, Communications Manager
Cell: 281.660.9205 | Office: 713.696.0756
Email: cvaughn@hcde-texas.org

Tech-Savvy School-Based Therapists Support Students with Special Needs, Teachers, Parents

Problem-solvers, parent-coaches, think-tankers and tech-savvy are terms which describe school-based therapists as they help students with physical and intellectual disabilities be successful through virtual learning.

Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) School-Based Therapy Services employs 157 physical, occupational and music therapists and assistant therapists who work in 32 school districts and charter schools. HCDE's team of highly trained therapists provide support for more than 7,000 students in greater Harris County with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities and other challenges.

At a Glance, School-Based Therapy Services in 2019-2020:

- **6,668 students served**
- **7,228 teachers/educators served**
- **24 ISDs served, 4 charter schools, 1 special education co-op, 1 nonprofit, 2 HCDE schools**
- **Highest percentage population served are children with autism (32.7 percent)**
- **Second-highest percentage population served are children with intellectual disabilities (23 percent)**

"Therapy sessions are conducted in a variety of ways, depending on the individual needs of the student," HCDE School-Based Therapy Services Director Carie Crabb said. "Sometimes therapists are attending a virtual class lesson along with the student they are supporting. At other times, the therapist is providing a virtual session with a student and their parent or caregiver."

As therapists continue to meet a main goal of helping students succeed in the school setting, the biggest adjustment since the pandemic is with technology. Districts first struggled to get equipment to families. Therapists then had to climb a steep technology learning curve themselves.

"We are able to do things now that we never imagined possible before," said Crabb.

A student needs help with handwriting skills or with using a pair of scissors. Distraction-free home workspaces are set up to help students with attention-deficit disorders. Parents are shown how to use writing or typing accommodations such as text-to-speech devices with their children.

HCDE manager and physical therapist Leah Alba talks about the qualities needed to be an excellent "tele-therapist."

"I think being a 'tele-therapist,' one needs to be patient, flexible, innovative and resourceful," said Alba.

When students began learning from home, she recalls challenges including computer connectivity, unfamiliarity with software and learning platforms, schedules and meeting parents' needs.

“But when you start seeing your students on the other end of the computer and how the parents participate during the session, it gave me a sense of purpose,” Alba said. “It was an opportunity for me to share my ideas with parents, problem-solve how their child can participate during instructional lessons, modify their environment, identify alternative strategies and help guide parents through the instructional routine.”

Occupational therapist and HCDE manager Traci Gault has worked in school therapy for over a decade. She agrees with Alba about the pandemic making therapists “think outside the box.”

“Therapists were able to successfully transition from in-person learning to virtual learning since we use a “coaching model,” Gault said. “Teachers and staff are shown and instructed in various strategies to help support students. These strategies are used by teachers and staff when providing support to their students daily.”

As many districts return to in-person instruction, therapists are careful to follow strict guidelines set forth by each of those districts, including social distancing, plexiglass barriers and face masks.

Manager Alba believes the feeling of being “connected” rings true for both in-person and virtual therapy.

“If think the most difficult part about my new role as a manager in the virtual world is making sure everyone feels connected and stays motivated,” she said. “Phone calls, emails and virtual chat are still available, but it can still be difficult to ensure everyone feels connected and supported.”

Crabb thinks of her staff of therapists as unsung heroes who have a deep sense of dedication and care for the students with disabilities whom they serve.

“These challenging times have brought to light the hard work and selfless sacrifice that they put forth every day,” she said.

About Harris County Department of Education: HCDE is a unique, educational hybrid serving school districts, governmental agencies, nonprofits and the public in the third-largest county in the U.S. HCDE annually serves a quarter-million students and educators through schools for students with profound special needs; the largest adult education program in Texas; Head Start early childhood education; school-based therapy services; and afterschool programs. Educator professional development and certification, school safety, records management, and a purchasing cooperative are also provided. #SeeTheImpact at www.hcde-texas.org.

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2 New Trustees Davis, Brown Welcomed as Harris County Department of Education At-Large Board Members

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

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

"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 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.

HCDE, founded in 1889, provides support services to area school districts and the general education community in Harris County. Services include Head Start, school-based therapy, four special schools, adult education and afterschool. A co-op helps supply monetary support for the department along with a small tax base and federal funding.

Find out more about HCDE services and programs at www.hcde-texas.org .

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2 New HCDE Podcast Series Help Public Navigate COVID-19 School Issues, Mental Health, Racial Equity

June 10, 2020 - Two new, free podcast series launched this summer and fall by Harris County Department of Education address social-emotional issues; wellness and safety needs of the education community; and racial equity in schools.

“The Wellness Space,” hosted by Errica Dotson-Hooper of HCDE’s Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) and “Take Care Tuesdays” provided by the HCDE’s Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS) tackle education issues related to COVID-19 and other topics impacting education.

“We provide feedback from experts on a wide variety of social-emotional and mental health issues through varied stakeholders, including superintendents, principals, teachers, students and parents,” Dotson-Hooper said.

Physical and emotional safety in school communities is the focus of “Take Care Tuesdays” as licensed professionals share dialogue regarding safe culture and climate that promotes deeper learning for students.

“We realize that many people are struggling now and feel that these conversations can help both educators and community members,” CSSS Director Julia Andrews said.

Examples of upcoming podcasts include national presenter Michael Dorn on Tuesday, July 14: “Re-Entry into Schools: School Policy Changes Post COVID-19.” “Helping Children Navigate Grief” is the topic July 17. Scott Poland brings “Campus Safety Strategies for Staff and Students” Aug. 11. “Threat Assessment Management: In the Virtual School Setting” is provided by Melissa Reeves Sept. 8 and “Mindfulness Practices for Educators” is Sept. 15 with Ann Friedman.

The podcasts are available through Apple Music, Google Play or Spotify. For more information, email edotson-hooper@hcde-texas.org or jowolabi@hcde-texas.org.

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Free Virtual School Safety Forum Oct. 16 Covers Host of Hot Topics: COVID-19, Social Justice, Child Trafficking

Sept. 21, 2020 - The Virtual School Safety Forum 2020 set for Oct. 16 addresses social justice, COVID-19 precautions, school safety hot topics, human trafficking, cultural awareness, mental health and more. Hosted by Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools and the Harris County Sheriff's Office, the forum features national presenters along with local experts who are hosting breakout sessions.

The free, eight-hour event is hosted on Zoom from 8 a.m.-4:45 p.m. and features vendor showcases from 8-8:30 a.m. and 4:15-4:45 p.m. Register at <https://tinyurl.com/SafetyForum20>.

Michael Dorn, president of Safe Havens International, is morning keynote. His presentation centers on developing trends in school emergency preparedness and recommunicating school safety. Districts take away tangible, actionable tips to bring them up to speed on emergency preparedness measures and steps to protect robust technology systems.

Carly Posey, mission director for I Love U Guys Foundation, talks about lessons learned from Sandy Hook and COVID-19. Her discussion includes heartfelt stories of Sandy Hook Elementary and ways to reassemble the school community and secure trust and safety. The foundation is a national advocate for school safety.

Breakout sessions include the following:

- Hot topics in school safety with Dorn, featuring a question-and-answer discussion with the presenter and school staff
- Trauma 101 with Sharif Charles and Nicole Milton of the Center for School Behavioral Health at Mental Health of America Greater Houston as they discuss trauma classroom strategies
- Human trafficking and keeping students safe with Christa Mayfield, director of prevention, Unbound Houston
- Best practices for social justice in schools presented by Charles A. Barrett, psychologist, Loudoun County Public Schools. Barrett also presents on systemic racism and police violence and the implications for promoting possible outcomes for students
- Online predators and cybersecurity for the online learning environment, a discussion with Gary Spurger, manager –Harris County Sheriff's Office High Tech Crime Division.

The School Safety Forum, now in its third year, is a mainstay for area educators and school safety officials throughout greater Harris County, said Julia Andrews, director for the Center for Safe and Secure Schools.

"As COVID-19 joins school security as being an issue of utmost concern to school districts, this forum continues to gain support and visibility among school security experts and area educators," Andrews said.

The forum is funded through the Student, Teachers and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Grant which is designed to improve school security by providing students and teachers with the tools they need to recognize, quickly responded to and help prevent acts of violence.

More details about the speakers and schedules may be found on the registration page at <https://tinyurl.com/SafetyForum20>.

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HCDE Expands Head Start Services from Infancy to Pre-k through New \$11.7 Million Grant; Families Urged to Enroll

June 29, 2020 - Harris County Department of Education has been awarded a \$11.7 million federal Head Start grant for the 2020-2021 school year. The new grant allows HCDE to expand comprehensive childcare and school readiness services to families in its northeast Harris County service area. HCDE Head Start will serve 1,000 preschoolers ages 3-5 and 64 children ages 6 weeks to 3.

“As we recruit families for the 2020-2021 school year, we shift to offering comprehensive services to families beginning at infancy, supplying low-income families or families of children with disabilities the support they need to raise healthy children who are successful throughout their school years,” HCDE Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock said.

The grant provides Early Head Start services expansion for children ages 6 weeks to 3 years within the Tidwell and La Porte Head Start communities. HCDE already serves 100 Baytown-area infants and toddlers through a separate Early Head Start grant.

HCDE’s Head Start service area covers approximately 600 miles of the northeast and southeast sections of Harris County, including downtown Houston. Twelve school districts fall within HCDE’s service borders, including Channelview, Clear Creek, Crosby, Deer Park, Galena Park, Goose Creek Consolidated, Houston, Huffman, Humble, La Porte, Pasadena and Sheldon.

