



Harris County  
Department of  
Education

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# the CONNECTOR



#TEAMHCDE CELEBRATES ITS CLASS OF 2025  
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TRANSITION FAIR CONNECTS STUDENTS,  
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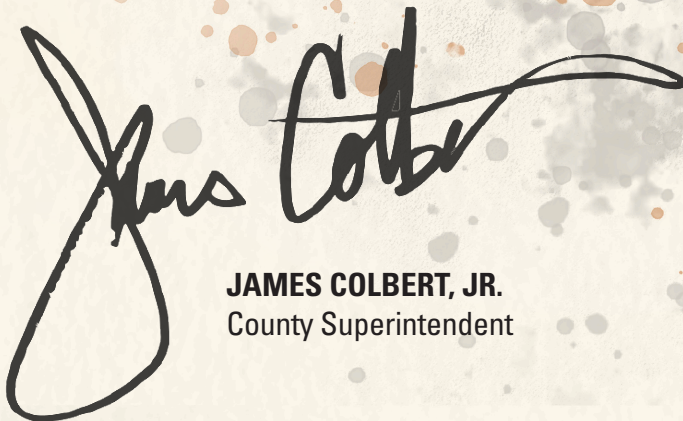
# of Note

**TRADITIONALLY** Memorial Day signifies the official start of summer and that can only mean one thing at HCDE: it's Convocation planning time!

Each summer I dedicate hours to planning the annual staff meeting known as Convocation. I work with our Communications team to devise a theme as well as all associated items including the venue, food offerings and actual presentation itself. Last year we took a break from Convocation so I could fulfill a lifelong dream of attending the Olympics. But employees have asked me all year if we were doing Convocation again. So on Tuesday, I gave them my official answer: Yes! Through a video to all staff I told employees that we were going back to high school for Convocation this year. And the theme is: "HCDE is Varsity." In the video I encouraged staff to think about what makes them proud to work at HCDE and to wear their favorite pair of sneakers from high school to the event in August. I am excited to show staff what it means to be on Varsity in HCDE and how that is demonstrated through our culture and the impact we make on our communities. Convocation is on August 8 at Kingdom Builders in southwest Houston and I hope each of you can attend to fellowship with staff and see firsthand what being on Varsity looks like in HCDE.

I started the week with the Memorial Day holiday on Monday. On Tuesday, I met with ELT followed by meetings with staff to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives. I started my day Wednesday with a Zoom meeting for the UIL State Executive Committee followed by Convocation planning. On Thursday, I met with a mentee in the morning followed by a walkthrough of the Perform employee evaluation platform. After this I joined Dr. Williams on a walkthrough of the first-floor renovations and ended the day with the Schools Division Teacher and Educational Aide of the Year celebration dinner. Today I met with staff at my NPO office.

Have a relaxing weekend.



**JAMES COLBERT, JR.**  
County Superintendent





# Program Connections



From left to right, Jessie Espitia, Teacher Maia Jones and Daniel Lopez photographed at ABS West graduation on May 22.

## PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE: HCDE'S CLASS OF 2025 HIGHLIGHTS OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

**C**ONGRATULATIONS to the Class of 2025 graduates from Harris County Department of Education's Special Schools!

Over the last few weeks, Department and campus leadership joined families and loved ones in celebrating nearly 30 students who "crossed the stage" to earn their diplomas and certificates of graduation and completion. These joyous occasions show what is possible when students and their respective villages come together through support and hard work to accomplish academic and life success.

At Fortis Academy, students have been empowered to take a path to sobriety, while those attending HCDE's Academic and Behavior Schools have worked to overcome emotional or physical limitations.

Landon Graham (ABS East), Jessie Espitia (ABS West) and Gilberto Jimenez (Fortis) are just three HCDE success stories, but they represent the magic that happens at HCDE's four special schools showing that when a strong support system combines with passionate educators, the result is top-notch services.

