

# The CONNECTOR

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



## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

### TOP STORIES INSIDE



Beating Breast Cancer



Students Experience New Foods and Books



Autism Speaks Walk

# The CONNECTOR



## *Of Note...*

The heart of HCDE employees is a beautiful thing. I am always amazed at how giving our employees are and how supportive they are in terms of local causes and non-profit organizations.

This week we saw this community spirit in action with employee support for Breast Cancer Awareness month as well as the annual Autism Speaks Walk in Houston.

Employees in divisions around HCDE decorated their doors for Breast Cancer Awareness month, decking out the surfaces in pink wallpaper, crepe paper trees, tassels, balloons, stickers and even a ghost in honor of Halloween! It was so much fun to walk around and see how spirited and supportive our employees are regarding this great cause. I was also touched by the stories of HCDE employees who battled and beat breast cancer that have been appearing on the HUB this month. Their strength in fighting this terrible disease is truly inspirational!

Last Saturday HCDE showed its support for Autism as well. The organization was well represented at the Autism Speaks Walk Houston, with our Schools Division and several staff members walking to raise money to fight this disorder. In total, HCDE employees raised more than \$3,000 towards this cause, which is near and dear to many of our hearts, as so many of our students are challenged by this spectrum disorder.

I started the week with my Executive Leadership Team on Monday, reviewing internal operations including technology email settings and financial reporting. I also met with staff for internal meetings on Monday and Tuesday. I am traveling out of the office for the rest of the week but will return to HCDE on Monday.

Have a great weekend.





# BOARD BRIEFS



HCDE employees supported the Astros by wearing their team gear with their traditional school/dress attire this Tuesday and Wednesday. Go Astros!



ABS West is "too cool" for drugs during Red Ribbon Week.



CASE for Kids hosted a Lights on Afterschool! workshop called "Lights On! Brains On!" for afterschool providers in greater Harris County with inspirational speaker/magician Chad Chesmark. Chesmark demonstrated the power of the subconscious and encouraged all to "think positive" in building an outstanding afterschool program.



Once a year, HCDE hosts the workshop, "Teachers Write!" The intense, two-day workshop held Oct. 22-23 gives teachers the opportunity to explore writing genres and new techniques for their students to produce excellent prose. These two teachers find themselves engrossed in a writing exercise.



CASE for Kids staff participate in the third week of Breast Cancer Awareness Month as they are "Positively Pink."



Red Ribbon Month held Oct. 23-31 is being observed in HCDE schools with student assemblies, dress-up days and art contests. Baytown Head Start says "no to drugs" but yes to cupcakes, unicorns, crazy hair, pupusas and tacos.



# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### HCDE Staff Joins Autism Speaks Walk to Support Students with Autism and Families

Several dozen principals, teachers and staff joined the Autism Speaks Walk powered by a sunny day and the love for students and family members with autism.

"We have multiple students on the autism spectrum, and our purpose for walking is that we want to support any and every effort for research and legislation," said Harris County Department of education Schools Curriculum and Compliance Services Director Brenda Mullins.

For the past four years, HCDE staff has joined the walk with an increasing number of participants. This year HCDE Schools raised a little over \$3,000 for the cause, placing in the top 10 fundraisers.

Joyce Akins, manager from the Center for Grants Development is an original HCDE walk member from "Educators Step Up for Autism." She says she walks because Autism Speaks is a way to support our students with autism throughout the community. In the past, HCDE employees from four divisions have participated: Schools, Educator Certification and Advancement, Head Start and the Teaching and Learning Center.

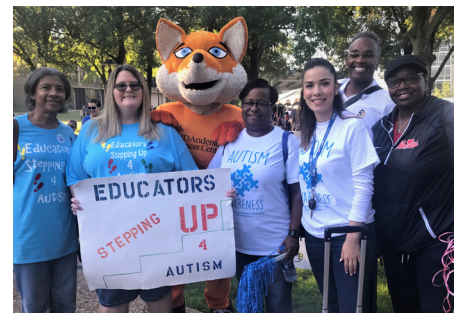
"The event raises awareness and financial support for Autism speaks, a national nonprofit dedicated to promoting solutions to meet the needs of people with autism and their families," said Akins.

Mullins pointed out some misnomers about people who are on the autism spectrum, a term used to describe the varying degrees of autism.

"Students with autism may appear they don't want to be bothered, but that is typical part of their spectrum," Mullins said. "They are indeed awesome individuals, and everyone should get to know them and give them opportunities."

Each year the number of HCDE staff participants increase. Next year the goal is to involve parents and children.

"You see students and adults on the spectrum who are participating," Mullins said. "I encourage all parents and family members to come because there are many vendors with a lot of great information. "So, I hope everybody will be able to come here next year."



# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### HCDE Purchasing Gains Prestigious Procurement Award

Harris County Department of Education's Purchasing Division has earned the 2019 Achievement of Excellence in Procurement Award.

Conferred through the National Procurement Institute, the award recognizes organization excellence in municipal and nonprofit procurement or purchasing.

HCDE is one of 48 agencies in Texas and 39 special districts in the United States and Canada to receive the award.

The Purchasing Division at HCDE is headed by director Bill Monroe, a certified public accountant.

"The program recognizes procurement organizations that embrace innovation, professionalism, productive, leadership and e-procurement," said Jesus Amezcua, assistant superintendent for HCDE Business Services. "We are proud of our transparency and commitment to organizational improvement."



