



Harris County
Department of
Education

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the CONNECTOR



DANIELLE CLARK EARNS NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR LEADERSHIP, MENTORSHIP IN SCHOOL PR P.3

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HOUSTON CHEF SHARES JOURNEY, COOKING WITH FORTIS STUDENT P.8

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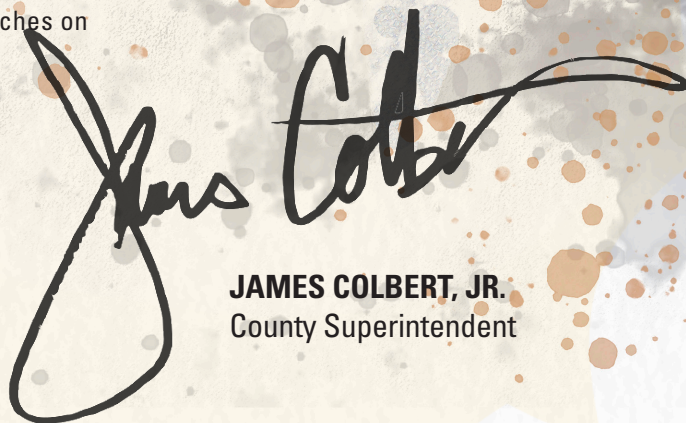
MENTORSHIP HAS ALWAYS been close to my heart. I've been fortunate to learn from some truly remarkable mentors throughout my career, and I continue to pay it forward by guiding aspiring superintendents and others in the education profession. That's why I'm extremely proud to celebrate a member of my team this week who shares that same passion – someone who is committed to mentoring others and empowering the next generation of leaders in our field.

Danielle Clark, HCDE's chief communications officer, was honored with the Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award in Washington, D.C. this week at the annual National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Conference. This award is an incredible accomplishment, as she was selected from thousands of entries from school PR professionals across the nation. I often say that Danielle does for her profession what HCDE does for public education. She identifies blind spots in school PR and consistently finds ways to support others. I'm proud to have her skills, passion and leadership on #TeamHCDE.

This week, our Marketing and Client Engagement division also hosted HCDE's inaugural conference for professional translators and interpreters. This was a huge undertaking and the first of its kind for educators in the history of the State of Texas. This is another way HCDE supports blind spots in public education, by identifying and filling the need for professional development for those who provide language access in our schools and communities.

I spent most of the week in Washington, D.C. at the NSPRA conference, supporting Danielle as the recipient of the Mentor Legacy Award. Today, I welcomed our partners, area translators and interpreters to the PTIC conference and then held ongoing meetings with staff. We're just two weeks out from Convocation, so I also met with the Communications team to put some final touches on the presentation for staff.

Have a great weekend.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Employee Spotlight



HCDE Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark, left, poses with her husband, Dennis, after she was named the 2025 Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award recipient. The award honors her dedication to mentorship and work in school PR.

A LASTING IMPACT: CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER HONORED FOR LEGACY, MENTORSHIP BY SCHOOL PR NATIONAL ASSOCIATION

A **N ACCOMPLISHED LEADER.** A passionate advocate for public schools. An innovative communicator. A relationship builder. A mentor and friend.

This is how Danielle Clark, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) chief communications officer, has been described by colleagues and school public relations professionals across the nation. This week at the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Conference in Washington, D.C., Clark added another descriptor to her impressive career in school PR.

Clark was named the recipient of the 2025 Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award for her dedication to mentorship and work to pave the way for future leaders in the field.

Named for NSPRA past-president Barry Gaskins, the prestigious honor recognizes one school public relations professional each year for outstanding efforts in mentoring colleagues new to school public relations.

While accepting the award on stage, Clark looked out at a standing ovation and gave an emotional and impassioned speech about the importance of mentorship in the school communications profession.

"Everyone in this room can be a mentor, you don't need 26 years to do it," Clark said. "Take the time to answer questions



Danielle Clark, center, poses with colleagues and friends, from left, Kristyn Cathey, Alief ISD chief communications officer, and Julie Thannum, CEO senior communications strategist.

from those new to the profession. That is a magical moment and could forever change the trajectory of their career."

Clark has more than two decades of experience in school communication across four states and held leadership positions in three NSPRA state chapters. From California, to Colorado, Tennessee and Texas, she has become a trusted advisor and mentor to professionals at every stage of their careers, providing counsel and advice on job success and creating programs to

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Employee Spotlight

assist leaders in their professional development.

She served as the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) APR Chair for multiple years and currently co-chairs the association's Professional Development Committee. Under her leadership this year, TSPRA launched its first-ever TSPRA Academy for early-career professionals. The chapter is also building an on-demand program to support early- to mid-career school PR practitioners across Texas.

