



THE CONNECTOR

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

THE RIGHT MOVES



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I often say, “I play chess, not checkers.”

This is usually in reference to exhibiting a strategic mindset in how I approach projects and initiatives. When playing chess, I start by observing what strategies are needed immediately and which can be used later on in the game. This typically entails looking at not only my next move, but also the next “four moves down the board.” When playing chess with regard to a project or initiative, I apply this same concept, looking at both long- and short-term actions that will help me achieve the desired outcome. I put on my chess mindset almost every day at work but once a year I can apply my actual chess principles at the Schools’ Annual Chess Tournament.

Last Friday, students from all four of our schools participated in the yearly chess tournament at ABS West. It was awesome to see so many kids calmly concentrating and focused during the tournament and to watch them work through complex strategies for their individual games. This is extraordinary because some students are with us because they can’t control their behavior or emotions. But walking into the cafeteria at ABS West you would not be able to tell which students have behavior issues and who is with HCDE for addiction or some other disciplinary reason. It is really cool that our students are able to engage with one another, even when their academic experiences are so vastly different. The Fortis Academy team actually took home top honors for the overall tournament and has been invited, along with the Highpoint team, to play in an additional tournament in the coming months.

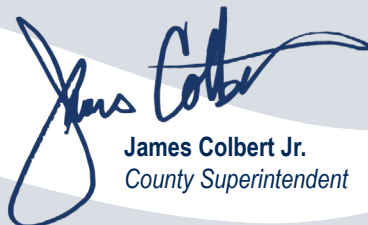
I personally played a seven-year-old who was systematically beating other students. I am happy to say that while his skills are tremendous, my strategic mind was able to outmaneuver him and I won my first game in a few years! I am proud that HCDE can offer students this type of extra-curricular activity that supports not only their academic progress, but their social and emotional growth as well.

We also see a focus on social and emotional learning this week through CASE, as local after-school and summer program providers learned various strategies for how to support students with social, emotional and behavioral learning. It is gratifying to hear about activities where an HCDE division supports local organizations and educators with a unique type of professional development that is not available elsewhere. When we “fill the gap” like this, HCDE is able to enhance opportunities for Harris County students in so many ways.

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by several internal meetings. On Tuesday I met with staff to discuss ongoing projects involving Convocation and Choice Partners. On Wednesday I traveled to Crosby ISD for the Education Foundation of Harris County grant presentation for AEDs. On Thursday morning I joined the Leadership Team for our monthly meeting before participating in agenda review for the April Board Meeting. Today I am at my NPO office for internal meetings and will also meet with Dr. Bostick, Stafford MSD Superintendent, to discuss the parameters of a proposed *Superintendent Think Tank* at the Texas Alliance for Black School Educators (TABSE) meeting in May.

Have a relaxing weekend.




James Colbert Jr.
 County Superintendent



MAKING THE RIGHT MOVES: CHESS BUILDS CONFIDENCE IN FORTIS STUDENTS

For students recovering from alcohol and substance abuse at Harris County Department of Education's Fortis Academy, the life skills learned through chess translate from the chessboard to the real world.

"Chess is the game of life," said coach James Hudson from Perfect TeamPlay, an instructional nonprofit chess organization. "Decision-making, time, attention, patience, and strategy. Those are four skills that it takes to be a good chess player, but more importantly, those are skills to be successful in life."

Fifty-five students from ABS East, ABS West, Highpoint School, Fortis Academy, and guest

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school Kingdom Preparatory Academy met for HCDE's fifth annual chess tournament last week after receiving instruction from Coach Hudson, teachers, and administrators at their schools.

"This program is just another example of what HCDE wants to do for the most at-risk students in the county," said Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker. "It's to provide opportunities. That might be contrary to some people's beliefs about students that get in trouble. But we think that there's a reason why students get in trouble, and we think programs like this can help them from making those kinds of decisions."

Rebeca Santiesteban, a junior from Spring ISD's Wunsche Sr. High School, started learning the game at Fortis only three short months ago. She currently plays on the intermediate level.

"Chess has shown me that I can be good at something," Santiesteban said. "It also gives me something to do because sometimes things aren't so good at home, so I play chess. That takes my mind off of it."

Besides building math skills and critical thinking, chess can improve cognitive skills like memory, concentration, problem-solving and spatial

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reasoning. On a social-emotional level, chess can build self-confidence and self-worth, discipline, patience, respect, and the relationship between cause and consequence.

Coach Hudson acknowledges that chess can offer singular lessons in rising above for the student population that Fortis serves.

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"They come from where I come from and how I was raised in the inner city. I can relate to a lot of things that they are going through," he said. "It touches my heart and makes me want to teach them more using the game of chess. It's chess, but it's much, much more than that."

Hudson believes that with discipline and practice, Santiesteban can go far.

