

**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



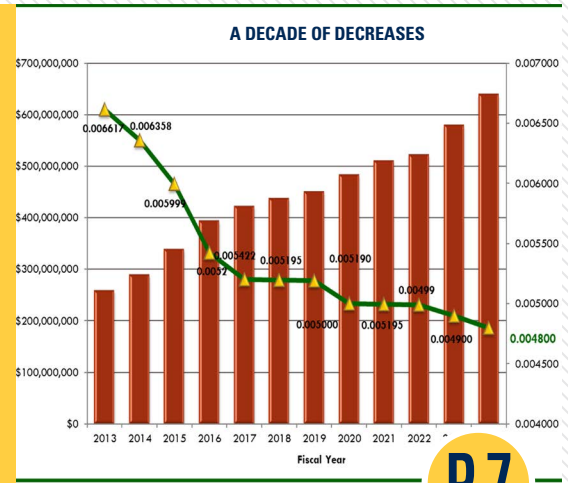
## iPASS PROCUREMENT SHOWCASE FOSTERS LEARNING, FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

P.3



P.6

## FORTIS STUDENTS EXAMINE GROWTH DURING NATIONAL RECOVERY MONTH



P.7

## DECADE OF DECREASES

## This week the board voted on one of the most important items they consider every year: HCDE's tax rate.

This vote controls how much revenue HCDE will see for the year from local property taxes. I am proud that we continue to be outstanding stewards of taxpayer dollars, reducing the rate for the 10th consecutive year, while expanding services for local school districts.


HCDE runs an efficient and complex business model that combines fees-for-service, grants and property taxes into a \$180 million budget that serves students and educators with high quality services while saving school districts millions of dollars each year. I look forward to seeing how we can continue to leverage taxpayer dollars while going deeper with our programs and achieving our quest to redefine alternative education in the country.

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by my regular weekly meetings with staff for updates on current projects and initiatives. On Tuesday I met with the head of our contracted security firm to review the incident at Irvington last week as well as best practices moving forward. I also met with the superintendent from Lamar CISD.

Wednesday was board day, filled with the Audit Committee followed by the PFC meeting and the regular board meeting. Thank you again for your commitment to the students and citizens of Harris County.

On Thursday I met with a local mentee along with more staff meetings and today I am at my NPO office meeting with staff and one of our local lobbyists.

The Fall Equinox is here, so let's hope the weather follows suit and starts to cool down. Have a great weekend.



**James Colbert Jr.**  
County Superintendent







Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Jesus Amezcua, left, and U.S. Small Business Administration Specialist Ida Benson, right, address participant questions during the iPASS event.

## SECOND ANNUAL iPASS PROCUREMENT SHOWCASE FOSTERS LEARNING, FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

**S**mall business owners and young entrepreneurs attended Harris County Department of Education's second annual Internal Procurement Annual Supplier Showcase (iPASS) on September 15, an event bringing area vendors together with school district procurement experts for networking and professional development.

"Everyone here is cultivating partnerships and learning to run a business on separate levels. I always want to remain a student of the game, so I'm grateful for this opportunity," said Sebastian Sanders, an iPASS sponsor and owner of The Sanders Hand, a small business that provides at-risk youth with financial education.

Participants, such as Sanders, were invited to sessions led by industry experts about procuring goods and services for their businesses using local and federal funds. The event is an opportunity for small business owners to gain the exposure and resources needed to grow their businesses while discussing specific topics like grant writing and leveraging public/private partnerships.

This year's iPASS featured speakers included representatives from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), the City of Houston Office of Business Opportunity (OBO), and the University of Houston APEX Accelerator, a business advising and training center.

Select companies were also introduced to HCDE Business Plus, an initiative that identifies small business vendors who provide services

such as guest speakers, professional development, and general consultants. Through this service, HCDE offers a way for districts to take advantage of these types of contracts, which can be challenging for districts to find on large purchasing cooperatives like HCDE's Choice Partners.

"Small businesses often face challenges getting vendor contracts because they compete with more established companies," said Dr. Jesus Amezcua, HCDE assistant superintendent of business services. "HCDE Business Plus helps level the playing field for young entrepreneurs to be successful and grow their businesses."

Amezcua also highlighted how attendees can partner with HCDE, local school districts, and charter schools to streamline procurement processes. He noted that iPASS gives small businesses a wealth of information in just one day.