In February 2025, her work with TSPRA Academy earned her the prestigious title of the organization's "Most Valuable Member" award.

"Danielle has been unknowingly doing what HCDE does for public education for her own profession – identifying blind spots and finding ways to support others," Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said. "She is the standard to which others aspire."

Some of Clark's greatest strengths are her ability to build relationships, connect with others and develop their potential. She uses her connections to uplift and support the next generation of school PR professionals, who are now or will soon take the reins and lead communications efforts in their communities.

"It's a blessing to have somebody like Danielle on your side who is never upset about the time you need from her," said Jordan Ziemer, executive director of communications for Abilene Independent School District.

In addition to her formal mentor duties with aspiring APR candidates and the TSPRA Professional Development Committee, Clark is known for taking calls to guide colleagues across the nation through personal and professional challenges. Her giving nature and natural willingness to guide others was on full display as she ended her speech to the full room of school communicators at the conference.



NSPRA President Heidi Vega, left, presents Danielle Clark with the 2025 Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award.

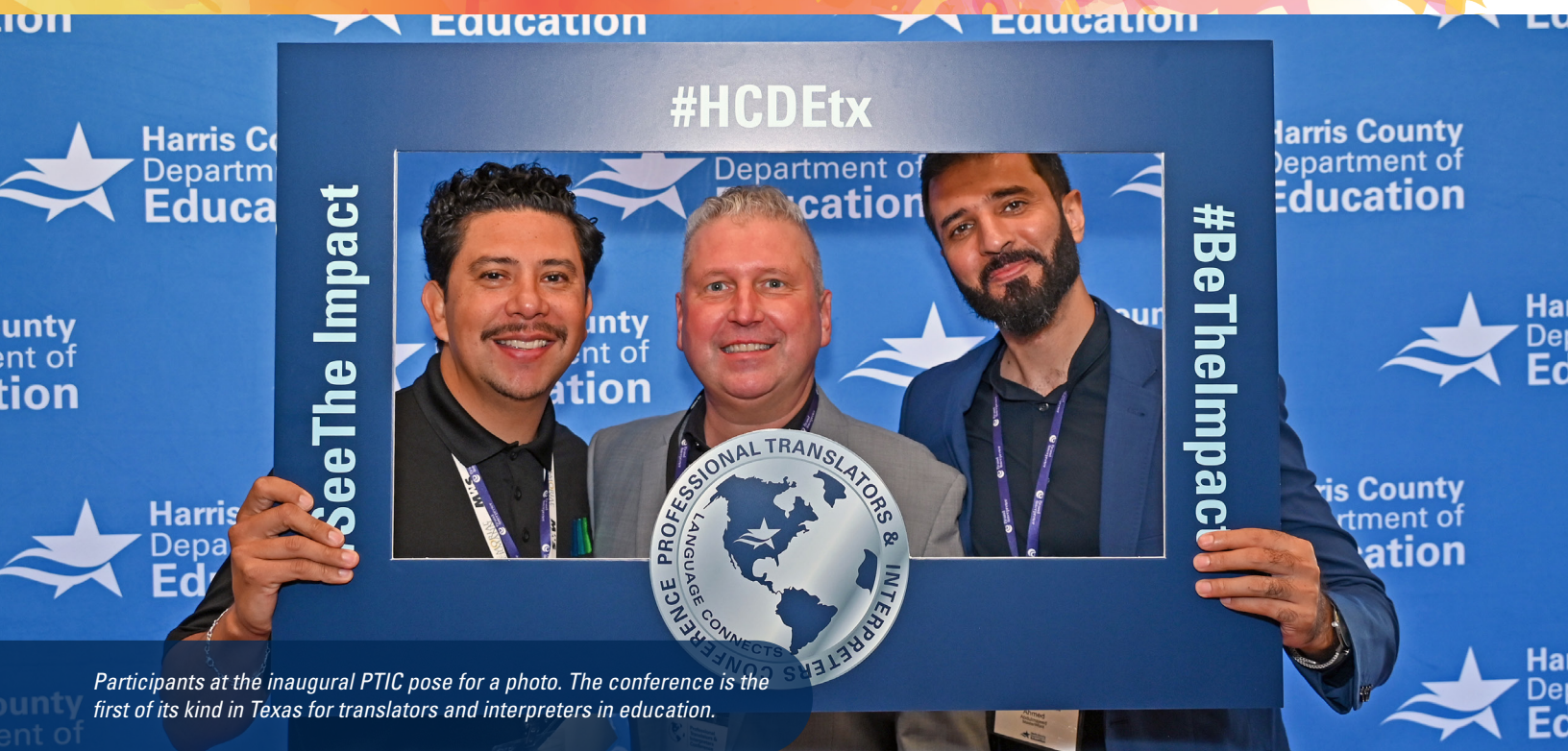
"If you can't find someone to talk to...give me a call, I'll talk to you," she joked.

