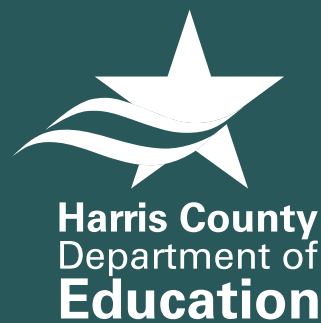


VOL. 9 | ISSUE 4 | WEEK OF OCTOBER 16, 2023

# THE CONNECTOR



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**SCHOOL NUTRITION  
EXPO AND VENDOR  
SHOW PACK A  
WALLOP > P.3**



**PEACOCK REFLECTS ON A  
LIFE SHAPED BY LEARNING > P.6**



**EMPOWERING STUDENTS  
THROUGH HEALING > P.8**



## I OFTEN REFER TO CHOICE PARTNERS AS MY “EXCALIBUR”

— the secret weapon in HCDE’s arsenal that returns revenue to our general fund. This, in turn, allows us to create innovative programs for students and educators.

This week we see that Choice isn’t living a fairy tale life, but rather has emerged as a group of Superheros for their vendors and members. On Wednesday and Thursday, Jeff Drury, senior director of Choice and his staff donned costumes complete with tights and capes for their annual Food Show and Vendor Exhibit at the Humble Civic Center. The event attracted more than 130 vendors who proudly exhibited their food wares while more than 100 students roamed around to taste-test the treats and provide feedback to their respective districts. I always enjoy going to the food show to sample the variety of breakfast and lunch options available to school districts through our contracts. It is fun to see which pizza, corn dogs, breakfast sandwiches and taco bowls students enjoyed the most. While I was unable to attend this year due to feeling under the weather, I heard the event was extremely successful. Choice Partners has grown tremendously in the last eight years, logging three “\$1 million revenue months” this year alone. That is due to the continued perseverance of staff in pursuing new contracts like Amazon and Apple as well as the continued education and engagement of members encouraging the use of our contracts. I look forward to watching Choice Partners continue to evolve and thrive in the years ahead.

I started the week with ELT and then met with staff for updates about ongoing projects and initiatives. On Tuesday I met with employees whose offices are on the fourth floor to discuss the move to temporary locations during the planned renovation. Staff are excited for their new offices and have maintained positive attitudes about the move, despite the minor inconveniences we know will occur with the temporary displacement. On Wednesday I participated in the Feasibility Meeting about the proposed Inclusive Playground followed by the regular board meeting.

On Thursday I met with other staff for my regular standing meetings and today I joined Mr. Vela for a meeting with the contractor at Highpoint Middle School about the delays in getting students and staff in the building. This delay is negatively impacting on our students and staff and I am working diligently to push the contractor to get the building open for staff as soon as possible. I also had lunch with Ms. Hinojosa as part of my quarterly meetings with board members. Tonight, I fly out to visit family before journeying to North Carolina next week for the Path International Equine Therapy Conference. I will be there all week and return to Houston next weekend.




**JAMES COLBERT, JR.**  
County Superintendent





Vendors pose for a photo behind a table of fruit samples.

## CULINARY CRUSADERS SAVOR BITES AT 24TH ANNUAL SCHOOL NUTRITION & PRODUCT EXPO

**A** **MIDST THE AROMA OF SIZZLING SPICES** and the symphony of satisfied taste buds, students and nutrition directors embarked on a culinary adventure during Choice Partners' 2023 School Nutrition & Product Expo this week.

The superhero-themed event, hosted at the Humble Civic Center, paid homage to the food service providers who help feed millions of Harris County students annually. Many business owners embraced this year's theme, dressing up as their favorite iconic comic book superheroes to showcase their products.

"All the costumes are so exciting, and we even brought in the Hulk and Spiderman for students to take pictures with, which has been a big hit," said Choice Partners Assistant Director Trisha Prestigiacom. "Along with our typical food options, we included food equipment and sanitation product companies this year to inspire service directors who may be looking to replace kitchen wares or purchase alternative cleaning supplies."