"Businesses typically have to attend several conferences to get the knowledge that HCDE provides in one day of instruction," Amezcua said. "With iPASS, it's a two-fold win: HCDE meets federal requirements to promote and recruit merchants, and small businesses receive the necessary resources to become vendors."

*Continued on page 4*





*iPASS participants learn to apply for local funding during a presentation by City of Houston officials.*



*An iPASS attendee and HCDE employee share a laugh while networking.*



[VIEW PHOTO GALLERY](#)



*iPASS sponsor and owners of Quality Security Services discuss new technology with a participant seeking potential vendors.*

More than 130 people and 75 small businesses attended the daylong supplier showcase, which was also live-streamed to the School Finance Council (SFC), comprised of school district finance officers from around the state.

“Running a business is a marathon, not a sprint. You must be committed to the business and your customers to continue learning about finance, client engagement, and maintaining vendor contracts,” said Sanders. “Partnerships that will help my company bring more resources to students are now in the works because of iPASS. I’m excited to be around like-minded individuals who want to change our community for the better.” ■



## HOUSTON AREA SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION AND HCDE HOST ANNUAL MEDIA ROUNDTABLE

**Eight members of the press** and nearly 100 school district communications professionals met on Thursday during the annual Media Roundtable hosted by the Houston Area School Public Relations Association (HASPRA) and Harris County Department of Education.

Held in person at HCDE's Conference Center, the Media Roundtable is a networking event where journalists meet local school district public relations personnel to discuss media coverage opportunities and best practices.

Attendees included reporters from the Houston Landing, KPRC 2, ABC 13, Univision 45, Fox 26 and CW 39.

Topics discussed at this year's roundtable included school safety and collaboration strategies.

Members of HASPRA meet monthly to discuss trending topics in public school public relations, and share strategies and tips to overcome emerging challenges in school communications. ■



[VIEW PHOTO GALLERY](#)

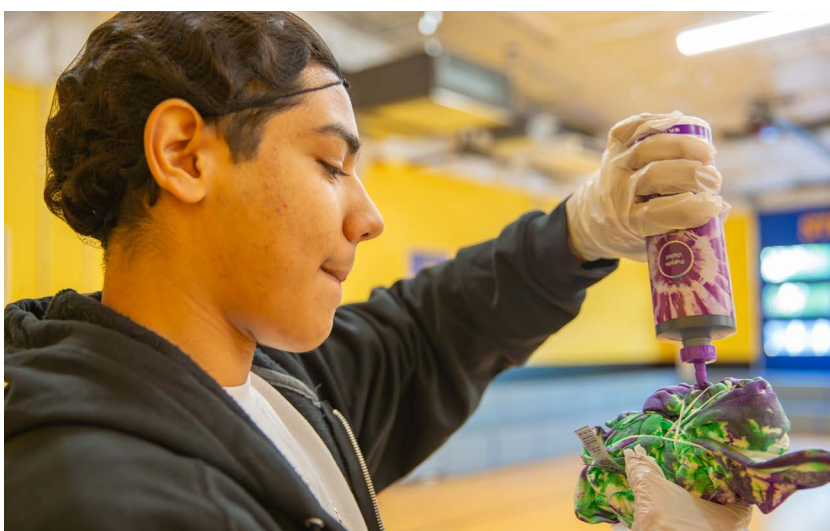
## ABS WEST STUDENTS RIDE TO CONFIDENCE

**On September 11**, Academic and Behavior School West students embarked on their first visit to a local stable for equine therapy. For this activity, students visited Reining Strength Therapeutic Horsemanship, one of two equine therapy programs with which HCDE's Special Schools partner to support the social-emotional learning, good behavior, and personal growth of students.

Equine therapy fosters responsibility and enhanced self-esteem among students. The first group of ABS West high school students to visit the stables learned riding skills that incorporated potential therapeutic benefits and took part in the care and grooming of the horses including brushing and bathing the animals. A different group of ABS West students will visit the center every week.

Principal Jatata Hutton hopes students who have participated in equine therapy throughout the year will feel confident and prepared to showcase their newly found skills during the "Top Hands Horse Show" at the 2024 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in February. This show offers students from therapeutic riding facilities across Harris County the opportunity to participate in a competitive horse show to demonstrate their skills at halter, English equitation, Western equitation, trail obstacle, pole bending, and barrel racing. ■





## FORTIS ACADEMY STUDENTS EXAMINE PERSONAL GROWTH DURING NATIONAL RECOVERY MONTH

**Students** at Harris County Department of Education's Fortis Academy are turning their journey to sobriety into a celebration of strength and transformation this month. Nationally recognized as Recovery Month, September is a time to support treatment and rehabilitation practices for those with alcohol or substance abuse disorders.