Here's a look at these three:



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

**VIEW OUR VIDEO**

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 4**



# Program Connections

## WITH SUPPORT FROM ABS EAST, GRADUATE LANDON GRAHAM FINDS HIS VOICE

**FOR THE LONGEST TIME**, Landon Graham didn't have the voice to speak for himself. A student at Academic and Behavior School (ABS) East, Graham is nonverbal autistic. Also diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Graham and loved ones used cues and an iPad at home with customized commands to communicate.

ABS East and its staff opened doors Graham and his family didn't know were possible. More individualized attention and support changed his trajectory. A new iPad with curriculum expanded his learning and opened his communication.

Graham's journey culminated with him donning a graduation cap and gown as he joined six fellow ABS East graduates for a school celebration on May 16.

"He had no voice," said Lesley Bennett, Landon's mother. "Especially when I'm not around. I know what Landon needs and wants, but now he can confirm it. He now can tell me what he wants from Walmart. He can go grocery shopping on my phone.

"This has opened up new ways of communicating. It gave him a voice."

Landon showed signs of delayed development and autism at an early age, which included not speaking. At three years old, he began early childhood special education in Clear Creek Independent School District.

Now 19, his struggles have not only affected his learning and development, but his behavior too. But this is where ABS East staff excel at and they quickly found ways to connect with Graham and work with his nonverbal cues.

He expanded his learning, including his vocabulary as he typed commands in the iPad.

"It's interesting to recognize his growth," ABS East teacher Antionette Dargins said. "He's a wiz with the calculator and finding out what words he knows is interesting because it's not traditional like a spelling test or reading sentences."



*ABS East Principal Mercedes Love, left, poses with Landon Graham at the school's graduation May 16.*



*Landon Graham earned an outstanding student award at graduation.*



*Lesley Bennett, Landon's mother, fixes his graduation cap.*

At the graduation, Graham's mother and grandmother hid in the back of the room, knowing he may run to them instead of staying up front with the other graduates. The plan worked and the two cheered from the back while Graham was called to the front for an outstanding student award before later going up to honor his graduation.

Graham's smile was beaming and his mother was thankful. "He has come a very long way," she said. "I'm very grateful for the school. We used to not know what he wanted. Now he's able to tell us."

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 5**



# Program Connections



*ABS West Teacher Maia Jones congratulates Jessie Espitia for graduating. She will see him this fall as a member of the Adult Transition Program.*

## JESSIE ESPITIA PREPARES FOR NEXT CHAPTER WITH ABS WEST

**WHEN ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIOR SCHOOL (ABS) WEST** staff members sign on to help Harris County students, they are in it for the long haul. So, when Jessie Espitia received his diploma at graduation on May 22, it wasn't goodbye but a "see you later."

Espitia was diagnosed with high-functioning autism at a young age and later deemed a ward of the state. He arrived at ABS West uncertain about his future, but has grown into a vibrant, thoughtful young man with a contagious smile and big dreams.

"They brought me here because I was running out of things," Espitia described. "So, the teachers decided I would come to ABS West until I get my act together."

Principal Jatata Hutton remembers Espitia as one of the first students he met.

"When I became principal last year, he was one of the first students who greeted me and with whom I formed a relationship," Hutton smiled. "From there, I've seen him become an advocate for himself. He's very well-spoken and likes to engage with anyone. He doesn't meet a stranger!"

Academic lessons accompany real-world experiences, as campus leaders expose students to volunteer opportunities at the Houston Food Bank and Goodwill. The work creates a space to develop critical communication, problem-solving

and job training.

It also creates an incentive that aids Espitia's favorite subject – math.

"He loves math because of the money," ABS West teacher Maia Jones said. "When they return from Goodwill with no problems, we give them \$20 of fake money, and they have to count all their cash. Jessie loves spending money in the campus store for shoes, snacks or drinks to bring back to class."