Matt Antignolo is no stranger to the School Nutrition Expo, having attended numerous times during his nearly 30-year career. The executive director of child nutrition for the Fort Bend Independent School District attends to discover vendors that cater to the district's diverse population of students and industry trends, such as plant-based and vegan offerings. Antignolo described his gratitude for the co-op, which helps simplify finding and partnering with new vendors.

"I love the expo because it's a one-stop shop. Without it, we would be on our own reaching out to individual vendors," Antignolo said enthusiastically. "Kids are eager to see menus that reflect what they are eating at home or healthy restaurants, and Choice Partners does a phenomenal job in keeping up with food industry trends."

For students like Sophia Lloyd, a fourth grader from the Galena Park Independent School District, her school's cafeteria provides access to nutritious meals that

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



## PROGRAM CONNECTIONS



*Galena Park ISD students pose for a photograph while enjoying yogurt, fruit bars, and juice options from local vendors.*



*Choice Partners Contract Coordinator Monica Niles, left, Senior Director Jeff Drury, center, and Client Engagement Assistant Director Janet Wachs pose for a photograph in superhero attire.*



*An elementary student samples a slice of pizza at the School Nutrition & Product Expo.*



*High school students sample tacos.*



Kids are eager to see menus that reflect what they are eating at home or healthy restaurants, and Choice Partners does a phenomenal job in keeping up with food industry trends.

may not be available at home. Lloyd was all smiles as she explored varieties of American, Asian, and Mexican cuisine.

"The food was awesome, and I got to try a lot of things I've never had before," Lloyd said with a smile. "There were pork chops, chicken nuggets, and fruit, but my favorite was still the French fries."

Lloyd is one of more than 100 students from Harris County districts who taste-tested food items at the expo and provided feedback via an app. Nutrition directors use the students' responses to evaluate food and beverage products being considered for their school cafeteria menus. Choice Partners also uses the feedback to plan for future food contracts, enabling the co-op to maintain its standard of service.

Choice Partners' food division is one of the biggest in the state in regards to the number of members, vendors, and competitively bid contracts. Food is purchased annually by school districts in the Harris County area for millions of student lunches through Choice Partners cooperative contracts. ✨

[View the photo gallery.](#)



## COOPERATIVE GROWTH

**DURING FY 2022-2023**, the Choice Partners (CP) national purchasing cooperative recorded three months of million-dollar revenues. The upward trend is a marker of CP's success and continued growth.

In September 2022, the division launched the Choice Cash rebate program, which is anticipated to generate between \$500,000 to \$750,000 for members, pending a final tally of the program's inaugural year. The rebate program encourages members to continue using CP contracts to receive some of their money back while generating more revenue for the co-op and, ultimately, to HCDE divisions and programs.

To accrue rebate money, members are required to report their contract usage activity on the Choice Partners portal. Data collected from the portal not only helps members stay in compliance but also helps the division track sales and contract usage, allowing them to better assess what services and products are in high demand.

Labatt Food Services and Amazon Business were the most used contracts during FY 2022-2023. Since Amazon Business became an approved vendor in August 2022, approximately 250 co-op members, including school districts, counties, and universities, have purchased more than \$100 million in products.

By the close of the fiscal year, CP's network comprised over 2,200 members and over 500 competitively bid vendor contracts, a testament to its sustained expansion and members' trust in its value and efficacy. ✨





*Venetia Peacock, first row left, at Burkeville High School.*

## A LIFE SHAPED BY LEARNING: VENETIA PEACOCK CELEBRATES HEAD START AWARENESS MONTH

**EXPERIENCE IS KEY.** For Venetia Peacock, the senior director of Harris County Department of Education's Head Start division, the journey to leadership was paved as a Head Start student herself.

Every October, Head Start Awareness Month draws attention to the opportunities and high-quality services that make the program a leader in early childhood education. When talking about the celebration this month, Peacock reflected on how her experience in the program instilled a profound understanding of the program's potential to shape lives and equipped her with the tools crucial for professional achievement.

"I remember going to Head Start because I remember Ms. Scott, my first teacher," said Peacock. "I remember how she made me feel. I felt welcomed and like she wanted me to be there. It was fun, and I felt like I was learning things. I also remember that's when we started going to the dentist."

Raised in a tight-knit family in East Texas, Peacock's parents set a clear expectation for their children to aim for success.

