

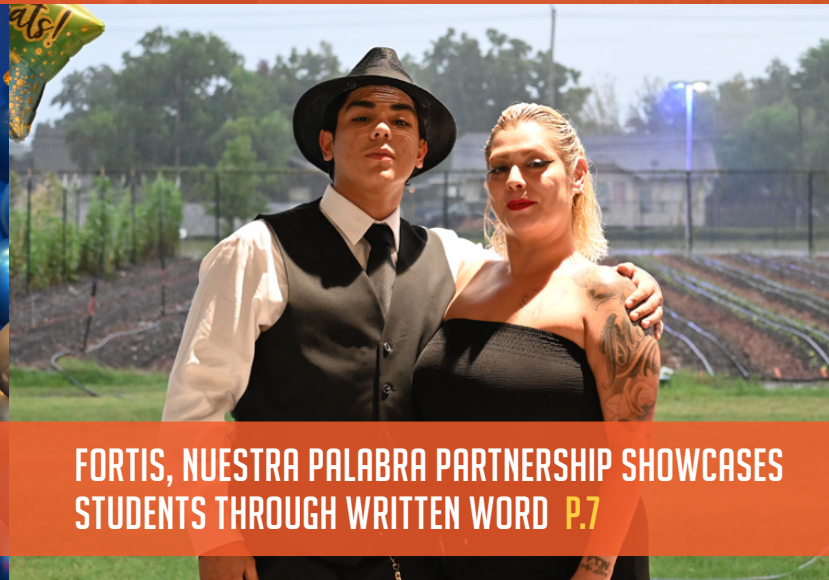
the **CONNECTOR**



OCTOBER EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH FINDS TRUE CALLING
IN THE CLASSROOM **P.3**



CAMPUS LEADERS RECOGNIZED FOR
NATIONAL PRINCIPALS MONTH **P.6**



FORTIS, NUESTRA PALABRA PARTNERSHIP SHOWCASES
STUDENTS THROUGH WRITTEN WORD **P.7**

of Note

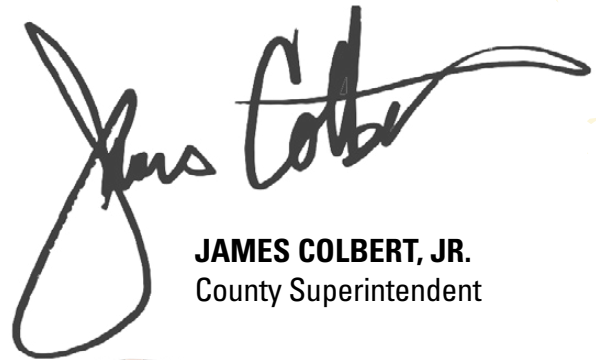
EVERY OCTOBER I tell our community and staff about the important role principals play in education as part of National Principals Month.

HCDE's principals are unique. They work with special populations of students that come with trials and challenges that could easily derail a work day. So it is heartwarming to hear our principals talk about why they lead our campuses in our video celebrating National Principals Month. Listening to them talk about being built to overcome, enjoying their jobs and watching students strive for progress, not perfection, made me smile and even more proud to work at Harris County Department of Education. The work our staff does with children everyday is tough. It takes time, energy and a heart for others. I can safely say that our four principals embody these characteristics and the spirit of education in all they do. I know they love their schools, staff and students. Our students and schools would not be successful without them. So it is my privilege to honor them this month for the outstanding jobs they do.

I started the week representing HCDE and Choice Partners at the Alief ISD Education Foundation Golf Tournament. On Tuesday, I visited Dogan Elementary for the SuperMENTor Meet and Greet event followed by meetings with staff in my office. On Wednesday,

I met with a representative from the Greater Houston chapter of NAMI, National Alliance on Mental Illness, about a potential future partnership. On Thursday, I participated in agenda review in anticipation of the board meeting later this month followed by meetings with staff to receive updates regarding ongoing projects and initiatives. I finished the week at my NPO office with standing meetings.

Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Employee Spotlight



October Employee of the Month Rebecca Ramos spends her mornings as a transition specialist at ABS East, welcoming students to campus and escorting them to class.

LIFE'S UNEXPECTED TURNS LEAD REBECCA RAMOS TO HER TRUE CALLING

SOMETIMES, WHEN YOU THINK you have everything figured out, life has an unexpected way of changing course. Rebecca Ramos set out to be a nurse but found herself trading in her textbooks for a classroom full of students who needed her heart, patience and unwavering consistency.

