



Harris County
Department of
Education

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the CONNECTOR



**MAY EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH GOES WHERE SHE'S
NEEDED TO HELP HEAD START THRIVE **P.3****

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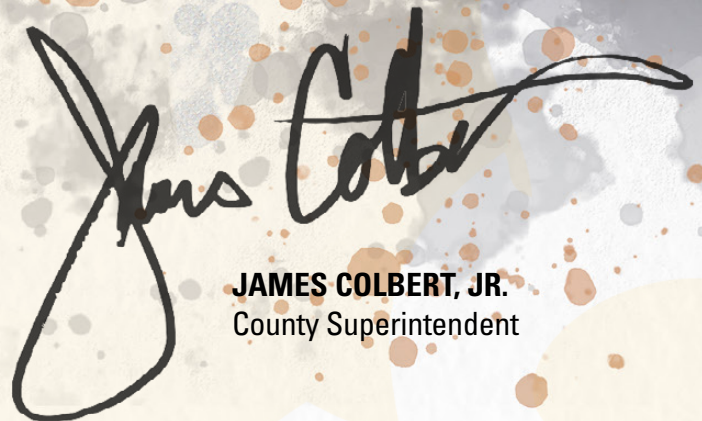
of Note

ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS about being an administrator is not being in the classroom and making a lasting impact on students every day. I miss ending my day and knowing that I personally made a difference in a child's life. However, while I recognize daily connections between students and teachers are critical to success, sometimes a single interaction can transform a child's future.

We see this concept this week with ELT members visiting one of our schools to teach young boys about the nuances of growing up including tying a tie, professional posture and the proper way to interact with others. It is gratifying to know HCDE's leaders are out in our schools directly supporting students with lifelong lessons that will serve them well beyond their academic careers.

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by standing meetings to discuss current projects and initiatives. On Tuesday, I reviewed contracts with Dr. Sylvester in preparation for board approval and on Wednesday, I participated in a teambuilding exercise with ELT. Thursday morning, I welcomed more than 80 school communications professionals from around Texas in person and online at the Communicating in Chaos marketing conference hosted by HCDE's Communications and Marketing teams. Later that day, I met with ELT members to discuss ongoing projects and issues. Today, I met with staff at my NPO office.

Have a relaxing weekend.

A portrait of James Colbert, Jr., a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and blue patterned tie. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a light blue and white abstract pattern with orange and yellow splatters.A stylized, handwritten signature of James Colbert, Jr. in black ink, featuring a large, looping 'J' and 'C'.

JAMES COLBERT, JR.
County Superintendent

Employee Spotlight



May Employee of the Month Quina Jones helps a Compton Head Start student with her art project.

QUINA JONES' COMMITMENT TO HEAD START STUDENTS MAKES HER EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

QUINA JONES' HOMEBASE with Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) is at Dogan Head Start, where she is in her sixth year serving as a teacher aide. She loves her work. "I had a calling and so I answered it," she said. That personal investment in serving Harris County's youngest learners has also proved invaluable to helping the Head Start team – it's why Jones was selected as the May Employee of the Month. Not only does she fill in with different roles at Dogan and adjust on the fly, Jones has continually stepped in to fill staffing shortages at other campuses when needed.

Currently, she's assisting at Compton Head Start. She started the school year at Coolwood, serving at the division's newest facility for two months. Jones' ability to adapt and fill various roles – while maintaining a smile and grace – has not gone unnoticed.

"That's one of the things that she's been complimented on from many different facilities," said Shenekia Hines, Dogan Head Start's campus manager. "They say, 'I know it's out of her comfort zone because she's not at Dogan.'"

"Of course, I know she wants to come back to Dogan but she's okay with meeting the needs of each center so the organization runs smoothly. She knows that Dogan is home but she still wants Head Start to thrive."

That is what Jones wants. Before working for HCDE and Head Start, she became familiar with the early childhood education centers as a parent.

Jones grew up on Houston's east side, running track while attending Furr and Galena Park high schools. After graduation, she worked as a model, doing promotional work and even landing in a few magazines.

Being around the glitz and glamour of hair and makeup led her to explore an interest in studying cosmetology. While in

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Quina Jones is in her sixth year as a Dogan Head Start teacher aide.

Employee Spotlight



Quina Jones joined Dogan Head Start students on a field trip to the Houston Aquarium on April 22.

school, her son Camryn was born.