“The importance of serving low-income children and their families in Harris County has never been more critical,” said Peacock. “More than 15 percent of uninsured Texas children live in Harris County.

“In addition, Harris County has approximately 350,000 children under age 5, but only six percent are enrolled in preschool programs.”

The grant provides \$10.4 million for Head Start services and \$1.3 million for Early Head Start services and goes into effect July 1, 2020.

Head Start ensures future success for students both academically and socially and provides comprehensive health, education, nutrition and financial services to families. Healthy meals and snacks are provided for students during the day.

Parent involvement opportunities are provided along with service referrals to meet family needs. Family engagement activities are hallmark to the program.

Eligible children are those from low-income families and with disabilities between ages 6 weeks to 5 years of age.

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Applicants will need to present the following at registration:

- Proof of age: child's state birth certificate, state birth facts or passport
- Proof of address: lease contract, current utility bill, state ID, benefits letter or paycheck stub
- Proof of income: current tax form (W-2 or 1040), 12 months of check stubs, child support payment record, verification of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Supplemental Security Income.

To get information about enrolling your child in HCDE Head Start in 2020-2021, call 713-672-9343 or go to www.hcde-texas.org/head-start.

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MEDIA ALERT

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Bates Collision Centers Gifts Rehabbed Car to HCDE Head Start Dad and Daughter Dec. 17

What: Bates Collision Centers provide a rehabbed car for a deserving Harris County Department of Education Head Start father and his daughter. It's the first time a father has received a car in 22 years. The car is wrapped and filled with gifts, including wheels for Journee, 4. John Rose and Journee meet Lee and Leila Bates and their staff as we kick off the holiday season.

Where/When: Bates Collision Center Baytown, 3219 Main St., Baytown
Thursday, Dec. 17 at 10 a.m.

Who: HCDE Head Start parent John Rose and daughter Journee, Bates Collision Center co-owners Lee and Leila Bates and staff

Etc: Social distancing required at this outdoors event.

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CASE Partnership Project Makes Impact Among At-Risk Students Enrolled in 5works Afterschool Program in Alief Apartment Complex

Sept. 28, 2020 - At an apartment complex in Alief, an afterschool program run by a nonprofit is being infused with \$10,000 in matching funds by the CASE for Kids Partnership Project. Supported through community partners like Harris County Department of Education's Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids), children enrolled in the program are advancing academically and getting emotional help during COVID-19.

Twenty-nine nonprofits and schools with comprehensive afterschool programs gained their share of \$550,000 in funding from the Partnership Project for the 2020-2021 school year as awardees were announced by CASE for Kids. Award amounts ranged from \$10,000 to \$30,000. Awardees provide a 25 percent funding match. View the list: <https://tinyurl.com/PartProject20>.

The Partnership Project is a 21-year-old program founded by HCDE's CASE for Kids which fills afterschool funding gaps through a unique collaboration between local, state and federal partners. Partnership Project provides funding through CASE for Kids, the Houston-Galveston Area Council and the Texas Workforce Commission. Eligibility requires the program to be a comprehensive, 12-hour program which operates five days a week.

Aims of the Partnership Project are to provide supplemental funding to comprehensive afterschool programs for disadvantaged students ages 4-12 or children with disabilities up to 19. The program promotes social and emotional learning skills and increases support for academic programs promoting math and reading.

"Our goal is to support the afterschool program providers that are working diligently to serve youth and families during this difficult timeframe," said Dr. Lisa Thompson-Caruthers, CASE for Kids director.

Besides the Partnership Project funding, organizations such as the nonprofit 5Works benefit from staff trainings; access to supplies and materials; and general afterschool support from staff at CASE for Kids.

The 5Works Inc. program operates from a one-bedroom apartment at Catalina Apartments and serves economically disadvantaged families of children in grades K-5 from two Alief Independent School District elementary schools.

"It's a very diverse community with over 60 different languages and dialects spoken," 5Works Inc. Executive Director Oralia Rios-Williams said. "We currently offer in person and virtual support and engagement options for our kids and families at the Catalina Apartments focused on academic improvement, healthy lifestyles and family involvement."

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Since Alief ISD has been operating virtually, one of the program's goals has included focusing on teaching parents and children how to connect with the school's online instruction system. In addition to partnering with CASE for Kids, the afterschool program works in partnership with the school district and local YMCA.

"The idea was to add value to apartment complexes where Alief students resided by offering a quality afterschool program which would extend the school day for K-5 students," Rios-Williams said.

Parents work in the program as a mandatory requirement for their child's eligibility. Local high school students volunteer to help at the complex as well.

"The program built community, and we hope it made the complex a little safer," she said.

Besides the social-emotional benefits of community-based afterschool, Rios-Williams says Alief ISD tracks students in the program and has found they are reading at or above their grade level.

As Alief ISD students return to school next week, 5Works shifts its focus back on supporting students and parents before and after the school day. Parents will be offered GED, ESL and parenting classes.

"This semester we will add writing for the children, beginning with journaling to help them express what they are experiencing with all the changes during this pandemic, and next semester we will do more creative writing," Rios-Williams said.

CASE for Kids Director Caruthers says afterschool is supplying a critical function during a time when so many families feel a sense of isolation.

"Afterschool programs can offer children a chance to play, share and explore in ways that foster peer-to-peer connections through positive mentorship," said Caruthers.

For information about CASE for Kids, go to www.hcde-texas.org/afterschool-zone. View the list of organizations gaining funding for 2020-2021 through CASE for Kids Partnership Project: <https://tinyurl.com/PartProject20>.

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Choice Partners Food Co-op to Supply Prepackaged Food Items to Meet District Needs During Pandemic

July 31, 2020 - In late spring as school districts shut down from the pandemic, Choice Partners food co-op assistant director Trisha Prestigiacomo began to worry about how the districts would be able to feed hungry kids.

Food is purchased through the co-op annually by school districts in the Harris County area for more than 85 million student lunches through contracts available through Harris County Department of Education's Choice Partners cooperative.

Although those food contracts were not interrupted by COVID-19, the needs of the districts changed as food service options went mobile.

District co-op members needed easy to prepare and deliver food products so students might continue to be fed in their communities through federally funded programs. Curbside feeding was established at many districts. Demand for individually wrapped, thaw-and-serve and heat-and-serve items continued to increase.

"School districts could use bulk products, but individually wrapped and easy to serve products were scarce and on short supply as manufacturers tried to meet demands nationally," Prestigiacomo said.

The phone calls and emails continued as some companies had problems keeping up with demand. Some manufacturing plants had to shut down due to COVID-19 outbreaks. Districts also continued to call, looking for prepackaged goods.

As Prestigiacomo embarked on new territory via the school lunch frontier, she had an idea she thought might work.

Her team created a survey which was sent to area school district clients. Based on need, the co-op put together a request for proposal (RFP) for the type of products needed by the districts, including individually wrapped items and meal kits created by food vendors for breakfast and lunch. Included in the RFP are personal protective equipment like gloves, face masks and sanitizer. The RFP products should be available after Aug. 19.

An example of the meal kits includes a breakfast packaged with juice box, wrapped wholegrain muffin and raisins. A lunch might include a calzone, milk and a fruit bar.

As early as August, many school districts begin the school year with virtual instruction. The conventional school cafeteria may no longer be an option for most districts due to COVID-19 risks. Students will continue to be fed, but many of those meals may be accomplished curbside or outside the school building, Prestigiacomo explained.

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On the flip side, some districts will have options for in-person instruction but will limit access to the cafeteria, opting to serve students in the classrooms or through restricted access to the cafeteria.

Contracts will be in place so that school districts may order the products they need quickly from 29 vendors who were awarded based on their products and the needs of Choice Partners members. Delivery can be made directly to the district. Even though districts will still buy in bulk, meals will be portioned so they can be distributed on the go.

“No one really knows what the big picture is, but everyone is problem-solving as we go,” she said.

To date, co-op officials believe they are one of the first co-ops in the state to be proactive to attend to the COVID-19 specific needs of districts and municipalities seeking food service options on the go and coronavirus supply solutions, all in one RFP.

The contracts can also mean measurable, fixed cost-savings for districts over food distributors, who typically mark-up pricing.

“Even though this emergency feeding RFP was built based on COVID-19, the need could go on longer than expected with natural disasters that can occur,” Prestigiacomio said.

Prestigiacomio predicts she will hear from some districts inside and outside of Harris County and perhaps in other states as they look for prepackaged goods to meet the unique needs of districts during COVID-19.

“Our districts can find the products they need now and later easily and buy them through legally bid contracts in order to feed their kids,” she said.

Choice Partners purchasing cooperative offers quality, legal procurement and contract solutions to meet government purchasing requirements. Food products are a vital part of the co-op as school districts and municipalities look for convenience and buying power.

Jeff Drury, director for Choice Partners, oversees the full gamut of operations for the co-op, which includes construction job order contracting to consulting services. He is impressed by his staff's ingenuity in the food co-op area of Choice.

"These times and circumstances are unprecedented for everyone," Drury said. "Trisha and her team are doing the things necessary to accommodate our members' returning students and child nutrition staff to provide safe and nutritional meals."

(The 700-plus vendors in Choice Partners co-op offer services ranging from food supplies and equipment to construction job order contracting to consulting services. An approximate 1,500 members benefit from time and money saved, plus legally bid contracts. For more information about Choice Partners and the buying power through the co-op, go to www.choicepartners.org or www.hcde-texas.org.)