"I knew from a young age that I wanted to help others; that was always big to me," she said. "When I started working as a paraprofessional, they paired me with a high-needs student who a lot of teachers were afraid to work with because he would become aggressive. But I felt he was crying out for help and just wanted to connect with somebody. When I saw the difference I could make with him, I changed my degree plan to education."

That choice eventually led her to Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), where she's spent the past five years making a difference at Academic and Behavioral School (ABS) East, one student at a time. Ramos started as a life skills teacher before becoming a transition specialist who bridges campus staff with more than 30 partner districts across Harris County. She executes the role flawlessly, even in challenging times, which earned her HCDE's October Employee of the Month title.

"I can go to Rebecca at any time, day or night, via email, phone call or in her office to ask her questions," ABS East Principal Mercedes Love said. "She is always willing to help and has been a phenomenal asset to our districts. She is the most giving person I've ever met in all the years I've been in education."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



Ramos meets with campus clerk Yvette Dixon to ensure students are marked present after exiting the bus.

Employee Spotlight



Ramos is teaching fellow Transition Specialist Nicholas Hearing how to support family orientations, manage individualized education programs (IEPs) and collaborate with district contacts.

Ramos supports family orientations, manages individualized education programs (IEPs), collaborates with district contacts and ensures teachers and students have what they need to succeed.

"I wear many hats," Ramos laughed. "I collaborate a lot with the districts, and I've built really good relationships with their directors and points of contact. I love the variety in what I do because no two days are the same. It keeps me connected to our students and partners."

Last year, she was tasked with carrying the weight of the position alone after a colleague transferred districts. Paperwork deadlines, communicating IEP changes to families, facilitating meetings between educators and district representatives, and more all fell on Ramos. Instead of buckling under pressure, she developed new processes and procedures to streamline communication and workflow between ABS East administrators, teachers and school districts.

"Rebecca is the 'Queen of IEPs' on this campus," Love said. "We can't have students on campus without IEPs, and she ensures we have everything we need before students step off the bus. She met with me three or four times daily to keep me abreast of everything going on with the districts we were serving at that time. She really contributed to the level of success that we've had on our campus."

Nicholas Hearing, who recently joined the campus as a second transition specialist, echoed the sentiments, calling Ramos the "Wonder Woman of the campus."

"I'm not even saying that jokingly, she is an absolute joy to work with and a library of knowledge," he smiled. "Anybody who can take on that title all by herself – kudos to you. Her soul is worth her weight in gold. She's amazing."

Hearing transitioned from the classroom to administrative responsibilities and has found the work rewarding and challenging. He's spent the first few weeks of the semester absorbing as much knowledge as possible from Ramos and observing how to serve students and families best.

"Rebecca is helping me learn the laws behind everything," Hearing said. "We go over what documents I need to stay in compliance and how much time I need to wait before I turn something in. I'm trying to be a sponge and soak in everything because she knows everything about being a transition specialist."

Added Ramos: "Sometimes I look through my pictures and think about how much I've learned and grown since I started at HCDE. I'm grateful to have had great administration and campus leaders who have seen things I didn't see in myself. I never in a million years thought people would be

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

Employee Spotlight



October Employee of the Month Rebecca Ramos facilitates meetings with teachers to streamline communication about student IEPs between administrators and district representatives.



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR VIDEO

**ANYBODY WHO CAN TAKE ON
THAT TITLE ALL BY HERSELF -
KUDOS TO YOU. HER SOUL IS
WORTH HER WEIGHT IN GOLD.
SHE'S AMAZING.**

asking me, 'Hey, can you help me with this?'"

Despite not being in the classroom, Ramos stays grounded in her philosophy of never giving up on her students. That's why she chooses to learn as much as she can and make students' transitions across campuses as smooth as possible. Because many of them have already experienced so much, she says, they deserve better.

"My biggest thing has always been building that rapport with the students," she described. "A student can sense when you truly care. A lot of them come to us with trauma, so in this job, you have to have a lot of heart. They see people come and go in their lives, but they need consistency and reassurance."

One of her favorite traditions at ABS East is the "clap out," where educators line the halls and celebrate students who can transition back to their home districts. It's a reminder that no matter the challenges or the amount of paperwork, she positively impacts the lives of children. It's also a humbling affirmation that those unexpected turns led her exactly where she was meant to be.