"She has the ability to be an advanced chess player," said Hudson. "After I taught her the fundamentals, she made some moves that you just don't normally make at her level. She can go as far as she wants."

However, Santiesteban believes she can go far because she has someone who believes in her.

"[Coach Hudson] made me feel like I could accomplish something," she said. "Sometimes people don't tell me that. It makes me feel good about myself. It makes me want to get better. So, I just want to thank him. I appreciate him for that." ■



To view more photos from the fifth annual HCDE chess tournament, visit our [gallery](#).





Above: CASE for Kids employee Kittra Hewitt gives opening remarks at the CASE for Kids Spring Symposium, April, 1, 2022.

CASE FOR KIDS SYMPOSIUM HELPS OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME EDUCATORS HELP STUDENTS PLAY WITH PURPOSE

On Friday, 75 out-of-school time professionals got their game on during the play-based, social and emotional learning-centered **CASE for Kids** Spring Symposium in preparation for summer break. The symposium focused on demonstrating how caring adults influence students' well-being and skill-building.

"Opportunities to play and engage with other children and youth don't always come naturally during the school day," said CASE for Kids Director Lisa Caruthers, Ph.D. "We're equipping out-of-school time educators with the tools to complement and reinforce play-based social and emotional learning."

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an approach that helps students of all ages to comprehend their emotions better, feel those emotions fully, and demonstrate empathy for others.

The six sessions covered non-verbal communication, game-based learning, behavioral health, and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics) lessons.

One session led by Kid-grit Director of Partnerships and Outreach Michelle Piña encouraged attendees to think on their feet as they gasped, growled, grinned, and giggled through improvisational theater games.

"The games foster that space for students to be creative, have fun, use their bodies, and learn that body language is powerful," said Piña.

Piña began with games that helped participants limber up and then added layers of sound and movement. As the layers progressed, so did the participants' comfort levels, confidence, and self-awareness.

"It was something about the smiles that it put on all the faces of the adults that made us say, 'Okay, we're going to do this with our kids,'" said Donald Brown, Ed.D., an afterschool site coordinator for Chambers Elementary School in Alief Independent School District.

Some students need SEL support more than others, says Adrian Treviño from Fort Bend Independent School District's Extended Learning Program. He hopes to use the tools from the symposium to help students in his program who are returning to face-to-face instruction after nearly two years of virtual learning.

"Creating relationships with these students is sometimes hard," said Treviño. "Taking these games back to help students learn how to manage their emotions and make new friends is very beneficial."

To learn more about and register for upcoming training offered by CASE for Kids, visit www.hcdetexas.org/afterschoolzone/training. ■

SERVING WITH HEART: PARTNERS IN EDUCATION GRANT SUPPLIES CROSBY ISD WITH AEDS



When Crosby High School senior Cody Stephens died suddenly in his sleep of a heart condition in May 2012, Crosby Independent School District leaders took measures to help protect students' cardiovascular health.

Thanks to funds awarded in the second-round Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) Partners in Education grants, the Crosby Education Foundation was able to equip the district's athletic facilities with two SaveStation automated external defibrillator (AED) towers.

"Having something like this on hand is a big deal," said HCDE Trustee Richard Cantu. "It's great that our foundations were able to partner and do something so impactful to this community."

Located at the base of the stands in Crosby ISD's football and baseball stadiums, the stations make the life-saving AEDs more accessible to community members at district events. They have been used twice in the 2021-2022 football season.

The Crosby Education Foundation also purchased art supplies for Crosby High School and iPads for Charles Drew Elementary School with awarded funds from the second-round EFHC Partner in Education grants, which supplied \$234,951 to various programs in 16 Harris County districts in spring 2021.





HCDE EARLY HEAD START CAMPUSES CELEBRATE WEEK OF THE YOUNG CHILD

HCDE Head Start hosted its first-ever “Beautiful Oops! Art in the Park” celebration at the Baytown Community Center this week. Early Head Start students and their families, local community partners, and Early Head Start staff enjoyed a day of music and movement, storytime, and art activities to stimulate the physical and social-emotional development of Harris County’s youngest learners.

The event coincided with the 2022 Week of the Young Child (WOYC), an annual campaign that celebrates young children and their families with hands-on, collaborative activities encouraging movement and healthy lifestyles through music, food, and art.

Students at HCDE Head Start campuses also participated in fun-filled events and activities with their families that incorporated the Frog Street Press pre-kindergarten curriculum and WOYC’s daily themes. Students sang and danced in talent shows, expressed their creativity in art shows, and engaged in authentic learning moments with parents to build homemade cardboard cars.



To view more photos from the event, [click the image above](#).



