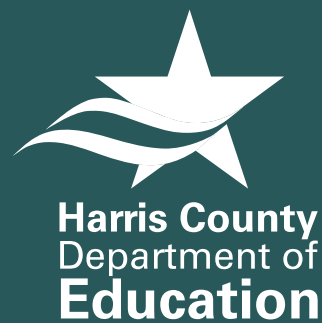


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THE CONNECTOR



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IN THE LAST 24 YEARS, THE IDEA OF KEEPING STUDENTS BUSY

after school has taken off and gained national attention. Studies have shown that students who engage in healthy and productive lifestyles in the hours after school are less likely to get in trouble with the law and display inappropriate behavior.

CASE has long been a leader in the after-school arena, and that was showcased this week with the division actively engaging in the 24th Annual Lights on After School celebration in Houston. As a large regional provider of afterschool programs and support, CASE is one of a handful of organizations who gathered this week to celebrate the national initiative with a rally at City Hall. As part of the celebration CASE also coordinated evening events at 11 after-school sites to showcase the support and experiences after-school programming provides to students. I am proud that CASE is a leader in the Greater Houston Lights On Alliance and that their work is positively impacting tens of thousands of students every year.

This week I took some much needed personal time before meeting up with staff in North Carolina on Wednesday at the PATH Intl. Annual Equine Conference. This three-day event was packed with information about the impact of equine therapy on the brain and body. I attended the pre-conference session with Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services Jonathan Parker at Wings of Eagles Ranch, which focused on how equine therapy supports veterans with a variety of challenges. Danielle Bartz, chief of staff, joined us Thursday evening and during the next two days we attended presentations by our local partners, SIRE Therapeutic Horsemanship in Spring and Reigning Strength Therapeutic Horsemanship in Richmond. There were also presentations by various therapists about the impact of therapeutic horsemanship on motor skills and other challenges facing those with physical, cognitive and emotional disabilities. This conference occurs every two years so it was perfect timing for us to attend in preparation for our own Equine Enrichment Center. It was great to connect with other equine therapy programs and see their structure and organization while gaining insight into how they handle the challenges and issues involved with this practice. I look forward to bringing what we have learned back to Houston and making our equine program one of the best in the country.

I return to Houston on Sunday and will attend the Alief ISD Education Foundation Golf Tournament on Monday. Have a great weekend.




JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



From left to right: A community engagement representative from the Mayor's Office of Education; Olivera Jankovska, director of the Mayor's Office of Education; Trina Finley, Asst. Dir. of CASE for Kids; Dr. Lisa Caruthers, Sr. Dir. of CASE for Kids; and Larry Taylor, District Executive Director of Youth Development for the YMCA of Greater Houston pose for a photo with a proclamation from the City of Houston for Lights On Afterschool Day.

KEEPING THE "LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL" FOR HARRIS COUNTY YOUTH

AMID THE ICONIC BACKDROP of the Houston City Hall Legacy Room, city officials, educators, and youth advocates gathered for the 24th annual Lights On Afterschool celebration, which emphasizes the vital role out-of-school-time programs play in bolstering youth learning and safety. Their unified message echoed through the hallways: afterschool programs are not just extracurriculars—they are lifelines for the city's youth.

"Afterschool initiatives support working families, help children excel academically and personally, and ensure their safety during vulnerable afternoon hours," said Dr. Lisa Caruthers, the senior director of the Center for Afterschool, Summer, and Enrichment for Kids (CASE for Kids). "This event underscores the pressing need for further investment in these programs."

Data from the Afterschool Alliance reveals that most juvenile crimes transpire between 2-6 p.m., a window when many children find themselves unsupervised. Extracurricular activities allow youth to enhance academic skills, explore new hobbies, nurture creativity, and interact with positive role models.