"I needed somewhere to have him and could help him while I continued going to school," said Jones, who enrolled Camryn at Sheffield Head Start. "As a parent, I loved it because it was helping me. I was already working with him at home, but they enhanced it. They made me feel good as a parent."

Camryn is now a sophomore at North Shore Senior High

School in Galena Park Independent School District. He's an honor roll student, to which his mother credits Head Start.

"I know they gave him that head start – I know it did," Jones said. "There were things that I didn't know to catch that they did. We know the basics – the ABCs, the numbers, the colors – but we forget about the beginning sounds, ending sounds, blending words and all those other things."

The journey wasn't always smooth. A few years ago, the family was involved in a severe car accident that nearly halted Jones' plans. She pivoted and decided to focus all of her energy on Camryn.

In short, it was about him. He plays basketball at North Shore and with his summer team, Houston Hustlers, which means hours in the gym and road trips for Jones.

"I'm a basketball mom," she said. "I like it because it keeps him busy and I'm seeing the results of him growing. It's worth it."

They have two more years in this journey before Camryn plans to enlist in the U.S. Navy, joining cousins who are already serving in the military. At that point, Jones said she'll put more time back into herself. She may even get back into the modeling scene.

Also still at the forefront is Head Start. Jones prayed about it and a sign pointed her to the organization, which serves more than 1,300 young students and supports language, literacy and social and emotional development.

Jones went to a job fair and after



Quina Jones poses for a photo with her son, Camryn. A self-described "basketball mom," Jones spends hours cheering in the gym.

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Employee Spotlight



Quina Jones has filled in at both Coolwood and Compton head start centers this school year in addition to her home campus (Dogan).

a great first impression, conducted two successful interviews before being hired and assigned to Dogan. Aside from wearing heels on her first day – she quickly learned those weren't needed with newborns to 5-year-olds – Jones has proved to be vital to Head Start.

"She is a teacher's assistant but it's hard to even categorize her as just a teacher's assistant," Hines said. "The way she interacts with kids, they respond to her in ways that some teachers can't get. She knows that extra little movement or something that they take to.

"Just the way she has her systems in place – nobody can do it like Ms. Jones does it."

For Jones, she enjoys Dogan because it's one of the few Head Start centers where staff can see their students after they graduate the program. While many campuses are freestanding or their own facility, Dogan Head Start is contained within Houston Independent School District's Dogan Elementary School.

So, when students are promoted to kindergarten at Dogan, Jones and fellow staff will still see the students and watch them grow up through fifth grade. This year's fifth graders are the first set she has seen all the way through.

"I love it," Jones said. "I can give them candy when I see them. I can give them hugs. If they're having a bad day, I can pull them to the side, talk to them, give them encouraging words or just anything they may need.

"This little girl – her name is Moesha – her mom passed away and we made these bracelets. She has a bracelet, and I have a bracelet. Now, every time I see her, I ask to see her bracelet and she'll show me. That's the cool part about Dogan."

That's also why her support at other sites is championed.

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jones helped at Pugh and Fifth Ward, both of which closed at the end of last school year, and the Humble campus.

She's also spent time at JD Walker before assisting at both Coolwood and Compton this school year. Jones has managed to get back to Dogan, helping chaperone for two field trips in April during state testing.

"Sometimes it's difficult for people. Even myself, having to ask if they can go to another center," Hines said. "But she'll do it with grace and with a smile. More people appreciate that than you know. To go to another location, to do what you do best and keep moving, that's one of the reasons she's gotten her acknowledgement.

