

# the CONNECTOR



**#TEAMHCDE HONORS ITS BEST OF 2024-2025  
AT CELEBRATION OF EXCELLENCE P.3**

**GRADUATES CELEBRATED AT  
ABS WEST, FORTIS ACADEMY P.6**

**BOARD OF TRUSTEES ELECT PRESIDENT,  
VICE PRESIDENTS FOR 2025 P.9**



# of Note

**ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE** is the way a company does things. It's the systems, protocols and atmosphere that are prevalent throughout the organization at all levels. But creating a positive culture and climate in the workplace is not an accidental feat. It takes intentional and purposeful thought behind every decision and action.

So when we set out to create a culture of appreciation, celebration and family at HCDE a few years ago, we did so with specific outcomes in mind. I am proud to say we have not only met but exceeded the goals we originally established.

Our annual Celebration of Excellence, which we held this week, exemplifies HCDE's culture. It showcases our family atmosphere while focusing on celebrating accomplishments and honoring the hard work of staff. As we recognized 40 employees from our five instructional divisions – many of whom brought their families to the dinner – we demonstrated that HCDE's culture is genuine and authentic. I am proud that the administration's efforts to create a positive working environment have resulted in something far beyond what we imagined five years ago. More than just celebrating staff and the work of the organization, we have created a legacy that will live on for many years through the impression made on employees and their families.

I started the week at the Kinder Institute Luncheon followed by dinner in Huntsville in anticipation of my presentation at Huntsville ISD. On Tuesday, I presented "Leadership Ethos" to about 40 Huntsville ISD administrators giving insight into the joys and challenges of school leadership. On Wednesday, I met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives before attending the Board Public Relations Committee to discuss the Adolescent Addiction Awareness Campaign. After this I attended the regular Board Meeting before emceeing the Celebration of Excellence that evening. On Thursday, I supported the Education Foundation's fundraiser by having lunch at Smashburger followed by standing meetings with ELT staff. Today, I met with ELT staff for my regular updates before attending the Fortis Academy Graduation.

All HCDE facilities will be closed Monday for the Memorial Day holiday. Have a great three-day weekend.



**JAMES COLBERT, JR.**  
County Superintendent



# Program Connections



*School-Based Therapy Services award honorees pose for a photo with division Senior Director Carie Crabb, left, and members of the HCDE leadership team.*

## HCDE LEADERS HONOR OUTSTANDING EMPLOYEES AT CELEBRATION OF EXCELLENCE BANQUET

**A** **S HONORED GUESTS** and their family members poured into the Irvington Conference Center on May 21, the smiles grew bigger and the laughter grew louder. They came together for Harris County Department of Education's third annual Celebration of Excellence banquet. The end-of-year staff recognition event honors employees for their achievements and commitments to serve the greater Houston area and empower Harris County students and their families throughout the school year.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr. welcomed celebration attendees with opening remarks recognizing the work the honorees do alongside their teammates, and HCDE's ability to provide exceptional work throughout Harris County.

"With awards, you don't go find it – it finds you," Colbert said. "You do the work first and then that little award or recognition will seek you out, catch you and bring you to the light. So just know that every single person who will be coming up is one of many very special people in Harris County Department of Education, but for whatever reason they were chosen and selected for something special."

Forty employees from HCDE's five instructional divisions – Adult Education, Head Start, Special Schools, School-Based Therapy Services and the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids – and the 2024-2025 Employees of the

Month were recognized at the event and received a certificate of appreciation and gift in front of colleagues, teammates and loved ones.

Merevonna Ross-Daniel, the campus manager at Compton Head Start, said employee recognition and appreciation events like Celebration of Excellence are impactful and a powerful reminder of the quality work being done to best serve Harris County students. She was named the Head Start division Campus Manager of the Year, starting with HCDE as a teaching assistant before

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*Dr. Margaret Patton (standing) speaks with Celebration of Excellence guests before the ceremony.*



# Program Connections

climbing the ranks through her career.

