

# THE CONNECTOR

A weekly publication of Harris County Department of Education for the HCDE Board of Trustees

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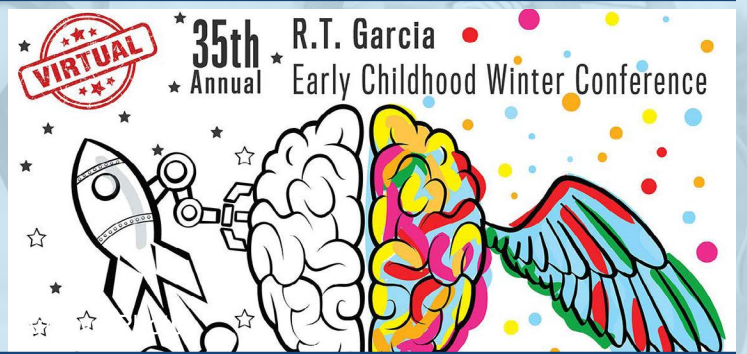
## EXPLORATIONS IN EDUCATION

### TOP STORIES

**CARES Act Provides Funding for Head Start Laptops and Protective Equipment p.2**



**Early Childhood Conference Features Author and Researcher p.3**



**4 Law Professionals Meet Virtually with HCDE Students p.4**



## Of Note...



One of HCDE's greatest strengths is our ability to be nimble and adapt to the changing educational landscape. This week we see how our divisions and programs continue to innovate to provide services that impact students, educators and the community.

Our Early Childhood Winter Conference, the second largest conference for PreK teachers in Texas, is shifting to a virtual platform this year to accommodate schedules and continued concerns regarding large gatherings of people. This conference typically attracts close to 1,000 educators from across Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma featuring dynamic speakers and rich content focused on the needs of PreK students and teachers. I typically welcome these educators at the conference and look forward to seeing the nationwide interest in this growing area of focus along with how HCDE contributes to this effort through our robust professional development offerings.

We also continue to explore new ways to support local ISDs and our community, as seen through our visit to ROCK equine therapy facility in central Texas. ROCK is by far the most comprehensive equine therapy program we have toured and provided valuable insight about startup challenges, operational efficiency and financial stability. Our discussions with the director informed many of our perceptions and goals and I look forward to exploring this further. Dr. Amezcua is working on a feasibility study for this type of program in HCDE and I look forward to speaking with you about it in more depth after the new year.

This week I was fortunate to meet with several of you regarding my annual Reflections publication and I look forward to meeting with the rest of you next week. These meetings provide an opportunity for me to tell you about things that you cannot read in the Reflections publication, which is organized by topic this year due to the COVID-19 shutdown. I am also able to explain my vision and goals for HCDE and engage in robust conversation with you about the future of HCDE. This is a yearly exercise I began in my first year as a Superintendent and I plan to continue this best practice moving forward.

I also had the opportunity to welcome the new Laporte ISD Superintendent, Dr. Walter Jackson, at a special dinner Wednesday evening. Superintendents from Fort Bend ISD, Spring ISD, Stafford ISD and Aldine ISD joined me in welcoming Dr. Jackson over a wonderful meal that was filled with great fellowship. One of the superintendents remarked how much he had missed this type of interaction with colleagues, as our work is best understood by those who engage in it daily.

On Thursday, members of ELT started the feedback process with our architects regarding design of the Irvington building. I am excited to see how our final renovations not only reflect the world class programs HCDE offers, but also address the needs of several growing divisions and programs.

Have a fabulous weekend.

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### CARES Act Provides Funding for 90 Laptops, Personal Protective Equipment for HCDE Head Start

Ninety computers found their way into the laps of Head Start teachers and family service providers as families returned to Head Start classes virtually this fall. The successful transition would not have been possible without the \$1.2 million supplied by the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act 2020.

The act provided \$750 million for Head Start programs throughout the nation, and funding was distributed by formula based on each Head Start grantee's funded enrollment.

Children at HCDE's 14 Head Start/Early Head Start centers and five childcare partnerships in northeast Houston were able to return to school virtually because of the funding.

The CARES Act also funded software to support training and professional development for teachers and staff.

Finally, the funding provided personal protection equipment such as masks, gloves and cleaning supplies to 300 staff members, benefitting 1,060 children ages 6 weeks to 5 years old in northeast Harris County.

***“The laptops allow us to move fluidly between in-person and virtual learning as classrooms or campuses are affected by COVID-19,” the senior director said.***

“During the pandemic, we had to go to remote learning to meet the needs of our families,” HCDE Senior Head Start Director Venetia Peacock said. “When technology issues arose from having older computers which slowed by the new software, we knew we had a problem.”

Between Zoom, Microsoft Teams, a classroom management software called Dojo and other software and application downloads, the old laptops were strained.