This fall, Espitia will return to ABS West to join the Adult Transition Program, which prepares students ages 18-22 for life beyond the classroom. The three-pronged approach focuses on vocational skills, independent living and continued academics. It's a chance for Espitia to build on his progress and continue working towards a future he's proud of.

"I want to go to the police academy, and I would like to be a policeman," Espitia said. "I want to get my driver's license and maybe a Ferrari."

Added Hutton: "We are working to give Jessie skills so he can be employed in the Houston community. So, know that in the next 3-4 years, Jessie will have a job. You'll see him at your local Home Depot, Lowe's or H-E-B. When you see him, he is going to light up the room."

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# Program Connections

## FORTIS ACADEMY HELPS GRADUATE GILBERTO JIMENEZ GAIN SOBRIETY, SECOND FAMILY

**STUDENTS STRUGGLING WITH** alcoholism and addiction make an active choice to remain sober. It's a daily effort that takes strength, determination and the right support system.

Gilberto Jimenez was referred to Fortis Academy as a freshman from Aldine Independent School District and spent his time there working diligently to turn his life around. On May 23, he crossed the stage and received his diploma with a list of accolades. Jimenez graduated a year early, was awarded Student of the Year and maintained the most days sober among his peers.

"He was one of those who, just like a puzzle piece, fit right in," Principal Travita Godfrey said. "Gilberto may not have always liked what we had to say, but he listened to us, and we could tell he was absorbing the things we discussed in group therapy and with him individually."

That close collaboration with Jimenez and his parents built a foundation of trust, enabling better implementation of intervention strategies, coping mechanisms and practical counseling sessions.

Over the years, Jimenez became more than a student—he became part of the Fortis family and started sharing personal milestones with educators.

"When he first learned how to drive, he talked to us about getting his permit, and I remember the first day I saw him drive, and we all ran outside like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't

believe you can drive,'" Godfrey laughed. "Of course, he was blushing, but he shared those pieces of his life with us, which we have appreciated. That's why we say we've grown into the Jimenez' extended family."

It wasn't long before Jimenez began searching for after-school employment. Staff conducted mock interviews that helped him discuss his experience in the campus culinary program and his food handling certifications. The preparation landed him a job at Bush Intercontinental Airport.

Jimenez worked nights but remained focused on his studies and was always held accountable for his responsibilities. A necessity that Godfrey believes made all the difference in his success. She describes Jimenez as a role model for new students and a campus leader who helped educators maintain a sober climate.

"What he has accomplished is very difficult," an emotional Godfrey said. "It takes perseverance and strength to walk away when kids are having conversations about drugs. Setting yourself apart from a group takes a level of maturity that he's clearly demonstrated. The other kids notice and often say, 'We have to be more like Gilberto.' We are very proud of him!"

After learning the ropes from his dad, Jimenez plans to take over his family's heating, ventilation and air conditioning company. 🌟



