

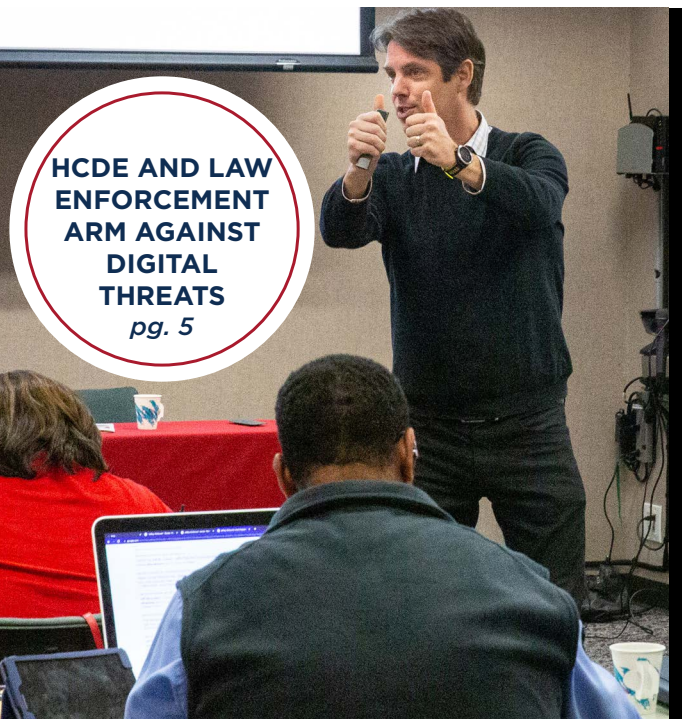


# THE CONNECTOR

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

## PROACTIVE PRACTICES

**BOARD RECOGNITION MONTH 2022**  
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**HCDE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT ARM AGAINST DIGITAL THREATS**  
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**ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE RETURNS**  
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Every time I watch TV or read the newspaper, there seems to be a story about the “Great Resignation” and labor shortages around the nation. Stories typically focus on the hardest hit industries including hotels, restaurants and healthcare, all of which are dealing with double digit percentages of vacancies. But I would argue that public education is suffering as much as these private sectors.

News of an impending teacher shortage has been around for many years, as analysts discussed the high number of retiring teachers and the low number of incoming candidates. Unfortunately, every school district is living that tale right now, struggling to fill vacancies as teachers retire and resign in droves and new teachers are not as plentiful as they used to be. The reasons for the large number of open positions at school districts include the cost of childcare overshadowing salaries, lingering COVID concerns and employees taking advantage of retirement as soon as it is a viable option.

At HCDE, we are not immune to this phenomenon either, as we deal with an increasing number of vacancies at our schools and within the Head Start program.

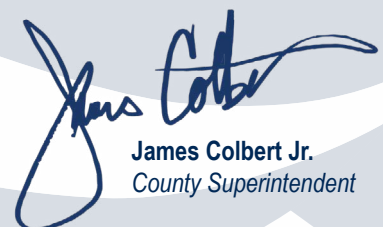
To combat this trend, this month we launched a teacher recruiting campaign designed to attract high quality teachers to our programs including the Special Schools, Head Start campuses and Adult Education courses. The county-wide campaign, centered on a website ([www.TeachHarrisCounty.org](http://www.TeachHarrisCounty.org)), and will be featured on several local media channels including a rotating billboard, ads on Facebook and Google along with a sponsorship spot on Channel 13. I look forward to seeing the outcome of this campaign and hope that we attract fabulous talent to staff-up our schools and Head Start centers. Having quality teachers at the front of every classroom is critical to the success of our students and I am committed to doing everything we can to not only attract top notch new talent but retain the amazing employees we currently have.

We started the week on Tuesday after observing the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. ELT met Tuesday morning after which I interviewed the two finalists for the Director of Grants position. I anticipate we will have a candidate for your approval at the February board meeting.

On Wednesday I attended both the PFC and Audit Committee meetings before fellowshipping with staff at the Board Appreciation reception. I really enjoyed that event and being able to give you the fabulous drawings completed by one of our students. I found them to be truly remarkable and hope you will treasure the “lifer” gift as much as I appreciate the one hanging in my office. After the reception I attended the board meeting with you and on Thursday I met with several staff to discuss ongoing projects. Today I am at my NPO office with more meetings scheduled throughout the day.

