



Harris County
Department of
Education

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the CONNECTOR



**ADULT EDUCATION GRADUATES READY TO TURN TASSELS,
MOVE TO NEXT STEP IN EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS P.3**

**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PREPARES WITH
'BOOTS ON THE GROUND' P.6**

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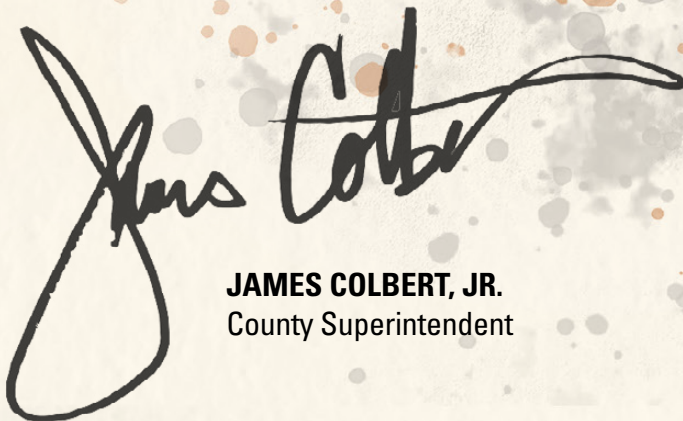
of Note

I OFTEN SAY that students in our Adult Education High School Equivalency (formerly GED) program have grit. For these students, sometimes life gets in the way of their academics. When that happens, they have to dig down and find the courage to get back in the race, face life's challenges and continue on their educational path to better their futures. The stories these students tell when they finally cross the finish line are often full of heartache and adversity but end in success with the help of their teachers and family. It's a true rollercoaster for many!

This week we hear from three Adult Education HSE graduates who tell their stories of perseverance and dedication. In these instances, the students were set to give up on completing their high school education but they knew they stood as role models for their families and ultimately, the faith of their families inspired them to keep going. On Saturday, they join more than 100 of their fellow students in receiving their high school diploma at the Adult Education graduation ceremony. Now, their path forward has so many more opportunities and options. It is always heartwarming to hear the stories of our Adult Education graduates and the trials they faced and overcame to achieve their goal of finishing their education. Many of them plan to continue their learning with workforce classes, training or college. I am proud of the doors that HCDE's Adult Education program opens for members of our community and look forward to seeing many more graduates cross that stage and head into their future full of hope that anything is possible if they just stick with it.

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by meetings with ELT members and a UIL State Executive Committee meeting that afternoon. On Tuesday, I met with Dr. Rodney Watson, executive director of Region 4 to discuss potential future collaborations followed by Convocation planning meetings. On Wednesday, I continued my semi-annual meetings with members of the Leadership Team, met with TASB about teacher compensation plans and attended the PFC and regular board meetings.

I am out of the office until Tuesday. Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Dr. Eduardo Honold, Adult Education senior director, welcomes guests to the 2024 Adult Education graduation ceremony.

ADULT EDUCATION GRADUATES TAKE THE FIRST STEP TO THEIR SECOND CHANCE

WITH MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ROAMING THE PLANET, there is no “one way” to get an education. Some finish school early, while others take a break, jump into the workforce and return at a later time. Regardless of the path, challenges are expected.

On June 21, more than 100 adults who courageously chose to return to the classroom will turn the tassel on a new chapter — one where they hold a diploma or the skills needed to advance their careers. Through Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) Adult Education program, students of all backgrounds found a place to grow, learn and reclaim opportunity after earning their High School Equivalency diploma (HSE), formerly GED.

“Everybody has their own different story,” said Adult Education Program Manager Bill Medina. “Students come here to get their diplomas and improve their lives with a better job or promotion. Everybody has gone through obstacles and challenges throughout life, but they come here for a second chance.”

Unlike a traditional graduation, age is only a number in Adult Education. Students like Rodolfa Saucedo, a 59-year-

old daycare instructor, are welcomed with open arms and encouraged to pursue their dreams boldly.

“My goal is to get into college and study more,” Saucedo said.

Her journey to graduation began unexpectedly while attending church.

“I was at the Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church where they announced that Lee College offered ESL classes through HCDE,” Saucedo recalled. “I would come for the ESL classes because it was always a goal of mine to learn English.”

