

THE CONNECTOR

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

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EMPOWERING YOUTH

TOP STORIES



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Of Note...



Yesterday, in the span of 10 minutes, the board sent HCDE on its projected course for the coming fiscal year. With this vote to approve the FY 22 Budget, HCDE will be able to increase the minimum we pay employees, give all employees a raise and fund several ongoing initiatives including the Tools for Teachers supply campaign, capital improvements and necessary maintenance for next year. This is a byproduct of your support for our staff, programs and services along with HCDE's ongoing success and the quality of work provided by our employees. It is also an indication of the value of our services and contracts.

The coming year is filled with exciting new programs and initiatives, and I look forward to seeing our ideas continue to come to fruition and positively support students and teachers around the county.

I started the week with several internal meetings including a planning meeting regarding the Community in the Classroom Head Start program. On Tuesday I joined several board members for a policy committee meeting then met with staff to discuss ongoing projects. Yesterday, we spent several hours together for the Public Relations, Special Schools and Budget Committee meetings before the regular board meeting. I enjoyed meeting your children and seeing them sworn in as junior board members. I hope you and your families had fun too.

Today I was at my NPO office in the morning and at Irvington in the afternoon for more staff meetings.

Have a great weekend.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Collier". The signature is stylized with a large loop at the end of the last name.

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Michael Carley poses before the second round of the North/Central Texas Scholastic Chess Championship March 10, 2018

Former ABS East student transforms his life through the game of chess

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

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

old amateur player and coach Michael Carley.

Michael, a former HCDE Academic and Behavioral School East student and incoming eleventh-grader at Huffman ISD's Hargraves High School, struggles with behavioral challenges that stem from a mild form of autism spectrum disorder. Through his introduction to chess at ABS East, Michael has developed the tools and discipline which aid

him in processing emotions and external variables.

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

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

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

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

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Clockwise from left: Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert plays chess with Carley during a tournament between ABS East and ABS West, May, 2019; Carley with his parents, 2018; Carley holds a trophy chess tournament at ABS West, May 2021; Superintendent James Colbert plays chess with Carley during a tournament held at ABS West, May 2021

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

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

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

nearly every Saturday to take him to chess practices.

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

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

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

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

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Center for Safe and Secure Schools hosts first-ever, comprehensive emergency management workshop

This week, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools hosted its first-ever Safety Leadership Cohort Workshop Series, a 3-day, in-person workshop sequence for school administrators involved in campus emergency and crisis management.

"The theory is that administrators walk away with the knowledge necessary to apply these protocols to their emergency response plans," said CSSS School Safety and Security Specialist Janice Owolabi. "In this setting, there were multiple [administrators] in the room who were able to share what they do, and they were able to pull those ideas and experiences together to identify best practices."

Owolabi, nationally recognized school psychologist and first responder Shannon Devlin, Ph.D., Humble Independent School District Chief of Police Solomon Cook, and special education attorney Melissa Goins led campus administrators from HCDE's schools division, Harris County school districts, and charter school partners in discussions about relationship-building between campus staff and law enforcement, threat assessments, and integrating social and emotional safety into emergency response.



The seminar integrated Incident Command System (ICS), Medical Emergency Response Team (MERT), Crisis Management, Standard Response Protocol (SRP), and Standard Reunification Method (SRM) procedures, which are typically held as stand-alone, one-day workshops. Offered as a sequence, the Safety Leadership Cohort Workshop aims to provide campus and district leaders with a comprehensive, "big picture" approach to developing safety plans.

The workshop comes at a time when the demand for crisis response preparation continues to grow and the need to build safe supportive environments is crucial.

Throughout the year, the 14 cohort participants will reconvene for three follow-ups—one in fall, and two in spring. These sessions will provide accountability exercises in which participants will review their responsibilities in assignments ranging from emergency response team roles to campus reunification plans.

"This was our initial group for the cohort, and we wanted to start building a community of educators where they could ask the questions they wouldn't [feel comfortable asking] in a theory-based class with a certified trainer from FEMA or their districts," said Owolabi. "It's meant to be a more intimate setting for them to get to know each other and continue the conversation."