"I love this and that's why I've been a part of it for so long," said Ross-Daniel, who is in her 23rd year with the Department. "From the very beginning I've felt that family atmosphere. I feel that family is important and it's in everything you do. And if you keep it in everything you do, you will excel."

For some honorees, it was a small token of acknowledgement for the work being done every day. For others, it was a chance to hear just how valued they are to the Department's mission – Colbert personally thanked employees before posing for a photo.

Jasmine Castleberry, a federal programs and compliance manager for CASE for Kids, had the unique opportunity to play both roles at the ceremony. She was honored as HCDE's April Employee of the Month but also represented her division and took the microphone to honor four deserving CASE for Kids employees.

"It's important to know that when we're coming to work, we're working with people we love, we respect and we have good relationships with," Castleberry said. "And relationships matter when you're trying to do work of the heart. We're trying to impact students, their families and their communities, and in return, we are also feeling that same impact too."

"So, when we come to work, it's important that we pour into each other and support and uplift each other. That is what families do."

As the evening ended, Colbert thanked employees for continuously choosing to be a part of #TeamHCDE.

Their commitment to serving Harris County students, their families and stakeholders not only makes those experiences better but also lifts everyday life in Houston.

"We have talented people. I mean super talented and we're proud of it," Colbert said to the families and loved ones. "You indeed are truly their family but just know that when they come to work, they come to their other family."

"We are tight, we are tough, we are fearless, we are sincere, we are advocates, we are champions for children, we are educators, we are professionals, and I love every single one of you." ✨

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Adult Education Clerk Mary Vargas (holding program) poses with family members for a photo.



Ashley Ford, sitting, smiles for a photo with Head Start Assistant Director Gulshan Rahman. Ford was named the division's Administrative Support Staff Member of the Year.



Broderick Wyatt, left, poses with Superintendent James Colbert Jr. Wyatt was honored as Highpoint School's Teacher of the Year nominee.



# Program Connections







## SPECIAL SCHOOLS GRADUATIONS HIGHLIGHT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND RESILIENCE

**MAY IS A SPECIAL TIME FOR STUDENTS** who have completed the academic requirements for graduation. It marks the closing of one chapter and the start of another.

This week, Academic and Behavioral School (ABS) West and Fortis Academy welcomed families and friends to celebrate the accomplishments of nearly 20 Harris County students combined.

Vibrant music set the atmosphere at ABS West as guests gathered to support students who face severe physical, mental or behavioral challenges. Ten graduates crossed the stage on May 22 to the sound of cheers as each earned his or her moment in the spotlight.

These students were referred to Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), which offers individualized learning in highly structured classrooms. They found a second home where kids learn to trust educators who empowered them with necessary skills to regulate their emotions. Those with disabilities gained essential skills like communication, self-advocacy and financial literacy in the Adult Transition Program, preparing for life beyond the classroom.

Representing several independent school districts across Harris County, including Alief, Spring and Houston, the students beamed with pride throughout the day. Educators and families alike were emotional as they witnessed a culminating moment for which these scholars worked tirelessly.

"It feels great to provide students a traditional graduation ceremony with all the fanfare that goes with this event," ABS West Principal Jatata Hutton said. "We always strive to celebrate students who work hard to achieve their academic and behavioral goals, and I'm just proud to be a part of their lives and experiences here."

Principal Travita Godfrey hailed Fortis Academy scholars as an inspiration at their ceremony on May 23. The gymnasium was transformed into a commemorative space with decorations and tables housing families, friends and local district representatives who pulled out their phones to capture the moment graduates appeared in their regalia.

"I'm so proud and excited for these graduates to move on in a positive way and explore the many opportunities available to

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# Board Briefs



TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR ABS WEST PHOTO GALLERY](#)



TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

them,” Godfrey said. “This is an accomplishment, and we have worked together with these students and their families to overcome stigma and labels. We are grateful that our students can see themselves in a new brighter light and we want to honor them.”