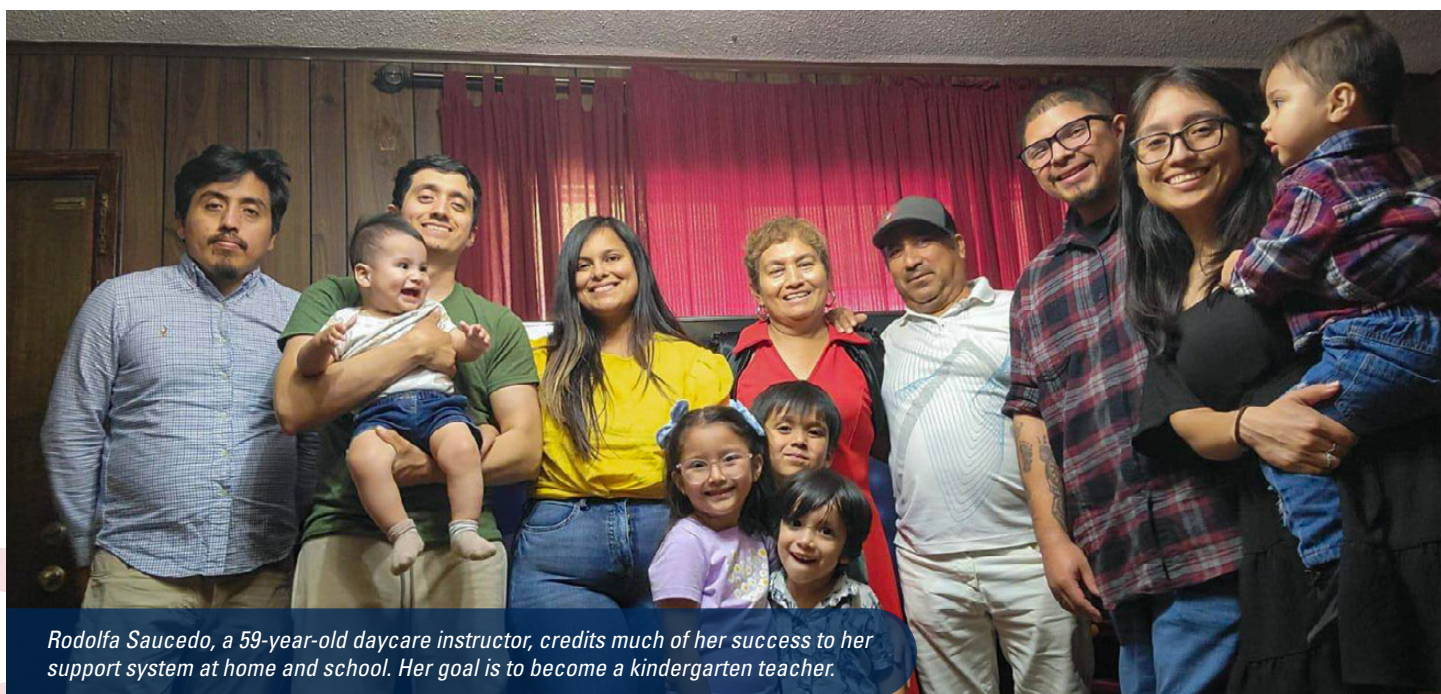
When HCDE began offering HSE courses in Spanish, Saucedo saw an opportunity to fulfill her dream of becoming a kindergarten teacher.

“I’m so proud of Rodolfa, she is a hard worker who never gives up and is an example for everybody in my class,” said Anamilena McDonald, an HSE teacher. “But this course is also an excellent opportunity for many Spanish speakers who want to improve their education.”

Balancing school and work wasn’t easy, but Saucedo remained focused. With every assignment and test, she moved one step closer to the classroom she hopes to lead one day.

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Program Connections



Rodolfa Saucedo, a 59-year-old daycare instructor, credits much of her success to her support system at home and school. Her goal is to become a kindergarten teacher.

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"I feel excellent because apart from teaching us really well, they encourage us to move forward and excel," Saucedo smiled. "Thank you to HCDE for opening these classes for all of us. The important thing for students is to dedicate themselves, focus on their studies, and say, 'Yes, I can!'"

Like Saucedo, Babyline Benoit proves that perseverance has no expiration date.

