



# THE CONNECTOR

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

## NATIONAL STAGES



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## One of the hallmarks of being a standard bearer in your industry is national recognition.

HCDE took another step toward prominence this week as four Case Debates teams and more than two dozen Scholastic Art & Writing Contest winners represented Harris County at national competitions and Fortis Academy was highlighted at a national conference.

It is outstanding to see local students flexing their debate prowess once again at the World's competition for CASE Debates. Even though our teams didn't win the entire competition this year, the fact that HCDE sent multiple teams to compete on the national stage - through a program that is only a few years old - is a huge accomplishment! As for our young artists at the Scholastic National Competition, I am proud that this prestigious fine arts program honors the talent of local students. I enjoy seeing the art and writing recognized and knowing that many students walked away with scholarships for college in addition to gold and silver medals.

Fortis Academy was also recently honored in the national arena, as I presented on the story of the school with Mr. Parker, Dr. Ned and Dr. Godfrey at the Association of Recovery Schools conference in Virginia last week. We had about 40 people in our session who were very impressed with the work we have done at Fortis Academy and excited to learn how we have grown the school into a model for an effective recovery and rehabilitation high school that is quickly becoming one of the largest in the nation!

I started the week with ELT on Monday after being gone at conferences last week including the ARS Conference in Virginia and School Leadership Institute in San Antonio. On Tuesday, I worked on employee evaluations and Wednesday morning I attended the PFC meeting followed by the regular board meeting. Today I met with staff to review ongoing projects in the morning before traveling to meet with the Klein ISD superintendent this afternoon. With this meeting I will have met with most of Harris County's new superintendents, further strengthening the relationships HCDE has with our local school districts.

I look forward to seeing you at the budget workshop next Tuesday. Have a relaxing weekend.



  
**James Colbert Jr.**  
 County Superintendent



## HYPED ABOUT LITERACY: SUMMER PROGRAM OFFERS YOUTH CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE

**F**or Mars Burren, a 21-year-old volunteer coordinator for HYPE Freedom School, spending the summer working with underserved youth is more than a job or a way to pad the resume—it’s a way to give back to the community that makes them feel seen.

“I went to an integrated school. As a student in advanced classes, I was the only Black student in my classes. I did not feel very seen, especially being a Black trans person. I felt especially isolating,” said Burren. “HYPE made me feel very normal. It was the place that I felt very much like just another scholar.”

From ages four to 15, Burren spent summers reading, playing games, developing a socially conscious mind,

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*Above: HYPE Freedom School elementary students pose for photos.*

and building lasting relationships through HYPE. However, aging out of the program was not the end of the road.

“I proceeded to work at HYPE starting the summer between my sophomore and junior year when I was about 16 years old,” said Burren. “I’ve worked here pretty much every summer since.”

HYPE Freedom School, formerly Waymaker Life Strategies, Inc., has served the Sunnyside, South Park, and southeast Houston communities for over 20 years. HYPE provides an integrated reading curriculum that includes conflict resolution, problem-solving, and social action through the Freedom School model offered by the Children’s Defense Fund, a nonprofit child advocacy organization. The model is designed to help scholars build self-efficacy and confidence in their learning abilities.

Freedom Schools support children and families through high-quality academic enrichment, parent and family involvement, civic engagement and social action, intergenerational leadership development, nutrition, health, and mental health. Currently, there are more than 150 program sites across the country.

HYPE, the first Freedom School in Houston, offers a six-week cultural literacy enrichment program every summer. From 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday, “scholars”—as children are referred to in the program—enjoy “drop everything and read” time, playing games, asking and answering thought-provoking questions, and discussing events that develop their awareness social issues.

A fundamental element of HYPE’s vision is to provide books to K-12 scholars that reflect their own images of Black and other underrepresented people’s experiences, accomplishments, and perspectives.

“We talk about how young people go to school every day and see books with characters that they may or may not be able to relate to,” said Brown. “During summer, we have an opportunity to expose our scholars to literature where maybe a mom and grandmother are raising a child as opposed to a mom and a dad. Maybe it’s a father who works from home or works overnight. They have an opportunity to see family structures and culturally relevant issues and ways of life that help them realize they are seen and heard.”

Burren shares a personal sentiment on culturally relevant literature.



Above: HYPE Freedom School Executive Director Brandi Brown and Operations Manager Paulann Kirkland pose for a photo with City of Houston Council Member Carolyn Evans-Shabazz during City Connections check presentations, April 7, 2022.