The event, held on Oct. 26, was one of thousands taking place around the country this month as part of the nationwide Lights On Afterschool awareness campaign spearheaded by the Afterschool Alliance. The initiative aims to afford every student the opportunity to access quality, affordable afterschool programs. In Houston, more than 300 local afterschool program sites opened their doors during the evening hours to welcome community members and advocate for and celebrate the value of such programs.

Locally, the Greater Houston Lights On Alliance (GHLOA) hosted the rally at City Hall. Every year, the GHLOA serves more than 50,000 students throughout Harris County. Alliance members include the Alief Independent School District; Boys & Girls Club of Greater Houston; CASE for Kids, a division of Harris County Department of Education (HCDE); Harris County; Houston Independent School District; Houston Parks and Recreation Department; Out 2 Learn, a United Way of Greater Houston initiative; and the YMCA of Greater Houston.

Research indicates that for every child in Texas benefitting from afterschool activities, three more await a spot in a program, and the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



CASE for Kids Sr. Dir. Lisa Caruthers addresses attendees.



Attendees cheer during the Lights On Afterschool rally.

demand is notably higher among Latino and Black children. However, students who consistently attend high-quality afterschool programs exhibit increased school engagement, superior grades, and a higher likelihood of advancing to the next grade level.

As the event drew to a close, GHLOA representatives acknowledged a proclamation from Mayor Sylvester Turner for 2023 Lights On Afterschool Day. They also encouraged attendees to visit one of 11 pre-selected afterschool sites that evening to witness firsthand the invaluable supports and experiences afterschool programs provide to Harris County youth. 🌟



NRG STADIUM SHINES BRIGHT WITH LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL DISPLAY

ON OCT. 26, the NRG Stadium marquee on Houston's southside, near 610 South Loop and Kirby Drive, showcased a "Lights On Afterschool" graphic throughout the day. 🌟



NEUROMUSCULAR DISORDERS TAKE FOCUS AT DAYLONG PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PHYSICAL THERAPISTS

ON WEDNESDAY, more than 75 Harris County Department of Education physical therapists and physical therapy assistants assigned to Harris County school districts delved into the latest research and best practices for children diagnosed with neuromuscular disorders. The workshop, spearheaded by Dr. Cosmo Kwok of Texas Children's Hospital, aimed to equip therapists with techniques and knowledge to support students in Harris County schools.

"Our physical therapists expressed a need for additional information about neuromuscular disorders, and it's important our division ensures they remain informed regarding best practices," said Senior Director for School-Based Therapy Services Carie Crabb. "We know what it takes for therapists to bring their best to the students, teachers, and families they serve, and we want to help support them in that endeavor."

Muscular dystrophies are caused by abnormal genes that interfere with the production of proteins needed to form healthy muscle. They cause progressive muscle weakness and degeneration, often resulting in the loss of the child's ability to walk. Guidance from HCDE's therapists aids these students so they can participate in school-based activities.

"For students with chronic illnesses like neuromuscular disorders, physical therapy is about helping them enjoy the good parts of life that include learning and having fun with their friends," said Kristen Ewing, a physical therapist in Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District. "This workshop has been beneficial in providing strategies to develop a seamless transition from school-based to medical-based physical therapy that will improve our student's overall quality of life."

The workshop emphasized how to identify critical clinical markers and highlighted the subtle differences and similarities between symptoms. Brittany Guidry and Sharon Malek, physical therapists also from Texas Children's Hospital, shed light on treatment strategies and the significance of modifying tasks to cater to students as they transition to adulthood.

"Therapy Services provides more than the minimum amount of licensure renewal hours to our therapists because we believe in the value of lifelong learning," said Crabb. "It being National Physical Therapy Month is a bonus because we get an opportunity to give extra TLC to our employees and let them know how valued they are at HCDE." ✨



Neuromuscular disorder experts Dr. Cosmo Kwok, left, Brittany Guidry, and Sharon Malek, right, from Texas Children's Hospital pose for a photograph before the workshop.

ANCHORING POSITIVE CHANGE WHILE NAVIGATING THE C'S!