Salyers Elementary School Assistant Principal Ketina Willis of Spring Independent School District said this is the first opportunity she has found to be part of the crisis response community.

"That's why this is very important to me—having the ability to reach out to people who are involved at different levels [of crisis management] than I am," said Willis. "We have ability to talk to other administrators and bounce ideas off one another and bring those ideas together. It's given me a good foundation so that I can work toward and empower other people to create a culture of safety on my campus." ■

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New Coolwood Head Start making progress in design phase

This week, the renderings for the new Coolwood Head Start center in the Northshore area were approved. Among the finishes that received final approval are the school's color palette, carpet and tile samples, and furnishings.

This project now enters the final design phase, in which construction documents are prepared. During this stage, the plans are refined to assemble a cohesive package for the bidding process. No changes can be made to the plans during this phase.

Construction of the new center is anticipated to begin in early Spring 2022. Students enrolled at the Coolwood center will be offered seats at the Sheffield center located approximately four miles away or at a most convenient center for students' families.



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Four CASE Debates students from Alief Elsik High School’s debate team called “Space City Violet”—Rodrigo Trujillo, Diego Castillo, Ebenezer Appiah, and Anthony Hoang—were recognized during the July meeting of the Harris County Department of Education Board of Trustees for taking top honors in the World Schools Debate event at the 2021 National Speech and Debate Championship. The team’s win demonstrates that students from urban schools can compete and win at the highest levels of debate.

CELEBRATING NATIONAL ICE CREAM DAY



HCDE employees enjoyed a frosty treat Monday afternoon in celebration of #NationalIceCreamDay. Employees met in the main break rooms at the Irvington and NPO campuses and savored a sweet variety of fudge bars, popsicles, ice cream sandwiches, and some friendly conversation.

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Fourteen Junior Board Members were sworn in by President Danny Norris during the July meeting of the Harris County Department of Education Board of Trustees. The group of children, affiliated with current trustees, were given the opportunity to learn about civic participation and observe routine board meeting business. The children read the Pledge of Allegiance to the American and Texas flags and were then presented with certificates.

To view more photos, visit our [gallery](#).

SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week the following Board expectations were met:

Superintendent Objective E: Instructional Management

- Ensures that goals and objectives form the basis of curricular decision-making and instruction and communicates expectations for student achievement.

This week, the Center for Safe and Secure Schools held another history-making event with the first-ever, 3-day Safety Leadership Cohort Workshop, a seminar integrating four different trainings typically presented as stand-alone, one-day events. Offered as a sequence, the Safety Leadership Cohort Workshop aims to provide campus and district leaders with a comprehensive, “big picture” approach to developing safety plans. We are proud to create a cohort of school and district leaders charged with overseeing their campus safety protocols and who will lean on each other as they progress throughout the school year.

In observance of International Chess Day on July 20, we get to know Michael Carley, a former HCDE Academic and Behavioral School East student and incoming eleventh-grader at Huffman ISD’s Hargraves High School who struggles with behavioral challenges stemming from a mild form of autism spectrum disorder. Through his introduction to chess at ABS East a few short years ago, Michael has developed the tools and discipline which aid him in processing emotions and external variables. He has become a United States Chess Federation (USCF) Level I Certified Chess Coach, bringing chess opportunities to other students in his community. Michael is an example of how a student’s life can be changed if presented with the right outlets.



Finally, we are happy to report progress made on the new Coolwood Head Start project. The renderings for the new center were approved this week, including the school’s color palette, carpet and tile samples, and furnishings. This project now enters the final design phase, in which construction documents are assembled in preparation for the bidding process. We are excited to see headway at many of our sites, especially at those where we serve the youngest members of our community.

By utilizing effective practices that maximize the achievement of student potential within HCDE schools, I am meeting the expectation to ensure that student’s learning goals are met or exceeded.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

August 18

Board Meeting

August 20

Staff Convocation