



By Steven Nester

# McKinney's Terrific Kids

The McKinney Kiwanis Club and several McKinney elementary schools have teamed up for the past seven years to promote reading, attendance and academic excellence. What these local kids have achieved through this partnership is terrific, which is why the Kiwanis call it the Terrific Kids Program.

Students have improved their reading, attendance and overall academic performance. And, while they probably don't yet realize it, students have also received first-hand exposure to the important ways that caring adults and service groups reach the community – by responding to the needs of its youngest members and providing guidance.

Caldwell, Finch and Webb elementary schools are participants, and each has its own program with distinctive goals, methods and rewards. A Kiwanian sponsor assists each school's administrators to ensure that goals are set, met, and, best of all, that rewards go to students who make an effort.

The program is a hit with kids, teachers, administrators and parents.

"The kids love it – they get very excited, and the parents are interested in it too," says Webb Instructional Specialist Kristi Odom. "They ask a lot of questions and enjoy watching their children work for something. Teachers love it because it motivates students and it's a great engagement tool."

The success of the Kiwanis Terrific Kids couldn't come at a more poignant time. Kiwanian Jim Blazier, who died in the spring of 2012, is responsible for taking the program to the McKinney school district in 2005.

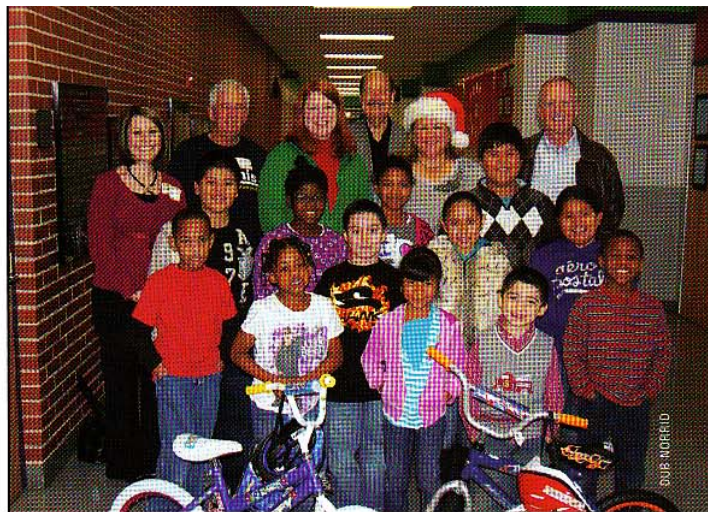
*Above: The students in Laura Amlin's third-grade class at Caldwell Elementary School were proud winners of a recent nine-week reading competition.*



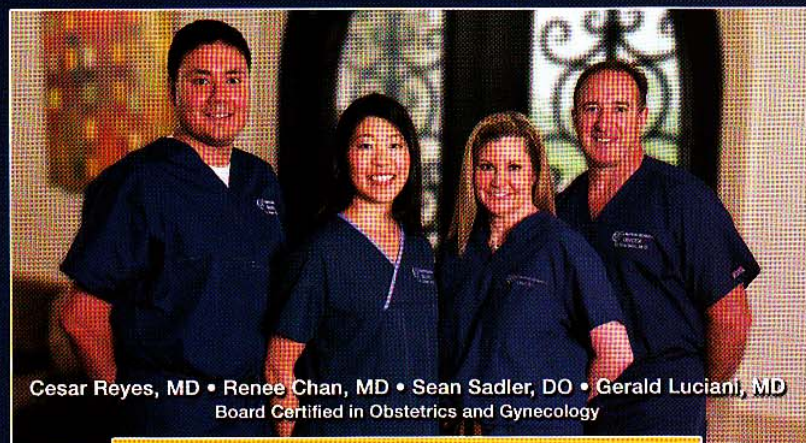
## Finch Attendance Success

Officials at Finch determined the school could best be served by improving attendance – and this could be achieved by rewarding students with no absences. Kiwanians and administrators decided to give a boy and a girl with perfect attendance in every grade each semester the chance to win bicycles donated by the Kiwanis.