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College Graduates: Looking for a New Career? Consider Teaching

Harris County Department of Education is recruiting college graduates for a fast-track, alternative certification program which has a proven track record for success. Online and onsite classes make the program convenient, and flexible payment plans provide affordability. Small classes allow students to gain experience from veteran educators who operate the program.

Teacher candidates gain jobs after the first five to 10 months of intensive training, and HCDE assists with job placement opportunities.

“Our program is built around an extensive network of support to ensure our teachers are prepared to step into the classroom ready to teach from day one,” said Lidia Zatopek, director for Educator Certification and Advancement. “Our one-on-one and small group onsite training is complimented by online support and resources.

“Teaching is a very stable and rewarding career, and teacher salaries have been on the rise in recent years.”

Eligible areas of certification provided by HCDE are core subject areas for grades pre-k through 12, including elementary Core Subjects EC-6, secondary math, science, and English, as well as special education, English as a second language and bilingual education.

Teachers receive support and professional development from the program even after they are certified. Teachers gain jobs in school districts throughout Harris County and beyond through the program which has produced award-winning teachers for the past 10 years.

For the past three years, HCDE teacher preparation program supports a 100 percent pass rate as interns complete the state teacher certification exams. In addition, 100 percent of interns gain full certification credentials within two years. References from teachers completing the program are available upon request.

For more information about upcoming enrollment in the program, email hcdeacp@hcde-texas.org.

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Fulltime Afterschool Programs Urged to Apply for \$550,787 in Funding through CASE for Kids Partnership Project

An afterschool visit from two master gardeners transforms an elementary school outdoor garden into a science experiment. Through an afterschool drum practice session, students learn emotional safety. In an online afterschool chess program, young players gain social skills and self-confidence.

Comprehensive afterschool programs which provide five-day, full care of students once school is over until parents pick them up are being bolstered by \$550,787 in funding from the Partnership Project. Partnership Project supplies matching afterschool funding provided by Harris County Department of Education's Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids, or CASE for Kids, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, and the Texas Workforce Commission.

Afterschool programs located in schools or other community sites may submit a request for proposal for the program which fills afterschool funding gaps through a unique collaborative between local, state and federal partners.

"We are so glad to have the ability to support school districts and not-for profit organizations that are committed to providing afterschool programming during these challenging times," CASE for Kids Director Dr. Lisa Thompson Caruthers said.

Afterschool sites applying for funding must provide a 25 percent match for funding provided by the grant award. Grants range from \$10,000-\$30,000 per site. Because of the pandemic, CASE for Kids is considering in-kind support as acceptable for matching fund contributions. Applicants using public dollars as their match contribution receive priority points on their application.

The Partnership Project is a 20-year-old program which provides funding for comprehensive afterschool programs from Oct. 1, 2020, through July 31, 2021. Historically, programs providing direct care for youth from Monday through Friday with at least a two-year history of offering out-of-school time services to the community have been eligible for funding. Due to COVID-19, local education agencies and nonprofit programs offering direct service, virtual or hybrid afterschool activities will be considered for funding. Comprehensive afterschool programs offering direct service for 12-plus hours receive priority points on their application.

CASE for Kids supplies resources, training and funding for students in afterschool programs in schools, childcare families and community centers. In 2019-2020, CASE for Kids served 6,028 students and supported 2,632 educators.

The goal of Partnership Project is to provide supplemental funding to comprehensive afterschool programs for disadvantaged students ages 4-12, or children with disabilities up to age 19. The program promotes social and emotional learning skills and increases support for academic programs which promote math and reading.

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The Partnership Project fills funding gaps with a variety of resources, including the CASE for Kids lending library which provides curricula, educational games, sporting equipment and STEM-based materials like robotics kits. Afterschool vendors affiliated with CASE for Kids specialize in academic focus areas that highlight math and language and social and emotional learning.

“Youth, more than ever before in their lifetimes, need the ability to engage with mentoring adults and peers through activities that spark their interest, build on school day learning and provide connections with others,” Caruthers said.

Deadline to apply for the Partnership Project RFP is Aug. 7 at 4 p.m. Visit <https://hcde-texas.org/afterschool-zone> for information and to apply.

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Fulltime Afterschool Programs Urged to Apply for \$550,787 in Funding through CASE for Kids Partnership Project

An afterschool visit from two master gardeners transforms an elementary school outdoor garden into a science experiment. Through an afterschool drum practice session, students learn emotional safety. In an online afterschool chess program, young players gain social skills and self-confidence.

Comprehensive afterschool programs which provide five-day, full care of students once school is over until parents pick them up are being bolstered by \$550,787 in funding from the Partnership Project. Partnership Project supplies matching afterschool funding provided by Harris County Department of Education's Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids, or CASE for Kids, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, and the Texas Workforce Commission.

Afterschool programs located in schools or other community sites may submit a request for proposal for the program which fills afterschool funding gaps through a unique collaborative between local, state and federal partners.

"We are so glad to have the ability to support school districts and not-for profit organizations that are committed to providing afterschool programming during these challenging times," CASE for Kids Director Dr. Lisa Thompson Caruthers said.

Afterschool sites applying for funding must provide a 25 percent match for funding provided by the grant award. Grants range from \$10,000-\$30,000 per site. Because of the pandemic, CASE for Kids is considering in-kind support as acceptable for matching fund contributions. Applicants using public dollars as their match contribution receive priority points on their application.

The Partnership Project is a 20-year-old program which provides funding for comprehensive afterschool programs from Oct. 1, 2020, through July 31, 2021. Historically, programs providing direct care for youth from Monday through Friday with at least a two-year history of offering out-of-school time services to the community have been eligible for funding. Due to COVID-19, local education agencies and nonprofit programs offering direct service, virtual or hybrid afterschool activities will be considered for funding. Comprehensive afterschool programs offering direct service for 12-plus hours receive priority points on their application.

CASE for Kids supplies resources, training and funding for students in afterschool programs in schools, childcare families and community centers. In 2019-2020, CASE for Kids served 6,028 students and supported 2,632 educators.

The goal of Partnership Project is to provide supplemental funding to comprehensive afterschool programs for disadvantaged students ages 4-12, or children with disabilities up to age 19. The program promotes social and emotional learning skills and increases support for academic programs which promote math and reading.

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The Partnership Project fills funding gaps with a variety of resources, including the CASE for Kids lending library which provides curricula, educational games, sporting equipment and STEM-based materials like robotics kits. Afterschool vendors affiliated with CASE for Kids specialize in academic focus areas that highlight math and language and social and emotional learning.

“Youth, more than ever before in their lifetimes, need the ability to engage with mentoring adults and peers through activities that spark their interest, build on school day learning and provide connections with others,” Caruthers said.

Deadline to apply for the Partnership Project RFP is Aug. 7 at 4 p.m. Visit <https://hcde-texas.org/afterschool-zone> for information and to apply.

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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release



Media Contact:

Carol Vaughn, Communications Manager
Cell: 281.660.9205 | Office: 713.696.0756
Email: cvaughn@hcde-texas.org

It's a First! Dad Receives Rehabbed Car for Bates' 22nd Annual Responsible Parenting Award with HCDE Head Start

Dec. 14, 2020 - For the first time in 22 years of gifting rehabbed cars to needy moms, Bates Collision Centers presents keys to a young father whose daughter is enrolled in Harris County Department of Education Head Start.

The historic moment will be celebrated in person, outside the Bates Collision Center, 3219 N. Main St. in Baytown, on Thursday, Dec. 17 at 10 a.m. Dad John Rose and daughter Journee join owners Lee and Leila Bates, their staff and community to unwrap the mystery vehicle filled with gifts and equipped with insurance for six months.

The 22nd Annual Bates Responsible Parenting Awards provides "helping out with a hand up" as the Bates and their staff spend months rehabbing a collision vehicle and gifts it to a deserving parent.

The 32-year-old father works as a truck driver for Amazon. He says he has turned his life around after getting into trouble in his younger years. Daughter Journee, 4, attends the HCDE Head Start at Fifth Ward. Her dad also volunteers at the center through a leadership group called the Policy Council.

"This car is going to change my life because I won't have to take the bus anymore," John said. "I will be able to take my daughter to school every morning. It's important to be in my child's education."

The Bates make the annual giveaway a priority because they recognize the sacrifices parents often make in order to provide for their children.

Journee is a precocious, bright child with a big vocabulary. She is enthusiastic about learning sight words and is enamored with her father. She will be presented with her own ride, a bike with training wheels.

"Most kids just want to play in school, but Journee wants to go to school to learn," her dad said. Co-owner Lee Bates was immediately impressed by John's application which was submitted by the center manager. John wrote an essay about his life as part of the application process.

"He owned his mistakes in his life and wants to be a good father for his daughter," Lee said.

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Bates co-owner Leila says both she and her husband Lee are proud of their employees who continue to supply time and resources to families they have yet to meet.

“Putting cars back on the road is part of our daily grind, but this is putting families back on the road,” she said. “We have a giving staff, and this project brings our entire team together.”

Leila sees the difference the project makes, from the Bates employees to the families receiving the cars.

Car no. 39 will be equally as special for all parties concerned.

“Seeing our team’s faces light up is a gift for us,” she said. “The gift of transportation is a game changer.”

Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock said she is excited to kick off the holiday season with this event.

“The generosity of the Bates family and their staff fills our hearts with joy each year,” she said. “This program embodies our goal at HCDE Head Start to build school readiness and success with our families.”

HCDE Head Start serves families of children ages six weeks to age 5 with 14 Head Start centers located in north to northeast Harris County. Income-eligible families and children with disabilities gain free Head Start services to help equip children with academic and social skills for school readiness. Families receive support services in the school readiness program through community partners.