She moved to the United States from the island of St. Lucia to seek medical care for her daughter. Benoit is a trained dental assistant, but starting in a new country meant she had to rebuild from the ground up.

"I left my whole family, my house, everything back home," Benoit described. "In the process, I went through a lot of hardship, including homelessness, but I didn't let that prevent me from doing what I wanted to do. After getting my kids settled, I decided to get my HSE, and they helped motivate me."

Benoit was determined to show her children that anything is possible with hard work and dedication. On the first day of classes, her instructor, Audrey Nelson, clarified that students would need to remain focused on their goals to succeed in the Adult Education setting, as it vastly differs from a traditional classroom.

"Most of my students who have children expect our programs to be like K-12, and so that is a little bit of a harder transition for them in the beginning," said Nelson, who has worked in Adult Education for more than 20 years. "They must be independent and take responsibility for their learning. Students can look at me all day and say, 'I want it,' but if they don't do the work, it's not going to happen."

Taking that message to heart, Benoit did everything she could to gain her diploma, from buying school supplies and study books to researching help on the internet. It wasn't long before she cashed in the vouchers provided by HCDE to take the HSE practice and final tests.

"I passed everything on the first try because I studied really hard," Benoit

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5



Babyline Benoit moved to the United States from the island of St. Lucia and decided to get her HSE to resume her career as a dental assistant.

Program Connections



Babyline Benoit celebrates passing her HSE test and receiving her certificate with Adult Education Teacher Audrey Nelson.

said. "I went on YouTube and did whatever I could to help me pass because I wanted to finish it. And here I am, with my HSE, on my way to college to become a dental assistant again."

Despite adjusting to a new country, Benoit's determination and belief in lifelong learning now serves as an example to her peers and children.

"Nothing is impossible," she smiled. "Don't let anybody tell you that you cannot do it. Don't let your mind tell you that you cannot do it; go ahead! Put your whole self into it if that is really what you want to do."

For Nereida Rivero, she decided to get her HSE as a strategic step toward professional growth. She currently works as a custodian at a middle school in Pasadena Independent School District, but before moving to the United States from Venezuela, she held a professional position. Now, she aspires for more.

"It's important to follow the educational lines of the country you're in," she said. "It is important to grow professionally and personally, and it gives you better job opportunities. It is good to dedicate time to yourself. It is good to grow; it is good to read. Information is good."

Rivero took on her educational journey alongside her daughter. Together, they tackled each lesson, spending hours reviewing materials, encouraging each other and holding one another accountable.

"It has been an emotional ride because you have to challenge yourself," Rivero recalled. "You say, 'I've done it once, I can do it again. I am 53 years old, but who cares?' Your brain has a great way of remembering things, and it did."

**“NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE.
DON'T LET ANYBODY TELL YOU
THAT YOU CANNOT DO IT.”**



Nereida Rivero studied to get her high school equivalency diploma with her daughter. They spent hours reviewing materials, encouraging each other and holding one another accountable.

Added Medina: "One of the things that we like to do is encourage the students not to give up. Once they're in the Adult Education classes, they have already taken the first step with us, and the next step is not to stop and continue the path to higher education or career advancement."

No matter their starting point, as the graduates prepare to turn their tassel on June 21, they also carry the knowledge they've gained and the confidence to keep moving forward.

"These moments mean the world to us," Medina smiles. "I've been with HCDE for more than 20 years and have seen many graduations. Every year it gets better! We take pride in it at Adult Education because we're here to support people who need our help." 🌟

Board Briefs



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

WITH 'BOOTS ON THE GROUND,' SCHOOLS DIVISION PLANS STRATEGICALLY FOR CONTINUED IMPACT

THE LAST DAY of the 2024-2025 school year for Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) four Special Schools was June 5, and less than two weeks later, campus administration teams and division leadership were already busy at work prepping for next fall.

"You win championships in the offseason," said Dr. CJ Rodgers, assistant superintendent of Education and Enrichment.

With the theme, "Boots on the Ground: On Mission," leaders from both Academic and Behavior Schools, Highpoint School and Fortis Academy spent the day setting goals, assessing data

and preparing professional development.

"The fact that you guys just let out of school and are already thinking and planning on making next school year better speaks to the level of leadership that's in this room," Rodgers said.

Each section had its own special title, from the "Rodeo Roundup" opening activity to the "Ranch Hand Roundtable" and "Wrangler Wisdom Workshop." And of course, attendees dressed the part with boots and jeans.