"My husband only finished 11th grade, and I finished the 12th grade," said Peacock's 89-year-old mother, Theresa. "I

was prepared to go to college but was the oldest at home. My father and mother were sick, so I had to work instead of continuing my education. We wanted our kids to exceed what we did."

Venetia didn't seem to need the expectation as her love of education was evident from an early age.

"I had sisters, so we played teacher at home," she said. Theresa also remembers the classroom-inspired playtime.

"Venetia was always the teacher!" quipped Theresa. "Her friends would come by, and she would make them sit down, and she would teach. Her siblings felt like she was pushing them, but I think she was pushing herself. I always thought she would be a teacher."

Venetia's early years in the program were foundational, providing an educational springboard and fostering resilience and ambition that would echo throughout her career.

"I remember liking school and being very happy to go, except when I started working on my bachelor's," laughed Venetia. "I love learning new things. I grew up with my face in a book. I do believe that being read to at Head Start and home fostered my

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 7**





*Venetia Peacock, bottom row left, as shown in her Head Start yearbook, circa 1970.*



*Venetia Peacock during her early years at Harris County Department of Education, circa 2000.*

love of reading. With what I understand now about brain development, I'm certain that the early exposure I got at Head Start to the classroom and to children who were different than me fed my curiosity and made me want to learn more."

Though the term hadn't been coined at the time, Head Start also instilled Venetia with social and emotional learning skills that would carry her throughout her life.

"I think there's a lot to be said about feeling safe, nurtured, and supported at home and Head Start," she said. "It allowed me to be free to learn without all the noise. I feel like that has a lot to do with why I feel like I got such a good head start and why I was able to be really resilient with some of the things that happened later in life."

One of those pivotal moments was the untimely death of her brother, who passed just a few short months after starting his first year of college. After his death, Venetia was emboldened to do what her brother couldn't: get a college degree. However, her mother, Theresa, recalls Venetia's laser-like focus and desire to attend college to become "someone" was always evident.

"She's been planning to go to college ever since she started school, come hell or high water," said the elder Peacock. "There wasn't anything that was going to keep her from going."

Though she became the first in her family to graduate with a bachelor's degree, Venetia didn't intend to go into early childhood education and initially attended the University of Houston to obtain a degree in computer science.

"I struggled with the advanced math classes," said Venetia. "Eventually, opportunity and time came together for me. I was destined to work in Head Start because I always loved being around young children."

Now at the helm of one of four Head Start programs in the third largest county in America, she channels her own transformative experience to drive initiatives that empower a new generation, embodying the living testament of Head



*Venetia Peacock photographed during a high school computer class circa 1982.*

Start's enduring impact.

"Head Start Awareness Month is important because it is still a well-kept secret," said Venetia. "I think people don't understand how focused we are on school readiness and supporting families, and it's important to celebrate success stories."

Her unique perspective has become a guiding force in her dedication to enhancing the program, affirming that success, for both the students and herself, truly does start with Head Start.

"I am definitely proud to be a product of Head Start," said Venetia. I want what has happened to me in my life to happen to every other Head Start student. I hope their engagement with this program has propelled them to make a good life for themselves." 🌟



# OCTOBER IS NATIONAL PHYSICAL THERAPY MONTH: VICKI NOLAN EMPOWERS STUDENTS THROUGH HEALING

**VICKI NOLAN, A PHYSICAL THERAPIST** with Harris County Department of Education, discovered her passion for human anatomy and community service at a young age. Her dedication deepened while studying physical therapy at the University of Texas Health Science Center, during which time she completed a clinical internship with HCDE. This experience cemented her love for working with children and kickstarted her more than 20-year career with the Department.

In observance of National Physical Therapy Month, celebrated every October, HCDE recognizes and appreciates the numerous physical therapists and physical therapist assistants in its School-Based Therapy Services division. These professionals are pivotal in supporting students with disabilities and aiding their classroom mobility and function. Among them is Nolan, who this week shares insights from her enriching journey as a physical therapist. She reflects on the strength she derives from working with children who tirelessly strive to overcome mental, physical, and emotional challenges.

