

# The CONNECTOR

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



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# The CONNECTOR



## Of Note...

As the last county office of education in Texas, I believe it is our duty to support and uplift public education in the region and state. This week, HCDE fulfilled this mission, enhancing not only our own reputation but inspiring those in education to seek excellence and find the blind spots in supporting children.

At the TASA Midwinter Conference this week, HCDE's presence and influence was widespread. Not only did we have a prime spot in the exhibitor's hall with other vendors, but we gave two well-attended presentations highlighting the success of two critical programs. The presentation on Fortis Academy served as a guide for districts on how to tackle the issue of drug-related offenses on their campuses by moving from a paradigm of punishment to one of support. As Dr. Moten said in the presentation, "When a student misses a day or falls behind on work, instead of marking them down, we ask what is going on and how we can help. You have to approach these kids with a mindset of support not just rules."

Likewise, in the presentation by the Center for Safe and Secure Schools and our Research and Evaluation Institute on Restorative Practices, audience members were encouraged to change their mindset regarding school safety. "This work is about building relationships with students, getting to know why things happen and then taking a collaborative approach to a solution," said Julia Andrews, director of CSSS. "One decision involving students can impact their entire lives. We need to be mindful of that in order to change the culture in a building and that will impact safety."

This week we also saw one of our Head Start employees be gifted with the American Dream: a new house from Habitat for Humanity and two conferences that showcase the influence of HCDE in our region: the Day of Educational Innovation last weekend with nationally renowned speaker Ron Clark and our Early Childhood Winter Conference this weekend. Both conferences attract hundreds of educators from around the state and serve to highlight the expertise of HCDE in the education arena.

After returning from TASA, the remainder of the week was spent catching up with internal staff meetings and planning for the February board meeting.



# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### TASA Midwinter Presentations Prove Popular

Harris County Department of Education was well represented at the recent TASA Midwinter Conference in Austin, with an exhibit in the vendor hall and two presentations.

Staff from Choice Partners and Client Engagement manned HCDE's trade-show booth, answering questions about the purchasing cooperative as well as HCDE's other services. Foot traffic around the booth was constant, with attendees remarking on the professional appearance of the booth as well as HCDE's increased presence in the state.

Participants at the conference were given insight into HCDE's Schools Division Monday morning with a presentation about Fortis Academy called, "A potential cure for drug-related offenses." This session, attended by nearly 75 people, focused on the story of Fortis as well as the structure, framework and concepts that set recovery schools apart from their more traditional counterparts. Audience members discussed their challenges to the idea of shifting the paradigm from punishment to support for addicted students as well as insights into how they could replicate the Fortis model at urban, suburban and rural districts.

On Tuesday, nearly 80 conference participants attended HCDE's session by the Center for Safe and Secure Schools and the Research and Evaluation Institute about the impact of Restorative Practices on a school's culture and climate. This presentation focused on shifting the mindset of administrators from a brick-and-mortar solution to school safety to one that emphasizes relationships to foster a positive learning environment. Here participants discussed strategies for culture building within a school and the resulting shift in thinking for staff, parents, students and the community.

**View photos:** <https://tinyurl.com/w85da82>



TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS



# PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

## Spotlight on New HCDE Trustee Amy Hinojosa, Position 1, Precinct 2

Amy Hinojosa is the newly appointed board member to Position 1, Precinct 2 for the Harris County Department of Education Board of Trustees.

The Pasadena native, wife and mother of two teenagers still resides in and serves the community where she grew up and says she takes the calling to serve the citizens of Precinct 2 very seriously.

She is committed to serving adult learners within her community and looks forward to assessing facility improvements needed within HCDE. HCDE provides GED and English as a second language classes along with workforce training at no cost to adult learners in Harris and Liberty counties and operates four special schools for area school districts which serve students with emotional and intellectual disabilities and recovering youth.

As a process engineer, she is employed by Chevron Corporation as project manager in technology development. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering from the University of Houston.

Hinojosa is passionate about giving local youth the same opportunities she has received.

"I am from Pasadena, and I am a first-generation college student, so I see myself in those kids," she said. "Be who you needed when you were young."



**"I AM FROM PASADENA, AND I AM A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT, SO I SEE MYSELF IN THOSE KIDS," SHE SAID. "BE WHO YOU NEEDED WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG."-AMY HINOJOSA**

Hinojosa shares her passion for education through several student and professional mentoring initiatives. As the founder of Community Leaders Encouraging Academia Through Sports, Inc. or CLEATS, she heads a Pasadena-area, youth athletic program which allows students to explore their college futures by visiting local universities.

"My journey in education started as a little league volunteer, where I realized I could use sports as an avenue to get the children in my community on our local university campuses," she said.

During 2020, Hinojosa serves as director on the board of ProUnitas, a nonprofit dedicated to raising awareness for health and wellness resources for youth to be successful in school and beyond. She continues to grow her leadership skills as a Houston Leadership ISD 2020 fellow and a Houston Latinos for Education 2019 fellow.

Hinojosa describes herself as being "passionate about compassion for all animals" as she claims poodle Bruno and cocker spaniel Elvis as additional family members.