For more information about Head Start, visit www.hcde-texas.org/Head-Start.

About Harris County Department of Education: HCDE provides special education, therapy services, early education, adult education and after-school programming. Services are funded by government grants, fees and a local property tax of approximately \$9 per homeowner. For every dollar in local property tax collected, HCDE provides \$4.40 in services to the 25 Harris County school districts. We operate four campuses for students with profound special education needs and adjudicated or recovering youth who require a low, student-teacher ratio and highly structured environment. One-hundred percent of students served on HCDE campuses are at-risk. We are governed by an elected board of seven trustees and have 1,076 employees and 33 facilities, including 14 Head Start centers. More info at www.hcde-texas.org.



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Cell: 281.660.9205 | Office: 713.696.0756
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Enroll in Virtual ESL, GED Summer Classes Offered Free Via Harris County Department of Education

June 19, 2020 - More than 40 Harris County Department of Education Adult Education teachers are preparing for their summer English as a second language (ESL) and GED virtual classes which will begin in July. The no-cost classes feature teacher and classmates meeting online several times a week, combined with online learning programs.

Registration for free classes ends June 24. Students are assessed for learning levels beginning with an intake questionnaire and will be contacted by HCDE Adult Education staff:
<https://tinyurl.com/HCDEadulted>.

“Now more than ever, it’s evident that technology should be a part of the learning process as a critical skill set,” HCDE Adult Education Director Stephanie Ross said.

“Engaging adult learners with technology skills with the assistance of their teacher during the pandemic helps prepare them for lifelong learning while also keeping them safe through social distancing.”

With 35 years of experience, HCDE Adult Education is the largest adult education program in the state. Adult learners are empowered by highly qualified teachers with the academic and workforce skills they need for lifelong learning success.

Classes include GED, adult basic education, adult secondary education, English as a second language, and English language civics (to prepare for citizenship exams).

Students will visit a central learning platform to gain assignments and assistance. Curriculum and online learning platforms used are proven, established systems. An information form must be completed to be considered for classes. Intake testing and orientation to online learning are part of the program.

“It’s never too late for learning, and we are very excited to launch our virtual learning platform this summer to help adult learners in a dual approach to education to combine technology with classroom learning,” Ross said.

To enroll, go to <https://tinyurl.com/HCDEadulted>. Visit [http://www.hcde-texas.org/adult-educationfor more information](http://www.hcde-texas.org/adult-educationfor-more-information).

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Free Virtual School Safety Forum Oct. 16 Covers Host of Hot Topics: COVID-19, Social Justice, Child Trafficking

Sept. 21, 2020 - The Virtual School Safety Forum 2020 set for Oct. 16 addresses social justice, COVID-19 precautions, school safety hot topics, human trafficking, cultural awareness, mental health and more. Hosted by Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools and the Harris County Sheriff's Office, the forum features national presenters along with local experts who are hosting breakout sessions.

The free, eight-hour event is hosted on Zoom from 8 a.m.-4:45 p.m. and features vendor showcases from 8-8:30 a.m. and 4:15-4:45 p.m. Register at <https://tinyurl.com/SafetyForum20>.

Michael Dorn, president of Safe Havens International, is morning keynote. His presentation centers on developing trends in school emergency preparedness and recommunicating school safety. Districts take away tangible, actionable tips to bring them up to speed on emergency preparedness measures and steps to protect robust technology systems.

Carly Posey, mission director for I Love U Guys Foundation, talks about lessons learned from Sandy Hook and COVID-19. Her discussion includes heartfelt stories of Sandy Hook Elementary and ways to reassemble the school community and secure trust and safety. The foundation is a national advocate for school safety.

Breakout sessions include the following:

- Hot topics in school safety with Dorn, featuring a question-and-answer discussion with the presenter and school staff
- Trauma 101 with Sharif Charles and Nicole Milton of the Center for School Behavioral Health at Mental Health of America Greater Houston as they discuss trauma classroom strategies
- Human trafficking and keeping students safe with Christa Mayfield, director of prevention, Unbound Houston
- Best practices for social justice in schools presented by Charles A. Barrett, psychologist, Loudoun County Public Schools. Barrett also presents on systemic racism and police violence and the implications for promoting possible outcomes for students
- Online predators and cybersecurity for the online learning environment, a discussion with Gary Spurger, manager –Harris County Sheriff's Office High Tech Crime Division.

The School Safety Forum, now in its third year, is a mainstay for area educators and school safety officials throughout greater Harris County, said Julia Andrews, director for the Center for Safe and Secure Schools.

"As COVID-19 joins school security as being an issue of utmost concern to school districts, this forum continues to gain support and visibility among school security experts and area educators," Andrews said.

The forum is funded through the Student, Teachers and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Grant which is designed to improve school security by providing students and teachers with the tools they need to recognize, quickly responded to and help prevent acts of violence.

More details about the speakers and schedules may be found on the registration page at <https://tinyurl.com/SafetyForum20>.

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Fulltime Afterschool Programs Urged to Apply for \$550,787 in Funding through CASE for Kids Partnership Project

July 24, 2020 - Preparing teachers to be virtual educators is a relatively new task for the team of education professionals who staff the Educator Certification and Advancement Division at Harris County Department of Education.

Recent college graduates or second career seekers enrolling in the longstanding teacher preparation program can expect to be greeted through Zoom meetings by an assortment of veteran educators who will help them prepare to become in-person and virtual teachers.

In the coming weeks, millions of students will go back to the classroom, but most of those classrooms will be in their own homes. ECA teachers-in-training will work virtually with the class of 2020-2021 until meeting their students in person.

“It’s a challenge as an educator preparation program,” ECA Director Lidia Zatopek said. “We are tasked with teaching our teachers how to be traditional educators but at the same time with COVID-19, we’re providing them with tools and strategies to use in a virtual setting. Those learning platforms vary district to district.”

ECA’s teacher alternative certification is a program designed for college graduates who decide to become teachers by gaining certification credentials. During the first five to 10 months, students train in small cohorts with veteran teachers who are also content experts in areas like math, science, bilingual education and language arts. Afterwards, the aspiring teachers gain positions in area school districts where they are paid while teaching. They continue to be mentored and trained.

The division also provides personalized principal training and certification preparation. A superintendent training program attracts approximately a dozen students statewide each year.

“Things are changing, and we have to adapt,” Zatopek said. As director, she brings several decades of leadership as a teacher, administrator and alternative teacher certification program veteran.

Teaching educators to teach virtually is now embedded into the curriculum of the teacher alternative certification program provided by ECA. Zoom is used for face-to-face, virtual teaching. Moodle and Power School are used for asynchronous or module-based teaching which may be accomplished at any time. Integration of technology into instruction is taught throughout the pre-service and internship phases using smart boards, mobile devices and Web 2.0 tools such as Kahoot, Padlet, Nearpod, Quizlet, and Google Docs.

Educators gain the technology competencies along with skills like classroom management and curriculum planning. Another important element of teacher training is social-emotional learning, the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions; set and achieve positive goals; and make responsible decisions.

Social-emotional learning is a critical component in education as students, their families and teachers navigate COVID-19, Zatopek explained.

She uses this social-emotional analogy to tell new teachers about selfcare in the profession:

“When the plane experiences turbulence, the oxygen mask drops. You must put the mask on yourself before you can help your students,” she said. “Self-care is extremely important for teachers.”

Zatopek urges teachers to keep a pulse on their emotional and mental health as they embark on this new school year.

“It’s just as important for teachers to find places where they can get that support,” she said.

Classes for prospective teachers, principals or superintendents begin in September and information sessions are currently being held through ECA staff. For information about ECA’s alternative teacher certification program email hcdeacp@hcde-texas.org. For principal or superintendent certification or leadership training, go to leadnow@hcde-texas.org.

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Harris County Department of Education Board Votes to Lower Tax Rate for 6th Consecutive Year

Sept. 16, 2020 - Through a unanimous vote, Harris County Department of Education's Board of Trustees voted to lower the tax rate for a sixth consecutive year. The board adopted the recommended rate of \$0.004993, a slight decrease from the current \$0.0050 tax rate.

For a home valued at \$200,000, the adopted rate of \$0.004993 means the average Harris County homeowner would pay HCDE less than \$10 a year in property taxes for education services. For a home valued at \$150,000, the yearly taxes are \$7.49. These calculations do not include a standard homestead exemption, which would lower the taxes.

Following the vote, HCDE Board President Eric Dick praised the move and support of his fellow board members.

"This shows that we are being good stewards of the county's money, especially during a pandemic," he said.

HCDE provides wraparound services to both school districts and the general 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.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said creating a leaner budget allowed for the continuation of HCDE's conservative adopted tax rate.

"Our business model has allowed us to continue to reduce the tax rate," County School Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said. "That's a testament to the quality of services provided to our clients."

For more information about HCDE's impact and local support of education, visit www.hcde-texas.org.

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1,000 Harris County Department of Education Head Start Preschoolers Begin School Virtually

Aug. 17, 2020 - Harris County Department of Education Head Start teacher Lois Rose has one hard-and-fast rule in her pre-k classroom, be it virtual or in-person.

"We take care of each other," Rose said.

As 145 HCDE Head Start teachers and teacher assistants start school virtually Sept. 8 with their students, they begin the year getting to know each other.

A slate of class rules follows. No running or hitting. Take care of others. Rose expects challenges, but she has big plans for the students in her virtual classroom.

