

the **CONNECTOR**



GRANTS DEVELOPMENT TEAM REACHES MILESTONE FOR 'FOCUS ON FUNDING' PODCAST AS SECOND SEASON BEGINS P.3



FORTIS ACADEMY STUDENTS SERVE UP THANKSGIVING MEAL TO TRUSTEES, ELT P.6



BUSINESS SERVICES DONATES MEALS TO HEAD START FAMILIES P.9

of Note

BEING A STANDARD BEARER is about doing something better than others or doing something new. In the case of our Grants division, it's a little of both.

This week we celebrate a milestone with the Grants team, honoring the first anniversary of the day they launched their podcast, "Focus on Funding." I enjoyed learning about the origins of the idea for a podcast that is dedicated to helping business partners and educators with grant opportunities. It was also cool to learn about the motivation behind using this new platform for community outreach. I have been on several podcasts in the last few years and it is a fun way to have a conversation with someone about a topic while allowing personalities to come through and enhance the discussion. I listen to a variety of podcasts myself and find them not only interesting but engaging and I look forward to seeing how this outreach effort supports more dollars for education in our community.

I started the week representing HCDE at the LoneStar College Annual Golf Tournament on Monday. On Tuesday, I met with Trustee Cantu as part of my quarterly board meetings followed by standing meetings with staff. On Wednesday, I participated in the Thanksgiving feast prepared by students from the Fortis Academy Culinary program followed by the regular board meeting. Today, I met with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives and met with a vendor to discuss the possibility of offering healthy, affordable food options at the Irvington building for staff.

The Connector will be on hiatus next week for the Thanksgiving break. Have a wonderful holiday with friends and family.



JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent



Program Connections



Harris County Department of Education's Center for Grants Development recently celebrated the anniversary of its podcast, "Focus on Funding," and the start of its second season. Development Coordinator Venetia Baldwin, left, interviewed Resource Development Specialist Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya on Nov. 6 for the latest episode.

'FOCUS ON FUNDING' REACHES SECOND SEASON, GIVES GRANTS DEVELOPMENT TEAM OUTLET TO SHARE RESOURCES

O N IRVINGTON'S FOURTH FLOOR – just around the corner from the elevator – a loud clanging sound rings out every now and then. Typically a quiet space inside Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) administration building, the noise can be startling if you're not ready.

The clanging sounds?

A cowbell.

The Center for Grants Development team rings the bell to celebrate when funding is acquired to support a project's enhancement and a program's expansion, as well as other significant accomplishments.

On Nov. 6, the team rang the bell to mark a milestone. Its podcast, "Focus on Funding," reached its one-year anniversary and began its second season.

"It went by so fast," said Venetia Baldwin, the division's development coordinator and host and voice behind the team's podcast. "You do a little bit at a time and then you look up and you say to yourself, 'We made a year.' This center has never had a podcast, so this was completely new territory and it's a really big deal."

The world of podcasting isn't new within HCDE. As a unicorn in the public education space, Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and his leadership team encourage divisions to seek out new trends and strategies to best serve Harris County learners, stakeholders and partners.

Podcasts are digital audio programs made available for download or streaming over the internet. They can cover vast topics while popular podcasts can reach millions of listeners every episode.

At HCDE, podcasts help divisions expand their outreach and better educate community members. The Center for Grants Development, Center for Safe and Secure Schools (CSSS), Choice Partners Cooperative and Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids currently host podcasts

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



The Center for Grants Development's "Focus on Funding" is among four HCDE divisions hosting podcasts, joining the Center for Safe and Secure Schools, Choice Partners Cooperative and Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment for Kids.

Program Connections

dating back to 2019.

The “Making Afterschool Cool” podcast features more than 150 episodes. CSSS’s “Take Care Tuesday” podcast released bi-monthly when it launched in 2020 and has settled into monthly episodes over the last three years.

Those successes planted the seed for Grants Development Director Joyce Akins. Unlike HCDE’s instructional and external support service divisions, whose team members routinely interact with community members and business partners, the Center for Grants Development has fewer face-to-face interactions. It holds the All About Grants workshop each February, but attendees and partners typically have questions and requests beyond the day-long event.