The observance carries extra significance at Fortis, where high school students seek a safe place to confront their challenges with the support of trustworthy faculty and staff.

"We are helping our students discover a sense of accomplishment by providing benchmarks that show growth and progression," said Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey. "They know sobriety is possible because they are doing it. Celebrating Recovery Month shows students that Fortis cares about them and wants to share in their success, no matter how small."

As part of the celebration, English Teacher Arial Coates and Recovery Coach LaKesha Hemphill collaborated to develop a recovery-themed curriculum centered around the 2012 movie *Flight*. The film follows Whip Whitaker, an airline pilot under the influence of drugs and

alcohol who performs a miraculous crash landing with minimal fatalities.

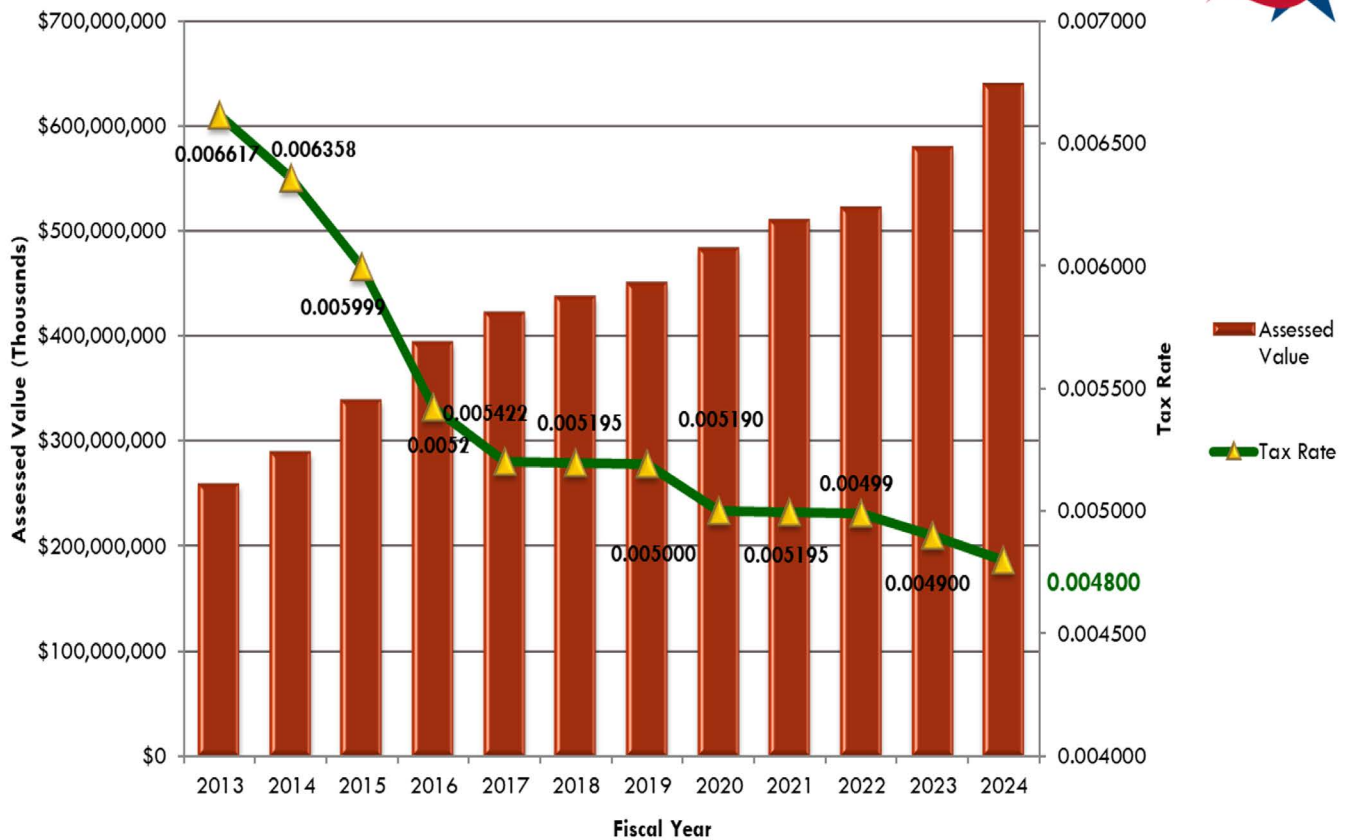
Students were tasked with completing a series of writing assignments, including a character analysis of Whitaker discussing the stages of recovery from denial to action and maintenance. The second exercise focused on students' personal stories, encouraging them to realistically determine their current period of change.

