

# The CONNECTOR

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



WEEK OF MAY 15, 2017

VOLUME 3/ISSUE 36



## In this issue...

- 2 *Community Garden to Become Hub for Learning to Special Populations Students at HCDE School Groundbreaking Event Set for May 18 at 1:00 p.m.*
- 5 *Center for Safe and Secure Schools Facilitates Truancy Share Session*
- 6 *Elected Officials Visit HCDE Head Start Centers to Celebrate National Head Start Association's 52nd Birthday*

FROM THE OFFICE OF JAMES COLBERT, JR.—SUPERINTENDENT

## Of Note...

We are winding down this semester with a flurry of typical end of year activities. I began this week with a meeting of my Executive Leadership Team, followed by Board Meeting on Tuesday.

To that end, I am pleased to announce the Board's approval of our new principal of the recovery school. Mr. Anthony Moten will come onboard June 1 to both assist with the formation of and be wholly responsible for the management of the recovery school campus. This is a significant step forward in the realm of public education. I am pleased to have HCDE at the forefront of this movement.

Yesterday, the AB East campus held its Community Garden groundbreaking event that will enable learners from various special populations to soar even higher. The garden was funded by the Whole Kids Foundation Garden Grant via Unilever. Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation also contributed \$500 to the endeavor. This is an exciting and innovative project for this campus to be part of, especially given its location in a well-known food desert environment within the city.

I also met with Dr. Bob Sanborn of Children at Risk. The meeting was productive as we met to discuss possible collaborations and partnerships. I look forward to future discussions with him as we further develop this relationship.

Tomorrow, our Adult Education division will host graduation for 92 graduates who will receive their GED. These graduates have overcome tremendous obstacles in order to accomplish this goal. This event offers hope to others and reinforces the mantra that it is never too late to learn.

This week, in the area of teaching and learning, HCDE hosted the following trainings and workshops: Elementary STEM with IEEE K-5 Online Instructors' Training, Part III; ELLA Leadership Meeting; Secondary STEM with IEEE 6-12; Houston Science Educators' Leadership Association; Raising the Bar: Literacy Strategies in Science; SEL in All You Do! (Social Emotional Learning); and Exploring the Role of the Instructional Coach.

Looking ahead next week, I will be attending IMPACT meeting. I will also be taking part in the School-Based Therapy Services end-of-the-year event, and I will be attending my Northwest Assistance Ministries (NAM) Board Meeting.

As always, thanks for your service to HCDE and for all you do to advance the Department. I hope you enjoy this issue of **The Connector** and I hope you have an enjoyable weekend.

**Upcoming Event:**  
**Board Meeting**  
Tuesday, June 20, 2017

# Opportunity

## PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

### Community Garden to Become Hub for Learning to Special Populations Students at HCDE School Groundbreaking Event Held May 18 at 1:00 p.m.



A community garden becomes a hub for learning to 100 special populations students enrolled in Harris County Department of Education's Academic and Behavior East campus as the school gains \$2,500 in grant funding.

A groundbreaking ceremony was held May 18 at 1 p.m. at the school, located in southeast Houston at 7703 South Loop East. Students worked in a small, raised garden plot created for the groundbreaking ceremony, planting seedlings of the fruits and vegetables to be harvested this fall.

Grant funding of \$2,000 for the community garden is supported by Whole Kids Foundation Garden Grant and is funded by Unilever. Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation contributed \$500 to the garden. The funds come to the school through the Education Foundation of Harris County.

Mindy Robertson, principal of the school and also the visionary for the project, said about 10,000 square feet will be used for the garden in a field adjacent to the school. Raised beds and hanging plants are planned, with plenty of walking space for children with physical challenges.

"Academically, students will benefit by learning math and science skills used to plan, build and maintain the garden," said Robertson, explaining the real-world experience the garden lends.

Tracy Shepard-Rashkin, Unilever Sustainable Communities lead said the company started its efforts to support school gardens in New York City in 2016 and are now expanding the program to Houston.

"As part of Unilever's broader commitment to food that tastes good, does good and doesn't cost the Earth, we are on a mission to improve access to fresh food and healthy cooking," said Shepard-Rashkin. We have partnered with Whole Kids Foundation to fund five school gardens within Houston this year, prioritizing schools that have a high percentage of students who are receiving free or reduced lunches and

are within USDA defined low food access areas. We are so excited to be working with HCDE schools to create a brighter future for these kids and their families."

