



**Harris County  
Department of  
Education**

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WEEK OF JANUARY 23, 2023



## EDUCATORS GEARING UP FOR ANNUAL EARLY CHILDHOOD WINTER CONFERENCE

P.3



P.4

**NEW DIRECTOR  
OF RESEARCH  
AND EVALUATION  
INSTITUTE NAMED**



P.4

**CONSTRUCTION  
MOMENTUM IN JANUARY**

**THE CONNECTOR**

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

## This week I welcomed local vendors and school district representatives to our annual Choice Partners Valued Member and Vendor Appreciation luncheon.

I really enjoy speaking at this event as it gives me the opportunity to discuss the impact of HCDE's programs and services to an unlikely audience: procurement officers and local vendors.

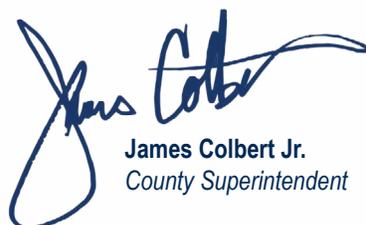
Each year I open the luncheon talking about HCDE, what we do and why our purchasing cooperative is different from others in Texas and around the nation. Unlike larger purchasing co-ops, Choice staff does not work on commission or get annual bonuses. We don't give away huge rebates to members and we don't offer push incentives to vendors. What we do offer is the opportunity for members to use solid legal contracts and for vendors to pay fees that do more than pay staff.

The additional revenue Choice generates each year supports innovative programming like Fortis Academy and trips to the US Army War College. It also affords HCDE the opportunity to be nimble and quickly adapt to the changing needs of public education in Harris County. This flexible mindset is also a key factor in HCDE's ability to provide exceptional programs that are valued by educators, school districts and the communities we serve. I am proud of the work Choice Partners does every day and I look forward to seeing how they can continue to grow with new contracts like Amazon and valued members around the country.

I started the week with ELT on Monday, followed by standing meetings. On Tuesday I continued my visits with the participants in our Focal Point trip to Gettysburg meeting with the Galena Park ISD Superintendent and the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent in Huffman ISD later in the week. On Wednesday I met with Moak Casey to discuss HCDE's educational and financial impact last year as it pertains to local districts and on Thursday I met with the new staff in the Center for Safe and Secure Schools. Today I met with various staff for updates on current projects and initiatives followed by the Choice Partners luncheon.

Tomorrow I will present the welcome at our annual Early Childhood Winter Conference and travel to Austin for the TASA Midwinter conference where several HCDE staff are presenting breakout sessions.

Have a relaxing weekend.



**James Colbert Jr.**  
County Superintendent

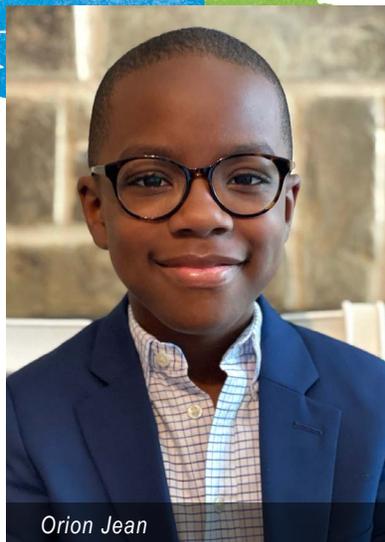




# Early Childhood Winter Conference



Mark Brackett, PH.D.



Orion Jean



Tami Charles

## EDUCATORS GEARING UP FOR IN-PERSON RETURN OF ANNUAL EARLY CHILDHOOD WINTER CONFERENCE

**M**ore than 700 early childhood educators will gather in southwest Houston this weekend for the 37th Annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference.

Held completely in person for the first time in two years, the event will feature keynote speakers Marc Brackett, a psychologist and researcher; New York Times bestselling author Tami Charles; and TIME’s 2021 Kid of the Year, Orion Jean.

Each of these speakers will speak about different aspects of social and emotional learning, leading with Brackett’s message of “Permission to Feel,” the title of his latest book.

“We want educators to have permission to feel,” said Senior Director of the Center for Educator Success Cynthia Brunswick, who oversees the event. “Opening up the lines of communication around how people feel is essential in education. We need to understand this to get to the hard work of teaching and learning, and we must tap into that emotional intelligence.”

Returning featured speakers include early childhood educator Mary Jo Huff, author Dan St. Romain, and educational consultant Charlotte Watts.

In line with the challenge set out by Harris County Department of Education Superintendent James Colbert Jr. last August for Department divisions to provide exceptional programming and services and distinguish themselves as standard-bearers in education, the event will include two new features during the midday break.

First is a “Make It Take It” room where educators can learn and practice a new skill they can apply in their classrooms the following Monday. The idea is to provide practical ideas and solutions in the classroom.

The second new feature is an “unconference” session, which has become a popular modality at conferences in recent years. An unconference is a participant-oriented meeting where attendees decide on discussion topics or workshop sessions. This model prioritizes participant voices and will create the space for early childhood educators to voice and discuss their most pressing needs based on what is happening in real-time in their classrooms.

The conference, which typically draws more than 1,000 attendees, will begin at 8:30 a.m. on Saturday, January 28, at the Kingdom Builder’s Center (6011 W. Orem Drive, Houston, Texas 77085). ■



## ◀ **YOLANDA PYRTLE NAMED NEW DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION INSTITUTE**

Harris County Department of Education has named Yolanda Pyrtle as the new director of the Research and Evaluation Institute (REI).