**2019 WINNERS ANNOUNCED!**

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### Beating Breast Cancer Twice Strengthens HCDE Therapist's Empathy

After being diagnosed with breast cancer a second time, school-based occupational therapist Meredith Miller considers herself a “thrivor” versus a survivor.

Like many of the students with disabilities she serves, Miller knows how difficult it can be to navigate the medical or therapy world to get the services you need.

She feels the pith of anxiety that goes with tending to family, work and fighting cancer—twice.

“My journey has taught me the importance of extending grace to others, and how to do it,” said the Harris County Department of Education therapist from Katy who works in the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District.



As a school-based occupational therapist, the 12-year HCDE employee supports students' academic achievement and social participation in all school routines, including recess, classroom, and cafeteria time.

Her boss, Amy Collins, calls Miller a “tremendous asset to Cy-Fair ISD and HCDE.” She is talented as a therapist and committed to students and schools she serves, says her manager.

#### The Scary Ride:

In 2012 at age 34, Miller was diagnosed with stage 0 breast cancer. It had not spread to other cells in the breast or to other organs.

Similar to actress Angelina Jolie who has the BRCA1 mutation gene, Miller had the BRCA2 mutation gene, causing an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer. She opted for a double mastectomy followed by immediate reconstruction of the tissue.

As she neared her five-year mark of being cancer-free, Miller was doing a self-check exam and felt a lump as small as a grain of rice during a self-check exam.

“And so begins the whirlwind of tests,” said the wife and mother.

An ultrasound followed, then a mammogram and biopsy. The phone call from the doctor came next.

“Are you sitting down?” the doctor asked. “It’s cancer. I’m so sorry.”

Two weeks later, there was a plan to do a lumpectomy followed by four-to-six rounds of chemo. Results looked good, but tests showed her silicone implants were leaking.

“We go back to surgery, but this time I opt to have both implants removed and will not undergo reconstruction,” she said. “The medical community considers this a second double mastectomy.”

Summer of 2017, Miller underwent more chemo and returned during the fall to do daily radiation.

On Thanksgiving week, she rang the bell to signify she was cancer-free...

**To read more of the story:** <https://wp.me/p4QJFI-14m>



# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### Fortis Academy Students Experience New Foods and Books

Hummus, dill, “Names Will Never Hurt Me and Pistol” were some of the new foods and books Fortis Academy students tested during a recent class assignment.

Fortis Academy teachers Rachel Finley and Quindetta Thomas wanted to introduce their students to new flavors and peak their interest in different genres of books.

“Thus, the food and book tasting was invented,” said Finley.

Students sat at an elegantly dressed table and were treated to multiple samples of food. They each tried five samples and wrote a brief description of the taste, texture and whether they liked it or not.

Senior Karen Espinoza liked the prosciutto ham after never having eaten it before.

“I like ham and cheese, but it looked different and didn’t seem appealing,” she said. “It does have a different taste so it was new to me but was good.”

The French macaron was a favorite for freshman Elmer Cante.

“It had a sweet taste to it and was good,” he said.

Next, students experienced a literary dessert. Books were covered at each place setting and walked around the table with music. When the music stopped and the place they were standing at was the book they were going to try. Students were given eight minutes to read the front and back cover and read the first few pages of the book. When time was up, they recorded their thoughts about the book and repeated the exercise for five books.

After the teens completed the tasting, they had a table discussion to discuss their favorite foods and books along with their least favorite foods and books. Students filled out a reflection napkin to let Finley and Thomas know what they liked and did not like about the overall tasting.

“In doing this tasting, Ms. Thomas wanted to help her students get a better understanding of food flavors for future recipe and culinary projects, and I wanted to get them excited about the Fortis library and help them recognize other literary interest that they did not know they had,” Finley said.



# SYSTEMIC

## ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

### Organization Morale

In an effort 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;**  
**Model and support responsible risk-taking so that all employees can be innovative and try new ideas;**  
**Celebrate accomplishments and acknowledge excellence;**  
and

**Demonstrate quality management through delegation of authority, team building, consensus development, leadership development and self-management.**



Walking for Autism and raising funds for research proved a worthy cause for employees in the Schools division, Center for Grants Development and Educator Certification and Advancement. As you know, many of our students are on the autism spectrum. HCDE raised more than \$3,000 for the cause, and the day provided a great bonding experience for the several dozen staff who participated.

Fortis students participated in an innovative event held to introduce them to new cuisine

from other parts of the world and to new books being offered in the library. From literary desserts to appetizers from foreign lands, students explored and then recorded their opinions through description. What an innovative exercise!

We also share good news about another procurement award through Purchasing and Business Services divisions and celebrate that accomplishment of excellence.



Finally, we share a story of struggle from one of our longtime employees who survived breast cancer twice. It is her hope that by sharing her story, just one life can be saved, and undoubtedly many more as she promotes mammograms.

**These activities and communications help support the expectation of me to treat every person with respect and dignity, implement effective management practices ensuring all policies are supported by effective procedures. Also, I am directing administrators to accomplish the mission, goals and objectives of the Department and monitoring progress. We are monitoring staff to ensure that support programs and services are cost effective and of high quality.**



**Harris County  
Department of  
Education**

### HCDE BOARD

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#### Vice President

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Eric Dick

Danny Norris

Don Sumners

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### UPCOMING EVENTS:

#### Play with Math

October 25, 2019

#### Stop School Violence

October 30, 2019

#### Behavior Management

November 1, 2019

#### Board Meeting

November 20, 2019