Clark added: "I'm just someone who loves their job and I want to help others love it too. I believe in the work we do. I believe it's valuable and worthy, and I believe in public schools. That's why I mentor – to ensure that the next generation of PR professionals coming up are successful." 🌟



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY: **VIEW OUR VIDEO**

Program Connections



Participants at the inaugural PTIC pose for a photo. The conference is the first of its kind in Texas for translators and interpreters in education.

FROM THE GROUND UP: LANGUAGE SERVICES PROFESSIONALS FLOURISH AT STATE'S FIRST TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS CONFERENCE

WHEN THEY COULDN'T FIND the right professional development, they made their own.

That's where Stephanie De Los Santos, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Marketing and Client Engagement director and Translations Coordinator Wendy Utterback found themselves less than a year ago.

On July 24, their dream became a reality. The inaugural Professional Translators and Interpreters Conference (PTIC) gave language service professionals in education a day to learn, network and celebrate the vital roles they play in serving families who speak languages other than English.

The event is the first of its kind in Texas and was a rousing success for all who attended. More than 180 participants from across the nation added to their toolkits throughout the day, as PTIC took place in the Irvington Conference Center and the recently-remodeled first floor conference rooms. A full slate of experts spoke on numerous industry topics, while 18 event sponsors and vendors were on hand to offer a variety of services and products.

"It was unfortunate that we had to look to another state to find high quality training and resources to advance our translations program here at HCDE," De Los Santos said. "The wonderful part of all this was that HCDE was well received and embraced by the language access

professionals and advocates in California and especially willing to provide support for the launch of our own event. Our local school districts quickly jumped on board as they saw the value of strengthening language access practices and building bridges for non-English speaking students and families within the community."

PTIC was exactly what Lindsey Beck, a middle school counselor at New Caney Independent School District, was looking for in growing her career. She is bilingual and routinely works with Spanish-speaking students and families.

"I knew today would be a day for me to expand on my skills and the way I use them as a counselor," she said. "We're some of the first people these families meet in education and that's the way we connect with them – language."

The day began with a welcome from Superintendent James Colbert Jr., who emphasized the role language service professionals play in giving a voice to families and students who perhaps thought they didn't have one.

Dr. Lupita Hinojosa, the first Hispanic female superintendent in Spring Independent School District, served as the keynote speaker. She spoke on her 30-plus year journey in education, starting in 1988 as an elementary bilingual

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Program Connections

teacher in Houston ISD. She moved into administration and joined Spring ISD in 2014.

Hinojosa was named to Spring ISD's top position in January 2022. She spearheaded a new Momentum High School, which offers a path to graduation for students wanting an alternative to the traditional secondary school experience.

"Going to other conferences, there are opportunities for translators and interpreters to come together, but this conference is just for you," said Hinojosa, who retired in June. "You are here for a specific purpose. Today is all about you and an opportunity for you to grow and network."

The idea for PTIC came when De Los Santos and Utterback couldn't find any professional development specifically designed for translators and interpreters in education. Conferences are beneficial to growing as a professional, allowing attendees to hear from industry experts, learn latest insights and strategies, and network with others in the same profession.

HCDE employees are encouraged to seek professional development and routinely travel to attend and speak at conferences. Divisions will also attend as a vendor to showcase HCDE services.

For Utterback, named HCDE's second-ever translations coordinator a little over a year ago, those same opportunities are minimal. She found one in California hosted by the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE). The idea for PTIC was born as Utterback and De Los Santos attended two more similar events in California – Riverside County of Education's Language Access Conference in October and the American Association of Interpreters and Translators in Education Conference (AAITE) in May – to continue planning and building their network.

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Retired Spring ISD Superintendent Dr. Lupita Hinojosa was the keynote speaker at the inaugural PTIC.



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

Program Connections

Natalia Abarca, language services coordinator at OCDE, served as PTIC's featured speaker, while Nestor Wagner, founder and director for the Southern California School of Interpretation, spoke during the general session.

Three breakout periods were divided among eight presenters who each led two sessions. Among the topics were the AAITE's National Code of Ethics and how it shapes the profession in the field, navigating the legal complexities of individualized education program meetings, supporting teachers in bridging cultural gaps and showing plans in action at one of the nation's largest school districts.