"It makes the job all worthwhile," Ramos smiled. "They come here to be loved on, cared for and fed positive vibes into their life, and when you see them return to their campus after everything they've overcome at East, it's truly amazing. I'm grateful to have played even the smallest role in their journey." 🌟

Board Briefs

FALL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS ALLOW OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PROVIDERS TO LEVEL UP FOR PROGRAMS

TO BETTER SERVE Harris County students who benefit from afterschool and out-of-school-time programming, the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids opened its Fall Professional Development Workshop series. The first workshop was held this week, giving program leaders the opportunity to gain insight, tools and a new sense of confidence in their positions.

On Oct. 3, emergency training was offered to community partners. With a certified Red Cross instructor, attendees learned immediate care procedures for cardiac, breathing and first aid emergencies. Those who successfully completed the course earned certification and access to a digital refresher course within two years of completion.

Nine training courses will be offered through December. The next (Oct. 10) will be drone training designed for students in grades 3-8. ★



Celebrating National Principals Month

SPECIAL SCHOOLS PRINCIPALS HONORED FOR LEADERSHIP, COMPASSION FOR STUDENTS

AT HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S four Special Schools are four visionary leaders who empower their students and staff every day and put their campus communities in positions to be successful. Travita Godfrey, Mercedes Love, Jatata Hutton and Courtney Waters are fearless leaders and champions for HCDE's mission to enrich educational opportunities.

As #TeamHCDE kicks off National Principals Month, which shines a spotlight on the transformational power of school principals each October, we celebrate their dedication and passion for education that shapes the future of students.

The Communications and Creative Services team will highlight the four principals during a campaign that includes a special video tribute and short quotable stories of staff talking about their campus leaders. The five-week campaign aims to recognize the group for their dedication to the unique needs of Harris County students, bring principals closer to the community and create awareness about HCDE's Special Schools.

Principals will also be recognized for their leadership and impact with a special video presentation at the Oct. 15 board meeting. ★



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR VIDEO

NUESTRA PALABRA PARTNERSHIP BRINGS POETRY AND RECOVERY TOGETHER AT FORTIS ACADEMY

FORTIS ACADEMY STUDENT JERRY GARZA was recently invited to share his poem, "What Love Means to a Chicano," at a local restaurant in front of a live audience. The piece, which explores love, emotion and Garza's struggle with addiction, marked the beginning of the school's partnership with Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say. Through the collaboration, students will use writing to reflect on their journey to sobriety, and several will be invited throughout the year to perform their work publicly. The initiative not only builds student confidence but also helps break down stigmas surrounding teen addiction and recovery. ★



CHECKMATE! HIGHPOINT SCHOOL PREPARES FOR HCDE'S ANNUAL CHESS TOURNAMENT



HIGHPOINT SCHOOL STUDENTS are sharpening their minds one move at a time. Chess Coach James Hudson recently met with middle and high schoolers to teach the fundamentals of the game, explore strategies and practice good sportsmanship. The group

will face off with students from each Special School campus at the 8th Annual Chess Tournament, which is hosted in the spring. The tournament allows students to put their hard work into action while building focus, critical thinking and confidence. ★

In the Community

HCDE LEADERS TEE UP FOR EDUCATION AT ALIEF ANNUAL GOLF TOURNAMENT



FORE! Harris County educators showed up and showed out at the Alief ISD Education Foundation Annual Golf Tournament on Sept. 29. Superintendent James Colbert Jr., Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment Dr. C.J. Rodgers, Assistant Superintendent for Academic

Support Services Jonathan Parker and Choice Partners Senior Director Jeff Drury hit the course at Sweetwater Country Club for a day of friendly competition while representing Harris County Department of Education. They networked with local district representatives, shared insight into division resources and built community support while helping raise more than \$135,000 for Alief ISD students and staff. ★



MARKETING TEAM REPRESENTS HCDE AT LANGUAGE AND HEALTH SYMPOSIUM



HCDE TRANSLATIONS COORDINATOR Wendy Utterback and Marketing Coordinator Peyton Keene represented the Department at the Second Annual Language and Health Symposium on Oct. 1. Hosted by the University of Houston-Downtown and Houston Interpreters and Translators Association to coincide with International Translators' Day, the event brought together language service providers, healthcare professionals and educators.

Breakout sessions featured topics that included medical interpreting, cultural competence with AI tools, interpreter training and program development. A "Meet the Translator/Interpreter" luncheon connected professionals and community partners. HCDE sponsored a table at the symposium, and Utterback and Keene shared Department services and resources to best serve Harris County learners.

