

THE CONNECTOR

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STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

TOP STORIES



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Of Note...



A point of pride for HCDE is the diverse and engaging programming we offer our students. Kids at our schools can engage with horses through equine therapy, find their calm and strategy at chess club and learn how science, math and engineering interact through a new summer robotic challenge. These are exciting activities that many students in traditional ISDs do not get the opportunity to participate in and our clients see this type of specialized programming as a value add for our services. We see it as a way to provide unique experiences to our students while enhancing their progress toward identified goals.

This week, students at AB West culminated their summer programming with the first ECOBOT challenge in HCDE schools. This program, in collaboration with CASE, afforded our students the opportunity to build and run robots in a tournament similar to the much larger county-wide tournament run by CASE each year. It is thrilling to see the students' concentration and joy when their robots work and take on specific tasks. This type of program helps our students not only focus on specific activities but also learn fundamental lessons in science and math in an engaging manner. There is nothing greater than seeing a child's face light up when they find something that not only supports their academic achievement but is fun to do as well. I am proud that HCDE offers this type of program to not only our own schools, but to thousands of students throughout Harris County.

I started the week with ELT and internal meetings. On Tuesday I welcomed educators from around the region at the Center for Safe and Secure Schools School Equity Boot Camp and met with Dr. LaTonya Goffney from Aldine ISD to discuss our ongoing partnership. Wednesday was filled with more meetings and today I met with several staff members to discuss current projects and initiatives. I look forward to seeing you next week for our committee meetings and regular board meeting.

Have a great weekend.

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Tech-loving student competes in first-ever All-Earth Ecobot Challenge hosted by ABS West and CASE for Kids

For tech-savvy special education students like Cameron King, the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge hosted by Academic and Behavior School West in collaboration with the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE for Kids) is a summer learning game-changer. This competition is the first time that special needs students enrolled at the school have the opportunity to participate in the popular STEM-focused challenge.

“It’s made him enjoy the summer program more,” said Cameron’s mother, Tanya King. “It’s given him something new to do and [is] a different challenge rather than [the typical] classroom routine.”

For the last month, nearly 40 students from the fourth grade to age 22 have worked together in teams to assemble, code, operate and maneuver Lego Mindstorms EV3 robots. The teams spent this final week preparing to face off in the much-anticipated All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Day on Thursday.

Both Cameron’s mother and teacher shared that the incoming twelfth-grader, who is on the autism spectrum, has an affinity



for computers, researching, and consuming informative tutorials and technical videos.

“I call him our computer student,” said ABS West life skills teacher Angela Ugo. “He is very good with electronics and computers, so when we introduced this project, [those skills] really helped him.”

Cameron’s true love, however, is airplanes. His mother explained

how he spends time researching flight schedules at different airports, types of aircrafts, and their purposes. Thus, it was no surprise to teachers and peers when Cameron naturally assumed the befitting role of “pilot” for his Ecobot team. Though he was slightly apprehensive, Cameron expertly maneuvered his team’s robot through the challenge mat,

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a floor covering with a designated route that teams must successfully guide their robot through.

Hands-on projects like the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge lend several benefits to participants, but especially for life skills students in the summer when school hours are shorter and peer interaction is limited.

Though the project follows a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) curriculum, staff agree that it also utilizes many soft skills ABS West curricula help students develop, including creativity, collaboration, and communication.

Ugo describes the sense of pride she feels to see Cameron cooperating with—and even leading—his peers.

“Just watching them work with each other is very rewarding,” she said. “I hope to see projects like this in the future.”

Cameron’s mother, too, noted this change, believing the experience has strengthened his friendship with his classmate.

“It seems like a good opportunity for any child to be able to participate in building teamwork skills, but especially kids at schools like [ABS West] who may struggle working with others,” she said. “I think it’s brought them closer, working as a team.” ■



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ABS West's inaugural All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Day caps off with big smiles

Today, Academic and Behavior School West celebrated the culmination of the school's very first All-Earth Ecobot Challenge with a Challenge Day.

