

THE CONNECTOR

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

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VOLUME 6 ISSUE 35

THOUGHT LEADERS

TOP STORIES

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Of Note...



I often comment that I want HCDE to be the premier educational service agency in Texas if not the nation. This is an audacious goal, but HCDE is well on its way to making this a reality.

There are a variety of ways to gain this type of national recognition, but one of the best is to have other professionals consider our staff as experts in their respective fields. This happens all the time with HCDE directors and ELT members presenting at conferences around the country on topics within their purview.

This week Carie Crabb, senior director of school-based therapy, presented at the Texas Occupational Therapy Association about Section 504, a federal law impacting students with disabilities. The 500 attendees at the conference now view Carie and HCDE as a valuable and knowledgeable resource for occupational therapists in K12 schools. This has been true for Therapy for the last 20 years, but that perception is further cemented with Carie's presence on the state-wide stage.

And I am proud to say that Carie is not alone. Several other staff members consistently present in Texas and around the country on various topics including school finance and budgeting, restorative practices, marketing and communications, recovery and alternative high schools, professional development for teachers and after-school programming.

HCDE staff are contacted frequently to showcase their experience and share collective wisdom on educational topics, which is affirmation of a positive reputation within the education industry. I am proud to see our staff considered as some of the best in the country and look forward to seeing them continue to position HCDE as a leader in educational services for many years to come.

I started the week with ELT and several standing meetings on Monday and a workshop on Implicit Bias with ELT on Tuesday. On Wednesday I met with our construction project manager, LAN, about the capital improvement plan. Today I attended a second Implicit Bias workshop and met with architects about the proposed new Coolwood Head Start Center.

Today marks the end of the week for most staff, myself included, as we have transitioned to our four-day work week. Getting up really early is always a challenge the first week, but I know we will settle in as the longer days become more routine. And come Friday when we have the whole day off, it's definitely worth it!

Space City Weather says we should see more typical summer weather conditions this weekend, so enjoy the sunny days and warm temperatures.

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

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



Hembree Uses Decades of Technology Problem-Solving To Aid Students, Employees

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

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

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

Hembree's computer experience is rooted in his military career. He joined the Army National Guard in high school and spent one summer in basic training and another in advanced individual training, moving from infantry to artillery. In artillery training, he used computers and developed a keen interest in electronic communication equipment.

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

"I did not serve in the Iraq war directly, but I was there starting in 2003 supporting the troops that were

serving as warfighters," he said. "I lived through many attacks from rockets, mortars, bombs and gunfire but did not fight."

