

THE CONNECTOR

A weekly publication of Harris County Department of Education for the HCDE Board of Trustees

WEEK OF July 5, 2021

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NEW BEGINNINGS

TOP STORIES

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Of Note...



Leadership matters. This is a mantra I wholeheartedly believe in and have seen in action during my more than 30 years in education. I often say that people don't work for organizations, they work for people. This is never truer than in a school setting where research shows that teachers stay in their jobs because of their principal; not the parents, the facility or even students. A great principal can inspire teachers to move mountains in supporting student success, overcome all obstacles and do things that nobody thought possible. I am proud to say HCDE has this type of principal in our schools.

This week I met with Travita Godfrey, the new Fortis Academy principal. Ms. Godfrey comes from Humble ISD and has an extensive background in counseling. I believe that with this focus, Ms. Godfrey can enhance the services we provide to students at Fortis to include not only high-quality academics but comprehensive mental, emotional and behavioral support as well. Ms. Godfrey is currently immersing herself in the local recovery community and I am excited to see Fortis flourish under her leadership.

I started the week with my ELT and monthly Leadership Team meetings. These gatherings are important to ensure the continuity of services and support across divisions and so upper management knows what their counterparts

across the organization are doing. On Wednesday I continued with our planning for the staff convocation on August 20. I am really looking forward to the program this year and I hope you can make it to this event. This is a great opportunity for you to get to know staff and interact with them personally in an atmosphere filled with a spirit of excitement. On Thursday we held agenda review in anticipation of the regular board meeting next week and I met with members of our Information Technology division regarding cyber security. Ransomware has been in the headlines for the last few months, and I am happy to report that HCDE has taken several significant steps to protect our systems from these attacks. The IT division has done an outstanding job of proactively making sure our information is safe and addressing this growing threat. Today I met with several staff members for standing meetings at my NPO office.

Next week we transition back to our summer flex schedule, working Monday through Thursday from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. until August. Have a great weekend.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Collier".

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



Recovery high school Fortis Academy welcomes new principal

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

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

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

“Ms. Godfrey is an innovative, forward-thinking leader,” said Dr. Charles Ned, director for Harris County Department of Education’s Schools Division. “She has an outstanding record of success in maximizing the effect of social-

emotional, behavioral and academic programs so that all students reach their maximum potential.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



Highpoint student gets ultimate wish-list item from HCDE teacher: adoption

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONTINUED ON PG. 4

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

McLean worked at Highpoint School for 11 years before retiring this summer. Highpoint is a school for troubled and adjudicated youth who come from their home schools to address behavior issues. Classes are small, and students work to catch up on their academics and behavioral problems. Students typically return to their home schools.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

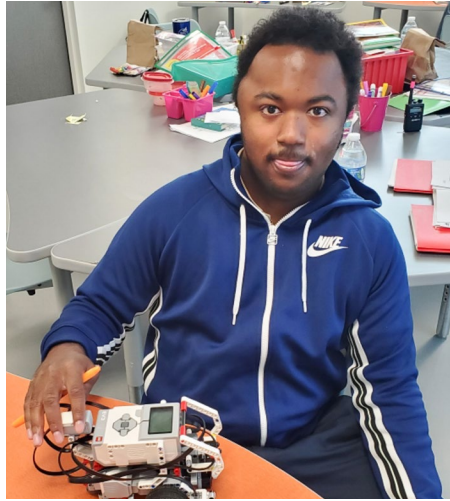
Like most teens, the 16-year-old has a sloppy room and must respond to the demands of his parents, who ask him to straighten it, feed the dog and take out the trash.

“I just grew, I guess,” he said.

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

PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS



Students in first-ever Ecobot Challenge hosted by ABS West making final touches to robots before challenge day

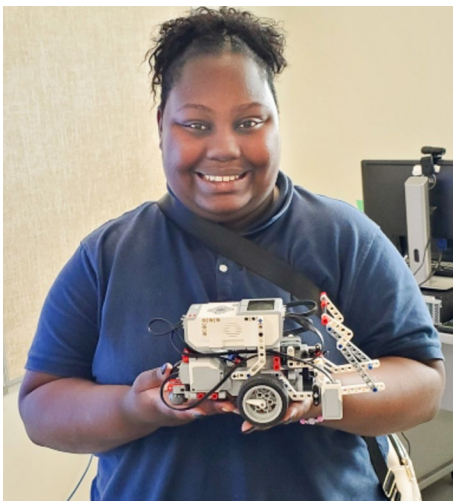
Academic and Behavior School West students continue to prepare for the school's inaugural Ecobot Challenge Day on July 15.

