

Three Big Country campuses nationally recognized as Blue Ribbon Schools

By Carl Kieka

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Students at Breckenridge Junior High had a special day last fall. They celebrated "Blue Ribbon Day."

"We borrowed a blowup big screen and watched movies in the gym and played fun games," Principal Jessica Stapp said.

And that was just for being nominated as a Blue Ribbon School. This week, it was announced that Breckenridge Junior High was one of three Big Country schools to be nationally recognized in the program.

Also among the 26 Texas schools recognized are Rising Star Elementary and Oliver Elementary School in Stamford. The three schools will be recognized at the Blue Ribbon School conference Nov. 14 and 15 in Washington, D.C.

The Department of Education program honors public and private schools that are either high performing or have improved student achievement to high levels, especially among disadvantaged students, according to the Blue Ribbon Schools' website.

"I'm sure we'll do something this year," Stapp said of celebrating the recognition. "We have banners up saying we were nominated. Now we can get the national banner up.

"We want the whole town to know. A lot of people don't realize how big a deal it is to be a Blue Ribbon School."

Superintendents and principals at all three schools credited three groups for their success — their staffs, the parents and, most importantly, the students.

"I've known for long time I've got one of the best staffs in state," said Susan Mueller, Oliver Elementary principal. "Now state knows it, and I guess the nation. Our kids have totally bought into it, as well, because they've seen what they can achieve."

Rising Star's award was for being in the top 10 percent in statewide tests. The school's scores have been high for the past few years, Superintendent Max Thompson said.

"That high performance at the commended level across the board for our third grade was outstanding," he said.

How does a school get on the list for such an honor?

"The biggest thing for us, I have the most dedicated teaching staff in the state," Stapp said. The students do their part by showing up. The school has recorded more than 96 percent attendance the past several years.

"That means our kids are here in their seats every day That makes all the different in the world," she said.

"I think it starts by stating the expectations, then believing you can achieve those expectations," Mueller said. "A lot of times we say we want something, but we don't really think we can do it.

"When kids do not believe in themselves and think they are failures so they don't even try, our staff will develop relationships with those kids, make them realize they are important."

Smaller schools might not have the same resources as large schools, but they can make up a lot with individual attention in smaller classes. Barbara Long, Rising Star Elementary principal, said she believes that plays a part in the school's success.

"We're like a family here," she said. "The teachers talk to each other about what the kids need. We're small enough that we know all of them. The teachers cooperate with each other and support each other, work as a team."

Long said the school will plan something to commemorate the honor, and promised to "make a big fuss over the kids.

"They continually amaze me in how hard they try," she said. "They go over and beyond what we expect. Maybe we don't have the funds bigger schools have, but our kids don't know that."



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