Supporting initiatives like the symposium strengthen language access, empowers interpreters and translators, and helps improve outcomes for diverse communities. ★

EDUCATION FOUNDATION CONTINUES PARTNERSHIP WITH PASADENA ISD AT DONOR APPRECIATION BREAKFAST

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (HCDE) Chief of Staff Danielle Bartz and Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva attended the Pasadena Independent School District Education Foundation Donor Appreciation Breakfast on Sept. 30. The event featured food prepared and served by district culinary arts students, student performances, remarks from Superintendent Dr. Toni Lopez, and interactive stations highlighting small grant projects made possible through donors and partners, including the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC). HCDE's philanthropic arm has supported Pasadena ISD with funding for initiatives such as making AP Tests affordable for college hopefuls, Power Up! classroom charging stations and tornado relief for district families. Since 2020, EFHC has contributed \$75,000 in grant funding to Pasadena ISD, fueling innovation and support for students and educators. ★



WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for September! Ten new faces have joined our Adult Education, CASE for Kids, Facilities, Head Start, School-Based Therapy Services and Special Schools divisions.



Aimee Aranda
Family Services Provider
Head Start



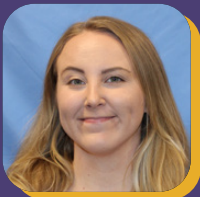
Ildefons Barrientos
Program Assistant
Adult Education



Jasmeen Cavazos
Teacher
Head Start



Valeria Claps
Occupational Therapy Assistant
School-Based Therapy Services



Taylor Hagness
Nutrition Services Manager
Head Start



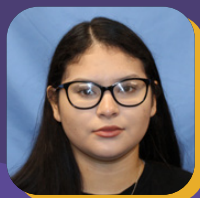
Earika Jackson
Cook
Head Start



Shantal Lugo-Portillo
*Construction Environmental
Specialist*
Facilities



Sasha Medina
*Afterschool Program
Specialist*
CASE for Kids



Marta Ortiz
Early Child Teacher
Head Start



Carol Salas
Relief Instructor
ABS West

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE C: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

- Encourages, oversees and participates in staff recognition activities.



October Employee of the Month Rebecca Ramos, a transition specialist at ABS East, takes a break from meetings and paperwork to spend lunch with students, connect with them, and personally check their progress.

GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND is part of the mission we have at HCDE and it's reflected in the work seen from staff members all across Harris County. In our Special Schools, #TeamHCDE works closely with students to put them in positions to be successful. The October Employee of the Month – Transition Specialist Rebecca Ramos from Academic and Behavior School East – is a former life skills teacher who quickly established herself as an outstanding educator and advocate for Harris County learners. In just a short amount of time, Ramos has become the beacon of light for families through her warmth and positivity. I enjoyed reading her story and hope all who hear it will share the same feeling as Ramos is honored this month.

This week also kicked off National Principals Month. It's no secret my experience as a campus principal is what I pull from the most now as a superintendent. Principals are the pillars and driving force on their respective campuses, and for our four leaders, they do an exceptional job of setting the tone at their schools. Our principals set the climate and culture for our students and staff and I'm extremely proud of the work they do every day. To help celebrate them this year, the Communications and Creative Services team put together a video showing the Department's appreciation for the work of these servant leaders. We will also hear from staff

members who work with our principals every day, highlighting again just what makes them the perfect candidates to be charged with leading a campus.

Finally, our schools are busy and I enjoy hearing the stories of all the good things happening at our four campuses. At Highpoint, students are already preparing for HCDE's Eighth Annual Chess Tournament. Mind you, the tournament isn't until the spring, so for Chess Coach James Hudson to already have students learning the fundamentals and exploring game strategies, it speaks volumes. I normally play the winner of the tournament so maybe my future opponent is getting ready over at Highpoint. Another achievement we're celebrating is Fortis Academy student Jerry Garza recently sharing his poem at a local community partner event in front of a live audience. I appreciate his courage to share his gift but also his vulnerability to share his emotions and struggles with addiction. Thank you Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say for its collaboration with our students and helping build them up while breaking down stigmas.

By encouraging and overseeing staff recognition events and activities, I am establishing a culture among the staff so everyone strives toward excellence and does not accept mediocre performance. ★



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Amy Hinojosa

1st Vice President
Richard Cantu

2nd Vice President
Dr. Erica Davis

Board Members
Eric Dick
Andrea Duhon
Silky Joshi
Dr. John McGee

UPCOMING EVENTS

October 8
[Choice Partners Nutrition Show](#)

October 15
Board Meeting

October 24
[Healthy Minds, Healthy Families Conference](#)

October 29
[Head Start Awareness Month Community Celebration](#)

November 4
Election Day

November 19
Board Meeting