It’s been a cool couple of days as winter is in full effect in our region, with the frosty temperatures forecast to stick around through Monday. Stay warm and have an enjoyable weekend.



  
James Colbert Jr.  
County Superintendent

# HCDE TRUSTEES HONORED DURING BOARD RECOGNITION MONTH



HCDE staff gathered on Wednesday to honor the contributions of HCDE trustees during a lunchtime School Board Recognition Reception.

Short videos highlighting trustees' contributions were played for attendees. Board members were then presented with plaques of appreciation and hand-drawn portraits of themselves made by Academic and Behavior School East student.

“Once a year, we get to recognize our trustees,” said County Superintendent James Colbert Jr. “They are the reason we can build facilities. They are the reason [staff] get raises. The team we have now is the best team I’ve ever been a part of.”

The theme for the event coordinated by the Texas Association of School Boards was “Rising Above” for the many unprecedented challenges school boards navigate in K-12 education.



Board members receive a special gift created by an ABS East student.

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Above, Board members Eric Dick and Erica Davis also receive a special gift created by an ABS East student.

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Above, Board members and attending HCDE staff celebrating at the Board Appreciation ceremony.

[Click here to view the video.](#)

# HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOL SAFETY TEAMS, LAW ENFORCEMENT ARM AGAINST THREATS WITH DIGITAL SLEUTHING SKILLS



*Safer School Together Director of Training Greg Gerber leads attendees in Digital Threat Assessment Training, January 19, 2022.*

HCDE's Center for Safe and Secure Schools hosted 26 school safety team members and law enforcement officials for a two-day Digital Threat Assessment Training this week presented by Safer Schools Together, a professional training agency whose mission is to end all school violence.

Attendees hailed from 11 school districts and multiple organizations across Harris County, including Houston Independent School District, Harris County Sheriff's Office, the Harris County judicial system, and San Jacinto College.

With the right skills, students' thoughts can be tracked through their actions online, says Safer Schools Together Director of Training Greg Gerber.

"The more that our kids work with technology, the more they're indicating what they're thinking [and revealing] the influences in their life," said Gerber. "Those cues can help us move towards intervention and be proactive in ensuring that [a] violent act doesn't take place. Digital threat assessment is that golden ticket."

The training aimed to equip safety professionals with a solid understanding of all the data necessary to assess an individual's potential for violence, whether in the form of self-harm or harm to others. In doing so, attendees gained knowledge and resources to help them establish a baseline for digital behavior and recognize marked changes in behavior.

Gerber, who also serves as the Associate Dean of the New York Institute of Technology Master of Instructional Technology

program and the Director of the Vancouver Centre for Teaching and Learning, says that the first thing to recognize is that nobody simply "snaps." There is a pathway to violence tread over time, and during that time, students "leak." They provide information about what is happening in their minds, and much of it happens on their favorite social networks.

The topics covered included best practices for research and documentation, the power of search engines and cached digital data, and recognizing obscure but significant meanings behind social media trends.

In one session, participants worked through a series of simulations using Google's search engine and Boolean operators, simple words or symbols used to connect and define the relationship between search terms. Gerber explained the significance of quotation marks, "minus" (-), "and" (+), "or" (|), "site:," brackets, and proper syntax—the arrangement of words, phrases, and symbols—when used in a Google search. With Boolean operators, school safety teams can find a lot of information with few details.

Houston ISD Department of Leadership Development Senior Manager Lauren Ford says the session helped her connect old habits and techniques with new ones.

"The connection that I've made today is an eye-opener and something that I can immediately share with leaders, and they can immediately implement," said Ford.

In another session, attendees saw examples of concerning social media trends, focusing on a 2020 TikTok trend in which youth used the seemingly innocuous hashtags "#ShampooAndConditioner" and "#IAtePasta" as a cry for help for mental health concerns. The hashtags represent two reasons referenced in pop culture for why someone with suicidal thoughts chose not to take their own life.

To stay ahead of trends, Gerber recommended TagDef.com, which provides definitions of common and trending hashtags.