All eight graduates attended Fortis to gain and maintain sobriety from alcohol and substance abuse. Administrators implement counseling and recovery coaching throughout the academic day to ensure students can continue their

education in a sober environment. Students also learn to express themselves healthily through the school’s culinary arts program. Skills from the kitchen can be applied to daily life or future employment opportunities.

Administrators work closely with representatives from students’ home districts to ensure they receive the necessary credits, and smaller class sizes allow for additional credits per semester.

This resulted in three students who

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# Board Briefs



graduated a year early and two a semester early.

After graduates received their diplomas, culinary education certificates and special awards, attendees were treated to an Italian-inspired meal.

These graduations remind us of the unique challenges each student who attends one of HCDE's Special Schools faces. More importantly, they highlight the strength, resilience and determination of Harris County students who continuously prove that they can write the next chapter of their story. ✨



KNIGHTS



FORTIS ACADEMY



# Board Briefs

## HCDE JOINS KINDER INSTITUTE IN CELEBRATING AGENCY'S 15TH ANNIVERSARY AT LUNCHEON

**FOR 15 YEARS**, the Kinder Institute has been a cornerstone in addressing issues in greater Houston and providing practical solutions. The agency celebrated this milestone anniversary at its annual luncheon, held May 19 at the Hilton Americas.

Harris County Department of Education was well represented at the event, with Superintendent James Colbert Jr., Assistant Superintendent of Education and Enrichment Dr. CJ Rodgers and Board Trustee Richard Cantu joined by members of the Research and Evaluation Institute: Director Yolanda Pyrtle and Coordinators Tracy Yager, Dr. Jesus Campos and Aansa Usmani.

Luncheon attendees were the first to learn results from the institute's 44th Kinder Houston Area Survey, which provides a picture of attitudes, perspectives and experiences of Houstonians across Harris, Fort Bend and Montgomery counties. 🌟



## BOARD OF TRUSTEES ELECT NEW PRESIDENT, OFFICERS FOR 2025

**DURING THE MAY BOARD OF TRUSTEES MEETING**, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) welcomed Trustee Amy Hinojosa back to the center seat of the dais as the re-elected board president.

"I am grateful to President Hinojosa for her service these last 12 months and her continued advocacy for HCDE," Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said. "She is committed to ensuring Harris County students of all ages have the tools and resources necessary to succeed."

Trustee Richard Cantu will join Hinojosa as the First Vice President and Trustee Erica Davis will serve another term as second vice president.

#TeamHCDE looks forward to beginning this new chapter of educational excellence and service to learners. 🌟



**Board President**  
Amy Hinojosa



**1st Vice President**  
Richard Cantu



**2nd Vice President**  
Erica Davis



## ABS WEST LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR LIFELONG SUCCESS AT ANNUAL FIELD DAY



TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

**VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY**

**NO HARD HATS WERE IN SIGHT**, but Academic and Behavior School West students were working hard and having fun at Field Day on May 23. The event embraced an “Under Construction” theme, inspired by the continuous efforts of scholars to overcome their behavioral, physical or mental challenges. Classes practiced behavioral strategies and coping mechanisms learned throughout the academic year by participating in activities like bounce houses, obstacle courses, face painting and more. Rooted in laughs and fun, each activity was also designed to help students work together, solve problems that arose throughout the day, and communicate

with peers and teachers to express their needs or seek guidance. Educators reinforced positive behavior by rewarding students with points or tickets that were used to redeem prizes and fun treats. After working up an appetite, classes enjoyed a hearty spread of hot dogs, hamburgers, popcorn and snow cones. Field Day reinforces Special Schools’ commitment to nurturing growth, resilience and positive behavior that empowers students to build a strong foundation of skills needed to become successful adults. Because when you think about it, we are always “Under Construction.” 🌟





## EDUCATION FOUNDATION SUPPORTS NEW STAFFORD ACADEMY PLAYGROUND, HOLDS LOCAL FUNDRAISER



TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

**AS THE SCHOOL YEAR WINDS DOWN**, Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva continues connecting Harris County Department of Education's philanthropic arm with community partners.