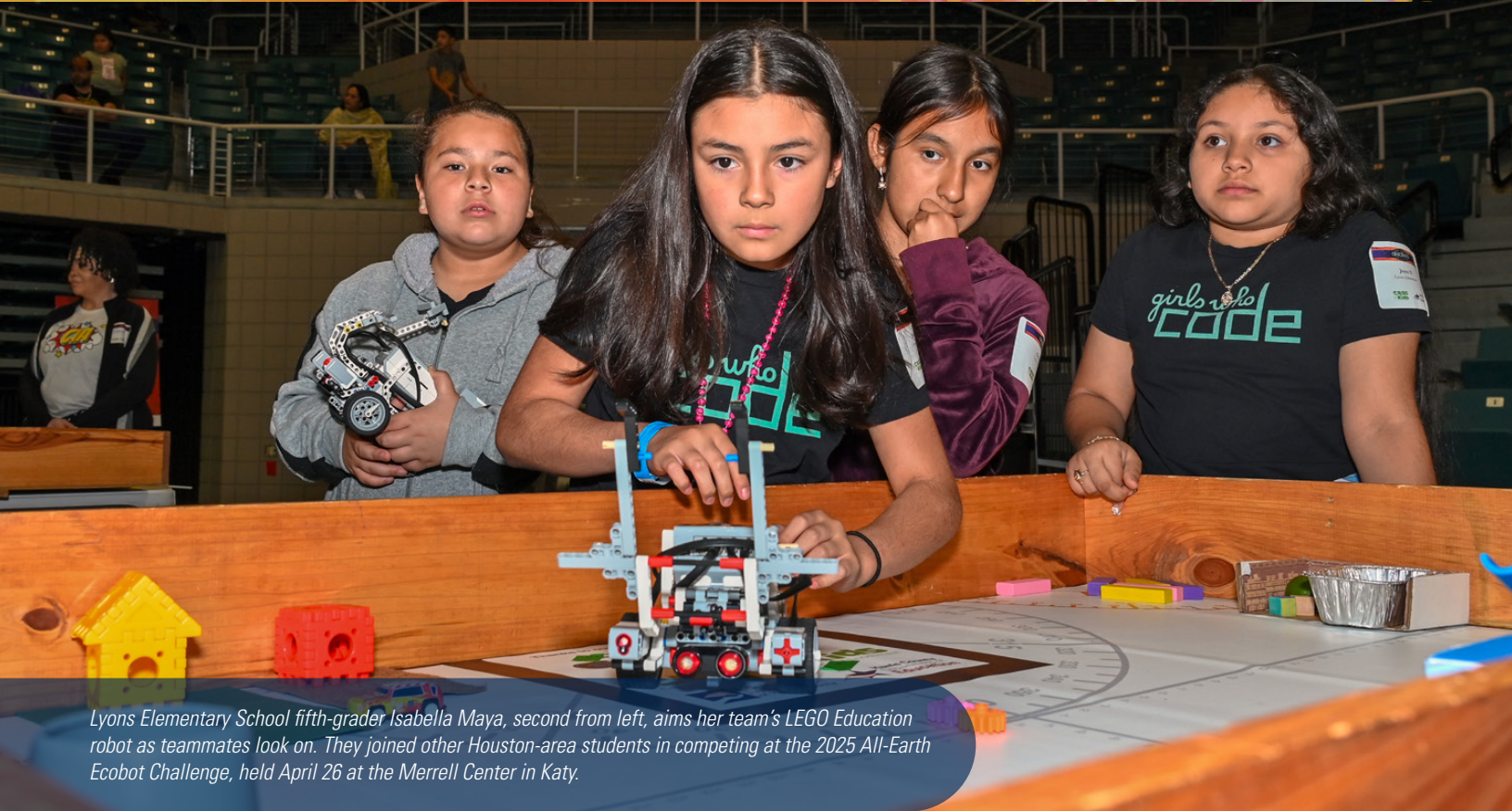
"So many people are blessed by her presence and some of these people have never worked with Ms. Jones until now."

Said Jones: "I did ask if I could go back before the end of the school year so I could see the graduation. At the end of the day, it's all about the kids and that's the part I love about this." ★



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

Program Connections



Lyons Elementary School fifth-grader Isabella Maya, second from left, aims her team's LEGO Education robot as teammates look on. They joined other Houston-area students in competing at the 2025 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge, held April 26 at the Merrell Center in Katy.

AREA STUDENTS LEARN MOVEMENT OF GOODS, SOCIAL SKILLS THROUGH 2025 ALL-EARTH ECOBOT CHALLENGE

SABELLA MAYA AND ABIGAIL MOSQUEDA both participated in the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge one year ago, learning the game but also fighting through the challenges of the timed competition.

That was their biggest takeaway – and a main priority to overcome for both when they returned this year for another opportunity. The two fifth-grade students at Houston Independent School District's Lyons Elementary relished the moments with their teammates not only leading up to the competition but during the 2025 challenge, held April 26 at the Merrell Center in Katy.