The school provides an enriching and supportive learning environment for students with intellectual, developmental and behavioral disorders. Students in grades 6-12 will be working in the garden. Another school hallmark is its low, teacher-to-student ratio of 2-to-6.

From measuring and staking out garden space to preparing the soil, planting the seeds, watering, composting, weeding and harvesting, students with a spectrum of physical and mental challenges benefit from the community garden.

Nonverbal life skills students enrolled at the school benefit from the tactile qualities of the garden, the feel and smell of the soil and plants.

"The majority of our students have a sensory disorder," said Robertson. "A garden on our campus not only gives students a sense of serenity, but it also instills self-esteem and independence as they learn to care for the garden."

With childhood obesity on the rise in Houston and one in three youth at risk, the garden is a good source for physical activity and healthy eating practices, said Robertson. The school resides in a "food desert" area, a low-income area with few grocery stores selling healthy food.

The community, including parents and area residents, will be welcomed to volunteer in the garden.

HCDE Superintendent James Colbert, Jr. says he looks forward to celebrating the first harvest with students and community. He hopes to join students in cooking the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor in the school's cafeteria.

"Our students take the work they do very seriously," said Colbert. "This will be a source of community pride, and we thank Unilever, Whole Kids Foundation, Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation and the Education Foundation of Harris County for their support."

# Opportunity

## PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

### Strife in Life: Graduation 2017 Set for May 20 with 80 Grads

(Harris County Department of Education's GED Graduation 2017 is scheduled for May 20 at 11 a.m. at 6300 Irvington, Houston, Texas, 77022 in our conference center. This story is part of a series of interviews with our adult students called "Strife in Life." For class information, go to [www.hcde-texas.org/adulteducation](http://www.hcde-texas.org/adulteducation).)



Adolfo Gomez

#### SNAPSHOT WITH ADOLFO GOMEZ

**View video:** <https://youtu.be/vp71uzF57Ds>

Adolfo Gomez, 35, came to the United States at age 21. He has worked religiously for up to 20 hours each day as a day laborer. Last year, he enrolled in an English class at Harris County Department of Education. The teacher said: "Don't just learn English. You can learn anything you want."

That moment stuck with Gomez as he thought about his little girl, 10, and wife Doris. He decided to go for his GED at a HCDE community class at Hastings High School in Alief.

Days were long and then came class and studies. "Then I also had to be a father and a husband," he said. He believes a higher power gave him the wisdom to go back to school.

"I did this for my family and my future," he said, clutching a graduation cap that would soon bear his tassel. That's why I'm here right now."

Gomez, now a foreman in a glass and aluminum company, will continue his studies at a local college. He wants to become an architect.

"So when I become an architect, I will be an example to my daughter," he said. "I believe in education. It's the key to opening doors."



Infant with teacher Coleman

#### SNAPSHOT WITH INFANT EGGLETON

**View video:** [https://youtu.be/j\\_oXjyBOonk](https://youtu.be/j_oXjyBOonk)

At just 27 years old, 2017 GED graduate Infant Eggleton has faced more hardships than most. Through her determination and positivity, and support from teacher Rosie Coleman, she will walk the stage and receive her GED on May 20 with approximately 79 other adult learners.

Earning her GED is a crucial step for Eggleton, who is trying to make life better for her three children. In May 2016, Eggleton's youngest child was diagnosed with meningitis and they spent two

months in the hospital. Eggleton wasn't financially stable at the time and didn't know where to turn for help. Her three children were taken from her, and this pushed Eggleton to make a change.

"Ultimately, I'm grateful for the push because I get to be a better mom," said Eggleton. "Getting my GED proves that I can complete something positive. I know I'm going to make my kids proud of me."

Eggleton found the support system she needed at Memorial Assistance Ministries through HCDE's Adult Education program and completed the program in just three months.

"Rosie Coleman is the best teacher I've ever had," said Eggleton. "She pressed me to keep going. She is the support system I always wanted and needed."

Eggleton is optimistic about her future and plans to continue school in June to become a dental hygienist.

"Earning my GED is not the end of what I can do, it's the beginning of what I'm going to do."



Estrella

#### SNAPSHOT WITH ESTRELLA TORRES

**View video:** <https://youtu.be/VghNX6QPhR8>

Before Estrella Torres found out about Harris County Department of Education's Adult Education program, she was beginning to think she might never earn a high school diploma. Now, she's receiving her GED after just one session – with nothing less than perfect attendance!