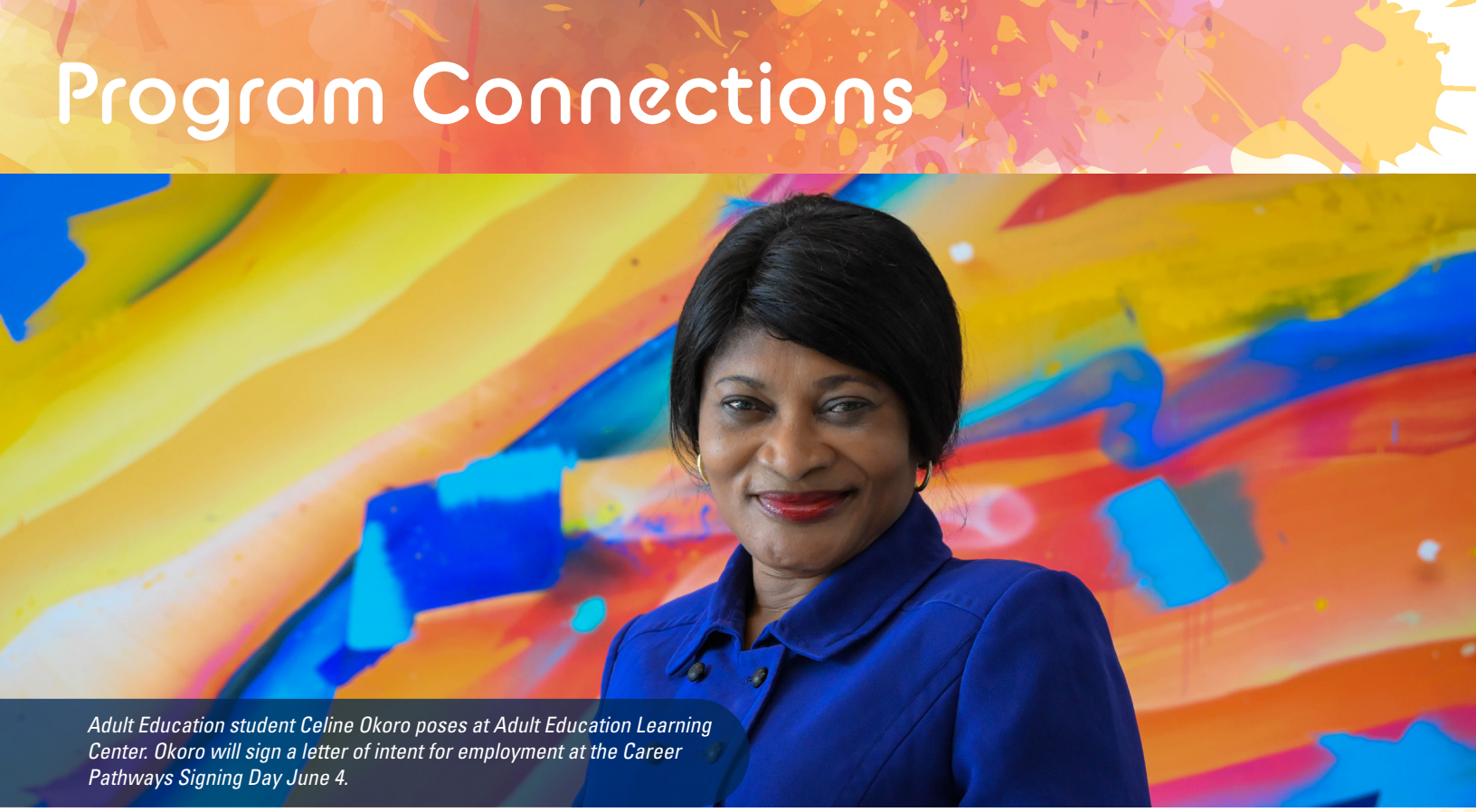
*Gilberto Jimenez, right, received his diploma from Principal Travita Godfrey on May 23. He graduated a year early and was awarded Student of the Year.*



*Jimenez, right, built strong, familiar ties with Recovery Coach Lakesha Hemphill, which aided in practical counseling sessions.*



# Program Connections



Adult Education student Celine Okoro poses at Adult Education Learning Center. Okoro will sign a letter of intent for employment at the Career Pathways Signing Day June 4.

## ADULT EDUCATION HELPS CELINE OKORO FIND A NEW CAREER IN A NEW COUNTRY

**LIFE CAN TAKE YOU ANYWHERE.** You might stay in the same city your entire life, find a new job and raise a family in another state or relocate to a new country for a fresh start. All you need are the right opportunities presented at a key moment.

Celine Okoro's life is somewhat of a combination of those possibilities.

For decades, she lived in Nigeria where she built a career advocating for women's rights in a country she described as failing to recognize women as professionals. She spent years championing equity and helping women find their voices while raising three children and nurturing a 35-year marriage.

