

VIPS means a lot more than volunteers

By Ruth Campbell rcampbell@oaoa.com | Posted: Thursday, October 3, 2019 4:20 pm

Most of the volunteers that work in Ector County ISD come through the office of Community Engagement Specialist Debbie Lieb. Along with keeping things going smoothly throughout campuses by supplying people to help with everything from making copies to helping students with multiplication tables.

The AVID Leadership Coaching initiative that started as a pilot program last year at Bonham Middle School is starting at all six middle schools this month. She and AVID District Director Amy Anderson are coordinating it all, Lieb said.

Volunteers are still needed to teach sixth-grade students everything from shaking hands and making eye contact to time management and conversing with adults. Extra coaches are recruited to account for things like attrition, doctor's appointments, the flu and flat tires, Lieb said.

"That's why we have a team for each school. The AVID teacher will be the school lead and then we'll have a community leader from that group of volunteers that will be the liaison point person," she said.

"There's a lot of people on the team to make it happen. It's a terrific collaboration. It's really going to benefit our ... sixth graders," Lieb added.

Anyone who volunteers around students has to undergo a background check through Lieb's office. The process is currently conducted on paper, but they will be moving to an online records management system soon. She also oversees the junior volunteer programs at elementary campuses who don't need background checks.

"We do have opportunities for when students are not around like building or grounds beautification. We do have a project that's coming up with district police regarding safety," Lieb said. "We're going to be recruiting men for a team to help build barricades at our different campuses. This will be in the evening when the students are not around it will be very important for the safety of our students."

Reading volunteers, as well as volunteers to listen to students read, are needed as well.

"At Buice Elementary, they have Bison book time the last 30 minutes of each school day, so every student pulls out a book and reads and so there's the opportunity for adults the last 30 minutes of a school day at Buice to go just listen to kids read and the kids really enjoy that," Lieb said.



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ECISD Community Engagement Specialist Debbie Lieb helps volunteers at a recent Volunteers and Partners orientation learn how to help students participate in the citizen science program SharkFinder, which has expanded to many more campuses in the district this year.

The exercise helps students gain more confidence in their reading abilities.

“You don’t have to be an educator to listen to kids read; just help them practice reading,” Lieb said.

She added that if they need help pronouncing a word, or identifying the meaning, the volunteers can help.

“It’s a lot of fun. There’s a lot of ways to volunteer, whether it’s a one-time special event or an ongoing commitment. ... We have volunteers who go in and help students in small groups in a classroom, work on multiplication tables, or reinforcing other lessons that they’ve been learning in the classroom,” Lieb said.

“And they do it in a lot of different ways. One is they can do board games, which helps with reading and counting and following instructions. Some of the games the volunteers have designed and made. Some of them, the teachers have and some are just store-bought games, educational type games that they can learn.”

Another way people can give of their time is through the ACCESS program where students can learn about careers from local professionals. Volunteers can participate in a live chat through FaceTime or Zoom (video conferencing), speak to a class in person or create a video that will be stored in a library of careers that all students have access to.

“Families can do career exploration together; students can. And it’s a lot of fun, but it’s also broadening our students’ horizons to think about careers perhaps they’ve never considered before ...,” Lieb said.

There are volunteers who alter band uniforms and master gardeners who have started a junior master gardening program. There have been work days on Saturdays where a family works to beautify the grounds at a campus.

“Students are learning about taking care of our resources, as well as how to grow things, how to landscape, how to take care of plants. We have that at all grade levels,” Lieb said.

Carver Early Education Center is continuing a parent leadership academy this year.

“It is very successful. We’ve had parents who have promoted up with their kids to elementary and they loved it so much they’ve asked, ‘Can I come back?’ and of course (Principal) Sherry Palmer said absolutely. There is limited space. You do have to RSVP, but that’s empowering parents about learning how to be an advocate for their student, learning expectations, the academic expectations, being able to ask questions and understand where their student is academically, and their goals and collaborate with the teacher in establishing their students’ goals and then how they can support them at home, whether it’s reading or phonetics, or learning their numbers, sight words, colors, shapes,” Lieb said. “It would be age appropriate whatever the student is working on.”

Lieb noted that volunteers are always needed in the libraries with book fairs, open houses, registration, textbook distribution and other activities.

“There are also people who would come before work and help keep the parking lot safe as kids are dropped off just keep the line flowing and students help with that. Also, (in) the junior volunteer program we have students who volunteer at school and they do everything from recycling; junior master gardeners. They help with breakfast delivery and pickup. They’ll help with the Food 2 Kids distribution, they do ... raising and

lowering of the flags, morning announcements. They learn morning news — how to present. We have technology teams that set everything up before morning assemblies. . . .” Lieb said.

