



**Harris County  
Department of  
Education**

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# THE CONNECTOR

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



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## HEAD START 'SUPERHEROES' UNITE FOR TEAM BUILDING

## Well that's a wrap folks!

Another school year is officially in the books and I am proud to say that HCDE not only continued to shine, but exceeded many of our goals and objectives. And the really great news is that next year is shaping up to be an outstanding year also!

This month we celebrated employees and graduates and that is the best way to end the school year. Last week we focused on employees with our Celebration of Excellence and this week we learn about a graduate from Fortis Academy who is using her HCDE experience as a springboard to being successful in college. It is always gratifying to see students recognize exactly what they have achieved throughout their time with HCDE and how this will benefit them after graduation. When students talk about how HCDE gave them the foundation to continue their growth and improvement, my belief that the work we do has great value to the students and families we serve is reinforced. I am proud that our schools and programs improve the lives of students and staff throughout our county and region. I look forward to seeing this work continue to flourish in the years to come.

I started the week with ELT on Tuesday after the Memorial Day Holiday. After ELT I met with staff to discuss projects and initiatives and began preparing for our presentation at the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) Summer Leadership Institute in two weeks. This is going to be a great presentation and after meeting with President Duhon on Wednesday, I am excited to see the reaction of board members from around the state when they hear first-hand how a partisan elected board moved beyond political differences to focus on students. TASB has put us in a big room at the conference so I expect a packed house will be on hand to listen to Ms. Duhon and Trustee Dick discuss their perspectives and give tips for how polarized boards can come together in the interest of kids.

Wednesday afternoon I met with the general contractor from the Adult Education building to discuss progress and some points of contention. On Thursday I met with staff for my weekly updates and today I am at my NPO office catching up with staff in that building and preparing for a busy summer.

I hope you enjoy the beautiful summer weather this weekend.



**James Colbert Jr.**  
County Superintendent







An emotional Rebeca Santiesteban delivers the Class of 2023 address.

## FORTIS GRADUATES REWRITE THEIR NARRATIVES WITH CAPS AND GOWNS

**A**s Fortis Academy seniors clad in caps and gowns paraded across the stage on May 26, they were met with applause and praise from family, friends, and Harris County Department of Education leaders.

"We are very excited for our graduates," said Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey. "Many of our students have made plans after graduation, including attending college and enlisting in the military."

Seven seniors gathered for the symbolic graduation ceremony, including Rebeca Santiesteban, a 19-year-old who has faced challenges related to substance abuse for nearly five years.

Two years ago, Santiesteban was referred to Fortis Academy from the Spring Independent School District after her addiction became a concern for school counselors and her family.

At Fortis, Harris County's first public high school for students recovering from alcohol and substance abuse, Santiesteban found a safe haven.

The school's low student-to-teacher ratio and on-campus licensed chemical dependency counselors enabled her to overcome obstacles to

sobriety and academic achievement.

Santiesteban also formed meaningful relationships with faculty and staff committed to her recovery.

Within months of enrollment, she learned to play chess, a game in which she quickly advanced, boosting her confidence and real-world problem-solving skills. In March, her abilities on the black and whites even earned her a match-up against Superintendent James Colbert Jr.

"I'm so proud of Rebeca because she has come a long way," said Godfrey. "When Rebeca started here, we knew she wanted to attend college, and we just needed to help her get there sober."

During the ceremony, Santiesteban and classmates who participated in the school's culinary arts program wore purple and white cords to symbolize their induction into the National Technical Honors Society. The organization recognizes students in Career and Technical Education (CTE) and connects them to trades in the workforce.

*Continued on page 4*





## FORTIS ACADEMY CLASS OF 2023

**BETHANY DELGADILLO**

Aldine Independent School District

**CRUZ MEDINA**

Goose Creek Independent School District

**REBECA SANTIESTEBAN**

Spring Independent School District

**LUIS MERAZ**

Aldine Independent School District

**MIGUEL PACHECO**

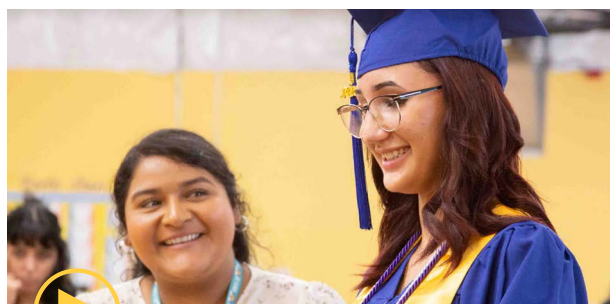
Aldine Independent School District

**VICENTE TORRES**

Galena Park Independent School District

**JOHNNY LEWIS**

Galena Park Independent School District



**VIEW PHOTO GALLERY**

*Continued on page 5*





HCDE Trustees Brown and Davis pose with Fortis and administration staff.