## **What inspired you to become a school-based physical therapist?**

**VN:** I wanted to be a physical education teacher or coach as a kid. However, I decided to study physical therapy in college because the field offers diverse opportunities and experiences. My internship with HCDE—back in the day when no jeans or “bare legs” were allowed at the Irvington location, I found a love for pediatric physical therapy, specifically school-based therapy, because it allows me to form relationships with children, their families, and teachers. I get to think outside the box to solve problems and help children actively participate in their family, school, and community through teamwork.

## **How does school-based physical therapy contribute to a student's classroom success?**

**VN:** Through HCDE, I've worked with students in the Waller, North Forest, and Cy-Fair independent school districts, and physical therapy is critical in helping increase their independence, confidence, safety, and participation across the school environment. Every day, we join educational staff dedicated to assisting students to be active learners in the classroom, gym, and playground. This involves academic learning and the development of musical, athletic, social, and self-help skills. We help teachers determine how students in wheelchairs can participate in recess or join the band with their peers. Physical therapists can also provide adapted equipment that allows students to run in their physical education classes or position them to learn in the classroom with their peers.

## **Why are physical therapists beneficial to teachers in the classroom?**

**VN:** Teachers are my heroes because they often face challenges managing large groups of students with diverse needs. As a physical therapist, I encourage teachers by giving positive feedback when I see great things happening in their



classrooms. We are all trying to help students become the best version of themselves. I've learned that physical therapists are teachers in their own right. We often educate school staff on best practices for student engagement and how to use proper mechanics to protect their bodies when lifting and transferring students safely. Similar to providing students with adapted equipment, those collaborations are in place to help teachers do their jobs efficiently by supplying supportive tools such as mechanical lifts, supportive seating, changing tables, adapted classroom furniture, and more. Physical therapists can also provide insight into students' medical diagnoses to better understand their strengths and limitations.

## **Describe the impact being a physical therapist has on your life. What is your favorite part of your career and why?**

**VN:** Over the last 20 years, I've had the privilege to work with children and families who inspire and strengthen me to be a better person. This job allows me to prioritize a healthy balance between a fulfilling career and being an active wife and mom of four. My favorite part of being a physical therapist is meeting my students at the start of every school year, helping them achieve milestones, and improving their quality of life and education. I hope my students gain strength and confidence in our lessons, feel loved, and know they can always count on me for support. My HCDE co-workers have also become my friends and extended family, which not everyone can say. This division has created an environment where I feel professionally and personally supported. Throughout the years, I've grown with my co-workers, celebrated, laughed, and mourned with them, and I'm genuinely grateful for this experience. 🌟





## HCDE LEADERS SHOWERED WITH GRATITUDE ON BOSS'S DAY

**DELICIOUS BREAKFAST TREATS**, personalized gifts, and small tokens of gratitude were presented to HCDE campus and division leaders on Monday for Boss's Day, celebrated annually on October 16. The heartfelt gestures are a testament to the united workplace and strong bonds that define #TeamHCDE. 🌟



## TEACHERS RUSH TO SUBMIT ORDERS BEFORE TOOLS FOR TEACHERS SHOPPING DEADLINE

**HARRIS COUNTY EDUCATORS** who received a \$100 classroom supply Tools for Teachers credit submitted 1,489 orders by the close of business on Monday, October 16—the last day of the fall 2023 Tools for Teachers shopping period. This impressive number underscores the eagerness and dedication of our teachers to provide the best educational resources for their students despite often facing budget constraints. The success of the program this fall not only demonstrates the ongoing need for such supportive initiatives, it reinforces HCDE's and the Education Foundation of Harris County's commitment to empowering educators and enhancing the learning experience in our classrooms. 🌟







## HIGHPOINT SCHOOL PIONEERS THE FUTURE OF DAEP INSTRUCTION AT NATIONAL CONFERENCE

**HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S** innovative leadership in the Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP) arena was on full display this week at the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) Conference in Tampa, Florida. Earlier this year, event organizers invited Highpoint School Principal Courtney Waters and Senior Director of Schools Dr. Charles Ned to lead a workshop on what Harris County Department of Education and Highpoint do differently to respond to student behavior and create a positive campus culture.

Every year, the NAEA conference welcomes hundreds of alternative education campus leaders from around the country to share best practices, information on public policy and advocacy, and participate in professional development.