“Our division has a lot of important information to share with the community and podcasts offer a convenient way to disseminate information,” Akins said. “I’m thankful that Venetia volunteered to spearhead our effort.”

While Baldwin said she’s flattered the team immediately thought of her as the perfect host, she admits part of it was because she “talks the most.”

“At first, it was awkward, but it was because this is formatted,” she said with a laugh. “All of us are creative but as the person that is very talkative, I think that’s why I was pegged for it.”

“OUR DIVISION HAS A LOT OF IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO SHARE WITH THE COMMUNITY AND PODCASTS OFFER A CONVENIENT WAY TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION.”

Baldwin was the right choice.

“She’s a natural in this,” said Resource Development Specialist Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya, who joined Baldwin for the second season’s first episode. “She has a great personality that shines through in this podcast and just throughout. I don’t think there’s a better person for the job.”

With no podcasting experience, Baldwin reached out to HCDE team members for guidance and assistance. Baldwin worked with Marketing and Client Engagement Director Stephanie De Los Santos on parameters and guidelines. She met with Dr. Vida Avery, Grants Development manager, to plan a schedule of episodes.

Michael Wilson, a CASE for Kids outreach coordinator, provided technical support as he’s done with other HCDE divisions in their podcast journeys. He went over his process, which included using Zoom for interviews and audio recording, and Adobe Audition for multitrack editing.



Resource Development Specialist Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya and members of the Grants Development Team have each served as guests on “Focus on Funding.” The team effort resulted in 10 episodes in the first season.



To increase the quality of the podcast, Venetia Baldwin has picked up tips along the way. Those included adding sound proofing to her office and reminding guests to avoid background noise for interviews.

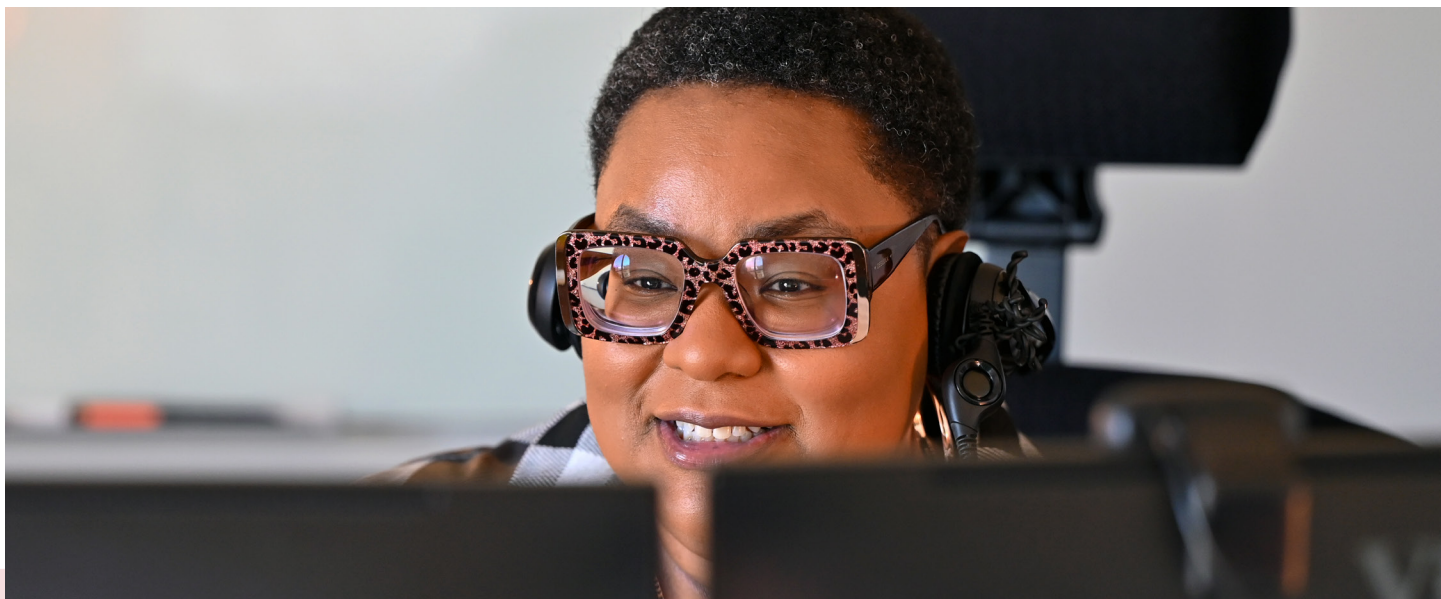
“He was very helpful, especially during that initial phase because it’s one thing to be talkative and get recorded, but to get it up and posted and even still I had to learn a new skill,” Baldwin said. “I’m not a person like a YouTuber who always has content coming out every day and knows where to post.”