Representatives from Albourn Translation Services, the event's underwriter, TNOLA Languages and T360nBeyond were among those partners who led sessions and exhibited a vendor table. Other vendors included Cross-Cultural Communications, Fox Translation Services, RWS/Trados Studio, MGM Linguistic Solutions, Masterword Services, Universe Technical Translation and HCDE's Choice Partners national purchasing cooperative.

"I'm super excited with the way our conference turned out. We had a lot of attendees who showed up from a lot of different fields, so we're excited that we were able to touch base with them," Utterback said. "I am amazed at how it all came together." 🌟



HCDE Superintendent James Colbert networks with retired superintendent Dr. Lupita Hinojosa, left, and HCDE translations coordinator Wendy Utterback, right.



Fox Translation Services speaks with professional translators and interpreters at PTIC.



PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS CONFERENCE IMPACT AWARDS

Legacy of Leadership Award

Dr. Lupita Hinojosa
Spring ISD Retired Superintendent

Legacy of Influence Award

Natalia Abarca
OCDE Language Services Coordinator

Pioneer in Language Access Award

Rosario Meehan
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD Translations Services Coordinator

Sylvia Puente
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD Translation Services Specialist

Initiative Impact Award

Mark Perez
Former HCDE Translation Coordinator and Adult Education Career Pathways Manager

Wendy Utterback
HCDE Translation Coordinator



**Professional
Translators &
Interpreters
Conference**

HOUSTON-BORN EXECUTIVE CHEF ADRIAN TORRES VISITS FORTIS ACADEMY

THROUGH FORTIS ACADEMY'S culinary program, students gaining and maintaining sobriety from alcohol and substance abuse learn to express themselves in a healthy environment. Students can also use skills gained in the kitchen for daily life or future employment opportunities.

Community partner and award-winning chef Adrian Torres recently visited Fortis Academy to mentor and pour into a talented student on July 17. In October, the 26-year-old was named the executive chef of Houston's Maximo. He revamped the menu, which he's described as "progressive" Mexican dishes. Other accolades include working in notable Houston restaurants Xochi and Belly of the Beast.

Torres visited Jerry Lorenzo-Garza in the Fortis kitchen. The two prepared delicious tacos during a live cooking demonstration.

"The experience was phenomenal," Lorenzo-Garza said. "It was something you can't get anywhere else."

Torres also shared his story, which started – like Lorenzo-Garza – as a child in Aldine. He watched "Cake Boss" on TLC and was inspired to bake, later taking culinary classes in high school and at San Jacinto College before landing a job at Xochi.

"My parents sacrificed a lot," Torres said. "The only thing I've ever wanted is to let them know that their sacrifice was worth it." 🌟



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)



Board Briefs

CENTER FOR GRANTS DEVELOPMENT HELPS FOSTER LOVE FOR READING

NEW BOOKS are on the way to our youngest students. The Center for Grants Development secured nearly \$12,000 to help bring the joy of reading to Head Start students through the Real SuperMENTors Read Program. Representatives from the Texas CPA Foundation recently visited Irvington to deliver the funds to Head Start Senior Director Venetia Peacock, Grants Director Joyce Akins and Resource Development Specialist Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya. Baytown, JD Walker, Barrett Station, Coolwood and Humble campuses were each awarded a grant for leaders to purchase 34 sets of seven Scholastic books. Each book will be read aloud by a SuperMENTor and gifted to students to build their home libraries. The effort will reach nearly 300 children with engaging, culturally relevant stories that inspire a love for reading. 🌟



CHOICE PARTNERS TEAM SHOWCASES CO-OP AT SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE



MEMBERS OF Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Choice Partners team were in San Antonio early this month, sharing the services and benefits of the national purchasing cooperative at the School Nutrition Association Annual National Conference.

Held July 13-15, Choice Partners joined more than 300 organizations and business partners to showcase services, culinary trends and cutting-edge equipment. The event also allowed team members to network and connect with industry representatives. 🌟



In the Community

JUNE AWARENESS UPDATE



THIS SUMMER, the awareness campaign focused on teacher and Head Start recruitment as HCDE prepares to welcome students in mid-to-late August. The Department recorded big wins across social media, pay-per-click and traditional advertising, garnering more than 7.23 million impressions.

June marked the end of the teacher recruitment campaign, which yielded a 213% year-over-year increase in impressions and reached a total of 289,471 users on Facebook and LinkedIn. As the public learned of HCDE's schools and students, page engagements experienced a 274% increase year-over-year. The Head Start campaign informed more than 112,000 users about HCDE campuses and services and yielded 26,768 video views. Of those users, nearly 9,000 clicked the ad offering additional enrollment information.