National Dropout Prevention Convention
October 18, 2023 / Orlando, Florida



Fortis Academy's Recovery Program Coordinator Andrinee Martinez, left, and Principal Travita Godfrey lead a workshop at the National Dropout Prevention Conference.

FORTIS ACADEMY CHARTS A COURSE FOR SUCCESS AT NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CONFERENCE

FOR THE SECOND YEAR IN A ROW, Harris County Department of Education's expertise in alternative education garnered attention from some of the country's largest school districts at the National Dropout Prevention Conference. The gathering, held in Orlando, Florida, this year, is designed to bring best practices, research, and practical strategies to educators who serve at-risk students.

Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey and Recovery Program Coordinator Andrinee Martinez led more than 30 attendees in a session titled "Anchoring Positive Change While Navigating the C's." The presentation detailed the art of maintaining

a positive school climate while fostering individual growth and responsibility. Godfrey and Martinez revealed how the C's – culture, climate, connection, collaboration, cognition, and competency – harmoniously fuel positive student/teacher relationships and create cooperative learning experiences.

Representatives from school districts nationwide were captivated by Fortis' innovative method of nurturing healthy connections beyond school grounds. Fortis' approach incorporates diverse strategies, including its culinary arts program, group therapy sessions, and mindfulness assessments. ✨



Principal Godfrey poses for a photograph after receiving positive feedback from a session attendee.



ABS WEST STUDENTS PLANT POSSIBILITIES IN THE KNIGHTS KONTAINER GARDEN

THE KNIGHTS KONTAINER GARDEN PROGRAM has officially taken root at Academic and Behavior School West. Last week, nearly 30 students with intellectual, developmental, and behavioral disorders began reviving the school's garden to grow a mixture of fruits and vegetables.

By maintaining the landscape, students will learn the importance of a healthy lifestyle while exploring the world of botany. Students will visit the greenery twice weekly and share responsibilities such as watering and weeding the garden. The initiative is designed to enhance students' motor skills by planting, touching, and tasting food grown in the green space.

Harris County Department of Education's Center for Grants Development helped secure a \$3,000 Whole Kids Foundation Garden Grant for the [campus program](#). ✨



9TH ANNUAL HEALTHY MINDS, HEALTHY FAMILIES CONFERENCE GUIDES FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS TOWARD HEALING

THE METAMORPHOSIS from a caterpillar to a butterfly is a fitting symbol of change, resilience, and growth. On Oct. 20, these themes took flight as parents and early childhood educators gathered for the 9th annual Healthy Minds, Healthy Families conference at the Irvington conference center.

The daylong event, sponsored by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, provides early childhood educators, community partners, and parents with resources and professional development to support their mental health and that of Harris County's youngest learners. This year's theme, "The Butterfly Effect: Nurturing Resilience and Embracing Change," focused on resilience, grit, perseverance, and promoting a growth mindset.

"We want this conference to serve as a reminder that the better we care for ourselves, the more we can give to our students," said Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock.

Building on the theme of personal growth and its

impact on the wider community, keynote speaker Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker spoke candidly about his youth during his presentation, "The Healing Power of People." He recounted what it was like to be adopted from an orphanage in South Korea by an American family in Dallas. Parker highlighted key individuals who showed him unconditional love, mentorship, and kindness to underscore the importance of community and the profound influence individuals can have in shaping one's journey.

"Sometimes you have to do the right thing and help people, even if you don't know the outcome," said Parker as he addressed the room. "When I think back on my life, the people who helped me didn't know the outcome, but they knew it was the right thing to do."