Rebeca Santiesteban and her mother embrace after the ceremony.



For her leadership and dedication, Santiesteban was selected by school administrators to deliver a speech on behalf of the Class of 2023. In her remarks, she shed light on the stigmatization of recovery in society and encouraged her peers to put forward the idea that recovery is possible with the support of caring individuals.

"I'm incredibly grateful for the unwavering support of my family," said Santiesteban as her parents looked on. "You reminded me of the person I once was and the person I could become. To my Fortis family, you saw beyond my mistakes and believed in my capacity for growth and recovery."

This fall, Santiesteban will attend Augsburg University in Minneapolis.

"She got into this university on her own merit!" said Godfrey. "She

has a wonderful personality and the resilience and grit to attend college."

To help maintain her sobriety, Santiesteban will participate in the university's StepUP Program, the oldest and largest residential collegiate recovery program in the U.S., like Fortis, which offers students like Santiesteban community support and on-campus access to counselors.

"I wanted a fresh start. It's one reason I'm going so far away," said Santiesteban. "I am worried about relapsing, but knowing that I will have a similar support system to Fortis is comforting. I want to stay clean, and with this program, I don't have to rely solely on myself."

As Santiesteban and her fellow graduates bid farewell to Fortis Academy, their stories prove that anyone can discover their potential, reclaim their life, and rewrite their narrative. ■





## ▲ ANDREA SEGRAVES NAMED NEW SENIOR DIRECTOR OF CENTER FOR EDUCATOR SUCCESS

Harris County Department of Education has named longtime educator Andrea Segraves the new senior director for the Center for Educator Success (CES). In her new role, she will lead the division's teacher certification and professional development initiatives.

"I'm thrilled to have been given the opportunity to take on this new role," said Segraves. "I'm honored to lead such an accomplished group of experienced educators. The CES team will work diligently to continue cultivating the next generation of Harris County educators."

Segraves, who began her new post this week, will guide the CES team in partnering with districts to envision a comprehensive approach to educator recruitment, growth, advancement, and leadership. Segraves also plans to establish a mentorship program for educators who aspire to advance into administrative positions. The division aims to address educator retention rates and provide continuing support for early-career teachers.

Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment C.J. Rodgers, Ed.D., described the search for the Center's new leader as complex due to the division's experienced staff and diverse client base.

"Segraves possesses the servant leadership skills, urgency, and sheer passion we felt necessary in our next CES senior director," said Rodgers. "I'm excited about the impact this team will have in Harris County under her leadership."

Segraves first joined HCDE in 2015 and has held several positions. As the director of special projects for the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), she oversaw two of the Department's most significant annual events, the [R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference](#) and the [Scholastic Art & Writing Awards](#).

Segraves also coordinated a national leadership speaker series and provided professional development opportunities for Harris County school leaders. In 2021, she was chosen as HCDE's [May Employee of the Month](#).

When the TLC merged with another division to become the CES last year, Segraves became the Center's officer of elementary education, overseeing teacher certifications for aspiring primary school educators.

Prior to HCDE, Segraves was a principal at the Clear Creek Independent School District. Segraves holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education and teaching from the University of Oklahoma and a master's in educational leadership and administration from the University of Houston-Clear Lake.



## IN THE NEWS

### THE Katy News

#### HCDE PARTNERS WITH HARRIS COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH IN NEW CARE SERVICE INITIATIVE

Online platform The Katy News mentioned HCDE in a recent story about Harris County Public Health's (HCPH) new initiative, Accessing Coordinated Care and Empowering Self-Sufficiency Harris County (ACCESS Harris County) that will provide a wide range of care services to at-risk individuals.