During group therapy sessions, Hemphill led students in a discussion about making positive transformations in their lives to support their sobriety and encouraged behavior and inner circles to reflect those decisions.

"Addiction does not discriminate. It can affect anyone, regardless of success," said Godfrey. "We want students to understand the importance of accountability for their actions and unhealthy behaviors. While the movie depicts the downside of addiction, it also portrays the upside of recovery."

Supplementing the curriculum with creativity, teachers and students said goodbye to drugs this week with daily dress-up themes, including "We Are Crazy About Being Drug-Free" and "Say Peace Out to Drugs." ■

## A DECADE OF DECREASES



## HCDE BOARD LOWERS TAX RATE FOR 10TH CONSECUTIVE YEAR

I'm thrilled with the Board of Trustee's adoption of the tax rate during the regular monthly September board meeting. For the tenth consecutive year, Harris County Department of Education lowered its nominal tax rate, decreasing from \$0.004900 to \$0.004800 per \$100 of taxable property value for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. For a decade, HCDE has lowered its tax rate by 27% for a savings of \$2.72 per year on a \$150,000 home.

For a home valued at \$150,000 with a homestead exemption, the adopted rate of \$0.004800 means the average Harris County homeowner will pay HCDE \$7.20 per year in property taxes for education services. A homeowner's taxes may still rise if the value of their property increases. For more information, visit [hcde-texas.org/tax-rate](https://hcde-texas.org/tax-rate). ■

## HONORING HISPANIC HERITAGE, SHAPING THE FUTURE

As HCDE continues celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month, we give thanks to the wonderful mix of countries that make up our community and honor the rich tapestry of backgrounds and ethnicities exhibited throughout our organization and our Board of Trustees.

Somos orgullosos: we are proud of who we are, and together, we can create a stronger, more inclusive Department and a brighter future for Harris County learners. ■





## THIS WEEK THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

### Superintendent Objective A: Management of Administrative, Fiscal, and Facilities Function

- Ensures the Department investment strategies, risk management activities, and purchasing practices are sound, cost-efficient, and consistent with policy and law.



Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Jesus Amezcua, center, prepares to address iPASS attendees.

**More than 150 purchasing professionals** attended Procurement's second annual iPASS event last week. The showcase's success emphasizes yet again the value that Business Services affords school districts through its HCDE Plus internal procurement network. As we heard from several accounts, participants made valuable connections with service providers like consultants, trainers, and curriculum writers, and have already set up meetings to discuss potential opportunities with vendors.

This week, more than 100 school district public information officers and members of the press gathered at the Irvington conference center for the annual Media Roundtable hosted by the Houston Area School Public Relations Association (HASPR) and HCDE. The event serves as a place where journalists meet local school district media relations professionals to discuss media coverage opportunities and best practices. More importantly, it is a place where we can expand our community relations efforts and serve as a mediator between districts trying to promote the positive things happening in their districts.

Finally, students at Fortis Academy are examining their personal growth on their path to sobriety as they celebrate National Recovery Month. Faculty and staff led students through a recovery-themed curriculum, which encouraged them to realistically determine their current stage of rehabilitation and acknowledge their accomplishments, no matter how small. I was also impressed by the style of our teachers and students who said goodbye to drugs this week with daily dress-up themes, especially the handmade tie-dye shirts. Fortis is a safe place where our students can confront their challenges, and I'm proud to see our staff supporting them every step of the way.

By ensuring sound purchasing practices, I am meeting the expectation to find ways to improve programs and services without greater expenditures and with concern for cutting expenses and costs to public schools for service without sacrificing high-quality services. ■

## HCDE BOARD

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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

### October 18

[Choice Partners Nutrition and Product Expo](#)

Board Meeting

### October 19

[Choice Partners Vendor Exhibit](#)

### November 15

Board Meeting

### November 23-24

Thanksgiving Break  
(HCDE closed)