"I felt less stressed as I was before," Maya said. "It was fun practicing and getting ready."

Added Mosqueda: "It was hard for me but also fun because I'm having fun with my friends. You're not by yourself here so you don't have to stress out."

In its 16th year, the All-Earth Ecobot Challenge is an innovative engineering competition for students that combines problem-solving, critical thinking and the application of solutions for real-world problems. Teams use LEGO Education robotics kits to construct robots and navigate a STEM-based challenge

simulating real environmental scenarios. The Challenge is provided to students across the Houston area through Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids and the Education Foundation of Harris County.

This year's theme, "Package Patrol,"

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Affectionately known as "Robo Joe," All-Earth Ecobot Challenge curriculum director and game designer Joe Paneitz speaks to participating students to start the day.

Program Connections



While not competing, students visited the EcoGenius Lab where community partners set up STEM-related demonstrations and experiments.

challenged fourth through eighth-grade students and teams to examine and learn about the shipping industry, movement of goods and how robots and humans collaborate to deliver clothing, groceries, automobiles, technology and other products to doorsteps across the planet.

For an industry that will only grow as the participants age, the game table featured buildings and houses, and food and other goods. Students explored how energy is powered and how goods are gathered in a factory or manufacturing plant before being sent out for delivery.



TO SEE MORE OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY

“You have to put yourself in the shoes of a fourth grader,” said Joe Paneitz, All-Earth Ecobot Challenge curriculum director and game designer, also known as “Robo Joe.” “They ask mom or dad for this toy and then all of a sudden, it shows up at your doorstep in 24 hours – or even the same day. Kids don’t think about all the stuff that’s behind the scenes that make it happen and how incredible that is.

“So, we want kids to not only know the process, we want them to know that there are jobs in all of those steps and we want them to know how much energy these big facilities are burning up. There are problems with this and these are the kids that are going to solve those problems.”

For a number of students, the Challenge is their first taste of robotics, coding and engineering. It’s an entry point for STEM-related curriculum and eventual careers.

The competition requires participants to build a team with different roles and be flexible in trying to find solutions to the problems on their gameboards. They learn those engineering traits and pick up soft skills in a fun environment.

For some participants, they can also learn which roles they don’t enjoy – a factor just as vital as moving toward those responsibilities they love.

“There’s the head engineer, the head programmer, the fashionista, the spotter. There are all these different people working on this team,”

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Program Connections



Lyons Elementary School fifth-grader Abigail Mosqueda lines up her team's LEGO Education robot.

Paneitz said. "They'll come up to me and say, 'Look what I coded, look what I built or look at what I created.' We're tapping into all these kids' talents.

"Not all kids like to build and throughout their practices, they discover that they like creating or leading, or they don't like it. It's not so much what you like to do. It's also discovering what you don't like."

The competition included two rotations. While one set of teams worked through their board on the competition floor, the other teams explored STEM activities in the EcoGenius Lab where community partners set up demonstrations and experiments for students.

CASE for Kids staff and volunteers kept the energy up throughout the day with music and encouragement. The fun also included costumes and a fashion show – students filled the center dressed as robots, scientists and Amazon support staff.

"I'm most inspired by how 100 percent engaged the kids are," CASE for Kids Senior Director Lisa Caruthers said. "I visit afterschool programs all the time and I go and see kids during the school day, and there's not another space where you can walk in and every single kid is either putting something together with their hands or supporting another partner on how to figure something out."

As teams worked through the competition, the arena filled with cheers and hugs from students and parents watching from the stands. For some students, it was completing all the Challenge

objectives within the two-and-a-half-minute time limit. For others, it was facing a problem, troubleshooting and finding the solution in real time.

Those outcomes – win or lose, big or small – showcase the Challenge's importance to young minds and how developing these skills will pay off for life beyond the classroom.

"If it wasn't for my friends, I would have been all over the place," Maya said. "But my teammates were there to help me out and help us get as many points as we could."

Said Paneitz: "We can do all this better and these are the kids that are going to solve that problem." ★



STEPPING UP: STUDENTS CREATE ENVIRONMENTAL SOLUTIONS THROUGH GREEN HEART STEM CHALLENGE

THREE TEAMS OF STUDENTS from across Harris County came together on April 26 to develop solutions for some of the biggest challenges posed by climate change and environmental injustice. The Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC), in partnership with the Captain Planet Foundation and CASE for Kids, marks its second Green Heart STEM Challenge for youth in the Houston area.