Seven student teams faced off on the challenge mat to accomplish specific tasks on a competition table. For each task completed, teams were awarded points. All forty students received a certificate of participation and the top three teams received medallions. ■



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Teen Debaters Use Virtual Summer Camp to Hone Art of Persuasion

Newbie debate student Emily Reyes is impassioned about issues like human rights and equal access for students with special needs. Her teachers encouraged her to attend the Houston Urban Debate League (HUDL) Summer Debate Institute this summer to better understand the fundamentals and basics of debate.

The weeklong camp funded by the nonprofit HUDL and supported by Harris County Department of Education's CASE Debates program provides beginner to advanced support for area high school debate students. HUDL has operated the camp for 14 years, and the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids, or CASE for Kids, became a camp collaborator four years ago. The camp has been virtual for the past two summers.

Reyes, a spunky Dobie High School sophomore in Pasadena ISD, is banking on the benefits of the virtual camp as she joins her school debate team next year.

"My teachers told me [debate] will help me in speaking and correlating my thoughts better for writing essays," she said. "I'm grateful that I got to be a part of this camp."

I GAINED
VALUABLE
COMMUNICATION
AND WRITING SKILLS
THROUGH DEBATE

- QUEEN ECHE



CASE Debates provides the yearlong debate program at Reyes' school and will support up to 300 students in Harris County with debate services during the 2021-2022 school year. While HUDL supplies debate services in Houston ISD high schools, CASE Debates provides services in other area districts. Approximately 70 students from six districts and three charters are being served through the summer camp.

Toni Candis, CASE Debates project coordinator for HCDE, says CASE for Kids and HUDL used last year's virtual camp prompted by the pandemic to make this year's even better.

Past attendees completed questionnaires about sessions. Less time is spent on lectures, and more hands-on experiences are offered through group activities, labs and special assignments. Afterhours, students have the option to participate in bingo and trivia games.

"We include lots of interaction," Candis said. "Students go in breakout rooms and have time to share ideas and get to know one another."

Four camp instructors and interns are former students in the CASE Debates program who are on

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summer break from college. Ahmad Howard, a graduate from Spring ISD, attends the University of Chicago. Rodrigo Trujillo from Alief ISD attends Bradley University. Mohammed Hemeida from Spring ISD goes to Columbia University.

Queen Eche, an Alief ISD grad who is attending Dartmouth College, is teaching the advanced class on the Policy Debate style and serves as a cross-examination lab instructor.

The rising sophomore at the Ivy League college believes debate helped her get into her dream school. She is a member of the Dartmouth Debate Team, which won the national debate tournament this year.

"I gained valuable communication and writing skills through debate," said Eche, who is co-editor of the Black Praxis Magazine at Dartmouth.

By giving back to youth at the camp, Eche hopes to share her passion and expertise with both novice and experienced teen debaters.

"These kids are amazing and know who they want to be in debate," she said. "Explaining something to them and seeing them get it is just so rewarding, much more than winning a debate round or getting a trophy."

Eche knows firsthand that debate makes teens smarter and more

I'VE LEARNED ABOUT PROBLEMS WITH THE ENVIRONMENT, AND I WANT TO MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON MY COMMUNITY. - CHINH LE



empathetic. Cultivating her logic and writing skills has helped her maintain a straight-A status as a Dartmouth freshman.

Spring Branch ISD student Chinh Le is spending his second year at the virtual camp. The rising junior studies World Schools Debate and is becoming more proficient at transferring his knowledge into persuasion.

Le wants to attend Stanford or Columbia universities and become a lawyer to help others.

"Overall, debate helps me not only in speaking but also with research," he said. "I've learned about problems

with the environment, and I want to make a positive impact on my community."

CASE Debates provides support for debate at his school along with access to CASE Debates tournaments. For that, Le is grateful.

"Even if you don't think you like the idea of debate, pursue it," he said. "It offers you the opportunity to network with other people and could really change your life and how you view the world today."

For information about CASE Debates, go to hcde-texas.org/afterschoolzone. ■

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HCDE's first-ever School Equity Boot Camp illuminates the path for educators

This week, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Safe and Secure Schools hosted its first-ever School Equity Boot Camp, a 4-day, in-person workshop series for educators designed to provide them with a framework to impact school safety and culture positively.