HCDE is one of the safety net agencies that will work closely with HCPH to address the critical needs of targeted groups within Harris County. These groups include youth and adults in specific neighborhoods, homeless individuals with mental or physical health conditions, youth or young adults aging out of the foster care system, black mothers at risk of health problems, adults transitioning from the justice system, and Hispanic residents with severe chronic diseases.

#### New Harris County Initiative Aims to Assist Vulnerable Groups Through Integrated, "No-Wrong-Door" Service Care Approach

May 23, 2023



*HCPH to Roll Out ACCESS Harris County to Help Groups with Multiple Needs Gain Self-sufficiency and Improve Their Well-being*

HOUSTON – Following more than a year of program building, Harris County Public Health (HCPH) is launching a new initiative to improve the lives of individuals experiencing hardship by providing an integrated, "no-wrong-door" service care approach across different local agencies.

ACCESS (Accessing Coordinated Care and Empowering Self-Sufficiency) Harris County will provide coordinated care services to targeted groups in the County that have been identified by HCPH and its partner agencies as having critical needs. The populations that ACCESS Harris will initially target include:



## FORTIS ACADEMY SERVES SUCCESS WITH CULINARY CERTIFICATIONS

Being a foodie paid off for several culinary students at Fortis Academy this year. More than 25 students received either a food handler certification or a food manager certification during the 2022-2023 school year.



## HEAD START 'SUPERHEROES' UNITE FOR END-OF-YEAR TEAM BUILDING

More than 200 Head Start and Early Head Start employees gathered at the Irvington conference center on May 31 for an end-of-year send-off. The team-building event embraced a "Superheroes in Action" theme, highlighting the division's superpower to deliver high-quality instruction to Harris County youth.

Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker's opening address emphasized the division's role in HCDE's mission to advocate for all learners and maximize student potential.

"When building a house, the most critical part is the foundation," said Parker. "Head Start is the foundation of HCDE—the fundamental learning component. You determine the trajectory of not only our students but their families."

Employees from each campus donned superhero attire and delivered presentations that showcased their embodiment of superpowers throughout the school year.

Amidst the festivities, Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock reflected on the year's accomplishments, encouraging her team to take a well-deserved rest in preparation for next year.

"Our department is always traveling a road to excellence," said Peacock. "I'm proud to have a team as committed to that objective as I am because the needs of our students and their families are ever-changing. This rest period will energize our staff for the coming journey."

Before the day concluded, Peacock recognized nearly a dozen employees who were honored at the Department's Celebration of Excellence event on May 24. Each Head Start campus also honored team members who exceeded expectations throughout the year.







## ▲ HEAD START STUDENTS LEAP INTO KINDERGARTEN

HCDE Head Start campuses surged with pride at recent bridging ceremonies to recognize students' transition into kindergarten. The ceremonies marked the completion of the Frog Street Press curriculum, an extensive program rooted in language, literacy, and social-emotional development.

Baytown Head Start kicked off festivities with a vibrant art car parade featuring colorful bikes, scooters, and kid-sized cars decorated by students, who paraded around the parking lot to celebrate their journey into the future. Students' creative flair extended to the embellishment of their graduation caps. At the luau-themed event, teachers awarded certificates for Most Talented and Hardest Worker to deserving students, recognizing their accomplishments.

Before their bridging ceremony, Fifth Ward Head Start organized a garden harvest activity, which allowed students to pick fresh vegetables from the school gardens. Delights such as Mexican squash, zucchini, lettuce, and green onions were plucked and sent home with students to share with their families.

At Fonwood, students treated their families to a medley of songs and dances. Afterward, students were presented with certificates of completion. Similarly, at J.D. Walker, parents' smiles illuminated the atmosphere as students inspired the audience with a performance of "We Are the World."

The milestone ceremonies highlight students' readiness for school and emphasize the important role of parent-teacher collaboration in early childhood development.



**Harris County Department of Education**  
March 21 · 🌐

The HCDE is recruiting talented educators to work in Harris County! Find exciting opportunities to give back to students.



### BE THE IMPACT!

FOR HARRIS COUNTY STUDENTS!

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**Top-Ranking Salaries**  
Begin Now!

[Learn more](#)

## APRIL TEACHER RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN UPDATE

After Spring Break, HCDE launched its teacher recruitment campaign, which garnered nearly 16.7 million impressions across digital and traditional media platforms in April. To prioritize recruitment efforts, the Department temporarily paused its awareness campaign during March, April, and May.