On May 15, she was on hand as Stafford Municipal School District officially cut the ribbon on a brand-new playground at its STEM Magnet Academy. Among the funding and support that made the project possible included a \$10,000 Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) Partners in Education Grant awarded in 2023. The academy serves students in grades 3-9

and is the first of its kind in Fort Bend County.

On May 22, Silva led an EFHC fundraiser with community partner Smashburger at its Yale St. location. Throughout the day, 20% of meals purchased at that location were donated to the EFHC to support grants, scholarships and teacher supplies. Silva met with patrons and community partners from HCDE, Houston Police Department, City of Houston, METRO, Methodist Foundation, Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, Harris County Precinct 4 and more, highlighting foundation initiatives and services to Harris County school districts 🌟



# Systemic Achievement: With Purposeful Intent

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

### SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATION MORALE

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellence.



*Award honorees from Head Start pose for photo with members of the HCDE leadership team.*

**MANY HAVE HEARD ME SAY** that Harris County Department of Education is the best organization I've worked for, and one of the main reasons is because of our dedicated employees. From those working with students at the Head Start campuses and the Adult Education Learning Center, to the numerous CASE for Kids site and program coordinators working with children across Harris County, to those from our support divisions providing top-notch services to our employees. At the annual Celebration of Excellence banquet this week, leadership paid tribute to our exceptional team members and recognized them for their outstanding work. This celebration is an opportunity to highlight the contributions from #TeamHCDE members across our five instructional divisions in addition to recognizing our Employees of the Month from the past year. It's even more meaningful knowing the room was filled with family members beaming with pride for their loved ones. I am very thankful to all these honored employees for being the standard bearers for our organization.

Graduation season continued this week as we watched Fortis Academy students overcome adversity to accomplish the goal of receiving their diplomas and ABS West students reach their full potential academically. As Harris County's only public recovery school, Fortis Academy

empowers high school students on their journeys to sobriety through supportive staff and resourceful career opportunities, including through our culinary arts program and Certified Nursing Assistant class. At our Academic and Behavior Schools, passionate educators combine with supportive families to provide a learning environment for students who may not have the structure needed in their home school districts. It's an honor to celebrate these graduates and I look forward to hearing more about their success stories.

Finally, thank you to everyone who participated in our latest fundraiser for the Education Foundation of Harris County. As HCDE's philanthropic arm, the foundation generates support for educational programs and initiatives in Harris County's 25 school districts. Patrons who purchased meals from Smashburger's Yale St. location on May 22 had 20% of their order donated to the EFHC. These funds will directly impact Harris County learners, as we recently saw at the Stafford STEM Magnet Academy on May 15. EFHC Director Trina Silva attended a ribbon cutting ceremony for their new playground, a project made possible with funds from an EFHC Partners in Education Grant.

By promoting the accomplishments and great work of staff, I am meeting the expectation to establish a culture of excellence at HCDE. ★



### HCDE BOARD

**Board President**  
Amy Hinojosa

**1st Vice President**  
Richard Cantu

**2nd Vice President**  
Erica Davis

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

### UPCOMING EVENTS

**May 26**  
Memorial Day  
(HCDE Closed)

**May 29**  
ABS West Transition Fair

**June 4**  
Adult Education Signing Day

Center for Safe and Secure  
Schools Thriving Not Just  
Surviving: Celebrating  
Professional Counselors  
Symposium

**June 11-14**  
TASB Summer Leadership  
Institute (San Antonio)

**June 18**  
Board Meeting

**June 19**  
Juneteenth (HCDE Closed)

**June 21**  
Adult Education Graduation