But in November 2023, she made a bold decision.

"Starting over in America was tough," Okoro said. "But one must ask themselves, 'Do you want to live the rest of your life complaining about your country?' No, rather than lamenting, while one still has strength, you can begin to realign yourself to new realities and live the life you want."

She left behind everything familiar—her career, home and community—to start over in the United States. It wasn't easy, but she believed the best was yet to come.

More than a year and a half later, Okoro is beginning to see her future unfold. On June 4, she will join more than 50 Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) students who have completed or will complete Adult Education's workforce training, High School Equivalency (HSE, formerly known as GED) or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the



The Adult Education Learning Center provides lab spaces where students, like Okoro, can gain hands-on training.

third Career Pathways Signing Day.

Adult Education students will sign letters of intent for employment offers from more than 20 top Harris County companies, many of which partner with HCDE to create entry routes into the workforce.

"Every day you live is cause for a celebration because life can be hard," Okoro smiled. "This ceremony is part of HCDE giving hope to the people in this program. Here, everybody gets an opportunity to improve themselves."

However, the adjustment to new life in the U.S. wasn't immediate. Okoro navigated an

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# Program Connections

unfamiliar culture, climate, legal system and job market. The advocate who once commanded public rallies and mentored women in Nigeria was searching for stability.

It wasn't until she stumbled upon an online ad for HCDE's Adult Education program that things began to look up.

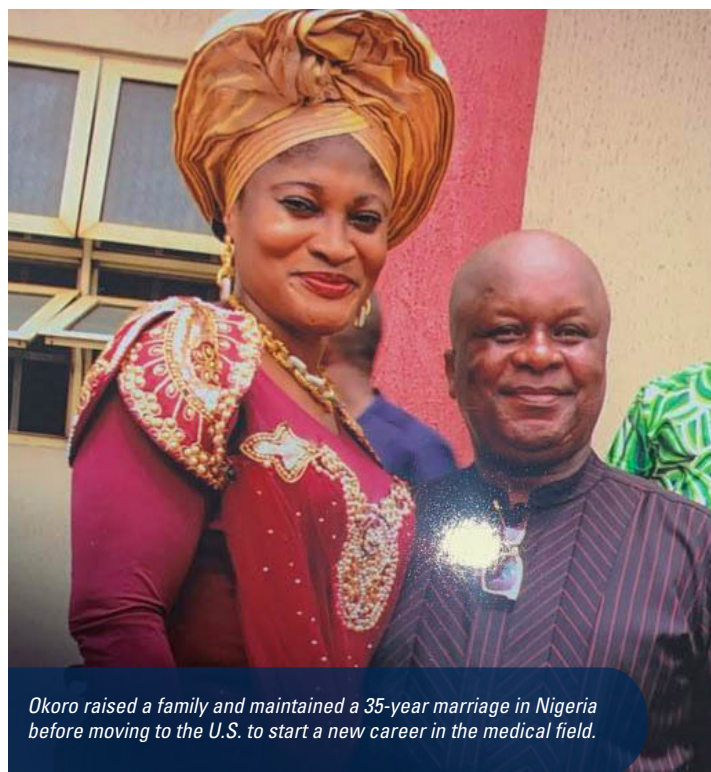
"One fateful day, my phone said, 'Put in your zip code and then fill in your name,'" Okoro recalled. "Then it said, 'Oh, you qualify.' I didn't take it as anything serious. I thought it was one of those scams. Then, within a week or two, I got an email inviting me to orientation."

She joined hundreds of students at the information session and was one of 70 adults who met the requirements to enroll in classes for Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and Phlebotomy. These entry-level positions opened doors to a new career within the medical field and aligned with Okoro's passion for helping others.