HCDE operates 14 Head Start sites and has Early Head Start programs at three of those sites, as well as four additional childcare partnership sites. In total, the program provides comprehensive services for 1,060 families of children ages 6 weeks to 5 years in northeast Harris County. Plans are for in-person classes to resume as COVID-19 numbers decline, HCDE Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock said.

Manager Pamela Jones-Lee oversees education and disability services within HCDE Head Start. Teachers use Frog Street pre-k curriculum for both Head Start and Early Head Start. Curriculum is aligned to Texas pre-k guidelines and Head Start early learning outcomes. Teachers are using the Microsoft Teams to meet virtually with students and parents.

"We know that many of our families have other children, so we don't want to overwhelm them," Jones-Lee said. "Family service providers see the challenges families are facing and they relate those back to us. Coping with COVID-19 is enough. We want to do what is best for their families."

Two synchronous or live sessions will be held twice a week for 45 minutes each with the pre-k learners and their parents.

"On a virtual day, parents pick a time frame for class which fits their schedule best, and students attend live sessions," Jones-Lee said. Outdoor time, music and movement time and art projects are sent to parents as supplemental activities.

Homework packets are picked up Mondays through a drive-through system along with meals made available three days a week. Teachers connect through a wave and a smile.

"Mondays are very important because they enable teachers to touch based and greet students and parents to maintain human contact through safe, social distancing," Peacock said.

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At Early Head Start centers with the infants and toddlers, sessions are one-on-one with families and allow for modeling learning activities with parents first. Later, students join in the sessions and feedback is given by teachers and their assistants.

Home visits allow parents to see what virtual learning will look like. Teachers can tour student home life virtually and get to know the family.

“Home visits allow parents and teachers to set goals,” Jones-Lee said.

Families have generally been very supportive of virtual instruction, she explained. Collectively, virtual learning is important for families because they want their preschoolers to have the social and academic skills to be ready for kindergarten.

Lessons for the pre-k students include a social-emotional component along with literacy and math. A class on friendship allows children to learn about themselves and their family relationships.

During the pandemic, Head Start staff are especially attuned to the social-emotional needs of students.

“So, if a parent relates any kind of learning or social-emotional challenge to the teacher or family service provider, there may be a referral of the child to a specialist or mental health professional,” Jones-Lee said.

Back in the classroom, Rose sees her virtual classroom as an open house of sorts. Last spring, parents would join into Zoom sessions to see what their children were learning and view classroom structure.

When her 4-year-olds get fidgety in the virtual classroom, the tactics are much the same as the regular class.

“We stop and do something fun that they like and then get them back on track again,” Rose said.

Calling it “a blessing” to have a new class of students, the Head Start teacher at the HCDE Fifth Ward Head Start Center is eager to get to know her students and set expectations.

“It will be different,” Rose jests. “We will need to do thumbs up instead of high fives.”

To find out more about enrollment opportunities in HCDE Head Start or Early Head Start, go to www.hcde-texas.org/head-start.

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HCDE Head Start Hosting Job Fair Feb. 21 at 6300 Irvington

Harris County Department of Education is hosting a job interview fair to recruit teachers, teaching assistants, family service providers, cooks and a mental health professional to join any of its 15 locations throughout northeast Harris County. The recruitment event will be held Friday, Feb. 21, 2020, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 6300 Irvington Blvd.

"We are looking for highly energetic, passionate individuals who enjoy working with young children to join our team," said HCDE Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock. "Our employees help transform lives of children and their families, along with making a difference each day."

Qualifications for Head Start teaching assistant, Early Head Start teacher and Head Start teacher include experience working with young children and an interest in early childhood education. Those who hold child development associate (CDA), associate or bachelor's degrees are strongly encouraged to apply.

Family service providers must have a bachelor's degree in social work, human services, family services, counseling or related field. The mental health professional should have a master's degree in social work, counseling, psychology or education with at least five years' experience working with underserved populations.

Cooks must have a high school diploma or GED.

Interested candidates can apply online at www.hcde-texas.org or call 713-696-8287 for information.

HCDE Head Start provides services to facilities in Barrett Station, Baytown, Channelview, Compton, Coolwood, Dogan, Fifth Ward, Fonwood, Humble, J.D. Walker, La Porte, Pugh, San Jacinto, Sheffield and Tidwell. Head Start ensures future success for students both academically and socially and provides comprehensive health, education, nutrition and financial services to families.

Find more information on positions available and qualifications, visit: <https://bit.ly/36ULgsF>. Visit www.hcde-texas.org/head-start for general information about HCDE Head Start and locations.

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HCDE Communicators Gain 2020 Top National Public Relations Association Award

July 10, 2020 – Harris County Department of Education has been awarded the 2020 Gold Medallion Award from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). The top honor was awarded to eight school districts and education organizations across the nation in a competitive entry process.

The award recognizes the comprehensive, strategic communications campaign HCDE launched in 2019 called “See the Impact.”

The campaign is the brainchild of HCDE communicators and includes video, billboards, social media advertisements and print messaging which explains HCDE programs and services and their impact on the education in the region and the community as a whole. It was designed to raise awareness of HCDE in the region and help taxpayers and residents understand what the organization does and how it positively impacts not only the greater Houston area, but Texas and the country as well.

“We are extremely proud to provide services such as special schools, school-based therapy, the largest adult education program in Texas, Head Start and afterschool programs to school districts and the general public in greater Harris County,” HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said. “This campaign helps us spread the word about our valued services so that we can increase our reach and improve the quality of life for residents, educators and students alike.”

A virtual celebration of achievement will be hosted by NSPRA in early July to display the winning campaigns. Several winners, including HCDE, will present during a virtual breakout session, discussing their winning campaigns and giving tips to other districts for how to create and implement strategic communications efforts. The winners are typically awarded at the national convention, which is cancelled due to the pandemic.

NSPRA is a national nonprofit organization which provides school communication support, training and services to several thousand school leaders throughout the United States and Canada. It is one of a handful of internationally recognized public relations associations.

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The award recognizes the comprehensive, strategic communications campaign HCDE launched in 2019 called “See the Impact.”

The campaign is the brainchild of HCDE communicators and includes video, billboards, social media advertisements and print messaging which explains HCDE programs and services and their impact on the education in the region and the community as a whole. It was designed to raise awareness of HCDE in the region and help taxpayers and residents understand what the organization does and how it positively impacts not only the greater Houston area, but Texas and the country as well.

“We are extremely proud to provide services such as special schools, school-based therapy, the largest adult education program in Texas, Head Start and afterschool programs to school districts and the general public in greater Harris County,” HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said. “This campaign helps us spread the word about our valued services so that we can increase our reach and improve the quality of life for residents, educators and students alike.”

A virtual celebration of achievement will be hosted by NSPRA in early July to display the winning campaigns. Several winners, including HCDE, will present during a virtual breakout session, discussing their winning campaigns and giving tips to other districts for how to create and implement strategic communications efforts. The winners are typically awarded at the national convention, which is cancelled due to the pandemic.

NSPRA is a national nonprofit organization which provides school communication support, training and services to several thousand school leaders throughout the United States and Canada. It is one of a handful of internationally recognized public relations associations.

About Harris County Department of Education: HCDE is a unique, educational hybrid serving school districts, governmental agencies, nonprofits and the public in the third-largest county in the U.S. HCDE annually serves a quarter-million students and educators through schools for students with profound special needs; the largest adult education program in Texas; Head Start early childhood education; school-based therapy services; and afterschool programs. Educator professional development and certification, school safety, records

management, and a purchasing cooperative are also provided. #SeeTheImpact at www.hcde-texas.org.

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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release



Media Contact:

Carol Vaughn, Communications Manager
Cell: 281.660.9205 | Office: 713.696.0756
Email: cvaughn@hcde-texas.org

About Harris County Department of Education Head Start:

Harris County Department of Education Head Start is accepting applications for children ages 6 weeks to 4 years, including children with special needs. HCDE Head Start is a nurturing, family friendly environment that prepares children socially and academically for kindergarten. Our program provides school supplies, healthy meals and a variety of support services that include health and family development. Call 713-672-9343 to find a center near you.

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PRESS RELEASE

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HCDE Partners with Union for Workplace ESL for Hospitality Industry

Aug. 24, 2020 - Housekeeper Sara Gonzalez tired of not being able to communicate with her boss. Two years ago, her relative told her about an English as a second language (ESL) and workforce development partnership between Harris County Department of Education and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Texas.

Today she converses with her employer and is readying to begin GED classes so she can advance to become a medical assistant. Although COVID-19 required HCDE Adult Education to make a move to virtual teaching, she is patient with her progress.

"I understand that COVID-19 makes it hard to be in the in-person classes," the 55-year-old student said. "I learned to study my lessons on my computer for two hours a day."

HCDE's Adult Education provides classes in ESL, GED, adult basic education and workforce development and partners with nonprofits and companies for specialized classes which serve up curriculum specific to occupations. The programs are promoted through Workforce Solutions.

Partner SEIU is a Gulf Coast union serving approximately 3,000 workers in hospitality, janitorial and medical support staff. During the pandemic, the hospitality industry has been especially hard-hit by the virus. Many industry workers were laid off and are readjusting to new jobs or different careers.

"With this pandemic, a lot of people lost their jobs in this industry," HCDE Adult Education teacher Antonio Fuentes said.

As teacher of the classes, Fuentes works through customer relations topics with his adult learners, offering help through various scenarios. Throughout the week, his students practice lessons in vocabulary and pronunciation through distance learning and completed assignments. On weekday mornings, they go online to virtual learning sessions with their teacher.

The former middle school teacher of 24 years retired two years ago and began working for HCDE Adult Education.