The Green Heart STEM Challenge supports young people in exploring and identifying environmental injustice issues in their communities and designing actionable solutions to address those issues. This year's theme was focused on WIND, asking students to create solutions to single-use plastics, fast fashion and e-waste.

The Challenge began in January, when students were asked to submit a pitch video and written proposal for their ideas. The top three middle school finalists were invited to compete in a formal "pitch" to a judging panel of experts during the event. The Ross Sterling Middle School "Pollution Police" stepped up and took the top spot in the competition with their idea to upcycle old shoes. Siblings Kaylee and Nathan Kibble developed the idea for a shoe upcycling and creation station, where students can bring their



old shoes for cleaning, redecorating and patching to create less waste.

As the winning team, the Kibble siblings will receive a small implementation grant to put their idea into action. They will also attend a summer intensive called the Green Heart Idea Incubator to work with mentors on implementing their solutions. ★

ABS EAST STUDENTS LEARN THE POWER OF A WELL-TIED KNOT

AT ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIOR SCHOOL EAST, looking good is only the beginning. During the Boys and Bow Ties event on May 2, young men learned a timeless skill – how to tie a bow tie – while gaining something even more valuable: confidence, professionalism and pride in how they present themselves to the world.

Dr. Tyrone Sylvester, Jonathan Parker and Dr. CJ Rodgers were inspired by the idea in February when students participating in the Black History Month program were enamored with the Executive Leadership Team members' suits and ties.

However, the event went beyond fashion. It was about teaching

young men that appearance can reflect ambition and dressing with intention can open doors. As the ties were tightened, so were the bonds between mentors and students.

Events like Boys and Bow Ties are just one of many ways HCDE leaders aid students. While working in the office, they ensure students have the necessary resources, but on campus, they show up with hands-on guidance and a genuine interest in student success. This reminded students that support comes in many forms and that something as simple as a bow tie can carry a powerful message. ★



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY

SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS LEARN TO ‘COMMUNICATE IN CHAOS’

AS EDUCATION IN TEXAS CONTINUES TO EVOLVE, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) is doing its part to help those charged with communicating with their stakeholders. HCDE's Marketing & Client Engagement and Communication & Creative Services divisions hosted a half-day conference titled, "Communicating in Chaos" on May 1. The event brought together more than 80 school public relations professionals virtually and in person from across the state to discuss and share strategies to market school districts in a choice environment.

Superintendent James Colbert Jr. welcomed conference attendees, as he spoke on the state of education in Texas and the vital role communication teams play in reaching stakeholders.

Three sessions followed, including the first of two presentations by Randy Barber, chief communications officer in Boulder (Colo.) Valley School District. His morning session focused on reversing the trend of declining enrollment and the importance of pushing accurate and encouraging messaging. Barber closed the conference with his lessons learned from more than 30 years of school choice since the passing of Colorado's Public Schools of Choice law in 1994.

In between, Justin Dearing, communications strategist for the Center for Effective School Operations, led a session on communication teams best positioning their respective districts in the school choice era. ✨



TO SEE MORE
OF THE STORY:

VIEW OUR PHOTO GALLERY

EDUCATION FOUNDATION DIRECTOR PARTICIPATES IN LATINAS IN EDUCATION PANEL DISCUSSION



TRINA SILVA, the Education Foundation and Partnerships director for Harris County Department of Education (HCDE), served as a panel discussion guest on the current state of education at the Latinas in Education Community Event. Held April 24 at the Denver Harbor Community Center, Silva was joined on the panel by Glen Austin, director of public policy for Greater Houston Partnership, and Latinos for Education Executive Director Sandra Rodriguez. The event also featured cooking demonstrations, voting and citizenship presentations, and employment and networking opportunities. ✨