Throughout more than 100 hours of classroom instruction and hands-on training, CNA students study diverse topics designed to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of providing primary care to patients. They learn everything from fundamental skills such as taking vital signs and assisting with personal hygiene to understanding how human anatomy and physiology are affected by diseases or injuries. Phlebotomy students are trained to safely draw blood, handle specimens and maintain proper lab procedures.

Adult Education leaders design programs to meet workforce standards, prepare students for immediate employment in high-demand fields, and help them build competence and confidence in their new careers.

"At the end of the day, there's quite a lot of loneliness in the medical system among patients, so caregiving is huge," Okoro said. "I tell people that caregiving is more than a job. You must apply yourself and be concerned about your patients, but beyond that, you must bring empathy and compassion. I have those skills now because of Adult Education and I have the confidence to go into my job because I've undergone rigorous training."



*Okoro raised a family and maintained a 35-year marriage in Nigeria before moving to the U.S. to start a new career in the medical field.*



*Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) students, Okoro pictured in the bottom right, pose happily with their new certifications after completing more than 100 hours of training.*



*Celine Okoro, right, stopped by her past Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) class to thank teacher Christine Davis for providing the foundation of patient care.*

Okoro's new opportunity manifested in a job offer from The Legacy at Long Meadow, a Pegasus Senior Living community in Richmond. She will sign her letter of intent at the signing day ceremony in front of peers and instructors who have supported her throughout the certification process.

Her journey powerfully reflects the mission behind HCDE's Adult Education program—to open doors, create pathways to employment and empower individuals to reach their full potential, no matter their starting point.

"This is just the beginning," Okoro smiled. "This is my entry point into the system. I'm going to the top, and I thank God for a good, credible entry point for me. I'm motivated by the fact that there's something to look forward to and grateful that Adult Education created a space where I'm encouraged to be my best version." ★



## COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND BUSINESSES SUPPORT STUDENTS AT INAUGURAL TRANSITION FAIR

**NEARLY 50 STUDENTS** and parents received an opportunity to plan their futures on May 29 at the Connecting Pathways & Next Steps: Transition Fair. Academic and Behavior School West leaders organized the inaugural event to link attendees with representatives who can help guide students as they transition to adulthood.

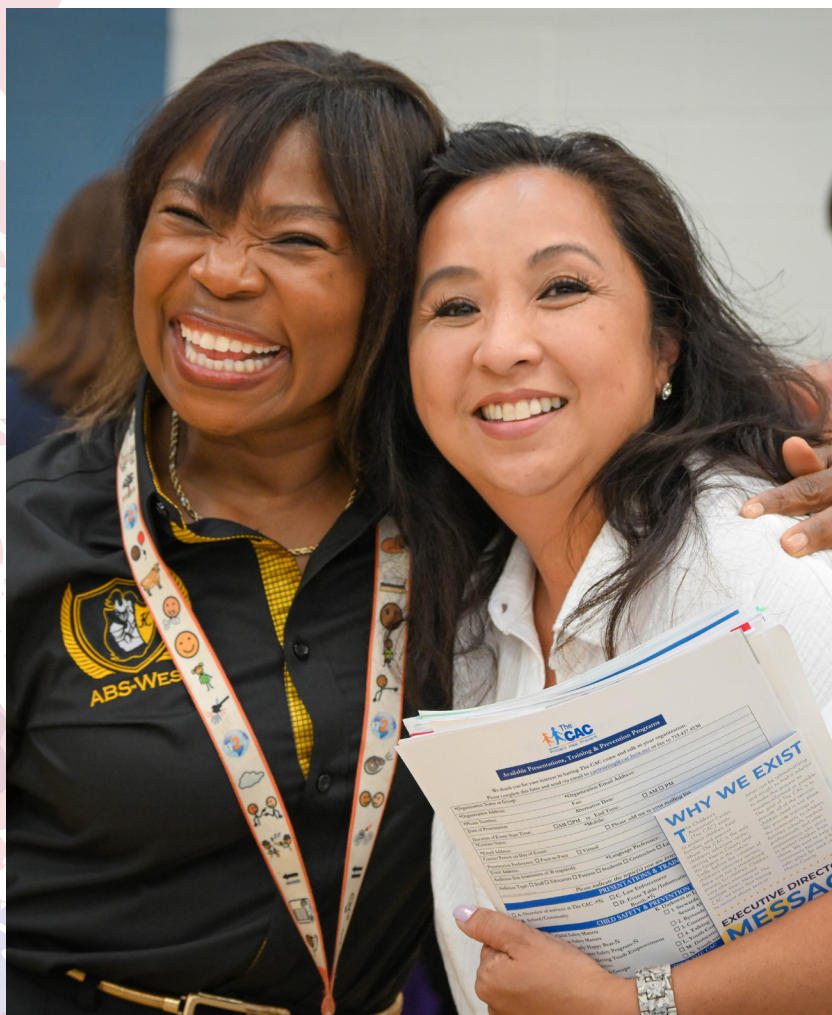
“At some point our kids are going to leave campus or maybe live on their own, but many families may not know the next step,” Principal Jatata Hutton explained. “Our job here today is bridging the gap between resources and information. That’s why we call it Connecting Pathways because we have to connect with the community for the betterment of Harris County students.”