Names were drawn randomly, and during the course of every school year, 24 Finch students have pedaled home on a new bicycle. Kiwanian Bob Cole took over as sponsor last fall. During the awards ceremony, the excitement is palpable and infectious, he says.



Above: Students with perfect attendance in each grade at Finch Elementary School had a chance to win bicycles donated by the Kiwanis Club. The children pictured here were bike winners in December 2011.



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"Even the boys and girls who don't win a bike get excited," Cole says. "It's such a reward to see the excitement and to see kids attend school more regularly and continue their education."

The Terrific Kids Program at Finch has improved attendance significantly. Finch was recognized the second year of the program with a Gold Performance Acknowledgement from the Texas Education Agency. Principal Becki Hoffman says the school is considering expanding the program in the 2012-13 school years to include academics. The kids, she says, are very excited about this.

## Webb's Winning Academics

Other schools, such as Webb, take a "learn together, earn together" approach. Students there work in teams to answer academic questions and complete tasks with the goal of winning books for their library. Playing an academic bingo game, entire classes complete tasks listed on a bingo board. Every student is a winner, and while working through the bingo board, students earn bookmarks, pencils and shoe tags.

Bingo reading and writing started three years ago, and the learning involved in the games complements the curriculum and enhances student achievement, says Odom. The subject matter changes from



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math to reading to science and to writing – and all tasks reinforce Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, the state standard for what students should know and be able to do.

Academic bingo also teaches the kids teamwork on a large scale, says Odom. Kiwanian sponsor Terry Witt says assisting elementary school children is an important part of the Kiwanis mission to make a community better one child at a time. It also instills a sense of community and volunteerism.

"A positive impact for the future can be made by reinforcing learning at the school," says Witt. "At Webb, the phenomenal staff determined what their academic goals were and how the Kiwanis could reinforce them. And the program has been a success."

When a class completes an entire bingo board, students revel in their success and also get fun rewards. A popcorn party is held and the Kiwanis Club donates money for books, which the students give to the school library with their names in them. Students earn something tangible that benefits everyone in the school while learning about altruism and the power of working for the common good.

## Caldwell's Terrific Readers

Through the Kiwanis program, Caldwell students focus on reading – and they truly love it. They love it so much they can't stop talking about it. And, they understand that while books are great fun, they contain important information.

Yasmin, a student in Susanna Bryant's first-grade class, tells it like it is. "I like to learn new things I don't know," she says, noting that books are where she finds things to learn.

Assistant principal Kelly Flowers says reading has increased at Caldwell, and students now understand that books are a fun, handy source for learning. The long-term goal is to develop lifelong readers, and Flowers says anecdotal evidence points to the program's success.

"We've seen a huge change in our kids," Flowers says. "It's tough to quantify,

but we know kids are taking home more books and reading more outside the classroom. We keep books around the school in hallways and places where kids can pass by and borrow them. It keeps them in touch with books and they begin to read more. Some parents visit these little book areas and pick out stories for their kids and take them home."

It's not quantity that counts, but quality. At Caldwell, the program is based on the number of books students read and whether they comprehend what they've read.

"Our kids are asked comprehension questions to make sure they are reading and that they comprehend what they're reading," Flowers says. The reading content also corresponds to reading workshops in their classrooms and their small group reading instruction.

Every quarter, classrooms have small celebrations for students who have met individual goals. Caldwell's Kiwanis sponsor, Dub Norrid, and other Kiwanis volunteers bring healthy snacks, and the Kiwanis donates pens and notebooks for the kids with some of his photos of previous winners printed on the back.

"We impact around 400 kids a year," says Norrid. "It's great for Kiwanis to interact with kids on this kind of basis. It gives us a chance to reward them for achievement, and we know

we are interacting in a positive way in young lives. Plus, we have fun promoting reading."

Jim Blazier's work at Finch and the efforts he inspired at other McKinney schools are living on to benefit a host of youngsters while teaching them the

bigger lesson of helping others. With the examples set by Blazier and other Kiwanians, it's a lesson the kids will certainly teach others someday.

*About the author: Steven Nester is an educator and freelance writer who hosts Poets of the Tabloid Murder, a mystery author interview show that can be heard on public radio.*