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

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

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

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

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

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

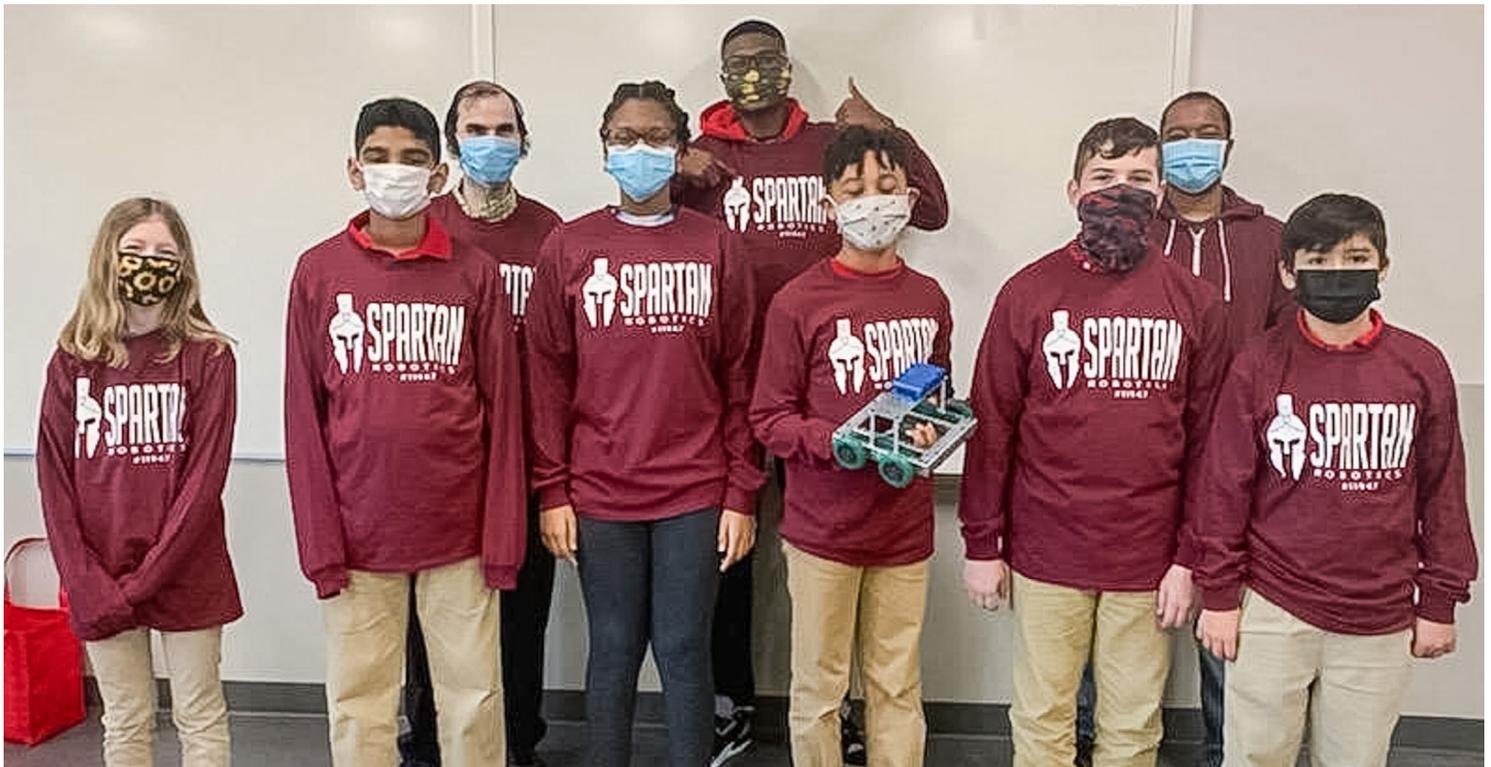
"I took my family to the SpaceX facility in Starbase, Texas, a few months ago to see the Starships and spaceport," he said.

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

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

PROGRAM

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Stafford MSD students “take flight” with new drones

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

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

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

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

Students learn safety, maneuvers, flight rules, situational awareness, and managing the advanced features of the drones. More importantly, students learn the drones’ real-world applications, including traveling to inaccessible areas, transporting items, and aerial filming. As a result, students have started to explore the importance of the FAA drone license and have developed career aspirations as drone operators. ■

PROGRAM

CONNECTIONS



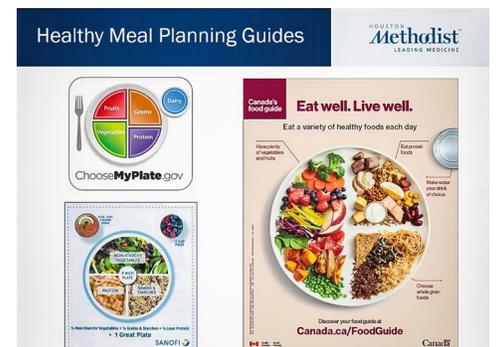
HCDE's wellness program offers master meal planning seminar for staff

On Tuesday, Harris County Department of Education staff members joined Houston Methodist Wellness Services' dietitian Angela Snyder in a webinar about mastering meal planning.

The webinar, a resource offered through the Department's wellness program, provided participants with practical tips to plan and prepare healthy meals at home and on the go.

During the 30-minute seminar, attendees were guided through a five-step system to help them get started in the healthy meal planning process. Participants were also provided with nutritional meal planning guides, tips to help home chefs save time, tips for selecting healthier options when shopping for frozen foods or through meal delivery services, healthy meal ideas, and online meal planning resources.

The Department's wellness program continues in June with free, virtual one-on-one nutrition consultations. The in-demand consultations proved to be popular, with all appointments booking in less than an hour after becoming available. In July, the wellness program will focus on healthy hydration, including a 4-week virtual hydration challenge. ■



PROGRAM

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Graduation ceremony held for one of Fortis Academy's first students

Fortis Academy held a graduation ceremony for its sole senior, Roberta Vasquez, on June 2. Vasquez is featured prominently on many of Harris County Department of Education's marketing materials and holds a special place in Fortis' history as one of the school's very first students. She celebrated the emotional occasion with school administrators and her parents, who were an integral part of her recovery, rehabilitation, and academic accomplishments. Vazquez plans to go to college and become a medical assistant. On June 5, Vasquez graduated from her home school district, Channelview ISD. ■



To view our video, click the image above.