The conference offered diverse sessions on topics such as resilience, childhood trauma, teacher burnout, and hands-on wellness activities. ✨

IN THE NEWS

CHOICE PARTNERS SCHOOL NUTRITION AND PRODUCT EXPO

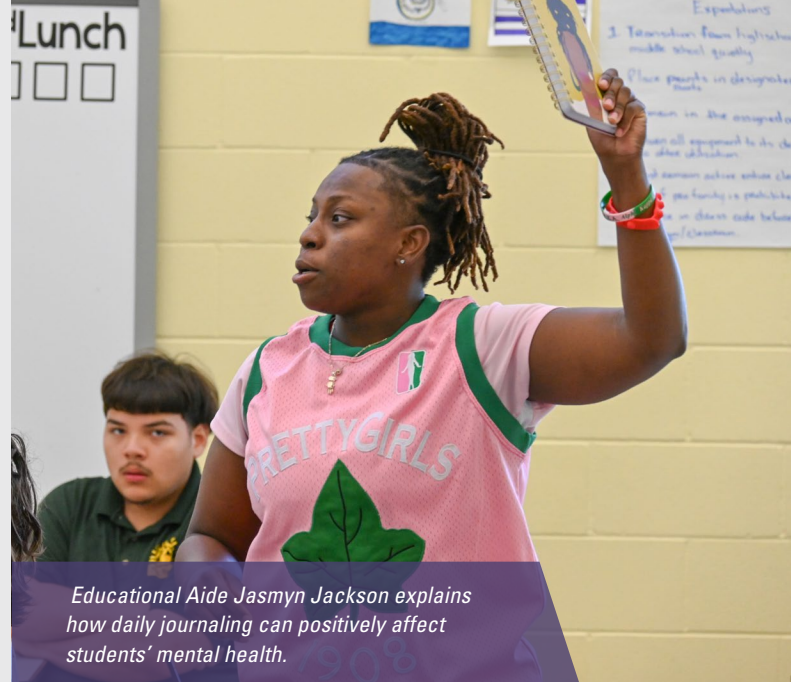
THE CHOICE PARTNERS School Nutrition and Product Expo continues to garner media attention on digital platforms. Online news outlet Houston Style Magazine published an article on their website promoting the event. ✨

Houston Style Magazine

[READ THE ARTICLE](#)



Fortis Academy Counselor Nakia Lee Francis smiles as student Lesly Lozano proudly shows off her "Say No To Drugs" painting.



Educational Aide Jasmyn Jackson explains how daily journaling can positively affect students' mental health.

HCDE'S SPECIAL SCHOOLS PROMOTE DRUG AWARENESS DURING RED RIBBON WEEK

STUDENTS AT Harris County Department of Education's four special schools reaffirmed their pledge to promote a drug-free and healthy lifestyle in honor of Red Ribbon Week. The annual event, observed Oct. 23-31, is the nation's oldest and largest drug awareness program.

Throughout the week, faculty and staff at all HCDE campuses encouraged students to get involved in drug prevention activities, which included themed dress-down days, such as "Team Up Against Drugs" and "Have the Power to Stay Drug-Free." Counselors also facilitated discussions about the potential social, educational, and physical challenges of substance abuse.

Highpoint School embraced this year's national theme, "Be Kind to Your Mind. Live Drug-Free," with a daily lunch speaker series. Each speaker provided information on coping skills and highlighted school resources to help students abstain from harmful substances. On Tuesday, Oct. 24, Educational

Aide Jasmyn Jackson explained to students how self-reflection, physical exercise, and meditation can help them uphold a healthy lifestyle.

"Many of our students face challenges outside of school and don't have the skills to properly articulate their feelings or know how to deal with them. Unfortunately, they often turn to drugs," said Highpoint Principal Courtney Waters. "Our goal is to provide alternative solutions that help our students recognize and manage those emotions, and prioritizing mental health is the first step to building those healthy habits."