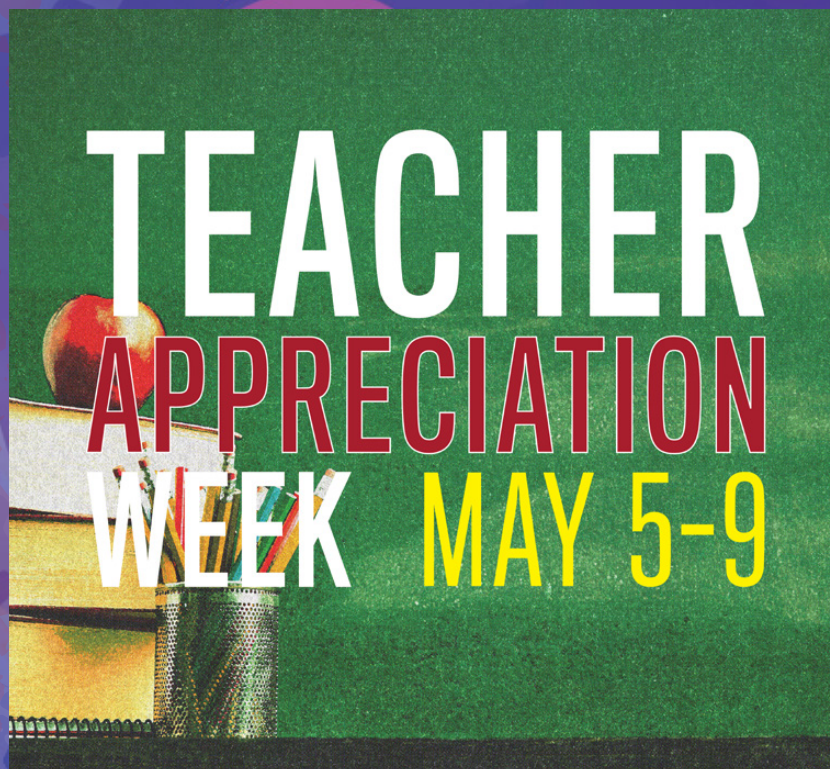
HCDE BIDS FAREWELL TO SPRING SEMESTER CIVIC INTERNS

HOPING THIS ISN'T THEIR ONLY TOUR with #TeamHCDE, Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) two interns were celebrated for their final days of service in support of Department initiatives and Harris County students and families.

University of Houston students Sophia Rodriguez and Saron Regassa joined HCDE for the spring semester as part of the school's Civic Houston Internship Program through the Hobby School of Public Affairs. It connects UH upperclassmen and select sophomores with government offices, nonprofit organizations and campaigns. Rodriguez, a pre-law sophomore, served her internship with the Education Foundation of Harris County, the philanthropic arm of HCDE, while Regassa, who graduates in May, joined the Civic Engagement team for the last three months.

Both built relationships with community partners and assisted with HCDE programs and initiatives. As part of their contributions to the Department, Rodriguez helped redesign the EFHC website, and Regassa assisted with information sessions ahead of the May elections.

HCDE wishes them all the best as they continue their education and public service. ✨



GEARING UP TO CELEBRATE TEACHER APPRECIATION WEEK

GET READY TO HONOR the educators who inspire, support and uplift students daily as Teacher Appreciation Week kicks off May 5. The celebration starts at Harris County Department of Education with a special "thank you" video featuring employees and festive parties at each of our four Special Schools. Leaders will end the observation by surprising our Teacher and Educational Aide of the Year with flowers, gift baskets and a \$500 check issued by the Education Foundation of Harris County. It will be a week of gratitude, smiles and well-deserved recognition. ✨

CASE FOR KIDS TEAM COLLABORATES WITH FELLOW AFTERSCHOOL PERSONNEL AT BOOST CONFERENCE

MEMBERS OF Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids Division attended the Best of Out-of-School Time (BOOST) Conference this week. Held April 29-May 2 in Palm Springs, Calif., regional program coordinators Keanda Fuller and Melvin Meade, and site coordinators Chelsea Geer, Benet Morgan and Jasmine Trier were joined by Likita Durden-Holmes, CASE for Kids research coordinator for the Research and Evaluation Institute team.

"It was both fun and educational, with so many valuable insights on how we can better engage with and support the students," Morgan said. "The sessions were very engaging and I'm excited to bring some new ideas back to the program!"

Notable sessions included elevating youth voices through leadership and community engagement and using restorative practices to foster growth.