“Even looking at things like analytics and now having to think about all these other things. That has been the biggest adjustment, but it’s been fun.”

“Focus on Funding” launched its premiere episode on Sept. 13, 2024. It introduced listeners to the Center for Grants Development and gave team members the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

Program Connections



Venetia Baldwin, a development coordinator for the Center for Grants Development, took on the challenge of starting the division's podcast, seeking help from fellow divisions while also learning the ups and downs on the job.

opportunity to share their backgrounds and highlight their roles in helping secure funding for projects.

"When I listened to the complete episode, I had a perpetual smile on my face," Akins said. "We have staff with a lot of good experience and it was very rewarding to hear them speak so positively about their jobs. It kind of felt like a fireside chat."

Added Baldwin: "I felt great, especially getting positive feedback from friends. And of course, you send your first one to your mom. She's always going to give you a thumbs up."

Akins, Avery, Kamaya and Development Prospect Researcher Kristal Frazier each joined Baldwin for episodes during the first season, while she also connected with Education Foundation and Partnerships Director Trina Silva for conversations on fundraising within organizations, the donor cycle and best strategies as efforts ramp up during the holiday season.

Baldwin went live from the All About Grants workshop, where she took listeners inside the sessions. She's even tackled artificial intelligence and evolving technology in the world of grant writing.

It hasn't always been smooth in this learn-on-the-job venture. Baldwin admits she expected podcasting to be

something that came nicely packaged and ready to go.

Instead, there were interviews recorded on phones with background noise and dealing with construction sounds during renovations of the Irvington building.

Baldwin learned and adjusted, from added sound proofing in her office by the windows to purchasing the same microphones for the Grants team so everyone sounds similar.

The result is a product business and community partners are benefitting from, hearing directly from Grants Development and picking up tips and insight to benefit their initiatives and projects.

There are already plans for even more guests in season two.

Baldwin even encourages others to jump into podcasting.

"HCDE is very supportive and people need to hear your voice," she said. "Even with things like learning the technical aspects of podcasting, go do it. Your voice is very important and the great thing about podcasts is no matter where I am, I can listen to one. It's a really good time to get into people's heads and impart some wonderful nuggets about what you do and your organization." ★

LISTEN TO HCDE'S PODCASTS HERE:



BOARD OF TRUSTEES, EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM TREATED TO EARLY THANKSGIVING FEAST



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



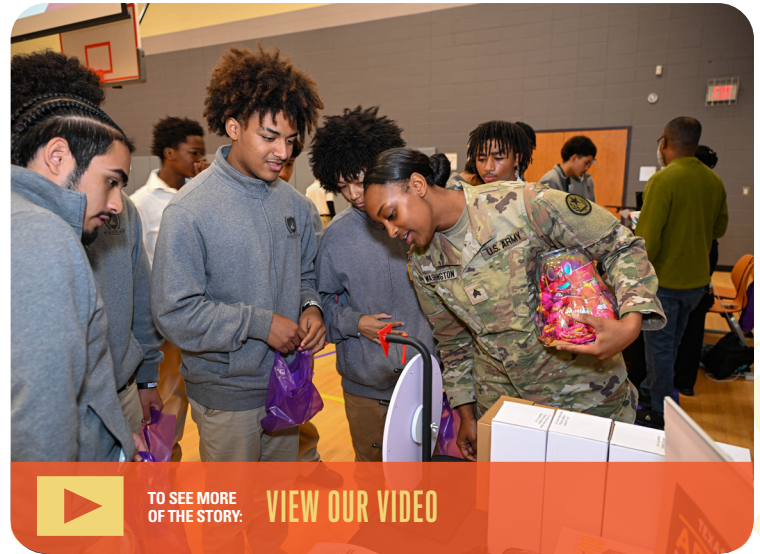
📷 TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY: [VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

IF THE QUICKEST WAY TO SOMEONE'S HEART is through his or her stomach, Fortis Academy students had the HCDE Board of Trustees and Executive Leadership Team feeling the love ahead of the Nov. 19 board meeting. Culinary students prepared and served a three-course Thanksgiving meal to celebrate the holiday season and show off their skills. Led by Chef Daisy Alvarez, the school's three sous-chefs started with a pomegranate harvest salad with a brown sugar balsamic vinaigrette, fresh fruit and crunchy pecans. HCDE leadership

raved about the Cajun-roasted turkey breast served with an array of traditional sides, including four-cheese macaroni and cheese, mashed sweet potatoes and classic stuffing. Students rounded out the feast with a salted caramel apple pie cheesecake. In its fifth year, the Thanksgiving tradition provides an opportunity for Fortis Academy students to meet and mingle with Department leaders while showcasing their cooking, time management, teamwork and communication skills, as well as their creativity through each dish they prepare. 🌟

HIGHPOINT SCHOOL HELPS STUDENTS EXPLORE FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

HIGHPOINT SCHOOL STUDENTS had the opportunity to explore their future possibilities at a College and Career Fair on Nov. 18. Scholars interested in higher education met with representatives from San Jacinto Community College and Houston Community College to discuss vital information about the admission process, financial responsibilities and various degree plans. United States Navy and National Guard recruiter booths drew large crowds as students were challenged to attempt physical challenges similar to those required at boot camp. Representatives from certification and vocational programs, such as certified nursing assistants and licensed barbers, were on hand to show students a path outside of higher education. Though making decisions about one's future can be difficult, the College and Career Fair provided a safe place for students to explore, ask questions and gain inspiration to dream bigger. 🌟



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

SPECIAL SCHOOLS HOST TURKEY GIVEAWAYS, FOOD DRIVE FOR HARRIS COUNTY STUDENTS



ABS West Food Drive



Highpoint School Turkey Giveaway

THIS THANKSGIVING SEASON, Harris County Department of Education's Special Schools came together on Nov. 21 to make the holidays a little brighter for their students and families. Highpoint School hosted its second annual turkey giveaway, welcoming families to drive through and pick up Thanksgiving meals generously donated by community partners. At Fortis Academy, staff added an extra touch of cheer by decorating boxes packed with turkeys and filled with feast-day favorites,

such as stuffing, macaroni and cheese and more. Students at ABS West were given bags full of non-perishable items donated and collected by staff ahead of the Thanksgiving break. These giveaways not only help students enjoy a warm holiday meal with loved ones but also alleviate some of the financial stress that can accompany big celebrations. It's also a joyful reminder of how HCDE campus staff support students both inside and outside the classroom. 🌟

CSSS TEAM ATTENDS NATIONAL CONFERENCE, ASSISTS LOCAL DISTRICT IN REUNIFICATION EXERCISE

THE CENTER FOR SAFE AND SECURE SCHOOLS (CSSS) team has been busy in recent weeks, growing and gaining more insights into the latest in school safety, while also putting the strategies into practice in helping a local Harris County school district work through its emergency management processes.

CSSS Director Leslie Etheridge and School Safety and Security Specialists Janice Owolabi and Robert Marquez attended the International Association of Emergency Managers' 73rd Annual Conference. Held Nov. 14-20 in Louisville, Ky., school session topics included increasing collective preparedness and lessons from reunification exercise.

