

# THE CONNECTOR

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

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## SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITY

### TOP STORIES

**Hussain Sees a Way Forward  
for Students**  
*p.2*



**Madison Overcomes  
Roadblocks Along the Path  
to Success**  
*p.4*



**County Connections Youth  
Summer Initiative Awarded**  
*p.6*



## Of Note...



Harris County Department of Education's services don't impact just school districts. Our influence reaches across the community to local non-profit agencies that serve school age children as well.

This week we can see that effect in action as our CASE division handed out nearly \$700,000,000 in grants to more than 50 local non-profits as part of the County Connections Youth Summer Initiative. For the program, the Harris County Commission allocated the money and CASE solicited proposals from hundreds of Harris County non-profits for summer activities for students. Activities range from fine arts to academic enrichment to college exploration and career readiness. It was great to see several board members at the award ceremony today at our NPO offices along with the commissioners. This type of activity shows the size and scope of the impact of HCDE services and I am proud that we are able to help our local communities and students with not only school activities but those that enrich their lives outside of school time. I look forward to seeing the fruits of this program and hope we can grow it to impact even more kids.

It was an incredibly busy week and I actually didn't meet with my ELT. On Monday, I met with several staff members on pressing internal matters and projects. Tuesday saw me in more meetings and on Wednesday I met with the president of the education foundation to discuss grants, scholarships and sponsorships for the coming year. Today I was at NPO for the County Connections award ceremonies and standing meetings with ELT and leadership team members.

We continue with our flex schedule this week and will be closed on Monday for the 4th of July holiday. Due to the shortened week, next week we will operate on our regular schedule Tuesday through Friday with office hours from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. We will transition back to our flex schedule on Monday, July 12.

Have a wonderful weekend celebrating our country's Independence Day. I hope you get a chance to rest and relax with friends and family.

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

# EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



## You may see ones and zeros, but Rizwan Hussain sees a way forward for students

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

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

Hussain, a research coordinator for the Harris County Department of Education Research and Evaluation Institute (REI), turns data evaluation into an art form. He is currently the lead on the Texas Data Dashboard Project, an

REI special project commissioned by HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr., which compiles information on students, teachers, schools, and superintendents together in a comprehensive visualization that highlights disparities and areas of need.

Dashboard data visualization is a well-known and popular concept among research and evaluation professionals and teams. It is a widely incorporated practice because of its usefulness in making sense of large amounts

of data and drawing attention to areas that indicate errors, needs, and progress.

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

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

*CONTINUED ON PG. 3*

# EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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professional development, which he applied to his work.

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

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

product is better than what we thought it would be.”

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

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS



### **GED student Madison overcomes health, academic roadblocks along the path to success**

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

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

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

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

*CONTINUED ON PG. 5*

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

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

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

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

“Learning math took every bit of determination she had, but she never gave up on her goal,” said Kleiman, a veteran teacher of 46 years who retired and came

to teach math at HCDE 10 years ago. “She wanted to be validated as both a mother and a learner.”

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

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

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

“I gave into peer pressure,” she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For information about free upcoming adult education classes at HCDE, go to [www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education](http://www.hcde-texas.org/adult-education). ■

**DON'T EVER THINK  
YOU ARE TOO OLD TO  
ACCOMPLISH  
YOUR GOALS.**

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### Harris County Commissioners present first-ever County Connections Youth Summer Initiative awardees with checks

Over the past two weeks, Harris County commissioners from all four precincts presented checks to County Connections Youth Summer initiative awardees during ceremonies held at Harris County Department of Education's North Post Oak office. Nonprofits offering engaging summer activities to sites across the county submitted proposals in early May for the grant created in a partnership between Harris County and the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids).

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



[TO VIEW MORE IMAGES, VISIT OUR GALLERY.](#)

grants through this program that will be providing fun and educational programming for the children of Harris County."

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

The diverse activities offered include fine arts, academic

enrichment, college exploration, and youth mentoring. Grant awardees will also provide synchronous or asynchronous college and career readiness initiatives for older youth delivered virtually through the CASE for Kids LevelUp online learning platform.

To view the full list of County Connections grant awardees, visit [hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone/funding](https://hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone/funding). ■

# SYSTEMIC

## ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week the following Board expectations were met:

**Superintendent Objective B: Organization Morale**

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.

**Superintendent Objective D: Community Relations**

- Works with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way.



This week I had the pleasure of having several trustees join me in welcoming Harris County Commissioners Rodney Ellis, Adrian Garcia, Tom Ramsey, and Jack Cagle at our North Post Oak building to present checks to nonprofits offering summer youth programming in their respective precincts. These nonprofits are the first-ever recipients of the County Connections Youth Summer Initiative grant, made possible through our partnership with Harris County. It was refreshing to see the commissioners and our many community partners in person. As we slowly transition back to normalcy, we are eager for our students feel connected to others in their community through in-person summer enrichment opportunities after a year of dealing with unprecedented challenges.

This week, we shine a light on Rizwan Hussain, a research coordinator for HCDE's Research and Evaluation Institute (REI). Rizwan is the lead on REI's Texas Superintendent's Dashboard Project, which compiles information on students, teachers, schools, and superintendents together in a comprehensive visualization tool that highlights disparities and areas of need. This tool will undoubtedly assist HCDE in being able to target services and programs for educators and students across Harris County. Hussain's ability to synthesize data is essential in this effort and we are lucky to have him.

By partnering with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way, I am meeting the expectation to impact education and advocate for all learners by responding to the evolving needs of Harris County learners.

### HCDE BOARD

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### UPCOMING EVENTS

**June 14 - July 15**

Ecobot Challenge  
Robotic Competition

**July 5**

4th of July observed -  
All HCDE offices closed

**July 21**

Board Meeting