Digital threat assessment, both a science and an art, is something every school administrator or law enforcement official should learn, says Gerber. The task may appear daunting, but Gerber hopes the training will leave attendees inspired and well-equipped to act.

"The most useful takeaway is understanding that we are able to make a difference," said Gerber. "By engaging in this understanding, leaning on relationships, [and] fostering positive community climate and culture, we can absolutely make a difference." ■

# 2022 ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE RETURNS IN-PERSON, INSPIRES NEXT GENERATION OF FEMALE STEM LEADERS



Galena Park Elementary student Gabriella Salazar and her robotics team take inventory of a LEGO MINDSTORMS EV3 Core robotics kit, Jan. 19, 2022.

Harris County robotics students are revving up for the 2022 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, which will be held in person after a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19, with the first of two practice days this Saturday.

"The impact that the Ecobot Challenge has on students in our afterschool programs is truly life-changing and we are so thrilled to be able to offer this opportunity in person once again," said CASE for Kids Director Lisa Thompson-Caruthers. "Hands-on opportunities, like robotics, help students problem-solve, build critical thinking skills, and expose them to careers in science, technology, engineering, and math, or STEM."

Three all-girl robotics teams from Galena Park Elementary School (Galena Park ISD) will be competing in this year's event alongside hundreds of students from the region.

Fifth-grade student Gabriella Salazar is already counting down the days until Challenge Day on April 23.

"I'm really excited because it was all online last year," Salazar said. "Now I can work with my friends and build stuff together, and it's super fun! We started [working] on some ideas in October."

The All-Earth Ecobot Challenge is a hands-on, project-based

competition that invites students to navigate challenges based on real-world environmental issues using LEGO MINDSTORMS EV3 Core robotics kits.

Students prepare for the event through afterschool or out-of-school time programs supported by the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids, or CASE for Kids, a division of Harris County Department of Education. CASE for Kids anticipates 300-400 students from afterschool programs across the county will compete in this year's competition.

The theme of this year's challenge—"Ecobot Kingdom: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rethink"—will challenge student teams from grades four to eight to design, build, and program autonomous robots. The teams will then use their robots to complete a series of missions that educate the next generation on the various methods and purposes of recycling, such as composting, alternative energy sources, and building homes from upcycled materials.

On Saturday, students will be guided through point-scoring strategies, mission-specific rules, game table set-up, and game piece placement.

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Science teacher and robotics coach Kaneice Washington, who runs Galena Park Elementary's afterschool STEM clubs, also looks forward to the event and the opportunity it will afford her students.

"When Gabriella started [in robotics], she was in the third grade, and that's when COVID hit," said Washington. "Last year, they had to do it online and it didn't involve the robot at all, so when I was told we could have the kids [in-person], I was ecstatic because I know what this can do for the kids."

The challenge, a 13-year tradition at HCDE, is provided through CASE for Kids and the Education Foundation of Harris County, the nonprofit foundation which supports HCDE programs and services.

Galena Park Elementary School, a Title I school near Houston's ship channel, has participated in the challenge for nearly 10 years. "We've been doing robotics since 2013, and it started with the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge," Washington said. "I think Ecobot, robotics, STEM, are very, very important—to this community in particular—because the demographics in this area [don't] have a high population of people in STEM careers. But also, in the area that we are in, not many people leave. After high school, we don't see many people venturing off to do something different."

Washington hopes that instilling a passion for robotics in her students will motivate them to pursue careers in STEM fields where women and minorities are underrepresented. "We have a high population of Hispanic and female students. I want them to look at science and math in a different way," said Washington. "They learn so much. Some of them learn how to program, some of them learn they can be a leader, some of them gain interest in so many other areas that they never thought they could have before. This is why I do robotics." For Salazar, the message is clear. "Robots are fun, no matter who you are!"

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Galena Park Elementary student Gabriella Salazar poses for a photo, Jan. 19, 2022.

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# BOARD BRIEFS

## HCDE LAUNCHES WEBSITE FOR TEACHER RECRUITMENT

Teacher shortages is a national issue and prevalent in every district across the country. Recruiting high quality talent for our classrooms has never been more important so this month we launched a comprehensive advertising campaign to showcase available teaching positions at our four Schools and various Head Start campuses along with options to each Adult Education courses and CASE afterschool programs.