The day ended with each campus putting together a plant bed, with each handpicked plant representing traits such as positivity, endurance and peace. 🌟

SCHOOL-BASED THERAPY SERVICES ATTENDS STATE AND NATIONAL CONFERENCES

MEMBERS OF Harris County Department of Education's School-Based Therapy Services division recently attended state and national conferences to gain insight into the latest developments in education policy and research, and innovations in therapy practice. Members attended the Innovation in School-Based Physical Therapy Practice Conference in Phoenix, Ariz. Additionally, therapists Nora Contreras and Kristen Ewing led sessions at the 2025 OT and PT Service Delivery in Schools: Policy, Research and Best Practices Conference June 13-14 in Austin, Texas. 🌟



Board Briefs



BUSINESS SERVICES SHOWCASES TOP PRACTICES AT ACCOUNTING IN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S (HCDE) award-winning Business Services division continues to be on the forefront as an industry leader. That includes recent presentations at the National Association of Accounting Education third annual conference on June 12-14 in Austin.

Dr. Jesus Amezcua, assistant superintendent of Business Services; Edna Johnson, director of Procurement; and Marcia Levia, chief accounting officer collaborated on the joint presentations. They trained school districts

on auditing procedures, as well as audit firms and certified public accountants who sought professional development on auditing districts. The sessions covered risk assessment protocols, purchase card processes and best practices, and the audit process for a procurement department.

Among the positive feedback, Amezcua said, was an auditor noting he had not seen any internal controls like HCDE's best practices. ✨

CASE FOR KIDS TEAM REPRESENTS AT OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME INITIATIVES CONFERENCE

NEARLY 20 TEAM MEMBERS from the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids division attended the Out-of-School-Time Initiatives Conference (OSTI-CON) in Fort Worth on June 11-13. CASE for Kids staff also led two presentations for fellow industry professionals.

OSTI-CON is one of the nation's leading conferences for out-of-school-time and expanded learning professionals. Attendees participate in professional development activities and networking to best serve youth within their programs.

CASE for Kids regional program coordinators Keanda Fuller and Melvin Meade led a session titled, "Mentorship in Motion: Navigating the Path to Excellence." The duo previously teamed up for this presentation in March at the National AfterSchool Association conference, highlighting the impact of mentoring, fostering relationships and long-term engagement in shaping youth.

Site Coordinator Nora Tejada led a presentation titled, "What Now? Empowering Post-Secondary Success Through



Career Readiness." The session highlighted tangible college and career readiness strategies and how to incorporate those tools and resources into afterschool programs. ✨

Board Briefs

EDUCATION KEEPS US MOVING FORWARD AS HCDE REFLECTS JUNETEENTH SIGNIFICANCE

FREEDOM WAS ANNOUNCED for enslaved African Americans in Texas on June 19, 1865, but equality was yet to come. This week, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) commemorated Juneteenth with a video tribute highlighting the role of education in the continuous journey to equality for Black Americans. Created by the Communications and Creative Services division, it emphasizes how education represented a gateway to freedom, autonomy and opportunity. Schools became a foundation for progress, allowing Black Americans to pursue economic independence, civic participation and leadership within their communities. HCDE honors that legacy by supporting lifelong learners and equitable access to education for all. 🌟



CHOICE PARTNERS SUPPORTS TOP VENDOR AT ANNUAL LABATT FOOD SHOW



CHOICE PARTNERS national purchasing cooperative team members traveled to San Antonio on June 18 to attend the Labatt Food Services Annual Food Show and Gala and support Choice Partner's top food vendor and trusted business partner. Assistant Director Trisha Prestigiacomo, Food Contracts Manager Ashlee Kane and Food Contracts Coordinator Monica Niles attended the events.

The food show featured more than 130 vendors and manufacturers separated into nine categories that included beverages, proteins, dairy, grocery, nonfood and chemicals, and condiments and sauces. Also featured were Labatt's in-house services, including Labatt Produce, Labatt Beverage and Direct Source Meats.

Labatt Food Services was recognized as Choice Partners' top food vendor each of the last three years. 🌟

In the Community



EDUCATION FOUNDATION DIRECTOR NETWORKS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS AT AREA EVENTS



TRINA SILVA, Education Foundation and Partnerships Director, attended recent community events, continuing to build relationships and share how Harris County Department of Education's philanthropic arm best serves the Houston area.