Overall social media outreach connected with more than 432,000 users, a 21% increase month-over-month. Additional wins included 1.13 million impressions and a 13% increase in

month-over-month video views. Facebook's best-performing ad recorded 40,048 impressions and garnered 1,226 clicks at an average of \$0.43 per click.

Online impressions for the teacher recruitment campaign increased nearly 83% month-over-month due to an adjustment in ad placement based on brand awareness efforts. As users engaged in pay-per-click Google ads, nearly 230 clicked through the application process and viewed other available positions. Clicks and impressions for the Head Start campaign decreased between the months; however, the percentage of the HCDE's search ads that were eligible to appear on Google search results increased monthly, with an 8.67% click-through rate.

In early June, a physical billboard boasting our *Bright Futures Begin Here* branding was placed near Interstate 10 East and Mary Road, earning more than 1.4 million impressions. Five-second ads on Fox 26 television solicited 4.3 million impressions between mid-May and late June, airing 85 times in total. ★



**BRIGHT FUTURES
BEGIN HERE**

SEE THE IMPACT ON HARRIS COUNTY SCHOOLS



Harris County
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HCDE-TEXAS.ORG



Head Start

EDUCATION FOUNDATION THANKS COMMUNITY PARTNER FOR GRADUATION REGALIA GIFT

THE GRADUATION STORE recently donated 15 brand-new graduation caps, gowns and tassels to Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Adult Education division, allowing 15 additional students to participate in the annual graduation ceremony.

To thank the community partner for this gesture, Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva, Adult Education Program Manager Denesse Bolaños and Development Prospect Researcher Kristal Frazier with the Center for Grants Development delivered a thank you gift – a framed photo of this year's graduates – to the store on July 23. The gift to HCDE and the Education Foundation of Harris County is valued at \$795 and was possible thanks to Frazier. ★



Systemic Achievement: With Purposeful Intent

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATION MORALE

Models and supports responsible risk-taking so that all employees can be innovative and try new ideas.



HCDE Superintendent James Colbert Jr., right, congratulates Chief Communications Officer Danielle Clark on her being named the 2025 Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award recipient.

IN FEBRUARY, the entire state of Texas officially saw what I see every day – Danielle Clark, HCDE's chief communications officer is one of the best at what she does in advocating for her peers, supporting public education and serving her fellow leaders in multiple capacities. The state association for school public relations named her the 2025 Most Valuable Member. Ms. Danielle Clark is one of my most trusted agents and plays a vital role in the direction of HCDE. So, we shouldn't be surprised when the National School Public Relations Association acknowledged her this week at its annual conference. Ms. Clark was named the 2025 Barry Gaskins Mentor Legacy Award recipient, earning the prestigious honor for her outstanding efforts in mentoring and work throughout her 26-year career. Across four states and multiple school districts, Ms. Clark is a trusted advisor to colleagues at every stage in their career. She has an ability to identify blind spots in her field and find answers when they may not be obvious. While she doesn't crave attention, I'm thankful those in her profession see her value in school communications and serving others.

The inaugural Professional Translators and Interpreters Conference was a successful way to end the week. Watching our Marketing and Client Engagement team see a need for professional development for language service professionals in education, construct an idea and plan a first-of-its-kind event was truly inspiring. Not

only were participants treated with numerous industry experts and strategies to take back with them to their organizations, they were able to network and meet others who do the same work, share stories and build a community that can rally together down the road. This is the type of work we pride ourselves on at HCDE – finding blind spots and then finding solutions. Thank you again to the MCE team for recognizing this need and creating the answer for so many language professionals in education.

Finally, it's always a pleasure to see community members and business partners help positively impact our students at our four Special Schools. It definitely takes a village and for many of these students, seeing more than their teacher, counselor and principal take an active role in their education can prove essential in their development. Fortis Academy student Jerry Lorenzo-Garza was treated with a special visit as Adrian Torres, an award-winning chef in Houston, met with him on campus and spent time with him in the kitchen. Torres, who grew up in Aldine like Lorenzo-Garza, shared his story and journey from watching cooking and baking shows to working in some of the city's top restaurants. Thank you for pouring into this young man and joining his village.

By celebrating #TeamHCDE accomplishments and acknowledges excellence, I am meeting the expectations to accomplish the mission, goals and objectives of the Department. ★



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UPCOMING EVENTS

July 30
Board Meeting

August 1
School Safety Summit

August 8
Convocation

August 20
Board Meeting

September 1
Labor Day (HCDE Closed)

September 12
iPASS

September 17
Board Meeting

October 8
Choice Partners Nutrition Show