"I love this job," he said. "It makes my day working with struggling students who work all day and come directly from their jobs, and they are dedicated to learning."

Twenty-one janitors and housekeepers were on his student roll last spring.

Fuentes with last year's students

"SEIU is a great organization because they are truly helping out their members," he said.

-more-

SEIU union organizer and ESL coordinator Ricardo Martinez made it a habit to drop by the in-person classes. The experience filled him with inspiration, joy and pride as SEIU members practiced their second language.

“During the last two years, our collaboration with the HCDE program has cultivated an incomparable enthusiasm and hope for SEIU Texas members that wasn’t there before,” he said. “For many of them, it was like a dream to have a very well-structured ESL program dedicated exclusively to them. The two teachers took the time to understand that most of the students have two jobs and families to provide for.”

As tradition would have it, on the last day of class students would proudly serve food from each of their countries to celebrate the end of the semester. Martinez loved to experience the celebration.

Student Gonzalez and teacher Fuentes knows there will come a day when they can return to the classroom for those celebrations.

“The students are so dedicated to learning,” Fuentes said. “They know by learning this language that it’s going to change their lives. They will be better for it.”

For information about the free adult education classes beginning this fall semester, go to www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education.

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HCDE Receives 'Top Workplace' as Large Employer for Second Consecutive Year

Dec. 3, 2020 - For a second consecutive year, Harris County Department of Education gains notoriety as one of Houston's Top large workplaces through the Houston Chronicle's Top Workplaces 2020 program.

View photos: <https://tinyurl.com/y5aqnolb>

The Top Workplace program is unique because employees weigh in on their employer through a survey where participants remain anonymous. Topics include leadership, work-life balance, training, cooperation and pay/benefits. Companies are judged in three categories: small, medium and large companies.

Top Workplaces rankings are determined by a scientific employee survey provided by Energage, an independent research company partnering with the Chronicle for the past 11 years. This year, 130 employers earned recognition as Top Workplaces in the three categories as 3,000 companies applied for the award. Eight-five percent of HCDE's employees responded to the survey.

HCDE was ranked no. 13 in the large company category, a 46 percent improvement over last year's ranking of no. 24.

"This honor shows that HCDE has a family culture and spirit which is valued by our employees," HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said.

"During this past year, adversity has come our way here and there, but that has done nothing but bring our employees closer together as a family. We are proud we have been able to support our families during the pandemic as we continue to provide high-quality education services to our clients.

"HCDE is one of the best places I have worked in my career as a leader in education."

Human Resources employee Monserrat Witine delivers Top Workplace cupcake to Cecile Porche,

HCDE provides education services to school districts and the community through a wide array of programs. Five pillar programs include afterschool, Head Start, special schools, school-based therapy services and adult education.

Educator Dr. Colina Poullard works as HCDE curriculum director for digital education and innovation. As a teacher trainer, she says she likes working for HCDE because it allows her to serve a large sector of educators.

"Outside of just serving just one district, we get to serve educators in all 25 districts in Harris County, and beyond," she said.

Employee Amy Thompson works for Educator Certification and Advancement, a HCDE division which trains professionals to become teachers, principals and superintendents.

“I value working at HCDE because everyone works as a partner here for the benefit of the students in greater Harris County, and all our hearts are into it,” Thompson said.

Head Start employee Gino Kamaya appreciates the benefits programs offered by HCDE, he said. The department contributes to both Teacher Retirement System and Social Security and observes many school holidays, a plus for working parents.

“Plus, the leadership team really cares about employees, and that’s the main reason I love working here,” Kamaya said.

Superintendent Colbert said he is humbled that HCDE employees think so highly of the organization they work for.

“I can’t help but think they feel that way because of the trustees and administration and the valuable work in education that all our employees do which has purpose in the community,” Colbert said. HCDE was founded in 1889 and employees approximately 1,100 employees. Other community programs and services the department provides include a purchasing cooperative, teacher training and records management.

About Harris County Department of Education: HCDE provides special education, therapy services, early education, adult education and after-school programming. Services are funded by government grants, fees and a local property tax of approximately \$9 per homeowner. For every dollar in local property tax collected, HCDE provides \$4.40 in services to the 25 Harris County school districts. We operate four campuses for students with profound special education needs and adjudicated or recovering youth who require a low, student-teacher ratio and highly structured environment. One-hundred percent of students served on HCDE campuses are at-risk. We are governed by an elected board of seven trustees and have 1,076 employees and 33 facilities, including 15 Head Start centers. More info at www.hcde-texas.org.

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release



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Cell: 281.660.9205 | Office: 713.696.0756
Email: cvaughn@hcde-texas.org

HCDE Head Start Hosting Job Fair Feb. 21 at 6300 Irvington

Harris County Department of Education is hosting a job interview fair to recruit teachers, teaching assistants, family service providers, cooks and a mental health professional to join any of its 15 locations throughout northeast Harris County. The recruitment event will be held Friday, Feb. 21, 2020, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at 6300 Irvington Blvd.

"We are looking for highly energetic, passionate individuals who enjoy working with young children to join our team," said HCDE Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock. "Our employees help transform lives of children and their families, along with making a difference each day."

Qualifications for Head Start teaching assistant, Early Head Start teacher and Head Start teacher include experience working with young children and an interest in early childhood education. Those who hold child development associate (CDA), associate or bachelor's degrees are strongly encouraged to apply.

Family service providers must have a bachelor's degree in social work, human services, family services, counseling or related field. The mental health professional should have a master's degree in social work, counseling, psychology or education with at least five years' experience working with underserved populations.

Cooks must have a high school diploma or GED.

Interested candidates may apply online at www.hcde-texas.org or call 713-696-8287 for information.

HCDE Head Start provides services to facilities in Barrett Station, Baytown, Channelview, Compton, Coolwood, Dogan, Fifth Ward, Fonwood, Humble, J.D. Walker, La Porte, Pugh, San Jacinto, Sheffield and Tidwell. Head Start ensures future success for students both academically and socially and provides comprehensive health, education, nutrition and financial services to families.

Find more information on positions available and qualifications, visit: <https://bit.ly/36ULgsF>. Visit www.hcde-texas.org/head-start for general information about HCDE Head Start and locations.

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Katy Teen Wang Makes Regional History as Harris County Department of Education's First 'National Student Poet'

Poetry and prose are interwoven throughout National Student Poet Ethan Wang's life.

The Katy ISD teen who learned Chinese as his first language remembers memorizing Tang poetry as a toddler, an ancient poetry revered by his scholarly grandparents.

By age 6, Wang won a school award for an essay he wrote about a book. Later that year, his mother Hong Qin recounted her son's first beach trip that prompted an in-the-moment poem which demonstrated rare sensitivity and insightfulness:

"I really like the sea; it can bring something," he said. "It also takes something."

At 9, Wang crafted a short novel as a gift to a friend. As an 11th grader, he credits his debate coach and creative writing mentor Mary Sarver for introducing him to contemporary poets and encouraging him to continue his writing.

"I can say with confidence I would not be here without her help," Wang said of his new status as one of the top young poets in the nation.

Sarver, who claims poetry as her wheelhouse, points to Wang's remarkable use of imagery, metaphors and experimental language, calling the young writer "one of the most outstanding poets she has ever worked with."

The 16-year old gained three Gold Keys from regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards sponsored by Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) last year. His work went on to be judged nationally in New York City and he earned a Gold Medal for his poem called "Cloth Ballad, Leather Trails."

This September, he was home eating lunch and got the call from the Awards which informed him of his new notoriety. Five National Student Poets were selected across the nation from various regions. He garnered the award, making him the top young poet from the Southwest.

The National Student Poets Program is a partnership between the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the nonprofit Alliance for Young Artists & Writers which presents the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Scholastic is the longest-running and most prestigious scholarship and recognition program for the country's young artist and writers.

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The poets were selected from students in grades 10-11 who submitted more than 20,000 works. Only 35 semi-finalists were chosen by poet jurors. Finalists were asked to submit additional poetry from which the five were named. Wang gained \$5,000 and the responsibility of representing the program through numerous literary events.

“This is an incredible honor for Ethan Wang and his sponsoring teachers Karen Thompson and Mary Sarver from Cinco Ranch High School,” HCDE Scholastic Art & Writing coordinator Andrea Segraves said. “Since 1993 when we began regional sponsorship of Scholastic Art & Writing, we have never had a National Student Poet named from our region.

“Harris County Department of Education celebrates this accomplishment and wishes Ethan the best in his future creative endeavors.”

As Wang reflects on the memorized words and their cadences he gleaned while learning to talk as a toddler, he feels the imprint of the experience.

“Poetry is about feeling and it’s important because it’s one of the few art forms left to effectively communicate feelings and stories,” he said. Wang encourages his peers to enter Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, even if it’s just to write for fun.

“It helps young writers achieve recognition, and more importantly, it lets them be proud of their work,” he said.

(HCDE is a regional affiliate of Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Writing and art submissions are currently being accepted through Dec. 4, 2020. For details, go to <https://tinyurl.com/HCDEartandwriting> or email asegraves@hcde-texas.org)

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MEDIA ALERT

For Immediate Release



'Because We Care' Packages Distributed to HCDE Head Start Families March 27

Precinct 2 volunteering at the telethon, and delivering our educ. Foundation sponrhisip check....opwene round two for applications from districts....continuing to support our local education foudnaitonat pasadena isd and delivering ourthrough sponshisp sto their education foundation End of January...send any pics doing out of goodness of her heart ...voutnering for their fundraiser....sponsorships—aldine isd having sponrships...shcoarhsp, sponsorships and grants...sponsorship of district eudcat foundation grants...we are sponsoring their fundraisers—golf tournament, gala, pasdena today is a telethon...\$2,500...back for the future telethon—aldine isd Friday event is a golf tournament....spelling bees...award teacher mini-grants and student scholsarhisps—pasadena isd...