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### Choice Partners Honors Vendors, Clients for Helping Support Local Education Projects Via Business

The unique story of Choice Partners—the Harris County Department of Education one-stop cooperative for facilities services, supplies and food—is best told through its loyal clients and vendors.

On Jan. 24, approximately 100 vendors and members were honored at Choice Partners' annual appreciation luncheon. Guest speaker HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. praised attendees for supporting public education through providing and utilizing competitively bid contracts with Choice Partners.

**View photos:** <https://tinyurl.com/rf3tys7>

"Today we provide even more services to area school districts and have lowered the tax rate five years in a row," the superintendent said. "A lot of that is because of the vendors and members in this room today who work with us through Choice."



Colbert pointed to the funds which flow from Choice and are leveraged to supply services to area school districts, including the new Fortis Academy, the county's first free drug-and-alcohol recovery public high school.

Revenue generated through Choice has grown from \$92 million 10 years ago to \$343 million today, allowing for local tax rates to be lowered while pumping money into new education initiatives to serve Harris County students. Profits from Choice are unique in the fact that the funds go back to the education community, said Jeff Drury, Choice Partners director.

Co-op customer and member Rick Gay, procurement director with Spring Branch Independent School District, says his district uses Choice for its reasonable and competitive pricing and time-saving processes.

"Choice Partners gives us an opportunity to very quickly bring to end-users the materials and supplies they need on a day-to-day basis for us to get the job done, which is to educate our children," Gay said. "Our mantra is every dollar we save is a dollar we return to the classroom."

His district depends heavily on Choice for job order contracting which allows for small construction jobs or quick repairs: a door replacement, air-conditioning problems or painting.

"These JOC contracts are reasonable and easy-to-use and allow us to move quickly to solve a problem," Gay said.

Vendor Facilities Sources was the top vendor honored at the luncheon. Company president David Terry said the competitively bid, line-item contracts available through Choice were critical during the rebuilding period, post-Harvey.

Humble Independent School District called Facilities Sources as a Choice Partners vendor. FEMA approval for repairing the 500,000 square-foot Kingwood High after the category five hurricane came quickly because of the transparent pricing.

"Pricing was established prior to the storm, so clients could be assured they weren't getting some inflated, out-of-town contractor pricing," said Terry. "It allowed students to be back into school within 90 days, whereas they thought they were going to lose an entire school year because of the damage from Harvey."

**Read more:** <https://tinyurl.com/choicecustomerappreciation>

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### HCDE Head Start Employee Receives New Home from Habitat for Humanity

Two years after suffering a huge loss, Harris County Department of Education Head Start employee Adriane Marks has reason to smile. She will soon be able to call herself a homeowner thanks to Habitat for Humanity and KPRC Channel 2.

"I always knew I wanted to be a homeowner," she said. "I thought I would have to get a realtor and do the regular process but didn't think it was going to happen like this."

In August 2017, she lost all her possessions in the flooding from Hurricane Harvey. At the time, she and her family were living in her father's house and still paying on it.

The HCDE Head Start Data Compliance Specialist, who checks to make sure children are eligible for the head start program, was overwhelmed with the support her coworkers offered after she and her family were displaced.

"My managers provided me with hair products, HCDE donated money to those of us affected by Harvey and Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock took us to her church's clothing drive," Marks said. "My kids were very thankful for the clothes."

After living in a hotel for about four months, they couldn't afford to move back into the house because the payments went up after the flood renovation. They stayed with family afterwards then started renting a house, but now the rent is cost-prohibited.

Marks filled out the Habitat for Humanity application in September 2019 and found out the next month when KPRC surprised her. This is the seventh house in east Houston for the news station.

"I was at a loss for words when they told me, but I am ecstatic," she said. "My kids are very excited and are ready to move in."



Applicants write a letter as to why they are a fit for the program by meeting one of four criteria. A panel of current habitat homeowners reads the letters and chooses the recipient based on the story.

Marks has an 11-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son. The house they are currently renting is behind a convenience store that gets robbed almost weekly, and she doesn't feel safe there anymore.

To participate in the program, each recipient must volunteer back through sweat equity hours by helping build other houses or at the ReStore center. Candidates also complete financial counseling.

"My family and friends are also able to volunteer hours to show support for me during this process and it means a lot," she said.

The work on her new home started about three weeks ago and she hopes to close on it at the end of April. Her house will be 1,206 square feet and consist of three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a one-car garage.

In the meantime, Marks is preparing for her new house by furniture shopping and completing her sweat equity hours.

For more information about Habitat for Humanity, visit [HoustonHabitat.org](http://HoustonHabitat.org).

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### America's Teacher Ron Clark Energizes Educators at 'Move Your Bus' Conference Hosted by HCDE

An audience of educators pulsed with the energy likened to a rock concert as America's educator Ron Clark left the stage to autograph books and pose for cell phone photos Jan. 25.

His two-hour presentation and question-and-answer session called "Move Your Bus" was hosted by Harris County Department of Education's Teaching and Learning Center. Many of the 450 faithful followers dreamt of seeing Clark for years and gave up their Saturday for the event held in west Houston.