This week, the seven teams of 40 students from the fourth grade to age 22 put the final touches on their robots while continuing to learning how to code, operate and control them.

"They have exceeded all of my expectations," said ABS West Principal Victor Keys. "The students have really surprised me with their level of involvement because these are complex robots to build. I'm impressed with how they are taking ownership of the whole program and I'm elated with the level of involvement from both the students and teachers."

Before they face off on Thursday, students will have the opportunity to practice maneuvering their creations on the challenge mat, a mat with a designated route that the teams must successfully guide their robot through.

This summer's Ecobot Challenge will be the first time that special needs students enrolled at ABS West will have the opportunity to participate in the popular STEM-focused competition. The Ecobot Challenge hosted by ABS West is a collaboration with CASE for Kids. ■



PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS



HCDE finalizes contract with construction company tasked with building new ABS East campus

Harris County Department of Education has finalized its contract with Construction LTD, the winning bidder of the construction for the new Academic and Behavior School East. The \$12,348,500 contract came in \$201,500 under budget.

A total of 15 proposals were received from general contractors for the new ABS East project.

The construction of the new ABS East campus is part of the Department's \$50 million capital improvement plan, the largest in HCDE's history. It also includes the construction of a new Highpoint School campus, Adult Education Center, and renovations to the existing Ronald Reagan Administration Building at 6300 Irvington Blvd.

In late July, Senior Director of Schools Charles Ned, ABS East Principal Donna Treviño-Jones, and HCDE Facilities staff will meet with the project's furniture vendor, Indeco Sales, to finalize the furniture selections for the new ABS East campus. Indeco Sales is the same vendor that worked with HCDE in furnishing the ABS West campus.

HCDE is awaiting permits from the City of Houston so that cre8 Architects can issue the Notice to Proceed, or the notice that will inform the contractor to start building the new ABS East campus.

Construction is expected to begin this summer. ■

SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT... WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week the following Board expectations were met:

Superintendent Objective A: Management of Administrative, Fiscal, and Facilities Function

- Recruit and maintain high-quality, professional staff at all levels.
- Implements and oversees a planning process that results in goals, targets, or priorities for major areas of operations.



This week, we welcomed Travita Slay Godfrey, the new principal of Fortis Academy, to the HCDE family. Godfrey is an unconventional leader for an unconventional school. Her extensive background in counseling and education makes her the right person to lead our students and staff at Fortis. We're eager to see her expand a culture of safety, trust and support on campus and know that she will be able to lead our students towards healthy, sober, and successful lives.

Dr. Amezcua and the Facilities division have finalized the contract with Construction LTD, the winning bidder of the construction for the new Academic and Behavior School East. Their bid, which came in \$201,500 under budget, offered HCDE the ideal proposal to build the new campus, which is modeled after ABS West. Dr. Ned and Dr. Treviño-Jones will be finalizing the furniture selections for the school at the end of the month and from there on, we are awaiting permits from the City of Houston before we can break ground. I'm thrilled

to see forward progress on our capital improvement plan, the largest in HCDE's history and can't wait to see our students enjoying their new learning space.

Finally, the Choice Partners co-op has received the first draft of a self-imposed internal controls audit conducted by accounting firm Whitley Penn. The results of the audit, which is not required of vendor cooperatives by federal code, reveal no significant anomalies and present a clean bill of health, which indicate that our cooperative is in compliance with federal regulations. We are proud to offer a transparent vendor marketplace and are delighted that we continue to show our fiscal responsibility.

By recruiting and maintaining a high-quality professional staff, I am meeting the expectation to find ways to improve programs and services without greater expenditures and with concern for cutting expenses and costs to public schools for service without sacrifice to high quality services.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

June 14 - July 15

Ecobot Challenge
Robotic Competition
ABS West Campus

July 21

Communications
& PR Committee
Schools Committee
Budget Workshop
Board Meeting

August 20

Staff Convocation