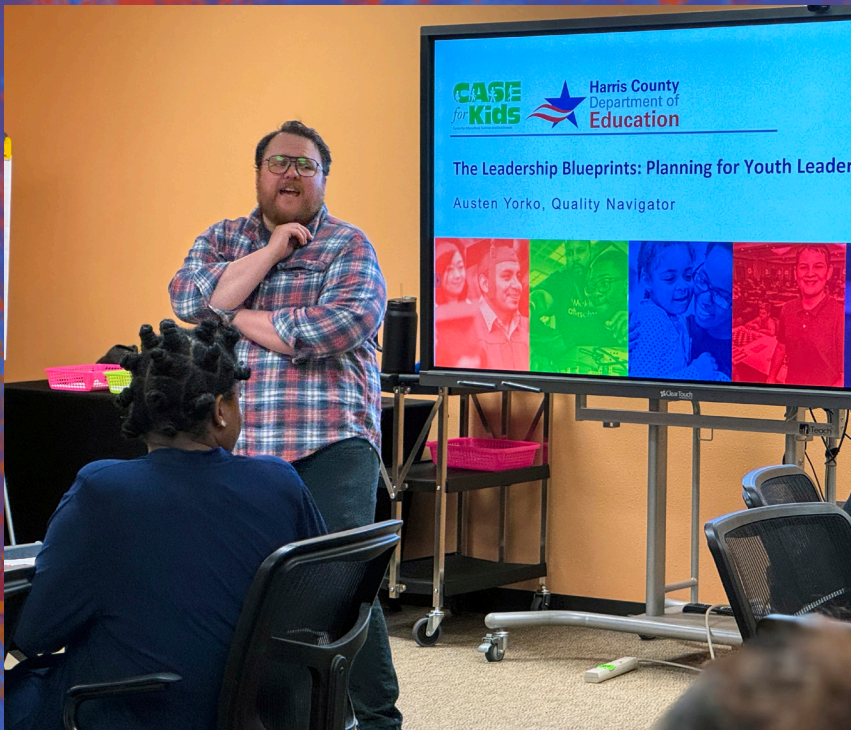
Participants also learned new insights on the latest tools and technology in emergency management and homeland security.

On Nov. 12, CSSS team members served as evaluators for the Stafford Municipal School District reunification exercise. CSSS regularly partners with federal, state and local agencies to take the lead or assist in developing increased safety and security strategies, standards and best practices for K-12 school environments. ✨



The Center for
Safe and Secure Schools
Harris County Department of Education

CASE WORKSHOP ELEVATES YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM STAFF



EMPOWERING YOUTH in afterschool and out-of-school time programs, and helping students find leadership opportunities in programming was the topic at hand at this week's Fall Professional Workshop hosted by the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids.

Held on Nov. 20, CASE for Kids team members shared exercises and strategies with workshop participants. By elevating youth voices in out-of-time school programming – whether the program is centered around homework, enrichment, sports or others – staff are able to create more structured and meaningful opportunities that can enhance engagement without sacrificing safety and effectiveness.

The next fall workshop will be on Dec. 5 and focus on out-of-school-time coordinators refocusing and intentionally aligning their goals for both personal and professional growth. The hands-on session will help community partners envision future possibilities through constructing vision boards. ✨

BUSINESS SERVICES DIVISION SURPRISES COMPTON HEAD START FAMILIES WITH THANKSGIVING MEALS

IN CONTINUING its long-standing Thanksgiving tradition, the Business Services team delivered holiday cheer to two Harris County families this week. Led by Dr. Jesus Amezcua, Harris County Department of Education assistant superintendent of business services, division members visited Compton Head Start on Nov. 20 with Thanksgiving baskets for the deserving families, selected based on their need for assistance, including nutrition support. The students and their families were surprised with the offerings – a basket filled of fruits and vegetables, canned good to prepare delicious sides and a turkey voucher.