Third grade teacher Kristina Ponce came with her three friends from Houston ISD's Berry Elementary to get energized inspired by his stories. Ponce clutched her autographed copy of Clark's bestseller and quoted a phrase inside.

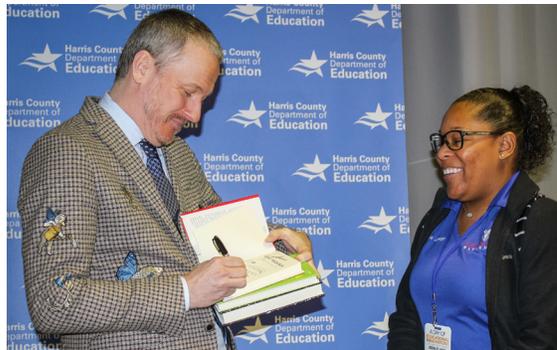
"Not everybody gets the cookie," Ponce said. "Just showing up doesn't get you an award. If everyone gets the reward, what's the point of working toward it. You have to earn it."

Clark, a two-time, New York Times bestselling author, friend to Oprah and former Disney American Teacher of the Year told stories about teaching in rural Aurora, North Carolina and New York City's Harlem.

He challenged educators to challenge their students.

"If you tell kids to 'suck it up' but it's with love and coming from a good place, they will reach high standards, and then you'll have great results," Clark said.

The North Carolina native spoke of a grandmother who raised him with rules and expectations like showing respect, shaking hands, and making eye contact.



"Every kid wants structure, and they want to know you are in charge and that you have discipline," he said.

Clark runs a small, nonprofit school called Ron Clark Academy which has experienced great success. Many educators travel to the school to study and emulate the innovative practices.

Teacher Ponce said she holds her students at a high standard for behavior and academic performance and as she highlights the importance of teaching manners in addition to curriculum. She hopes to visit Clark's school one day to garner new ideas.

To bring excitement into the classroom, Clark promotes music, movement and creative thinking processes. One of his activity examples includes allowing students to blow up balloons and solving a math challenge problem on the balloon. Students successfully answering the problem with a marker get to pop the balloon.

Furr High School Assistant Principal Brian Roberson volunteered as an ambassador at the event and helped prepare for the big crowd and the big day. His takeaway for the day was to spread creativity.

"Think outside the box," he said. "We have set curriculum, but the way you deliver that curriculum can be unique. To be the most creative educator you can be can transform not only the classroom, but the community as a whole."

# IN THE NEWS

## Houston Public Media 'Houston Matters' Discusses School Safety Issues with CSSS Director Andrews

Center for Safe and Secure Schools Director Julia Andrews met with Houston Public Media Houston Matters Producer Craig Cohen Jan. 24 to discuss school safety. The interview followed the Bellaire High School shooting.

The pair discusses creating healthy relationships between adults and students. Listen to the interview through the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/u663gc5>



# SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT...WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

## Community Relations

In an effort to meet the elements associated with this expectation of performance for me to:

- Establish and maintain a program of public relations to keep the public well-informed of the activities of the Department, affecting a wholesome and cooperative working relationship between the Department and the community; and
- Work with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way.

We've seen lots of action and networking this week as we work in and out of the county (at TASA Midwinter) to meet the needs of educators.

We reflect on the Ron Clark "Move Your Bus" event on Saturday and revel in the energy and creativity he generated with teachers and administrators throughout Harris County.

One of the exercises he discussed is novel but simple. Use a balloon-popping experience to motivate your students to get math problems correct. Imagine the noise coming from that teacher's classroom!



In east Houston, we find a Head Start employee who gains a Habitat for Humanity home. One can only imagine the joy felt throughout her Head Start cohorts and her family as she experiences joy as a new homeowner, post-Harvey.

Choice hosted its annual vendor and member luncheon to honor the hard work and revenue generated to support public education endeavors. Choice is unique in that money earned goes back to education in Harris County.



Again, we are in the news with Houston Public Media as we supply expert information on school safety through the Center for Safe and Secure Schools.

Finally, we traveled to Austin for TASA Midwinter. Our presentations about progress at Fortis and the restorative practices experience at a local middle school were well attended. We also provided plenty of information about who we are and what we do to attendees in the vendor/exhibitor area.

**By HCDE continuing to be a presence in the community, I am working to achieve the Board's goal to present a positive, professional image of HCDE; maintain visibility in the community; be open to the ideas and needs of the community; and communicate the needs and accomplishments of the Department, as appropriate.**

## HCDE BOARD

### Board President

Eric Dick

### Vice President

Danny Norris

### Board Members

Richard Cantu

Andrea Duhon

Amy Hinojosa

Don Sumners

Michael Wolfe

## UPCOMING EVENTS:

### Feb. 1

34th Annual R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference  
Kingdom Builder's Center  
8:30 a.m.

### Feb. 6

Cybersecurity Skills  
6300 Irvington  
8 a.m. - 4 p.m.

### Feb. 26

Board Meeting  
6300 Irvington  
1 p.m.

### Feb. 28

Go Texan Day/Chili Cook-Off  
6300 Irvington  
11:30 a.m.