Businesses like H-E-B, Goodwill and Chick-fil-A discussed student employment opportunities upon graduation. Representatives from Houston Community College and the

University of Houston were on hand to offer insight into higher education opportunities. Life Skills students with the potential to maintain their households were connected with Fort Bend Center for Independent Living employees. Other vendors included Starbucks, Family to Family Network, Camp Blessing Texas and Molina Healthcare.

Harris County Department of Education’s two Academic and Behavior Schools (East and West) provide supportive learning environments for students aged 5-22 with intellectual, developmental and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorder and other health impairments. Many parents used the event to catch up with educators and discuss plans to continue education and intervention strategies throughout the summer.

The Transition Fair created a space that empowered families with resources they may not have known existed and showed students a future filled with support. ✨





## HEAD START EMPLOYEES ENJOY ‘BACKYARD KICKBACK’ TO CELEBRATE 2024-2025 SCHOOL YEAR

**INCLEMENT WEATHER** may have moved the party inside, but Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) Head Start division and its staff members enjoyed a fun day together to celebrate their accomplishments and recognize employees as the force behind educating the county’s youngest learners.

With its “Backyard Kickback,” the picnic-themed event on May 29 included games featured at a cookout mixed in with other stations to relax and mingle with fellow Head Start team members.

“We want to relax, enjoy and have some fun,” Senior Director Venetia Peacock said in her opening remarks. “Even though this year has been very challenging, think about all the great things that you’ve done. The children you’ve touched, the families you’ve helped, the staff you’ve encouraged throughout the year.

“We as a leadership team are so proud. I don’t even have the words to tell you how thankful we are of each and every one of you for the service, help, support and work that you’ve done.”

Also incorporated in the day was a “Head Start Got Talent” presentation from each center and the Irvington staff. Each team took the stage and performed, whether it was a song, dance, poetic reading and skit, and received a raucous applause from the crowd. 🌟



*Head Start Got Talent performance*



*A synchronized swimming talent performance*



*Mix and mingle session games*



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



# Board Briefs

## CASE FOR KIDS OFFERS SUMMER TIPS TO PARTNERS WITH BOOTCAMP BLITZ

**JUST AS THE WELCOME PAGE** said to attendees, it's never too early to start planning for a successful and engaging summer. So, for several Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids community partners and division staff members, three days were well spent this week picking up a host of tools, skills and ideas to plan out and deliver high-quality activities for Harris County youth this summer. The CASE for Kids team hosted a Bootcamp Blitz on May 28-30, with two main topics covered each day through collaborative activities and discussions. Topics included building a trusted community with staff and students, lifting up a student's voice, team building, structuring a physical and emotionally safe environment, and curriculum planning. 🌟



TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY](#)

## SUPERINTENDENT COLBERT MAKES SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT IN END-OF-YEAR MESSAGE

**HELLO, SUMMER!** Superintendent Colbert officially bid farewell to the 2024-2025 academic school year on Tuesday with the release of his annual end-of-year message to Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) staff. He highlighted key moments for the Department, including the distribution of winter retention incentives.