Amezcua is a longtime Head Start SuperMENTor at Compton, reading to students monthly as part of the program. He also goes the extra mile for the young learners, which includes dressing up as Santa Clause for his December visit. He started his initiative of adopting Compton Head Start families years ago and Business Services has continued to answer the call to support families. 🌟



HOUSTON AREA LANGUAGE SERVICES PROFESSIONALS GATHER FOR INAUGURAL NETWORKING MEETING



WITH A STRONG PUSH from Harris County Department of Education's Marketing and Client Engagement (MCE) team, area language services personnel from a variety of industries came together on Nov. 18 for the start of a networking association for like-minded professionals to share insights and best practices.

Called HCDE Connects: A Multilingual Network, the group gathered for its inaugural meeting at the Irvington Conference Center. Nearly 20 school district interpreters, translators, language services professionals and others gathered for the network's inception, establishing goals and objectives, and discussing topics for future meetings. HCDE Connects plans to meet quarterly, with the next two scheduled for March 17 and June 16 at HCDE's North Post Oak office.

HCDE Connects was spearheaded by MCE Director Stephanie De Los Santos and Translations Coordinator Wendy Utterback, who have teamed over the last 12 months to build a national network in language services and bring tools both locally and statewide to benefit those who serve stakeholders. That includes the Professional Translators and Interpreters Conference held last July, the first event of its kind in Texas. 🌟



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

HCDE OFFICES, SCHOOLS WILL CLOSE FOR THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY



HCDE IS TAKING a short break to enjoy the Thanksgiving season! Special Schools and Head Start campuses will enjoy an extended holiday starting Monday, Nov. 24, while HCDE administration offices will close on Thursday, Nov.

27, and Friday, Nov. 28. All classes will resume and offices will reopen on Monday, Dec. 1. View the [HCDE Work/Holiday Calendar](#) and [Academic Calendar](#) for more information. 🌟

EDUCATION FOUNDATION PREPARES TO KICK OFF HOLIDAY GIVING CAMPAIGN

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT the holiday season that reminds us how powerful small acts of kindness can be. This year, the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC) is embracing that spirit with the launch of its Holiday Giving Campaign, an opportunity for #TeamHCDE, local businesses and community supporters to help fuel life-changing resources for students throughout Harris County.

The giving campaign will begin Dec. 2 and run through Dec. 31. All donations will receive an extra boost from the [Birdies for Charity program](#), sponsored by the Texas Children's Houston Open. Area nonprofit organizations, such as EFHC, utilize the Houston Open as a means to generate donations, receiving 100% of the funds generated in addition to a guaranteed 5% match. HCDE staff and community members wanting to donate can click on the following link to the [EFHC through Birdies for Charity](#). They can also donate via check and ACH transfers through the Astros Golf Foundation.

More than \$33,000 has already been raised through Birdies for Charity since September, bringing EFHC one step closer to expanding opportunities for students who



need them most. To reach the finish line, the foundation is counting on the community's continued support to keep that momentum going and help change lives. 🌟

In the Community



CHOICE PARTNERS, HCDE SERVE AS SPONSORS AT LONE STAR COLLEGE FOUNDATION GOLF TOURNAMENT

HARRIS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION leaders were in attendance to support the Lone Star College Foundation's 32nd annual Drive for Scholarships Golf Tournament, held Nov. 17 at The Woodlands County Club. HCDE and Choice Partners served as sponsors in the event and the Department featured a team that included Superintendent James Colbert Jr. and Dr. CJ Rodgers, assistant superintendent of education and enrichment; and Jonathan Parker, assistant superintendent for academic and support services. With local partnerships, HCDE is able to support Harris County students and educators through district sponsorships, campus grants, school supplies in classrooms and scholarships for graduating seniors. In addition, funds that flow from Choice Partners, a national purchasing cooperative, supply services to area school districts and the surrounding community. ★



