

Reading is the reward: Bastrop ISD sees benefits after installing book vending machines in schools

KUT 90.5 | By [Becky Fogel](#)

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Fourth-grader Nicolas demonstrates how the book vending machine works at Bluebonnet Elementary School in Bastrop last month.

Nicolas stands in front of a vending machine just outside the entrance of the Bluebonnet Elementary School library. But instead of Doritos, Snickers or the obligatory granola bar, this vending machine is filled with books.

The fourth-grader pulls out a token with a bookworm on it and feeds it in the slot. He punches a few numbers into the keypad and a book from the “Junie B. Jones” series drops.

Most of the titles in the vending machine are in English, but there are several books in Spanish, too. Nearly 50% of the students at this Bastrop ISD campus are considered emergent bilingual, meaning English isn't their primary language.



Michael Minasi / KUT

Librarian Pattie Nix shows tokens for the school's book vending machine.

Nicolas is a pro at using the vending machine. He first got to try it after receiving a “positive office referral” for going out of his way to help others.

“It’s the child that went back and picked up things for a friend [or] they notice someone in the hallway dropped a book and they help them,” Bluebonnet Principal Laura Faircloth says. “It’s that above-and-beyond good-hearted little child moment.”

Nicolas says he got the referral for being the “star student.”

Faircloth says the idea of giving students books as a prize for being considerate warms her heart. On top of that, it supports the goal of getting students excited about reading.

“Prizes don’t need to be food. Prizes don’t have to be toys. Let it be a book. Let your child love to read,” she says. “Our kids are readers, so it’s been really good.”

Why a book vending machine?

Turning books into prizes was Bluebonnet librarian Pattie Nix’s goal.

“So many times we have reading programs where the kids read a certain amount of minutes or pages and then they get some other kind of reward,” she says. “I wanted books to actually be a reward, and I wanted there to be this positive energy around getting a book.”

Nix came across a school in Chicago that had a book vending machine. It was an aha moment.

“I’m like, ‘That’s it!’ We have to find a way to bring that to Bastrop,” she says.

Nix got a grant from the [Bastrop Education Foundation](#) to buy the vending machine, which cost about \$5,000. Once it arrived on campus, she wanted to build some suspense and get students excited about it.



Michael Minasi / KUT News

Bluebonnet Elementary School got a grant to buy the vending machine for about \$5,000.

"We kept it in a box and put signs all over it that said 'Top Secret.' And so then we had a contest with our kids to guess what was in the [box]," she says. "They were coming up with all this crazy stuff."

At the big unveiling almost [two years ago](#), all the students who had received positive office referrals got to use the vending machine and pick out a book. Ever since the machine was introduced, Nix says, positive office referrals have tripled.

"It's motivation for kids. It's motivation for teachers to remember to recognize kids because they want their kids to visit the vending machine. And it's just so cool," she says. "And I love that we're putting this positivity on getting a book."

Nix says it costs about \$1,000 per year to buy books for the vending machine. The school uses a combination of book fair profits and funds from the [Bluebonnet PTA](#) to buy them.

"We want the books to be new," she says. "We're not giving away junk, we're not giving away old stuff that's been discarded. They're brand new books."

Teachers see benefits

Fourth-grade teacher Sarah Diaz-Eason says when one of her students does something to earn a positive office referral and subsequently a token for the vending machine, the rest of the class cheers them on. She also thinks the machine makes reading extra fun for kids.

"My biggest goal is to bring back the magic of reading for each of my students," she says. "I think that this helps instill to our students that we at Bluebonnet really believe that reading is important and that it's fun and that it's magical."

Courtney Grafton, who also teaches fourth grade, says she sees her students light up after they've gotten to choose a book from the vending machine.

"They're so proud to come back with a book. They come in [and they're like], 'Look, look, Ms. Grafton! Look what I got!' So they're very proud of it" she says.

“We’re trying to show that reading is a positive thing. It’s not a punishment. It’s not a homework assignment. It’s an enjoyable thing.”

Pattie Nix, Bluebonnet librarian

Grafton says it also makes a difference that students get to pick out a book for themselves, instead of reading something a teacher has assigned.

“It’s more of an enjoyable thing. ‘I picked this book. I get to read it all by myself. Nobody’s making me do it and I get to do it just for my own enjoyment,’” she says. “So, I think that element makes it really cool.”

Another fourth-grade teacher, Isleen Ortiz, seconds what Grafton says about students getting excited to choose a book for themselves – whether that’s at the vending machine or the school library.

“When they have the option to choose something, they’re really into it,” she says. “They always ask me, ‘Can I read this right now? I just got it.’ They’re just eager to jump into it.”

Ortiz also likes that the vending machine is helping to get physical books into kids’ hands.

“I love that the kids are getting back into reading,” she says. “I know with electronics and everything it’s kind of a battle.”

That’s a battle Nix is willing to fight – whether it’s with the book vending machine or a book club for one of her favorite series, Harry Potter.

“We’re trying to show that reading is a positive thing,” she says. “It’s not a punishment. It’s not a homework assignment. It’s an enjoyable thing.”

Nix says a handful of other Bastrop ISD campuses have either gotten or are in the process of getting vending machines after seeing Bluebonnet’s success.

“They’re starting to spread now all over the district, especially at our elementary schools,” she says.

