

From left, Bluebonnet summer interns Hannah Teague, Adryanna Coy and Tyler Medack prepare a welcome bulletin board near the entrance of Prairie Lea Elementary School. At far right, a volunteer displays books at Krause Elementary's book fair. (Photo at right by Bluebonnet; far right by Joe Stafford)



Bluebonnet employees lending helping hands to students, teachers through new partnership program

In support of schools

By Melissa Segrest

Brightly colored bulletin boards in entranceways greeted students and teachers at five elementary schools on the first day of school this year, courtesy of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative volunteers. Each teacher at the schools had already received a bag of school supplies to start the semester.

That marked the launch of the cooperative's new school-support initiative, the Bluebonnet School Partnership Program.

"We have always been advocates for the communities we serve. Educating our members' children is so important because these kids are the future of our communities," said Elizabeth Kana, Bluebonnet's chief financial officer, who helped launch the program. "This is one of the best ways we could help. The new program will support several schools every year, to assist students and teachers with needed supplies and volunteer hours."

The five elementary schools receiving support during the program's first school year are scattered across the cooperative's service area. They are Red Rock Elementary in the Bastrop school district, Blake Manor Elementary in the Manor ISD, Krause Elementary in the Brenham ISD, the Prairie Lea School and the Dime Box School.

These five are among 43 elementary schools in the co-op's service area that have a large percentage of students from families with low incomes. Over time, the program goal is to provide some support to all 43 schools.

One of the teachers who received a Bluebonnet bag of supplies is Sandra Staes, a life skills teacher for children with special needs at Blake Manor Elementary.

For the last six years she and aides have helped children with physical, intellectual and emotional disabilities learn how to interact with the outside world.

"I found out there is such a need for this type of teaching," she said. "There's a high staff turnover rate because it can be very stressful." For her and so many other teachers, what they



Photo by Joe Stafford

Volunteers at Bluebonnet's headquarters in Bastrop stuff bags with canned goods, granola bars and other food items that were handed out to students at Dime Box and Prairie Lea Elementary schools.

do isn't just a job, it's a calling.

At Krause Elementary, cooperative employees helped reward good conduct or perfect attendance with pizza parties, and they assisted at the book fair. At awards day, Bluebonnet line workers and other employees served ice cream at Prairie Lea. Volunteers plan to attend other awards days at all schools throughout the year. At Red Rock, line workers were among the volunteers setting up booths and overseeing some activities at the school's annual Fall Festival.

Bluebonnet volunteers have stuffed bags to provide weekend food for children at three of the schools because many students cannot always count on consistent meals. Almost one in four Texas children — more than 1.6

million — struggles with hunger, according to Feeding America, a national hunger relief organization.

"In December we'll deliver small holiday gifts for the kids at all five schools," Kana said. "During teacher training days, Bluebonnet volunteers will provide food for teachers. On testing days and at special events, we'll support both teachers and students."

More is planned for the 2020 spring semester at the five schools. In January, Bluebonnet employees will hold a cooperative-wide drive to provide mid-year supplies for teachers at all the schools. They will help out on field days in May. During weeklong State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, testing in April, volunteers will provide snacks and water.

And, of course, there will be a day when students can meet a Bluebonnet lineman in his gear and learn about electricity and safety.

The most important contribution, the schools' leaders say, is for volunteers to spend time each week mentoring a child who may need tutoring or support from a role model.

Dime Box School, in Lee County, about 18 miles northeast of Giddings, has 170 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. This year was momentous: students, teachers and many of the town's residents turned out to watch the school's first home football game ever. Bluebonnet volunteers helped run the concession stand and shot video of the six-man team's game for coaches and players to review.

Nicholas West is the assistant football coach and the school's superintendent. After the game, which Dime Box won, he thanked Bluebonnet for the help. "It seems simple to work a concession stand, but with other people doing that ... I didn't have to ask anyone connected with the school to help out," he said. "They were actually able to enjoy the game today."

Even though more is planned for the remainder of the school year, fall of 2020 isn't that far away. "We're already looking at possible schools for next year's program," Kana said.



Through the Bluebonnet School Partnership Program, the cooperative has given teachers cookies bearing the program's logo and bags of supplies. (Photo by Bluebonnet) At right, Stacey Staes, the life skills teacher at Blake Manor Elementary in Manor, expressed gratitude for the support. (Photo by Joe Stafford)



Above, Red Rock Elementary teachers enjoy treats from Bluebonnet. (Bluebonnet photo) Above right, Bluebonnet apprentice line worker Taylor Rutledge attaches a harness to Parker Lewis, 5, in an inflatable bounce house slingshot. Garrett Gutierrez, superintendent of Bluebonnet operations in Red Rock, keeps an eye on the action at Red Rock Elementary's Fall Festival. Parker's mother, Casey Lewis, is a teacher at the school. (Photo by Sarah Beal)