Facebook impressions for recruitment ads nearly doubled to 426,000, up from 220,000 compared to March. The best-performing ad tallied 109,939 impressions.

Pay-per-click ad big wins include 910 total clicks and a total of 58,480 impressions. Both clicks and impressions nearly doubled from last month.

Five-second television spots on ABC 13, CW 39, and Fox 26, achieved 11,506,475 impressions.

Radio spots on local iHeartRadio stations Sunny 99.1, 94.5 The Buzz, and 93.7 The Beat, and Audacy Radio stations Mix 96.5, 95.7 The Spot, and 100.3 The Bull achieved obtained 2,052,040 impressions.

One physical billboard near the 610 North Loops and I-45 North garnered 2,639,292 impressions.



# WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for May! Seventeen new faces have joined our Adult Education, CASE for Kids, Center for Educator Success, Head Start, Technology Services, and Special Schools divisions.



**Veronica Barreto Otero**  
*Early Childhood Teacher*  
Head Start



**Jeremy Davis**  
*STEM Manager*  
Center for Educator Success



**Sherry Calagon**  
*Afterschool Program Specialist*  
CASE For Kids



**Irma Lampe**  
*Intake/Transition Specialist*  
Adult Education



**Ivermoner Fultz**  
*Relief Instructor*  
ABS West



**Alicia Romo**  
*Relief Instructor*  
ABS West



**Liseth Gonzalez**  
*Senior Accounting Clerk*  
Business Services



**Vanessa Barraza**  
*Office Clerk, Operations*  
Head Start



**Janae Moore**  
*Afterschool Program Specialist*  
CASE For Kids



**Maria Polina**  
*Instructional Aide/Clerk*  
Adult Education



**Ayriana Brown**  
*Afterschool Program Specialist*  
CASE For Kids



**Shiraz Siddiqui**  
*Systems Analyst*  
Technology Services



**Laketta Walker**  
*Clerical Aide*  
Adult Education



**Mechelle Whiting**  
*Clerical Aide*  
Adult Education



**Mary Chancey**  
*Substitute Teacher*  
Special Schools



**Antoiwain Johnson**  
*Relief Instructor*  
ABS West



**Murphy Anderson III**  
*Substitute Educational Aide*  
ABS West



## THIS WEEK THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

### **Superintendent Objective E: Instructional Management**

- Ensures that goals and objectives form the basis of curricular decision-making and instruction and communicates expectations for student achievement.



*A group of Fortis Academy graduates pose for a photo with HCDE leaders.*

This week, seven Fortis Academy seniors earned the honor of walking across the graduation stage to receive certificates of completion. Among the students was 19-year-old Rebeca Santiesteban. This fall, she will attend Augsburg University in Minneapolis, where she will participate in the school's StepUP Program, the oldest and largest residential collegiate recovery program in the United States. We are thrilled to feature students like Santiesteban, who have gained a healthy foundation at Fortis Academy and plan to continue prioritizing their education and sobriety with the skills they've learned in our care after graduation.

We are pleased to announce that longtime #TeamHCDE educator Andrea Segraves has been named the new senior director for the Center for Educator Success. Segraves began her new post this week and will lead the division's teacher certification and professional development initiatives. For seven years, she successfully coordinated two of the Department's most significant annual events, and in 2021, she was chosen as HCDE's May Employee of the Month. Her internal promotion demonstrates that HCDE has a vast pool of talented leaders dedicated to cultivating the next generation of Harris County educators.

Finally this week, Head Start marked the end of their school year. Campuses held bridging ceremonies to recognize students' transition into kindergarten, and division employees gathered at Irvington for a day of team building and reflection. The warm summer months will serve the Head Start team as the relaxing backdrop to rest and recharge for the 2023-2024 school year.

By 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

**Board President**  
Andrea Duhon

**1st Vice President**  
Amy Hinojosa

**2nd Vice President**  
David W. Brown

### **Board Members**

Richard Cantu

Erica Davis

Eric Dick

Danny Norris

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### **June 5**

Last Day of School (Special Schools)

Dr. Keys' Retirement Party

### **June 14-17**

TASB Summer Leadership Institute

### **June 21**

Board Meeting