There are also students that set up science labs and help younger students with everything from science to reading.

Special teams were being recruited to help with the citizen science program SharkFinder that has expanded across the district this year.

Some 60 background checks a day are processed, but it takes several days to do.

“Each campus has their own junior volunteer program the principal helps determine what roles responsibilities they’ll have . . .,” Lieb said.

Students have to meet certain grade requirements, no referrals, good attendance and punctuality.

“If a student’s grades slip in something, or perhaps they were tardy, then they can lose the privilege of being a junior volunteer. But they can regain the privilege once they make improvements, whether it’s attendance, punctuality or grades,” Lieb said.

Asked if this prompts students to think their peers are teacher’s pets, Lieb said students love helping out and serving.

“We will have students who will be bus buddies, helping younger students get from the bus into the classroom; get on the right bus when they’re leaving. Our students look after each other,” Lieb said.

“Everyone looks up to the older students and they can’t wait to be big enough to be like that. They look at them as positive role models. The younger ones think it’s way cool that older ones would help them and they like to help each other.”

Lieb’s office also is responsible for Texas Scholars.

“I serve as liaison for the district on the Texas Scholar advisory board, which is a collaboration with the chamber and our business community, as well as our nonprofits. We encourage our ninth through 12th grade students to be engaged in our community by serving and for multiple reasons: one is to develop personal civic awareness. It takes all of us to help each other to make this a good community in which to live, so we want to develop volunteerism in them so wherever they live throughout their lifetime that they will be engaged and be involved,” Lieb said.

Texas Scholars also is another chance for career exploration. There is an approved list of agencies students can volunteer for.

“We also have a strong collaboration with Keep Odessa Beautiful. Our students will help keep their school clean and when we have the city wide days. Not only will they clean around their campus, they’ll go to the perimeter around in the neighborhoods around their campus like two blocks away or whatever is determined by the number of adults that can help supervise the kids,” Lieb said.

Students also help out at the West Texas Food Bank, Food 2 Kids, which provides youngsters with ready-to-eat foods on the weekends, and the HEB Feast of Sharing.

“There’s just a lot of ways our students are engaged in our community,” Lieb said.

The last couple of years, volunteerism has increased in the schools and more awareness that community support is needed. When the community volunteers in the schools it shows students the community cares about them and it shows that the community values education and believes in the students.

“I don’t know so much as there was a lack of interest in the past, or if it was a breakdown in communication that our community wanted to help but didn’t know how and our schools wanted their help but weren’t quite sure how to connect,” Lieb said.

She added that she has been able to work on that with her colleagues.

Anderson, with Advancement Via Individual Determination, said Lieb is a one-of-a-kind treasure.

“She is the definition of having a servant’s heart. She serves all she meets with joy, precision and follow through,” Anderson said. “There has never been anything left to be desired when working with Debbie because she always goes above and beyond to exceed expectations. It is a privilege to be able to work alongside of such excellence.”

Ted Press, who has been a VIP for 10 years, said Lieb is a “sweetheart.” He volunteers at Buice Elementary School.

“If we have problems of any sort she is always there and willing to assist us and resolve the conflict” of whatever issue pops up at a campus, Press said.

“I have enjoyed immensely working under her leadership for the Volunteers and Partners,” he added.

Lieb has been with ECISD since 2007.

“I love my job. I love people. I really enjoy connecting people with serving because my heart is to serve. I’m a ... product of ECISD. I had people who supported me, played a role in my growth and development. I’ve had the opportunity to live other places. Now I’m back in my hometown and have the opportunity to pay it forward, to encourage our families and our students and my community, my hometown. It’s a great place to live and work and raise a family. We’re a very caring, compassionate community and I want our students to experience that,” Lieb said.

Lieb also is active in community endeavors like Big Brothers Big Sisters and Be the Change.

Be the Change Challenge Days at OCTECHS is Jan. 7 through Jan. 9, 2020, at OCTECHS on the Odessa College campus.

Twenty-five volunteers are needed each day, Lieb said. A volunteer may choose to serve one day for six hours and lunch is provided.

During a day-long interactive workshop, teens experience compassion and connection with thought-provoking games, activities and discussions. Challenge Day provides students the tools to break down walls of separation and isolation and build respect and communication with adults and peers. Students gain the skills they need to recognize problems and empowers them to address challenges, she said in an email.