In north Harris County, Fortis Academy students gathered in the school's gymnasium for a drug-prevention rally where they embraced their artistic abilities. Faculty members led students in a painting activity that encouraged learners to make positive choices throughout their lives and seek assistance from trusted counselors when facing the temptation of alcohol or substance abuse. ➤

HCDE EARNS MULTIPLE TRANSPARENCY STARS FROM TEXAS COMPTROLLER FOR CLEAR FINANCIAL PRACTICES

HCDE HAS AGAIN SECURED multiple Transparency Star Awards from the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts office. The awards highlight HCDE's exemplary efforts in maintaining transparency in traditional finances, contracts & procurement, and debt obligations. The Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts' Transparency Stars program commends public organizations that provide open access to their traditional finances and shed light on areas like contracts, procurement,



economic development, public pensions, and debt obligations. The Department has received the awards since 2009 when the program was formerly known as the Texas Comptroller Leadership Circle program. The initiative's stringent criteria underscore the significance of HCDE's repeated accolades, which cement the Department's commitment to the transparent management of public funds and resources and reaffirm its dedication to the residents of Harris County. ➤



Pre-conference at Wings of Eagles Ranch.



Superintendent Colbert with representatives from the ROCK Equine Facilities (Georgetown, TX) at PATH Intl. Conference.



HCDE LEADERSHIP ATTENDS EQUINE THERAPY CONFERENCE

SUPERINTENDENT JAMES COLBERT, Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services Jonathan Parker, and Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz attended the PATH Intl. Conference in North Carolina held Oct. 26-28.

The conference, attended by about 600 people from around the country with varied interests in equine therapy, featured various tracks, including one focused on programs for children and adults with disabilities, one focused on various programs offered through equine therapy, one dedicated to programs

targeting veterans, and one that detailed the ins and outs of the administrative tasks involved in running a therapeutic equine program. Sessions covered a range of topics, from the impact of interactions with horses on the brain, to managing and engaging volunteers, to finding and maintaining a good therapy horse.

The pre-conference session took participants to a local equine center, Wings of Eagles Ranch, where they heard about programs focused on supporting veterans and toured the barn and stables for the program. 🌟

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.



CASE for Kids Sr. Dir. Lisa Caruthers, center, and Lights On Afterschool attendees participate in the Lightbulb Challenge to raise awareness about the importance of afterschool programs.

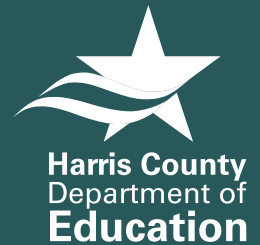
THIS WEEK, CASE FOR KIDS, elected officials, and community partners highlighted the value of afterschool programs for Harris County youth at the 24th annual Lights on Afterschool rally at Houston City Hall. CASE Senior Director Dr. Lisa Caruthers underscored the need for additional investment in out-of-school time activities and presented the latest data on the impact of afterschool funding. CASE's leadership in this annual nationwide event reinforces HCDE's commitment to enhancing student achievement and well-being through quality afterschool programs.

On Wednesday, our School-Based Physical Therapists welcomed professionals from Texas Children's Hospital to learn about neuromuscular disorders that affect students' mobility, a subject in which our therapists requested additional expertise. Ongoing professional development, especially

when self-initiated, demonstrates our therapists' dedication and empowers them to provide students, teachers, and families with the best care possible inside and beyond the classroom.

For the second year in a row, HCDE highlighted its proficiency in alternative education at the National Dropout Prevention Conference, emphasizing our dedication to at-risk students. Principal Travita Godfrey and Coordinator Andrinee Martinez presented Fortis Academy's methods, prioritizing a positive environment and individual growth. Fortis' approach, which showcases HCDE's innovative techniques for building healthy connections beyond classrooms, attracted attention from school districts nationwide, reiterating HCDE's reputation as a benchmark for excellence.

By effectively partnering with entities and community organizations, I am working to meet the needs of students and the community in a coordinated way. 🌟



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UPCOMING EVENTS

November 2

Therapy Workshop on Emotional Dysregulation

November 15

Board Meeting

November 23-24

Thanksgiving Break (HCDE Closed)

November 28

Emergency Preparedness Workshop at Irvington

December 13

Board Meeting

December 14

Bates Responsible Parenting Award 25th Anniversary