“I think HYPE is critically important to scholars feeling, seeing, and understanding that literacy is not just something where they are side characters, background people, and accessories. It helps them understand that they can be the main characters in their own stories and that they matter,” said Burren.

To keep its scholars engaged in reading, HYPE sends a book home with every child weekly to add to their home libraries. These books, along with the Freedom School curriculum and training, are purchased with the help of the County Connections Youth Summer Initiative, a grant offered through a partnership between CASE for Kids and Harris County. County Connections infuses funding to nonprofits for programming that will take place from June 6 to Aug. 26.

Through the 2022 County Connections grant, HYPE received \$20,000 from Harris County Precinct 1.

Brown says the initiative holds far more value than the dollar amounts awarded to organizations like hers.

“When you think of having an opportunity to have your elected officials invest in the lives of our scholars, it allows us to help our scholars realize that there are people who care about them,” she said. “It highlights that there are advocates out there that they might not ever meet but who are pushing for and wanting to see them shine.” ■



Adult Education Center

### CONSTRUCTION UPDATE

Construction progress at HCDE sites continues in June.

Following the pouring of the plinths, or bases, the new Adult Education Center has officially gone vertical with the erection of the steel framework and reinforced concrete grade beams. A pit that will house the future building's elevator has been excavated and waterproofed.

ABS East's thermoplastic polyolefin roof membrane—a protective layer that resists punctures and tears—is complete, making way for the addition of the metal roof to begin over what will be the school's cafeteria. Exterior framing is moving quickly, and workers are beginning to lay brick. After completing the masonry, interior metal framework, and laying out of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing lines, workers will start adding drywall and sewer and domestic water tie-ins.

Construction documents for Coolwood Head Start have been submitted to the City of Houston and are awaiting approval.



ABS East



ABS East

## CASE DEBATES STUDENTS EARN TOP HONORS IN NATIONAL SPEECH AND DEBATE TOURNAMENT



Four Harris County high school CASE Debates teams competed in the National Speech and Debate Tournament in Louisville, Kentucky, from June 12 to 17. The annual event boasts participation from more than 1,500 schools and 6,000 competitors.

Alief Independent School District's Elsie and Kerr high schools' teams qualified for nationals when they took first and second at the 2022 Houston Area Urban Debate League (HUDL) City Championship Tournament in March. Spring Branch Independent School District's Spring Woods High School's and Westchester Academy for International Studies' (WAIS) teams also attended.

In the World Schools Debate event, which welcomed over 700 competitors who are individually ranked for speaker awards, Elsie student Diego Castillo placed sixth and Kerr student Carlos Estimbo Jr. placed fifth. Kerr's and WAIS' teams advanced to elimination rounds, and Elsie's team advance to octo-finals, placing 15th in the nation.

In Congressional Debate, a new event for CASE Debates, Spring Woods student Jesus Silva took 19th and Elsie student Ajibola Yerokun placed 13th.

CASE Debates, a program for inner-city youth funded by HCDE, is a collaboration between CASE for Kids and HUDL.



## HARRIS COUNTY TEENS RECOGNIZED AT CARNEGIE HALL

Creative teen writers and artists from 12 Harris County school districts and 11 private schools were recognized this month through the 2022 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards National Ceremony at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

Ninety-four teens from the Harris County Region—the country's largest regional Affiliate Partner of the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards sponsored by HCDE—earned 101 national medals, including special accolades such as Silver Medal with Distinction Portfolio Awards and a Best-in-Grade Award.

Several students, joined by parents and family members, journeyed to New York City to enjoy a week of festivities, art and writing workshops, and the annual art exhibition featuring more than 600 works from the 2022 Awards. During the ceremony, special guests Mayim Bialik, Nick Cannon, Kelly Clarkson, Zac Posen, Jason Reynolds, and Tschabalala Self congratulated the young creatives on their prestigious accomplishments.

To view the complete lists of the 2022 national medalists, visit [www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards](http://www.hcde-texas.org/scholastic-awards).



**HCDE'S FORTIS ACADEMY GARNERS RECOGNITION ON NATIONAL STAGE** ➔

HCDE Schools administrators gave their third consecutive presentation at the Association of Recovery Schools (ARS) 13th Annual Recovery School Conference at Virginia Commonwealth University on June 15. The presentation, entitled "Partnering with Public Schools for Adolescent Recovery: The Story of Fortis Academy Vol. III," shared the triumphs and challenges experienced developing Fortis Academy, Harris County's first public recovery high school.