**HCDE  
IS  
Varsity**



TO SEE MORE  
OF THE STORY:

[VIEW OUR VIDEO](#)

Colbert also announced the 2025 Convocation theme during his video message - "HCDE is VARSITY." He encouraged #TeamHCDE to start looking through their personal school archives as we prepare to travel back to high school for this year's theme. Staff will assemble at Kingdom Builder's Center in southwest Houston on Friday, Aug. 8, 2025, where he will distribute Service Awards, reflect upon this past school year and describe for staff what it means to be VARSITY in HCDE. 🌟



# Systemic Achievement: With Purposeful Intent

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

### SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE E: INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

- Ensures that goals and objectives form the basis of curricular decision-making and instruction and communicates expectations for student achievement.



Fortis Academy graduate Gilberto Jimenez, left, poses for a photo with HCDE Assistant Superintendent for Academic Support Services Jonathan Parker at the school's graduation ceremony May 23.

**OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKS**, we've celebrated graduations at Fortis Academy and both ABS East and West. Nearly 30 of our students symbolically crossed the stage in front of campus staff and loved ones, earning their diplomas and certificates of graduation. Each of these students has had a tremendous journey of overcoming adversity and have a strong support system of educators and family members to help reach their goals. To showcase these journeys, we highlighted three graduates: Landon Graham (ABS East), Jessie Espitia (ABS West) and Gilberto Jimenez (Fortis Academy). Each of these three young men represent the magic that happens each and every day at our four special schools and are a reminder to #TeamHCDE of our "why." We're invested in bettering the lives of Harris County learners, especially those who are in the blind spots or special populations that a traditional school district may not be able to provide for. Congratulations again to all of our Class of 2025 graduates.

Our third Adult Education Career Pathways Signing Day is next week and to introduce everyone to those outstanding accomplishments, we share the story of Celine Okoro. A native of Nigeria, where she built a career advocating for women's rights, Okoro came to the United States in 2023 and started over. She saw an online ad for HCDE's Adult Education program and knew that was the opportunity she needed to find her path. Okoro enrolled in classes for HCDE's Certified Nursing Assistant and Phlebotomy,

where she reclaimed that drive for advocacy. Now, she uses her passion in the healthcare industry, giving care to patients. Her success in the classroom and training has already landed her a job offer with a senior living community in Richmond and Okoro will join the many others who will ink letters of intent on signing day. I'm proud of her journey and those like her who created pathways to employment. Congratulations on your accomplishments.

Finally, ABS West was the host site for the Connecting Pathways & Next Steps: Transition Fair. This inaugural event gave our students and families from ABS East and West a chance to meet representatives from a number of community partners and learn about available resources for the transition to adulthood, whether it's higher education, employment or independent living. At HCDE's Special Schools, educators provide a supportive learning environment that many times extends beyond the four walls of a classroom. The fair is another extension of the support these families receive, as they were able to speak with businesses about job opportunities, healthcare agencies and other organizations. Thank you to those community and business partners who see value in our students and their ability to contribute to society as they become adults. I look forward to seeing this fair grow in years to come.

By utilizing effective practices that maximize the achievement of student potential, I am meeting the expectation to ensure that the learning goal of students are met or exceeded. ★



### HCDE BOARD

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Dr. John McGee

### UPCOMING EVENTS

**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

**June 25-29**  
Annual Recovery Schools Conference

**July 4**  
Independence Day (HCDE Closed)