Torres, 19, the single mother of a 5-year-old, faced a number of medical setbacks throughout high school that made finishing, less and less likely.

"I came back to get my GED because I had to drop out two years ago because I got really sick," she said. "I spent most of my time in the hospital."

(continued on page 4)

# Opportunity

## PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

### Strife in Life: Graduation 2017 Set for May 20 with 80 Grads *(continued from page 3)*

#### **SNAPSHOT WITH ESTRELLA TORRES** *(continued)*

Depression followed, and Torres, who has diabetes and a disability, learned that going back to her previous high school was not an option. HCDE's Adult Education program was.

"I just had to overcome," she said, adding that she is "proud" to be earning her GED the same year that she intended to graduate high school. "I was the only one in my class to get perfect attendance."

With this big achievement behind her, Torres now has her sights on a post-secondary education and career.

"I want to go to a two-year college to study medical billing and coding," she said.

She credited HCDE's Adult Education teachers for helping her along, referring to them as "wonderful" and "very helpful."

As for those who are in a similar situation, Estrella has some words of advice. "It is a little bit hard, but you've just got to be really determined," she said.



*Veronica Espinola*

#### **SNAPSHOT WITH VERONICA ESPINOLA**

**View video: <https://youtu.be/slIeZ0nnWaM>**

Veronica Espinola, the mother of a teenaged son who earned her GED through Harris County Department of Education's Adult Education program, wasn't expecting that learning high school math would bring her closer to her son, but it did – in unexpected ways.

"It was hard to start because I have two jobs, and I'm a mother," she explained. "It's hard to balance both jobs morning and night."

But when Espinola faced her most challenging subject – math – she found that she could relate to her son, who is a ninth-grader, on a new level. It gave them something to talk about.

"I think since we were on the same level, we were able to joke around about homework – about slopes and formulas," she said.

Espinola said she made it through to graduation by setting a goal and focusing on the reason why she set out for it in the first place.

"The reason I decided to go back to school was because I wanted to be an example to my son," Espinola said. "I want to be able to provide a better lifestyle for him."

While there were challenges at times, especially when it came time to schedule classes around her busy life as a working mother, Espinola remained laser-focused on her goal.

"I said I was going to finish by December 2016, and I did," she said. "It was worth it."



*Matthew Mbaeri*

#### **SNAPSHOT WITH MATTHEW MBAERI**

**View video: <https://youtu.be/VCJ4ABID8EI>**

At age 56, single father of five Matthew Mbaeri set out to find a new career path last year and enrolled in GED classes as part of his master plan.

Mbaeri moved to the United States in 2006 from Nigeria and has since worked hard to make a living for his children, ages 16-23.

The Alief resident decided that finally, it was time to make time for his own future.

"My kids said Dad, how can you go back to school?" he said, laughing at the memory of his new beginnings. Mbaeri answered pointedly: "So I can be like you guys."

Through God's grace and with lots of studying, Mbaeri said he passed all parts of his rigorous test after completing his GED class. Soon he will enroll in a workforce class at HCDE so that he may study to become certified in construction. After that, he wants to focus on becoming a civil engineer.

"The point is, education has no age limit," he said. "Even if you are 70 or 80."

Returning to school 20 years after dropping out is not easy, he said, but it's definitely doable with help from good teachers.

This year his oldest graduates from college, and he is one proud papa. He admits to feeling a bit wiser himself.

"Go back to school and take care of yourself," he said. "Education is power—and knowledge."

# Opportunity

## PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

### Center for Safe and Secure Schools Facilitates Truancy Share Session



HCDE's Center for Safe and Secure Schools held its final quarterly Attendance Officers' Share Session for the year. A total of 72 attendance officers, truancy officers, and other personnel attended the event, which they generally rated as "excellent."

Justice Court Chief Johanna Craft, from the Harris County District

Attorney's Office, presented information about how Harris County courts handle truancy cases. Truancy officers from Harris County school districts were also present.

### Research and Evaluation to Distribute Employee Satisfaction Survey



Next week, HCDE's Research and Evaluation division will distribute the employee satisfaction-composite survey it designed for all employees. This annual survey collects feedback from employees on their use of support services from internal divisions such as Business Services, Communications,

Center for Grants Development, and others.

Guided by HCDE's accountability process, the confidential survey provides employees with the opportunity to rate and comment on the services they used throughout the year. Divisions will use this information to improve services as needed while continuing areas of achievement.