The laptops also supplied convenience so that desktop computers didn't have to be transported to-and-from home to office.

“CARES Act funding couldn't have arrived at a better time,” Peacock said.

Now that staff and students are back in the classroom in person, the laptops still provide flexibility in the event numbers rise and its necessary to go back to virtual instruction.

“The laptops allow us to move fluidly between in-person and virtual learning as classrooms or campuses are affected by COVID-19,” the senior director said.

Staff use their newfound technology skills to promote social distancing as they communicate with parents and other staff via Zoom and Teams.

“It's a blessing to have our students and staff back, but we are now empowered to stay engaged with our families through virtual instruction if the numbers rise,” Peacock said.

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### Texas' Best Early Childhood Conference Hosted by HCDE Features Author Eric Litwin, Researcher Kenneth Wesson



Celebrating its 35th year, the R.T. Garcia Early Childhood Winter Conference is set for Jan. 30, 2021 from 8 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Held virtually this year, the conference provides national presenters Eric Litwin, New York Times bestselling children's author and guitar-strumming hero. Dual keynote speaker Kenneth Wesson, consultant and child neuroscience expert, provides insight on how young brains work.



Kenneth Wesson

The conference attracts approximately 1,000 educators of children in grades pre-k through second and includes breakout sessions from local and national presenters. Attendees leave with lessons and ideas which may be used in the classroom immediately.

Litwin is the author of Pete the Cat series; The Nuts; and Groovy Joe. He is also a musician-storyteller as he sings and performs on the guitar and harmonica.

Wesson's presentation is entitled: "Early Brain Research and Dealing with Today's New Normal in Early Learning." The neuroscience researcher often poses the question: "If it's your job to develop the mind, shouldn't you know how the brain works?"

Conference breakout sessions supplied by local and national presenters include child growth and development; diversity and dual-language learners; family and community relationships; learning environments; planning framework; and curriculum and standards. A virtual vendor section provides educational materials and products.

The largest early childhood conference in Texas is named after former HCDE Board President R.T. Garcia, a longtime supporter of early childhood education.

Cost of the conference is \$75. Attend the live sessions and pose questions and comments through a virtual platform or view the sessions post-conference. Register today: <https://tinyurl.com/ECWC21>.



Eric Litwin

# PROGRAM

## CONNECTIONS

### 4 Law Professionals Share Thoughts with HCDE Students on Struggles, Successes of Growing Up

Four high-profile law professionals found common ground with troubled and recovering teens as the Harris County Department of Education Schools Division sponsored “The Law Society” Nov. 6.

Students from Highpoint Schools, HCDE’s school for adjudicated and troubled youth and Fortis Academy, HCDE’s school for recovering teens joined a virtual meeting with Harris County Judge Jeremy L. Brown, Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez, Loudoun County Schools Certified Psychologist Dr. Charles A. Barrett and Harris County Deputy Sheriff H. Ihejirika Jr.

During the hour-long Zoom session, guests fielded questions posed by HCDE Schools Division staff Nkechinyere Ihejirika Washington and Gabriela Hernandez. The panel answered questions about overcoming hardships as teens, family dynamics, inequities in society, perceptions of law enforcement as youth and general advice on getting through adolescence.

At age 6, Gonzalez realized his father couldn’t read or write, and he was determined to get an education and become a lifelong learner.

“You should never stop learning and growing,” the sheriff said.

Judge Brown admitted to teens that he had issues with authority figures telling him what to do as a teen.

“I have to take a step back when people talk to me and take direction from what they are saying,” the judge said.

When asked to define trauma, Barrett said he sees it as any circumstance which makes one feel unsafe and affects you physically or emotional. Examples given included gang violence or living in a violent household.

“Trauma does affect you,” he said. “It affects how much you pay attention in school and can have mental health and behavior effects.”

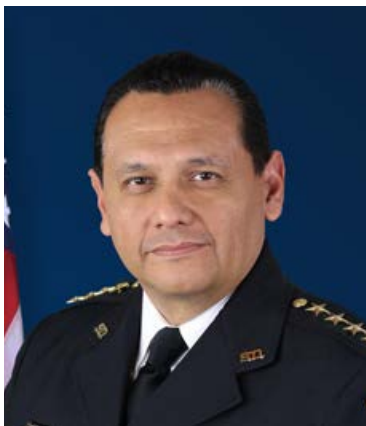
In Harris County, 90,000 children each year must deal with a parent who is incarcerated, Gonzalez noted. Those children inherit the trauma and often become statistics in the criminal justice system themselves.

For advice on overcoming adversity, Ihejirika urged teens to be patient in their youth and enjoy the moment.

“Enjoy your experiences, no matter how tumultuous and no matter how joyous those occasions are,” he said. “Experiences add to your character, your life story.”