Waters and Ned headed a standing-room-only seminar, "Pushing Past Punitive: A Think Tank for DAEP Programming." The presentation addressed how to reframe DAEP programs and showcased how Highpoint's equine therapy, educational planning, and mentorship initiatives empower and rehabilitate students to achieve personal and academic success. Highpoint leaders delivered a similar presentation [in June](#) at the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (TASSP) Summer Workshop in Austin.

"One of the biggest compliments we can get as educators is when other schools desire to mirror our campus programs," Waters said proudly. "This tells me that Highpoint students and staff are reaching our goals and steadily making an impact in the DAEP community." 🌟

## IN THE NEWS

### FOX 26 SPOTLIGHT ON CHOICE PARTNERS' SCHOOL NUTRITION AND PRODUCT EXPO

**MARKETING & CLIENT ENGAGEMENT** Assistant Director Janet Wachs participated in an in-studio interview on Fox 26 this week to promote Choice Partner's 2023 School Nutrition and Product Expo. Wachs, who donned a head-to-toe superhero costume, shed light on the national cooperative and the event's importance and highlighted food items anticipated to generate significant interest from students and school district nutrition leaders. print stories promoting the program. 🌟



**FOX 26 TASTE-TESTING SCHOOL CAFETERIA FOOD**

TO NEW YORK COURTROOM AS CIVIL FRAUD TRIAL RESUMES. **FOX 26 UKRAI** | LOCAL NEWS

TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

**WATCH OUR VIDEO**





## BOOKS, BIRTHDAYS, AND BIG HEARTS FOR HEAD START SUPERMENTOR CJ RODGERS

### ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION AND

**ENRICHMENT** CJ Rodgers kicked off the Real SuperMENTors Read program for the 2023-2024 school year at Channelview Head Start on October 12, reading “Bear’s Big Day” by author Salina Yoon. Volunteers Superintendent James Colbert Jr., Asst. Supt. of Academic Programs Jonathan Parker and Asst. Supt. of Business Services Jesus Amezcua also participate in the program, which

is part of Head Start’s Significant Male Initiative to encourage male involvement throughout HCDE Head Start centers. The program works by recruiting, selecting, and assigning mentors to each school. Mentors commit to at least one hour, once a month, between October and May, to read to students. Rodgers also enjoyed a toddler-sized “Happy Birthday” performance from the students to commemorate his special day earlier that week. 🌟



# SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

## THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

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

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



Vendors at the Choice Partners School Nutrition Expo pose for a photo.

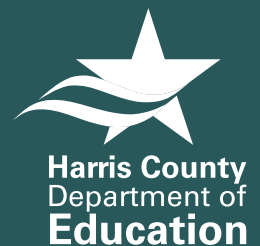
### THIS WEEK, CHOICE PARTNERS

welcomed students and co-op members to its 24th annual School Nutrition & Product Expo and Vendor Exhibit hosted at the Humble Civic Center. More than 130 vendors had the opportunity to receive student feedback and network with nutrition directors from school districts and government agencies between both days. Choice Partners, which I often call HCDE's Excalibur, continues its upward growth and vital role in supporting HCDE divisions and programs, and Harris County students.

Senior Director Venetia Peacock often describes Head Start's potential to shape the lives of young learners. During Head Start Awareness Month, observed every October, we underscore that Peacock speaks from experience, having been a Head Start student in East Texas. Peacock is a testament to the program's success, which we firmly believe offers a solid academic foundation for Harris County's youngest learners.

Finally, I'm always excited to see national agencies recognize the trailblazing work being done at HCDE. This week, Highpoint School Principal Courtney Waters and Special Schools Senior Director Dr. Charles Ned led a presentation at the National Alternative Education Association Conference—on what the school does differently to respond to student behavior and create positive campus culture. Highpoint is at the forefront of reshaping Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs. I'm confident our leaders will continue being a national resource for other educators and innovating new programs for student success.

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

**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

**October 26**  
Lights On Afterschool Day

**October 27**  
Head Start Awareness Month  
Community Celebration

**November 15**  
Board Meeting

**November 23-24**  
Thanksgiving Break (HCDE  
Closed)