"We hope to have made better educators this week," said HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr. "Equity is an issue and a topic that we've talked about for quite some time as public [school] educators. We know that nationally, there's a disproportionate number of a specific demographic of students that tend to get suspended from school and get expelled. We hope that educators get a better perspective on how to address inequities in public education and be able to help the juveniles that they may come in contact with."

Nationally recognized speakers Cami Anderson, Paul Forbes, and Devon Horton, Ph.D., led forty

educators and juvenile detention case managers from Harris County school districts, the University of Houston, My Brother's Keeper, and Harris County Juvenile Probation Department in intimate discussions addressing inequity, implicit bias, social-emotional learning, mental health, school discipline, restorative justice, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

The seminar, held at the historic Buffalo Soldiers National Museum, is a continuation of efforts in Houston and Harris County in recent years to address implicit biases in school discipline.

"Equity is so complex," said C.J. Rodgers, HCDE assistant superintendent of education and enrichment, who attended the boot camp. "There are a bunch of different meanings. People interpret it in a bunch of different ways, and it can also be very

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polarizing. I've seen teachers and principals who are struggling. Our kids are bringing all of [the childhood trauma stemming from inequities and hardships in their lives] to school, and they are dropping it at the feet of our educators. And in some cases, we just aren't equipped and trained to handle that. We owe it to our kids to successfully educate them and prepare them for the world that they are getting ready to enter to be global citizens."

For Richard Evans, a caseworker at the Harris County Leadership Academy, a secure youth residential facility overseen by the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, a framework to address inequity means having the tools to help troubled youth.

"I'm a restorative justice trainer and practitioner. It's important that teachers and all of the people who are stakeholders in working with our kids are all on the same page," says Evans. "For us, everybody needs to know what the moving parts of restorative justice and restorative circles are so that everyone understands what the "assignment" is.

The "assignment," he says, is rehabilitation.

"By attending this boot camp, we are hoping to get information on how to quell anger, deal with behavior issues, and encourage behavior modification so that kids have an opportunity to talk through what their issues are so they don't have to continue to feel like everything needs to be handled with fists and guns." ■

*To view our video
on the School Equity
Boot Camp,
click the image*



SYSTEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT...*WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT*

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.



HCDE's Center for Safe and Secure Schools did a fantastic job this week hosting its very first School Equity Bootcamp at the historic Buffalo Soldiers National Museum. Three experts led Harris County educators and juvenile probation caseworkers in sensitive discussions about inequity, restorative justice, and the school-to-prison pipeline. The resources offered by the CSSS during the week are a beacon of hope for educators and professionals on the frontlines of this inequity crisis – especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic – and demonstrates the timely and critical work being done by this division.

Today, CASE for Kids and ABS West celebrated the culmination of the school's very first All-Earth Ecobot Challenge with a Challenge Day. Activities like these are critical for special needs students, especially during the summer when they are prone to the summer slide and peer interaction is limited. We were delighted to see the students' faces light up and can't wait for the next edition of ABS West's All-Earth Ecobot Challenge. Both the School Equity Bootcamp and the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge attracted positive media coverage of the work being done by HCDE's divisions.

Finally, CASE for Kids and the Houston Urban Debate League (HUDL) hosted the 14th annual Summer Debate Institute. Though it was hosted virtually for the second year in a row, we are particularly proud to support this summer camp in light of the recent success of one of our CASE Debates teams, Space City Violet from Alief ISD's Elsie High School, who honed their craft as a team while working virtually for the past year. They recently took top honors in the World Schools Debate event at the 2021 National Speech and Debate Championship. Debate teaches students critical thinking, researching skills, and inspires them to be resilient and become global citizens – even in during a global pandemic.

By utilizing effective practices that maximize the achievement of student potential within HCDE schools, I am meeting the expectation to ensure that student's learning goals are met or exceeded.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

July 20

Policy Committee

July 21

Communications
& PR Committee

Schools Committee

Budget Workshop

Board Meeting

August 20

Staff Convocation