Gonzalez shared his positive outlook on growing up, suggesting that teens look to mentors and friends for help.

“If you are going through depression, it’s okay to talk to others,” he said. “We’re all vulnerable, but don’t stay in that place.”



Sheriff Ed Gonzalez



Judge Jeremy Brown



Charles Barrett



Deputy Sheriff H. Ihejirika Jr.

# FACILITIES UPDATE

## Bonds Issued, Architects Approved, Staff Input Begins!

As bonds were issued on Oct. 22 at premium rates, HCDE saved nearly \$2 million on our financing package. Here are other highlights:

- The board approved the selection of two architectural firms on Oct. 30.
- English & Associates gains the contract for 6300 Irvington, and Cre8 is issued contracts for Adult Education, ABS East and Highpoint School.
- Currently Administration is finalizing contracts with both firms.
- Staff and architects will meet in upcoming weeks to discuss input regarding desired form and function of new or renovated buildings.



In summary, many of the features of the new ABS West, 12772 Medfield Dr., will be duplicated as we renovate ABS East. These include a playground for handicapped students and a sensory room for autistic students.

The pandemic thwarted our plans for a fall open house and ribbon cutting, but this video provides a virtual tour highlighting many of ABS West's unique features.

[View the video:](#)

# BOARD BRIEFS

## CASE for Kids Debates, Houston Urban Debate League Host National Debate for Criminal Justice



CASE for Kids Debates is proud to join Houston Urban Debate League and National Association for Urban Debate Leagues in 1 of 5 national debate sites for youth voice on Nov. 16 at 6 p.m. The debate focused on criminal justice reform and features Sheriff Ed Gonzalez, HISD Trustee Elizabeth Santos, Professor Gary Bledsoe, and attorneys Barbara Radnofsky and Nickolas Spencer.

Register to attend the free event:  
<https://tinyurl.com/y44nl6s2>

Presenting Sponsor: **MASSEY & GAIL** LLP



## Honoring HCDE Staff Serving in Military on Veterans Day

On Veterans Day Nov. 11, we thanked our staff who served in the military and asked them to share stories and photos. The results are posted in this video.

[View video](#)



## Equine Therapy Tour Explores Healing through Horses

Members from HCDE's administration, board and Precinct 2 toured the Ride On Center for Kids (ROCK) to consider implementing a similar program in Harris County. The ROCK is a nonprofit in Georgetown, Texas that provides equine-assisted activities and therapies to children and adults with physical, cognitive and emotional challenges. ROCK also serves veterans.

Students at all four HCDE schools can benefit from equine therapy as it is adapted for each student population. The equine-therapy program would also be made available to local school districts as well as the general community through veteran and adult populations.

Exploration of the program will be used to construct a feasibility plan which will be brought forth to the HCDE Board in early 2021.

[View gallery](#)





# SYSTEMIC

## ACHIEVEMENT... WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT

This week, the following Board expectations were met:

**Superintendent Objective A: Management of Administrative, Fiscal and Facilities Function**

- Implements and oversees a planning process that results in goals, targets or priorities for major areas of operations.

**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.

**Superintendent Objective E: Instructional Management**

- Establishes a system for regular evaluation of instructional programs to meet student instructional needs and to attain desired student achievement.



As a first in 35 years, we bring the Early Childhood Conference virtually with due diligence for public health during the pandemic. In doing so, we are committed to providing high-quality professional development for early



childhood educators who are especially in need of support this year. It is our collective goal to identify learning needs of students and develop a process that ensures goals are met or exceeded, and this conference gives teachers concrete ideas and inspiration to use in their virtual and in-person classrooms.

We begin the process of planning and building through the capital improvement projects approved by the board. As a conservative financial leader, I look for and present programs and services to cut expenses and costs to public schools while providing high-quality services to the community.

As we investigate equine therapy as a learning tool for our students, our partnering districts and adult learners, we seek to invest in best practices for student achievement and use effective practices to maximize achievement in the greater community.

Finally, we bring together law professionals this week in a virtual mentoring presentation with our students from our Schools Division. In doing so, we maintain visibility and involvement in the community with elected officials and allow our students to see law enforcement leaders as humans who have learned from their past mistakes and moved forward to be productive community members.

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### UPCOMING EVENTS:

**WORKSHOPS**  
(Online only)

**Nov. 17 and 19**  
Speak Up! Creating Math Conversations  
4 - 6:30 p.m.

**Nov. 11**  
The Grants Budget: Not Just About the Math  
1:30 - 3 p.m.

**Nov. 17**  
Strengthening Elementary Social Studies  
9:30 a.m. - Noon

**Nov. 18**  
Board Meeting: Irvington  
1 p.m.