Added Fuller: "I enjoyed the dynamic energy of School Yard Rap, which showed how education and entertainment can come together to make learning more engaging and culturally relevant. I'm leaving recharged and ready to lead with purpose!" 🌟



AANHPI

ASIAN AMERICAN • NATIVE HAWAIIAN • PACIFIC ISLANDER

HERITAGE MONTH • MAY 2025



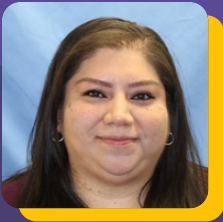
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HCDE RECOGNIZES AANHPI HERITAGE MONTH

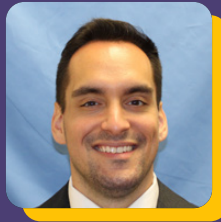
MAY IS Asian American, Native Hawai'ian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month! Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) proudly celebrates by embracing this year's theme, "A Legacy of Leadership and Resilience." This legacy is reflected in the dedication of our employees and their unwavering commitment to uplifting students and families across Harris County. Throughout the month, HCDE will recognize the contributions of our AANHPI colleagues through a video shared on social media and across internal channels, honoring the voices and stories that shape our community. 🌟

WELCOME TO HCDE

Please join us in welcoming HCDE's new hires for April! Five new faces have joined our Choice Partners, Head Start and Special Schools divisions.



Lauren Cantu
Administrative Assistant
Head Start



John Davalos
Contract Coordinator
Choice Partners



Traneichia Harris
Teacher
Head Start



Norma Ramirez
Campus Clerk
Head Start



Timothy Oliver
Substitute Teacher
Special Schools

Systemic Achievement: With Purposeful Intent

THIS WEEK, THE FOLLOWING BOARD EXPECTATIONS WERE MET:

SUPERINTENDENT OBJECTIVE B: ORGANIZATION MORALE

- Celebrates accomplishments and acknowledges excellences.



HCDE BOARD

Board President

Amy Hinojosa

2nd Vice President

Erica Davis

Board Members

Richard Cantu

Eric Dick

Andrea Duhon

Silky Joshi Malik

Dr. John McGee

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 5

CASE for Kids End-of-Year Celebration and Spirit of Excellence Awards Luncheon

May 16

ABS East Graduation

May 21

Board Meeting

Celebration of Excellence

May 22

ABS West Graduation

May 23

Fortis Academy Graduation

May 26

Memorial Day (HCDE Closed)

June 4

Adult Ed Signing Day

Center for Safe and Secure Schools Thriving Not Just Surviving: Celebrating Professionals Counselors Symposium

June 18

Board Meeting



May Employee of the Month Quina Jones and Dogan Head Start students arrive at their field trip destination, the Houston Aquarium, on April 22.

OUR HEAD START DIVISION and its 12 centers offer a long list of benefits to not only the young students, but their families as well. From the curriculum to the support, there are multiple reasons why Harris County learners in our programs are prepared for their journeys into K12 education. But those impressions aren't just for the students. For someone like Quina Jones, the May Employee of the Month, that impression from Sheffield Head Start where her son attended years ago led her to want to do the same. A teacher aide at Dogan Head Start, Jones embraces the role of supporting these young minds and even champions them as they age out of Head Start and walk the halls of Dogan Elementary School before earning a promotion to middle school. When asked, Jones has filled in at a number of centers during her Head Start career, from Pugh, Fifth Ward and Humble coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, to Coolwood and Compton this year. There's no better example of being a servant leader than caring for students you see every day only to take another assignment to show a new set of children that same care and attention.

The 2025 All-Earth Ecobot Challenge once again showcased what Harris County students are capable of in the STEM fields and hopefully opened a few eyes to future promising career pathways. Hundreds of students filled the Merrell Center arena in

Katy on April 26, a culmination of months building, coding and operating robots to complete tasks. The Challenge examined the shipping industry, movement of goods and how robots and humans collaborate to deliver products across the planet. Teams worked together against the clock to accomplish their missions for points. This annual event highlights the importance of engaging students in the STEM fields and opening their minds to future learning opportunities.

Finally, our Marketing & Client Engagement and Communication & Creative Services divisions hosted a conference titled, "Communicating in Chaos," on May 1. As education in Texas continues to evolve, our division leaders in school communications saw the need to help their counterparts across Houston and the state virtually in discussing strategies to market school districts in a choice environment. I was glad to see so many school public relations professionals come together to network and hear from speakers who have already worked in a school choice era and who shared best practices and insights to better position their respective districts.

By creating an open and positive environment, and treating every person respect and dignity, I am working to meet the needs of demonstrating fair and equitable management practices. ★