"There's a lot of intrigue there because many advocates and representatives from organizations are looking to build their own recovery high schools," said Schools Senior Director Charles Ned, Ed.D.

Ned, Superintendent James Colbert Jr., Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker, and Fortis Principal Travita Godfrey provided attendees with a comprehensive blueprint of Fortis dating back to its opening in 2018.



The team of four reviewed Fortis' purpose, funding structure, staff and enrollment trends, relationships with districts, and procedure for identifying students. Godfrey offered her unique perspective of day-to-day campus operations, including counseling and academic support, alternative peer group sessions, and service-learning opportunities.

The presentation concluded with a video showcasing Fortis' success stories.



**HCDE KEEPS SUMMER SCHOOL COOL**

HCDE Academic and Behavior Schools extended school year students are staying busy with structured summer learning and enrichment opportunities. Following reading and math classes, students enjoy social and emotional learning and skill-building activities such as building and coding their LEGO MINDSTORMS EV3 Core robots, arts and crafts, and cooking and food etiquette lessons. Each Thursday, a different class has a chance to go on a field trip to destinations such as the San Jacinto Monument and Museum and the Museum of Natural Science.



**CS** **CSSS LAUNCHES SECOND ANNUAL SAFETY LEADERSHIP COHORT**

The Center for Safe and Secure Schools kicked off its second annual Safety Leadership Cohort with a three-day comprehensive school safety workshop from June 14 to 16. The event gave administrators a collaborative environment to practically apply emergency response knowledge and training by updating their campus' emergency operations plans (EOPs).

School administrators from local districts and one charter school association in New Orleans reviewed Incident Command Systems (ICS), Standard Response Protocol (SRP), Standard Reunification Method, and strategies for building trauma-informed school environments.

The workshop featured presentations from guest speakers, including Klein Independent School District Police Chief Marlon Runnels, KBS Law Group Attorney Melissa Goins, and Gulf Coast Center Director of Innovative and Special Projects Amanda Groller. The topics covered fostering relationships between schools and the community, case studies, school safety legislation, and disaster recovery.

The cohort will meet for virtual accountability sessions in October, February, and April of the 2022-2023 school year to review their EOPs and make improvements as necessary.



**HCDE DIRECTORS REFLECT, RECONNECT, READY FOR THE NEW YEAR**

On Tuesday, HCDE assistant superintendents C.J. Rodgers, Ed.D., and Jonathan Parker and the directors of the Adult Education, Center for Grants Development, Center for Educator Success, Center for Safe and Secure Schools, and Research and Evaluation divisions set off for an annual day of team-building exercises and reflection. Along the way, the group made stops to Alief and Aldine school districts, Baker Ripley Gulfton, and the new Adult Education building site to visit individuals and teams who have been instrumental in the work of their divisions and be reminded of their guiding principles.



## THIS WEEK THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

### 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.



The chance to see themselves represented in literature is something every child should be afforded. This week, we highlight the ways HYPE Freedom School, a 2022 County Connections grantee, offers the youth and families of the Sunnyside, South Park, and southeast Houston communities the opportunity to participate in a cultural literacy summer enrichment program that fosters generational impact. HYPE has been doing important work for Houston-area youth for more than 20 years, but we are proud to support this work through the partnership between CASE for Kids and Harris County.

In the month of June, HCDE was represented on multiple national stages. Last week, I accompanied Assistant Superintendent of Academic Support Jonathan Parker, Schools Senior Director Dr. Ned, and Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey to the annual Recovery School Conference to highlight our sober school for the third year in a row. We continue to see great interest in Fortis as we share our journey from the birth of a vision to the celebrations of student success. As Dr. Ned stated after the conference, the best compliment is receiving requests for site visits, and we have requests coming in from across the country.

Finally, we honor the students who received national recognition this month. Earlier this month, nearly two dozen of the 94 students from Harris County who received top honors in the 99th annual Scholastic Art and Writing Awards made the trip to New York City to walk the stage in the National Ceremony. Last week, four CASE Debates teams competed in the National Speech and Debate Tournament in Louisville, Kentucky, and received top honors. We congratulate these students on their success and commend the respective program coordinators for providing valuable opportunities such as these.

By functioning as the primary ambassador for the Department and representing HCDE at events, I am meeting the expectation to keep the public well-informed of the activities of the Department, affecting a wholesome and cooperative working relationship between the Department and community.

## HCDE BOARD

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

**July 4**  
Independence Day  
(HCDE Closed)

**July 14**  
ABS West Ecobot Challenge  
Day

**July 21**  
Center for Educator Success  
Kick-off Events