What: Some 400 care packages for Harris County Department of Education Head Start families have been assembled and will be distributed by HCDE staff. The program called "Because We Care" provides food items meeting healthy food guidelines selected by nutrition staff at HCDE Head Start during the COVID-19, stay-at-home order.

When: Media opportunity from 10-11 a.m., Friday, March 27, 2020

Where: J.D. Walker Head Start Center, 7613-A Wade Road, Baytown, TX 77521

Who: Head Start families from area centers gain care boxes as they drive by in their vehicles. Parents from five centers will be served at the central location (Walker). More distributions are being planned at additional locations.

Etc.: The HCDE Board approved the care package program through an emergency board meeting, appropriating funding for food for Head Start families. Food was purchased through Choice Partners, HCDE's purchasing cooperative which supplies one million meals for Harris County students yearly. Distribution assistance is provided by Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Adrian Garcia's office.

(Care packages will be given to families enrolled in HCDE Head Start programs from designated centers, not the general public. Families have already been selected by geographic location and notified about the giveaways by HCDE personnel.)

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Online Instructor's Training Builds Teacher Confidence in Virtual Classroom

Sept. 4, 2020 - High school history teacher Chase Coulter completed a six-week, self-paced online instructor's course offered by Harris County Department of Education after the onset of COVID-19. During the summer he was given the opportunity to create online history curriculum for his employer, Conroe Independent School District. The course also helped him establish best practices in his virtual classes this fall.

"I'm very grateful I took the course," the nine-year teacher said. "It helped prepare me, and I believe it will open more doors in the future because I have that experience."

HCDE began offering the course half-price this summer because of a growing demand for online teaching strategies as many districts shift back and forth to virtual instruction during the pandemic.

The course is sectioned into six modules, can be completed in six weeks and is recognized as a three-year certificate from the Texas Education Agency. Through Oct. 31, HCDE is offering the course for 50 percent off at \$250 to support teachers new to the virtual classroom. Many districts are picking up the tab to help teachers with online teaching techniques.

"Everything in the course is self-paced," Dr. Colina Poullard said. Poullard serves as curriculum director for HCDE's Digital Education and Innovation and is one of several experienced curriculum directors who are available to help guide teachers through the online course.

The six modules span subjects like ensuring student achievement; promoting student collaboration and engagement; using best practices and strategies in online learning; teaching in an online classroom; and understanding copyright law and fair use requirements. Teachers will be introduced to online course activities like blogs, forums, wikis and discussion boards along with learning platforms and apps.

Poullard emphasizes the importance of establishing norms and structures in any virtual learning environment. That includes doing activities at a specific time like watching a video or saying the pledge.

"You should also model what you are going to be doing with your students," she said.

When using the chat box or a new app, she suggests modeling first. Tell them the "why" and give them opportunity to practice with the device before the lesson begins.

Finally, Poullard urges teachers to provide lessons in small bites as students progress virtually. A student should be able to give feedback after each piece.

"It's extremely important for students to feel connected to their teacher," Poullard said.

Poullard said the course is beneficial to teachers across the country, as well as locally in Texas. For more information about enrolling in the Online Instructor's Course through HCDE, access

<https://tinyurl.com/HCDEonline> or email cpoullard@hcde-texas.org.

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"I love this job," he said. "It makes my day working with struggling students who work all day and come directly from their jobs, and they are dedicated to learning."

Twenty-one janitors and housekeepers were on his student roll last spring.

Fuentes with last year's students

"SEIU is a great organization because they are truly helping out their members," he said.

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SEIU union organizer and ESL coordinator Ricardo Martinez made it a habit to drop by the in-person classes. The experience filled him with inspiration, joy and pride as SEIU members practiced their second language.

“During the last two years, our collaboration with the HCDE program has cultivated an incomparable enthusiasm and hope for SEIU Texas members that wasn’t there before,” he said. “For many of them, it was like a dream to have a very well-structured ESL program dedicated exclusively to them. The two teachers took the time to understand that most of the students have two jobs and families to provide for.”

As tradition would have it, on the last day of class students would proudly serve food from each of their countries to celebrate the end of the semester. Martinez loved to experience the celebration.

Student Gonzalez and teacher Fuentes knows there will come a day when they can return to the classroom for those celebrations.

“The students are so dedicated to learning,” Fuentes said. “They know by learning this language that it’s going to change their lives. They will be better for it.”

For information about the free adult education classes beginning this fall semester, go to www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education.

About Harris County Department of Education: HCDE is a unique, educational hybrid serving school districts, governmental agencies, nonprofits and the public in the third-largest county in the U.S. HCDE annually serves a quarter-million students and educators through schools for students with profound special needs; the largest adult education program in Texas; Head Start early childhood education; school-based therapy services; and afterschool programs. Educator professional development and certification, school safety, records management, and a purchasing cooperative are also provided. #SeeTheImpact at www.hcde-texas.org.

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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release



Media Contact:

Carol Vaughn, Communications Manager
Cell: 281.660.9205 | Office: 713.696.0756
Email: cvaughn@hcde-texas.org

HCDE Celebrates Teen Artists through Galleria, Texas Art Supply Exhibits Feb. 18-March 16

Harris County teen artists and writers in grades 7-12 are celebrated through artist exhibits in the city as awardees through Harris County Department of Education's Regional Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

The Awards recognize student achievement in the visual and literary arts in 29 categories, including editorial cartoon, poetry, graphic design, fashion, science fiction, photography and more.

Exhibits will be held from Feb. 18-March 16 to honor the artists and writers from public, private and home schools.

- Top Gold Key Awardees will be showcased at the Galleria, 5085 Westheimer, Houston, Texas, 77007 on the first-floor level near Saks Fifth Avenue during mall hours.
- Works from Silver Key artists and writers are being displayed at Texas Art Supply, 2001 Montrose Blvd., Houston, Texas 77066 during store hours.

HCDE is one of more than 100 regional affiliate partners with Scholastic Art & Writing for the past 16 years. Since 1923, Scholastic Art & Writing has showcased the artist vision, ingenuity and talent of youth. Past honorees include notable alumni like Andy Warhol and Joyce Carol Oates. Students this year submitted approximately 350,000 original works for judging. Regional affiliate HCDE judged 8,997 pieces this year.

Teens awarded Gold Keys will advance for national judging in New York City. National Medalists will be announced on March 16.

For questions regarding the Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards program events, contact Andrea Segraves at asegraves@hcde-texas.org.

View press release with more details about teen artists and writers and other celebrations planned for the year: <https://wp.me/p4QJFI-18s>.

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Spotlight on New HCDE Trustee Andrea Duhon, Position 4, Precinct 3

Jan. 13, 2020 - Newly appointed board member Andrea Duhon was sworn into office Dec. 18 to represent Position 4, Precinct 3 within the Harris County Department of Education Board of Trustees.

A self-professed public education advocate, Duhon wants to bolster Harris County student opportunities in early childhood education, adult education workforce certification and second-language acquisition.

"I have been in the fight for public education programs for several years now through galvanizing public support and testifying in the 86th (Texas) Legislature in support of HCDE," she said. "I will continue to stand up for the good of our community through public education programs."

The Katy resident holds a bachelor's degree in marketing from McNeese State University. She is a territory manager and marketing strategist for Plant Sight 3D.

Her affiliations include community leader for Combined Arms, formerly Lone Star Veterans Association, a nonprofit helping veterans transition to civilian life. Her husband Hank is active-duty Navy.

As a mother to second-grade student Jaci, Duhon talks about education reaching outside the school.

"Education does not end in the classroom," she said. "It extends to the playground, the sports field, the neighborhood and home. When we support our students from a community level, we grow as a society."

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Online Learning Expert at HCDE Helps Train Teachers to Be ‘Virtual Best’

Aug. 7, 2020 - As virtual learning expert Dr. Colina Poullard trains teachers at Harris County Department of Education’s Schools Division in upcoming weeks, she offers these tips. Three best practices can be applied for any teacher who is teaching virtually this school year:

1. Set Virtual Classroom Norms/Expectations:

Being taught through a virtual classroom can feel isolating for students. A good way to introduce structure and a sense of togetherness is to set norms. These include having a daily log-in time; only using the chat box for questions; and expecting students to have needed materials near their computer.

2. Model Use of Tech Tools:

Before expecting students to use tech tools, teachers should familiarize students with their location, function and use for each lesson.

3. Chunk Lessons:

It’s important that learners don’t feel overwhelmed during lessons without teacher support. Prevent this by introducing the overarching lesson, then splice the learning components into small bites.

(Dr. Colina Poullard is HCDE’s Teaching and Learning Center curriculum director for Digital Education and Innovation. She oversees HCDE’s online instruction program, an asynchronous, self-paced program offered for teachers who want to enhance their virtual teaching skills. A certificate is gained at the end of each of three courses. Her email is cpoullard@hcde-texas.org.)

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Tech-Savvy School-Based Therapists Support Students with Special Needs, Teachers, Parents

Problem-solvers, parent-coaches, think-tankers and tech-savvy are terms which describe school-based therapists as they help students with physical and intellectual disabilities be successful through virtual learning.

Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) School-Based Therapy Services employs 157 physical, occupational and music therapists and assistant therapists who work in 32 school districts and charter schools. HCDE's team of highly trained therapists provide support for more than 7,000 students in greater Harris County with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities and other challenges.