PROGRAM

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School-Based Therapy Services

HCDE senior director of therapy services leads practitioners in workshop during statewide conference

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

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

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

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

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

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

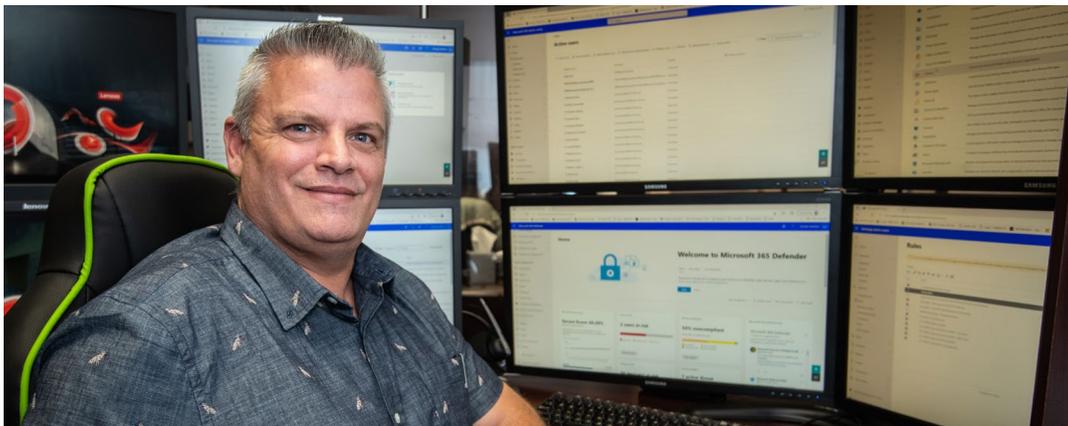
SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT... WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week the following Board expectations were met:

Superintendent Objective C: Personnel Management

- Encourages, oversees, and participates in staff recognition activities



This week, we shine a light on HCDE technology network analyst George Hembree, an Iraqi war veteran and an essential member of the HCDE family. Hembree has helped the IT team persevere through disasters ranging from Hurricane Harvey to the winter freeze to the pandemic, keeping HCDE on track with computer operations. We are proud to recognize his contributions to the Department and look forward to his continued success.

We are also honored to focus attention on Fortis Academy's sole graduate this year, Roberta Vasquez. Roberta leaves a special legacy at Fortis as one of the school's first students. As such, she has been featured prominently on many of HCDE's marketing materials and collateral. Roberta is a true example of what the Department's specialized schools can offer students who deserve specialized, dedicated care to succeed academically. We are eager to see Roberta grow into the young adult she is and see her triumph as a medical assistant.

The Education Foundation of Harris County Partners in Education grants continue to make an impact in our community. At the Stafford Municipal School District, middle school students benefitted from a second-round grant awarded to the district to expand their existing STEM, drones, and robotics program. Through this grant, students gained the opportunity to explore interests and careers within the STEM fields, including drone operation.

HCDE's senior director of school-based therapy services, Carie Crabb, led occupational and physical therapists across the state in a workshop discussing Section 504 during the 2nd biennial Texas Occupational Therapy Association's (TOTA) conference titled "OT and PT Service Delivery in Schools: Policy, Research, and Best Practices." Crabb, who serves on TOTA's School Focus Group Advisory Board, is a leader in the field and emphasized the importance of providing professional development to therapists across the state who do not have access to an entity such as HCDE in their county. Access to continuing professional development for school-based providers helps ensure teacher and student success.

Finally, the Department continued its effort to develop a healthy staff with a 30-minute healthy meal planning webinar. The event offered participants tips to learn how to plan meals, healthy meal ideas, and a list of online meal planning resources. We are excited about the success of the program and are looking forward to providing our staff with more opportunities that will help them with their overall well-being.

By promoting the recognition of the great work of our staff, I am meeting the expectation to establish a culture of excellence at HCDE.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

June 14 - July 15

Ecobot Challenge
Robotic Competition
with HCDE's AB West
School

June 15

Budget Workshop
9 a.m.

June 16

PFC Meeting
12 p.m.

June 16

Board Meeting
1 p.m.