EDUCATORS SEEK CULINARY OPPORTUNITIES FOR HARRIS COUNTY STUDENTS



EDUCATORS ARE ALWAYS LOOKING for the next best opportunity for their students. On Nov. 15, Fortis Academy Principal Travita Godfrey and Culinary Instructor Daisy Alvarez attended an open house at LeNotre Culinary Institute to learn about the admissions process. Institute students can study both classic and contemporary culinary methods, learn to prepare hundreds of dishes and expand their knowledge of various topics related to culinary arts. Admission

would provide a unique opportunity for Fortis Academy students after graduation, as many have already honed basic skills through the campus' culinary program. Godfrey and Alvarez networked with local business owners and professionals in the culinary space throughout the event while touring the institute's facility. By connecting with industry partners, they're helping to open doors that can guide students toward meaningful and sustainable careers. ★

SYSTEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: WITH PURPOSEFUL INTENT THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATIONAL MORALE

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



Harris County Department of Education's Center for Grants Development recently celebrated the start of the second season of its podcast, "Focus on Funding." Development Coordinator Venetia Baldwin, right, interviewed Resource Development Specialist Sharvon Pipkins Kamaya for the latest episode.

AS UNIQUE AS HCDE IS in the public education space, I am always glad to see our divisions and team members explore new opportunities to best serve Harris County students and families, in addition to the many community and business partners we work with. The Center for Grants Development recently celebrated the one-year anniversary of its podcast, "Focus on Funding." Reaching this milestone is significant as it shows the team's commitment to an idea, building it from the ground up and seeing it through no matter the obstacle. The podcast gives the Grants Development team a bigger reach to its partners, as episodes share insight and best practices to grant writing and acquiring funding among other topics. The podcast also shows how #TeamHCDE works together – members of CASE for Kids and Marketing and Client Engagement were more than willing to assist the Grants team and podcast host Venetia Baldwin in the initial stages of the project. HCDE features four podcasts with hopefully more to come. Congratulations to the Center for Grants Development on their anniversary and good luck on their second season.

One of our popular traditions here during the holiday season is Fortis Academy culinary students plating and serving the HCDE Board of Trustees and Executive Leadership Team a delicious Thanksgiving meal before the board meeting. For the last five years, these talented students have showcased their talent and willingness to serve, and I can't thank them enough. Fortis Academy is Harris County's only

public recovery high school and offers a high-quality culinary arts program to help students develop coping strategies for substance abuse and provide career options in hospitality. With instructor Daisy Alvarez Jimenez leading the charge, I never leave Fortis hungry or empty handed. Thank you again for taking care of HCDE leadership and showcasing your talent. We all truly enjoyed the Thanksgiving meal.

Finally, our HCDE team members are no stranger to giving and looking out for those less fortunate or just needing a little extra assistance. Thank you to our Business Services division for gifting two Compton Head Start families with a basket filled with fruits and vegetables, canned good and other items to prepare tasty side dishes, and turkey voucher. Spearheaded by Dr. Amezcua and his long-standing relationship with the center, our Business Services team members have truly shown their hearts of gold by not only pouring into the Compton students but their families also. Last month, the division set up a "Trunk or Treat" with full costumes and plenty of treats. In December, Amezcua will don a Santa Claus outfit during his SuperMENTors visit. Kudos to Business Services and the many HCDE team members who will serve, donate or give to others during this holiday season.

By creating an open and positive environment for sharing resources and exchanging ideas, I am meeting the expectation of improving the organizational climate and accomplishing the mission, goals and objectives of the Department. 🌟



HCDE BOARD

Board President
Amy Hinojosa

1st Vice President
Richard Cantu

2nd Vice President
Dr. Erica Davis

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

November 27-28
Thanksgiving Break
(HCDE Closed)

December 10
Holiday Reception – NPO

December 17
Holiday Reception –
Irvington
Board Meeting

December 23 - January 1
Winter Break (HCDE Closed)

January 19
Martin Luther King Jr. Day
(HCDE Closed)

January 21
School Board Recognition
Reception
Board Meeting

January 31
Early Childhood Winter
Conference (ECWC)