On June 11, Silva attended Frost Bank's Small Talk Expo at the University of Houston. The event was designed to connect and empower small business owners with resources and future partnership opportunities. It included a vendor and resource fair, and educational breakout sessions.

She attended the Hispanic Health Coalition Scholarship Recognition Luncheon on June 17. Held at the Junior League of Houston, the reception honored the organization's scholarship recipients. The coalition aims to advance health outcomes and equity for the region's Hispanic community through initiatives, education and advocacy. 🌟



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TEAM BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS AT LOCAL QUARTERLY MEETINGS

HCDE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR AVERY SPRANGER and Specialist Arnaldo Sandoval-Guerrero recently attended and hosted meetings to share insights, strategies and collaborative possibilities to better serve their respective stakeholders.

On June 5, they attended a Voter Engagement Working Group meeting through Houston in Action. A quarterly meeting, the all-day summit included training sessions on building relationships to help promote better voter turnout and capturing and interpreting data.

On June 9, Spranger and Sandoval-Guerrero hosted their counterparts from area Harris County school districts for the Civic Engagement Coalition meeting. Representatives from Spring and Aldine independent school districts attended, as they discussed upcoming local elections, messaging with constitutional amendments on the state ballot, cohosting candidate forums and best practices in student outreach and



evaluation. The three organizations are joined by Houston and Alief ISD in receiving Houston Endowment grant funding for civic engagement staffing and initiatives. 🌟

Systemic Achievement: With Purposeful Intent

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE G: PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

- Ensures that appropriate staff development is available and monitors staff development for effectiveness.



The Academic and Behavior School West administration team poses with their plant bed on June 17 to end the Special Schools leadership retreat.

THIS WEEK, we'll celebrate more than 100 graduates from our Adult Education program and watch them cross the stage to receive their High School Equivalency diplomas in front of loved ones and HCDE staff. This event is one of our most meaningful, as it reminds us that each of these students has their own story, including obstacles and adversity, as well as triumph as they reach the finish line. Each year, we learn of new stories from students, but many have the same emotions. The heartache of missed opportunities. The conviction to start adult education classes to change their circumstances. The determination to see it all the way through. My hearty congratulations to the entire Adult Education Class of 2025. No matter your age or circumstance, #TeamHCDE is grateful to have played a small role in your educational journey.

During the summer months, a number of state and national associations and organizations hold their annual conferences, which means #TeamHCDE will be traveling to these meetings for professional development and networking opportunities. What you'll also see is on many occasions, our division leaders and team members leading sessions and presenting at conferences, sharing best practices here at HCDE and showcasing how we're leading the way to support Harris Country students and their families. Members of the School-Based Therapy Services division

presented at the Texas Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. conference this week, while the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids team led two sessions at the Out-of-School Time Initiatives Conference in Fort Worth. Dr. Jesus Amezcua and his Business Services team presented on auditing procedures at the National Association of Accounting Education conference. These presentations reinforce the fact that we employ industry leaders here at HCDE.

Finally, our Special Schools division had their "Boots on the Ground" this week at Irvington for its leadership retreat. With another school year in the books, this was a time to not only celebrate the accomplishments of serving our students but also look ahead and devise a strategic plan for continuous improvement and impact. I don't want HCDE to be an organization that will rest on its laurels. Instead, let's be audacious, build on our successes and learn from our missteps to better serve our stakeholders and continue pushing forward. Our Special Schools team members participated in a full day of activities, workshops and fun – all with a rodeo and cowboy twist.

By making and communicating staff development opportunities to HCDE team members, I am working to establish a culture that all strive to achieve excellence and do not accept mediocre performance. 🌟



HCDE BOARD

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1st Vice President
Richard Cantu

2nd Vice President
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Board Members
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Andrea Duhon
Silky Joshi
John McGee, Ph.D.

UPCOMING EVENTS

June 21
Adult Education Graduation

June 25-29
Annual Recovery Schools Conference

July 4
Independence Day (HCDE Closed)

July 16
Board Meeting

July 24
Professional Translators and Interpreters Conference (PTIC)

August 8
Convocation

August 20
Board Meeting

September 1
Labor Day (HCDE Closed)