The center of the campaign is a website, [www.TeachHarrisCounty.org](http://www.TeachHarrisCounty.org), which features information about the benefits of working for HCDE including true work-life balance and being a three-time Houston Top Workplace with high ranking salaries. The website also showcases information about our schools, Head Start campuses, Adult Education Program and CASE along with links to available positions.

The campaign will be featured on a billboard that will rotate around the county from January through April as well as highlighted via digital ads and [video](#) on Facebook and Google and a bi-weekly 5-second TV spot on Channel 13 during morning and evening newscasts. The new campaign has a fresh, vibrant design, built to grab prospective employees' attention and drive them to the new website for more information.

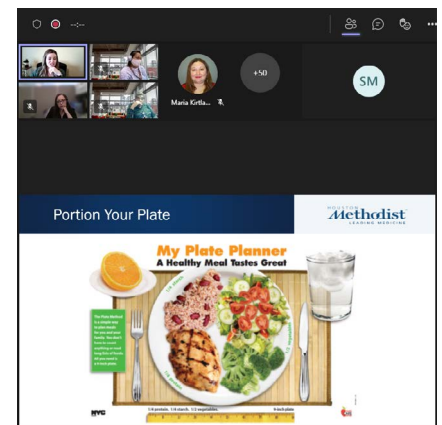
## HCDE EMPLOYEES GET A JUMP ON NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS THROUGH WELLNESS EVENTS

On Tuesday, nearly 60 HCDE employees joined Houston Methodist Corporate Wellness Dietitian Angela Snyder in a webinar about proven strategies for maintaining weight loss.

"Eighty percent of weight loss is about diet, but 80 percent of maintaining weight loss is about physical activity," said Snyder.

During the 30-minute session, attendees learned the difference between overly restrictive fad diets that eliminate or stigmatize food groups and sustainable eating patterns that promote meal satisfaction.

Snyder discussed healthy eating challenges in modern society, such as portion distortion fueled by restaurants' excessive serving sizes. Participants also learned five key behaviors to sustain long-term weight loss—hydrating with water, eating balanced breakfasts, stocking healthy snacks, eating mindfully, and staying active, aiming for 150 minutes of moderate activity every week.



Also, this week, HCDE staff members joined Methodist wellness expert Danisha Clary in the latest Virtual Fitness Break, a 30-minute office-friendly workout routine. Next week, the wellness program continues with monthly one-on-one dietitian consultations on Jan. 27.

## FAYE YVONNE JOHNSON RECEIVES JANUARY 2022 EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH AWARD



## THIS WEEK THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

### Superintendent Objective E: Instructional Management

- Ensures that appropriate data are used in developing recommendations and making decisions regarding the instructional program and resources.



This week, the Center for Safe and Secure Schools welcomed school and law enforcement officials from across the county for a two-day Digital Threat Assessment Training presented by Safer Schools Together. This training comes at a crucial time when we know students feel disconnected, isolated, and even powerless. These safety professionals were empowered with valuable skills, resources, and techniques to track the “pathway to violence” and determine the risk of harm to oneself or others through students’ actions online. With these tools, they’ll be able to identify student safety concerns and proactively provide holistic intervention.

CASE for Kids is revving up for the 2022 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge with the first of two practice days this Saturday. Three hundred to four hundred Harris County students are anticipated to participate in this 14-year HCDE tradition. We are eager to see their creations, as the challenge will be held in person after a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19.

To address teacher shortages—an issue impacting schools district across the country—this month, we launched a comprehensive advertising campaign to showcase available teaching positions with HCDE. The center of the campaign is a website, [www.TeachHarrisCounty.org](http://www.TeachHarrisCounty.org), which features information about the benefits of working for HCDE, including true work-life balance and being a three-time Houston Top Workplace with high-ranking salaries.

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

## HCDE BOARD

### Board President

Danny Norris

### 1st Vice President

Richard Cantu

### 2nd Vice President

Andrea Duhon

### Board Members

David W. Brown

Erica Davis

Eric Dick

Amy Hinojosa

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### January 22

All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Practice Day

### January 26

Munch and Learn with Rich Vela

### January 27

Choice Partners Vendor and Member Appreciation Luncheon

### January 29

R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference

### February 4

Adult Education Center groundbreaking