### ADVANCED TEACHING AND LEARNING BY TRAINING THE TRAINER

*Trainings hosted at HCDE this week*

#### **MAY 15, 2017**

Elementary STEM with IEEE K-5 Online Instructor's Training - Part III

#### **MAY 16, 2017**

ELA Leadership Meeting

Secondary STEM with IEEE 6-12

#### **MAY 17, 2017**

Houston Science Educators' Leadership Association

#### **MAY 18, 2017**

Raising the Bar: Literacy Strategies in Science

#### **MAY 19, 2017**

SEL in All You Do! (Social Emotional Learning)

Exploring the Role of the Instructional Coach



# Service

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

### Elected Officials Visit HCDE Head Start Centers to Celebrate National Head Start Association 52nd birthday



On Thursday, May 18, elected officials attended community reading parties at Harris County Department of Education Baytown and La Porte Head Start centers to celebrate the National Head Start Association's 52nd birthday. La Porte City Manager Corby Alexander read to students at the La Porte Head Start Center and Baytown Mayor Pro Tem David McCartney read at the Baytown center.

The elected officials also took a tour of the two Head Start centers and received a "thank you" surprise from the centers for their support. Additionally, all 15 HCDE Head Start centers participated in various activities in honor of the 52nd birthday.

For more information on HCDE Head Start services and center locations, visit

[www.hcde-texas.org/headstart](http://www.hcde-texas.org/headstart).



Community reading parties were held at Head Start centers across the nation to celebrate the 52nd birthday and highlight

the importance of local engagement in Head Start classrooms.



# Systemic Achievement

*...with purposeful intent*

## Organizational Morale

In an effort to meet the expectations of this element of performance as it relates to the Board's goals for me to:

- Create an open and positive environment for sharing resources and exchanging ideas to improve organizational climate;
- Seek systemically to improve the climate by obtaining and utilizing feedback from employees of the Department;
- Celebrate accomplishments and acknowledge excellence

Over the last several months, the Human Resources division has hosted numerous events and opportunities for employees to connect, in an effort to maintain high morale across the Department.



The following monthly social events have taken place and/or are scheduled to take place. All events are well-attended and employees enjoy the opportunity to spend time with other staff.

### Socials:

- October 21, 2016—Caramel Apple Nacho Bar Social
- November 2016 – Popcorn
- December 7 & 8, 2016 – Hot Chocolate Bar (NPO & Irvington)
- January 13, 2017 – Popcorn
- February 13 & 14, 2017 – Chocolate Covered Strawberries (NPO & Irvington)
- March 31, 2017 – Popcorn
- April 27 & 28, 2017 – Ice cream sandwiches (NPO & Irvington)



- May 24, 2017 – Popcorn

### Humanitarian:

- December 2016—Toy Drive (Head Start)



### Wellness efforts:

- August 2016—National Immunization Month
- September 2016—Mold Awareness Month
- October 2016 – Breast Cancer Awareness Month
- November 2016 – Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month
- December 2016 – Seasonal Depression Month
- January 2017 – none
- February 2017 – American Heart Month
- March 2017 – Caffeine Awareness Month
- April 2017 – Distracted Driving Awareness Month
- May 2017 – National Employee Health & Fitness Month



### Wellness Initiatives:

- October 2016—Breast Cancer Awareness Month (Friday themes)
- October 2016—Flu Shots
- May 2, 2017—"Meal Planning" Webinar (EAP)
- May 4, 2017—Yogurt Bar (NPO)
- May 10, 2017—"Creating Healthy Habits" Webinar (EAP)
- May 19, 2017 –Yogurt Bar (Irvington)
- May 25th and May 26th, 2017—Health Matters Blood Screening



As a result of these events, I am striving to meet the Board's expectations of me to ensure high organizational morale with the staff of HCDE.

## HCDE BOARD

### Board President

Louis Evans, III

*Position 4, Precinct 3*

### Vice President

Eric Dick

*Position 2, Precinct 4*

Erica Lee Carter

*Position 6, Precinct 1*

George Moore

*Position 1, Precinct 2*

Don Summers

*Position 7, At Large*

Diane Trautman

*Position 3, At Large*

Michael Wolfe

*Position 5, At Large*

## UPCOMING

## BOARD EVENT:

**Board Meeting**

**Tuesday, June 20, 2017**