Pyrtle first joined HCDE in 2019 as a research coordinator before being promoted to research manager, overseeing select divisions' data and survey needs.

"I'm excited and honored for the opportunity to lead the great team of REI," said Pyrtle. "They are an amazing group of individuals with a wide variety of skill sets. I look forward to continuing the work of supporting HCDE and its divisions as we carry out the mission to serve Harris County school districts, educators, and students."

In her new role, Pyrtle will focus on increasing the visibility of REI to highlight its value for other divisions and stakeholders.

"I'm excited about Yolanda and her vision for the REI team," said Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment CJ Rodgers. "She fully understands the role that data and research play in making critical decisions for the organization. When you couple her expertise with her problem-solving prowess, grit, hard work, and sheer love for Harris County Department of Education, it is clear why she should be the next leader for REI."

Pyrtle's background is in education, prevention, research, program design, program evaluation, and community outreach, and she has worked for organizations such as MD Anderson Cancer Center and UT Health.

Pyrtle holds a bachelor's degree in biological sciences from Tougaloo College and a Master of Science in public health education and promotion from Mississippi State University and is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.



## ◀ **CONSTRUCTION MOMENTUM IN JANUARY**

Construction progress at several HCDE sites continues in January.

The Adult Education Center is 85% complete. Recent elements that have been installed include windows, the electrical pole, and the transformer. Drywall work is being finalized, and the terrazzo floors are anticipated to be poured next week. The new center is expected to be completed in the spring.

At Highpoint School East, crews are working through recent adverse weather events and will pour the first phase of the foundation when the ground dries.

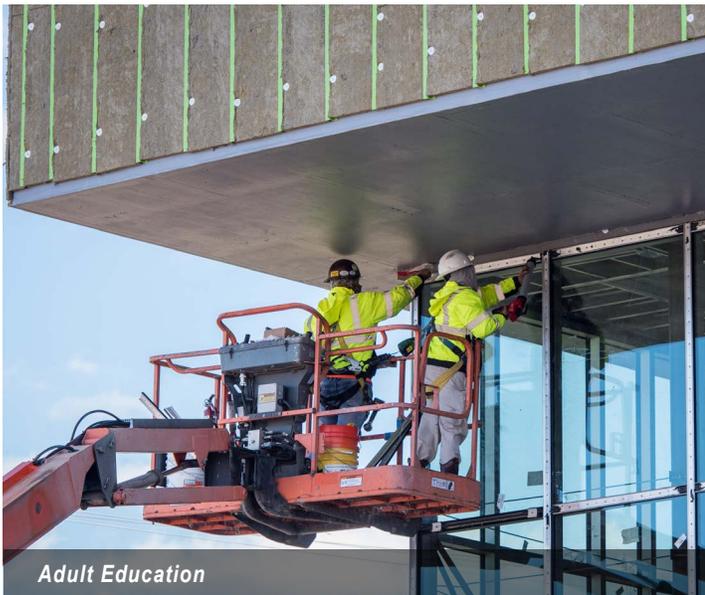
Geoffill Construction, which was awarded the construction contract for the new Coolwood Head Start campus in December, has hit the ground running. The contractor was able to work through the Holidays and gain the momentum needed to push this project through its demanding timeline. The land has been cleared, and the building pad has been excavated. This puts the contractor in a position to start backfilling the building pad with select fill soil and start the foundation.

ABS East has progressed extensively through the Fall and Winter months. All of the major components have been installed except for the generator. Due to supply chain issues, the generator has been delayed by several months and is scheduled to be delivered in late February. Currently, the sidewalks along the public right-of-way are being poured, and preparations are being made for landscaping. The interior of the building is nearly complete, with only minor details and punch list items left to do.

*Continued on page 5*



Coolwood Head Start



Adult Education



ABS East



Highpoint Middle School



ABS East

## 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 has been the final stretch leading up to our annual Early Childhood Winter Conference, which is one of our biggest events of the year. On Saturday, we will welcome more than 700 early childhood educators at the Kingdom Builder's Center in southwest Houston. Some educators will travel great distances to hear addresses from an impressive lineup of speakers. Each speaker will discuss social and emotional learning, an issue central to our classrooms, through a different lens. This is an enriching event where many innovative ideas emerge and are implemented in classrooms across our area.

We are excited to announce that Yolanda Pyrtle has been promoted and named the new director of the Research and Evaluation Institute (REI). Pyrtle is a longtime supporter of education and children through her vast experience in the research field. She first joined HCDE in 2019 and has risen through the ranks through her attention to detail and problem-solving prowess. We are eager to see the REI grow under her leadership.

Finally, this week, we report on progress made at various HCDE construction sites, including Coolwood Head Start, ABS East, and the new Adult Education Center. As some of these projects are nearing completion, we look forward to the coming months when we can open these buildings up to our community and continue providing much-needed services.

By identifying the learning needs of students and utilizing effective practices that maximize the achievement of student potential, I am meeting the expectation to ensure that students' learning goals are met or exceeded.

## HCDE BOARD

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Andrea Duhon

### 2nd Vice President

Amy Hinojosa

### Board Members

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Erica Davis

Eric Dick

Danny Norris

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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### January 28

[Early Childhood Winter Conference](#)

[All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Reveal Day & Practice #1](#)

### January 29 -February 1

[TASA Midwinter Conference](#)

### February 9

[HAABSE Outstanding Teacher Awards and Recognition Ceremony](#)

### February 20-23

[Texas School Public Relations Association Conference](#)

### February 21

[CSSS: Bomb Prevention Awareness Training](#)