PHYSICAL THERAPY ASSISTANT NORA CONTRERAS IS APRIL EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

The April Employee of the Month is Physical Therapy Assistant Nora Contreras, a 25-year employee of HCDE. As the leader of the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District physical therapy team, Contreras takes it upon herself to provide exceptional support to all physical therapists in CFISD. She mentors new therapists and has served as a clinical instructor to numerous physical therapy assistants who do their fieldwork in the district. Known for her innovative ideas to modify and catalog therapy equipment, she works closely with CFISD’s carpentry department to design adaptive equipment for specific students.



CASE FOR KIDS AND CITY LEADERS PRESENT CITY CONNECTIONS CHECKS TO AFTERSCHOOL PROVIDERS

The Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids, or CASE for Kids, continues to partner with the City of Houston to bring afterschool activities to each of the 11 city council districts through City Connections grants.

The grants provide unique learning opportunities facilitated by local nonprofits that cater to each district's individual out-of-school time needs and help keep children in communities engaged and safe.

"During an ever-evolving time, the City of Houston has been a constant in its support of afterschool programs," said CASE for Kids Director Lisa Caruthers. "We are glad to hear from these organizations that more and more services are being offered in-person again. We are equally grateful that the city has displayed a commitment to invest in youth because it validates how important their work is in the community."

Nonprofit afterschool service providers met with city council members and CASE for Kids on Thursday, where they were presented with checks for their out-of-school-time programs.

Brandi Brown, executive director of HYPE Freedom School, a nonprofit organization that provides out-of-school time enrichment in the south Houston Sunnyside community and has received City Connections funding for the past several years, has been able to expand her organization's footprint.

"This year, we were able to launch a new program with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Houston of Greater Houston where we do an online virtual Book Buddies program," she said. "Our high school HYPE [students] mentor our first-, second-, and third-grade scholars through reading and weekly connection activities. These funds gave us an opportunity to launch that program and reignite the love of reading and learning for our scholars."

Funding comes from the City of Houston and the Council District Service Fun, the council members' discretionary fund. Through this partnership, afterschool programs in Houston received \$619,500 for the 2021-2022 school year. Awards for each organization in council district communities ranged from \$4,000-\$12,500.



HCDE SPECIAL SCHOOLS CELEBRATE ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS DURING #APWEEK

Students and staff from HCDE's Academic Behavior Schools and Highpoint School East honored their assistant principals for their hard work and dedication during Assistant Principals Week. Employees from ABS East and Highpoint took turns planning celebrations for their second-in-commands, and ABS West Principal Victor Keys treated his right hands to a special dinner to thank them for their tireless support of students.

THIS WEEK THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

Superintendent Objective D: Community Relations

- Works with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way.



Last Friday, ABS West hosted one of my favorite events of the year—HCDE's annual chess tournament—which is now in its fifth year. For the first time ever, talented students from all four schools participated in the tournament. The event is an opportunity for our most at-risk students to show themselves and their peers what they are capable of. We believe that chess affords our special student populations cognitive and social-emotional skills as well as experiences to learn values that will guide them through life. Every year the program grows, and we are eager to see what next year's tournament will bring.

On Thursday, CASE for Kids hosted check presentations for the 2021-2022 City Connections grant awardees at City Hall in Houston. These grants support nonprofit afterschool programs that help keep children engaged and safe in out-of-school time. Through this partnership, afterschool programs in Houston received nearly \$620,000 for the 2021-2022 school year. Organizations that received funding for the first time, as well as those who have previously received funding, were unanimous in their gratitude for the opportunities provided through CASE for Kids' partnership with the City of Houston. We're excited to see in-person afterschool programming return and look forward to the ways it will positively impact education in Houston.

Lastly, we continue to see the impact that the Education Foundation of Harris County's Partner in Education program has on our community. This week, Trustees Cantu and Duhon joined me during a visit to Crosby ISD, where we had the opportunity to visit the district's football and baseball fields. Through a second-round PIE grant, the district was able to install two publicly accessible SaveStation automated external defibrillator (AED) stations at these facilities. These AEDs offer a life-saving resource to students and stadium visitors who may experience a cardiovascular emergency. We also visited Charles Drew Elementary School, where we took photos with students who received iPads through a separate PIE grant.

By partnering with other governmental entities and community organizations to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way, I am meeting the expectation to impact education and advocate for all learners by responding to the evolving needs of Harris County learners.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

April 12

Highpoint School tours
Texas Southern University

April 13

Virtual Fit Break

April 15

Good Friday
(HCDE offices closed)

April 19

Healthy Knowledge Webinar:
Practicing Being Present

April 20

Board Meeting

Highpoint Teen Summit

April 23

All-Earth Ecobot Challenge Day

April 27

Administrative Professionals
Day

April 28

Virtual Nutrition Consultations

April 29

CASE for Kids
End-of-Year Celebration