At a Glance, School-Based Therapy Services in 2019-2020:

- 6,668 students served
- 7,228 teachers/educators served
- 24 ISDs served, 4 charter schools, 1 special education co-op, 1 nonprofit, 2 HCDE schools
- Highest percentage population served are children with autism (32.7 percent)
- Second-highest percentage population served are children with intellectual disabilities (23 percent)

"Therapy sessions are conducted in a variety of ways, depending on the individual needs of the student," HCDE School-Based Therapy Services Director Carie Crabb said. "Sometimes therapists are attending a virtual class lesson along with the student they are supporting. At other times, the therapist is providing a virtual session with a student and their parent or caregiver."

As therapists continue to meet a main goal of helping students succeed in the school setting, the biggest adjustment since the pandemic is with technology. Districts first struggled to get equipment to families. Therapists then had to climb a steep technology learning curve themselves.

"We are able to do things now that we never imagined possible before," said Crabb.

A student needs help with handwriting skills or with using a pair of scissors. Distraction-free home workspaces are set up to help students with attention-deficit disorders. Parents are shown how to use writing or typing accommodations such as text-to-speech devices with their children.

HCDE manager and physical therapist Leah Alba talks about the qualities needed to be an excellent "tele-therapist."

"I think being a 'tele-therapist,' one needs to be patient, flexible, innovative and resourceful," said Alba.

When students began learning from home, she recalls challenges including computer connectivity, unfamiliarity with software and learning platforms, schedules and meeting parents' needs.

“But when you start seeing your students on the other end of the computer and how the parents participate during the session, it gave me a sense of purpose,” Alba said. “It was an opportunity for me to share my ideas with parents, problem-solve how their child can participate during instructional lessons, modify their environment, identify alternative strategies and help guide parents through the instructional routine.”

Occupational therapist and HCDE manager Traci Gault has worked in school therapy for over a decade. She agrees with Alba about the pandemic making therapists “think outside the box.”

“Therapists were able to successfully transition from in-person learning to virtual learning since we use a “coaching model,” Gault said. “Teachers and staff are shown and instructed in various strategies to help support students. These strategies are used by teachers and staff when providing support to their students daily.”

As many districts return to in-person instruction, therapists are careful to follow strict guidelines set forth by each of those districts, including social distancing, plexiglass barriers and face masks.

Manager Alba believes the feeling of being “connected” rings true for both in-person and virtual therapy.

“If think the most difficult part about my new role as a manager in the virtual world is making sure everyone feels connected and stays motivated,” she said. “Phone calls, emails and virtual chat are still available, but it can still be difficult to ensure everyone feels connected and supported.”

Crabb thinks of her staff of therapists as unsung heroes who have a deep sense of dedication and care for the students with disabilities whom they serve.

“These challenging times have brought to light the hard work and selfless sacrifice that they put forth every day,” she said.

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It's a First! Dad Receives Rehabbed Car for Bates' 22nd Annual Responsible Parenting Award with HCDE Head Start

Dec. 10, 2020 - For the first time in 22 years of gifting rehabbed cars to needy moms, Bates Collision Centers presents keys to a young father whose daughter is enrolled in Harris County Department of Education Head Start.

The historic moment will be celebrated in person, outside the Bates Collision Center, 3219 N. Main St. in Baytown, on Thursday, Dec. 17 at 10 a.m. Dad John Rose and daughter Journee join owners Lee and Leila Bates, their staff and community to unwrap the mystery vehicle filled with gifts and equipped with insurance for six months.

The 22nd Annual Bates Responsible Parenting Awards provides "helping out with a hand up" as the Bates and their staff spend months rehabbing a collision vehicle and gifts it to a deserving parent.

The 32-year-old father works as a truck driver for Amazon. He says he has turned his life around after getting into trouble in his younger years. Daughter Journee, 4, attends the HCDE Head Start at Fifth Ward. Her dad also volunteers at the center through a leadership group called the Policy Council.

"This car is going to change my life because I won't have to take the bus anymore," John said. "I will be able to take my daughter to school every morning. It's important to be in my child's education."

The Bates make the annual giveaway a priority because they recognize the sacrifices parents often make in order to provide for their children.

Journee is a precocious, bright child with a big vocabulary. She is enthusiastic about learning sight words and is enamored with her father. She will be presented with her own ride, a bike with training wheels.

"Most kids just want to play in school, but Journee wants to go to school to learn," her dad said. Co-owner Lee Bates was immediately impressed by John's application which was submitted by the center manager. John wrote an essay about his life as part of the application process.

"He owned his mistakes in his life and wants to be a good father for his daughter," Lee said.

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Bates co-owner Leila says both she and her husband Lee are proud of their employees who continue to supply time and resources to families they have yet to meet.

“Putting cars back on the road is part of our daily grind, but this is putting families back on the road,” she said. “We have a giving staff, and this project brings our entire team together.”

Leila sees the difference the project makes, from the Bates employees to the families receiving the cars.

Car no. 39 will be equally as special for all parties concerned.

“Seeing our team’s faces light up is a gift for us,” she said. “The gift of transportation is a game changer.”

Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock said she is excited to kick off the holiday season with this event.

“The generosity of the Bates family and their staff fills our hearts with joy each year,” she said. “This program embodies our goal at HCDE Head Start to build school readiness and success with our families.”

HCDE Head Start serves families of children ages six weeks to age 5 with 14 Head Start centers located in north to northeast Harris County. Income-eligible families and children with disabilities gain free Head Start services to help equip children with academic and social skills for school readiness. Families receive support services in the school readiness program through community partners.

For more information about Head Start, visit www.hcde-texas.org/Head-Start.

About Harris County Department of Education: HCDE provides special education, therapy services, early education, adult education and after-school programming. Services are funded by government grants, fees and a local property tax of approximately \$9 per homeowner. For every dollar in local property tax collected, HCDE provides \$4.40 in services to the 25 Harris County school districts. We operate four campuses for students with profound special education needs and adjudicated or recovering youth who require a low, student-teacher ratio and highly structured environment. One-hundred percent of students served on HCDE campuses are at-risk. We are governed by an elected board of seven trustees and have 1,076 employees and 33 facilities, including 14 Head Start centers. More info at www.hcde-texas.org.

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[Therapist Uses Music to Communicate with Students with Emotional, Intellectual Disabilities](#)

Nov. 13, 2020 - Music is the voice box in Omar Reyna's life. The musician uses seven years of guitar and piano instruction to his advantage as a school-based music therapist, a licensed health professional.

He truly identifies with his students at Academic and Behavior School East because he has experienced their struggles. ABS East is a school for children with intellectual and emotional disabilities which serves area school districts through Harris County Department of Education.

At age 7, he barely spoke but turned to music to transpose his emotions. Diagnosed on the autism spectrum, he experienced pervasive development disorder, a delay in development of socialization and communication skills. Through support from his mother, he was mainstreamed into a regular classroom by third grade.

Reyna uses his skills in musical performance, lessons, songwriting, and listening as part of an integrative course of therapy in the school setting to improve children's social, emotional, physical and/or cognitive abilities. A team of nine music therapists work with 150 physical and occupational therapists to serve children through Harris County Department of Education's School-Based Therapy Services. They provide 54 percent of school-based therapy in the county to area school districts.

At ABS East, Reyna works with elementary-aged, life skills students to gain beneficial social skills, focusing on one social skill each week.

This week that skill is dealing with anger, and Reyna is working with Blake and John, two fourth graders.

"You're feeling upset?" Reyna asks the boys. "Show it to me through your playing."

The students work their emotions on tambourine and drums, and Reyna orchestrates a pause.

The music therapist covers other coping devices for dealing with anger, sharing the tools and asking questions. Count to 10 and take a break. Tell an adult about your problem. Talk it out. What else?

"My job is to try to meet them in the middle and validate their feelings, because we don't want those feelings to lead to a negative trajectory," Reyna said.

Since a large sector of students at ABS East is autistic, Reyna will work on social skills like personal greetings or creating personal space.

“Having music as a motivator not only builds rapport but also keeps students more engaged so that I may instill positive ideas,” he said.

Music therapists also use elements like cadence, lyrics and melody to also solicit physical and speech outcomes with students.

For Reyna, the idea to become a music therapist clicked at a college fair. He was envisioning becoming a pianist or mariachi guitar player. Then he heard the story about how music therapy helped trauma injury patient Congresswoman Gabby Giffords.

After five years at Sam Houston State, Reyna secured an internship with HCDE’s School-Based Therapy Services and was later offered a job.

ABS East Principal Dr. Donna Trevino-Jones says her school has used music therapy for two years. She witnessed the benefits firsthand.

Recalling a student who was nonverbal, she witnessed him come out of his shell and begin communicating through music therapy.

“For our students to be able to find a different outlet to express themselves is very important,” Trevino-Jones said. “Once I saw what music therapy could do for the students, I thought: ‘We need more of that.’”

Reyna now visits ABS East for two hours, five days a week. Deeper emotional connections are made as visits become daily versus weekly.

“It has been a gamechanger for students to be able to use their words to express their feelings rather than their actions,” Trevino-Jones said.

For Reyna, the music travels with him long after he closes his guitar case and packs up his small, percussion instruments. He carries it forward to motivate himself to work out or relax when he’s stressed out.

He knows the music will speak to his students as well.

“Music can break through barriers, and it’s universal,” he said. “Finding what drives someone music-wise can be very powerful.”

For information about HCDE’s School-Based Therapy Services or schools for children with special needs, go to www.hcde-texas.org.

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