



State Board of Education News

1701 North Congress Ave.
Austin, Texas 78701-1494

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State Board of Education recognizes 2019 Student Heroes

AUSTIN- Establishing a school-based food pantry called the Energy Bar, spearheading an environmental campaign that redistributed 2,750 pairs of shoes, and raising funds for cancer research are just some of the ways the students selected to receive the State Board of Education's Student Heroes Award helped their classmates and communities this year.

Begun in 2015, the Student Heroes Award recognizes public school students who voluntarily perform acts of kindness. One student is recognized in each of the SBOE's 15 districts. This year's recipients range from third-grade students to high school seniors.

"Each year, I'm amazed at the volume of caring and compassionate work carried out by our Texas students. They see a need and they step in to fill it, typically without any thought of recognition or awards. These 15 award recipients are role models for both students and adults," said SBOE Chair Donna Bahorich.

The students were presented with a plaque and a medallion during events at their schools. The board approved a [resolution](#) in their honor during today's SBOE meeting in Austin.

Below are the stories of the 2019 Student Heroes:

District 1: Award recipient Hitzel Medrano presented by SBOE member Georgina Pérez

Hitzel Medrano, a sophomore at Del Rio High School in San Felipe-Del Rio Consolidated Independent School District (ISD), a recent immigrant and English Learner, arrived at school as a monolingual Spanish speaker. Because she is an excellent student, she quickly volunteered to become a reading and writing mentor to other English as a Second Language students. Now, she has branched out and helps classmates in additional subject areas as well.

District 2: Award recipient Irasema Orozco presented by SBOE member Ruben Cortez, Jr.

Irasema Orozco, an eighth-grade student at Ida Diaz Junior High School in the Hidalgo ISD, found a passion for helping people at a McAllen homeless shelter. She participated in a school supply drive for the children at the shelter that raised more than 2,500 donations, including 60 items from herself. She and her family donated 165 items for the Thanksgiving food drive. During a clothing drive, she arranged for the donation of 265 articles of clothing.

District 3: Award recipient Samantha Almaraz presented by SBOE member Marisa Perez-Diaz

Aware of food waste in the cafeteria at a time when many of her classmates faced food insecurities, Samantha Almaraz, a junior at Lamar Academy in McAllen ISD, launched the Energy Bar, the first food pantry of its kind in her school district. Working with the school principal, Almaraz secured an unused

science storage closet that could accommodate a refrigerator and shelving. During the school's breakfast service, students began collecting unconsumed items such as milk, fruit juice, cereal and energy bars for the pantry. Through student council fundraisers and private donations, the pantry obtained other items such as canned goods, pasta and personal hygiene items. The Energy Bar is open each afternoon so students can grab a snack or food to take home.

District 4: Award recipient Brianna Freeman presented by SBOE member Lawrence Allen, Jr.

Brianna Freeman, a senior at Carnegie Vanguard High School in Houston ISD, mentors junior high students. Along with tutoring them, she teaches them about financial literacy. Freeman also volunteers in the summer at the school's math camp, a boot camp for incoming freshmen who need to boost their math skills. She volunteers at the school's Fight Hunger Club where she participates in food drives and works at soup kitchens multiple times a month.

District 5: Award recipient Abigail Redin presented by SBOE member Ken Mercer

Abigail Redin, a junior at Smithson Valley High School in Comal ISD, led a project called Soles4Souls in which 2,750 pairs of shoes were collected from six campuses in 11 days. The shoes were given to the non-profit Soles4Souls, which repurposes the shoes to supply micro-enterprise businesses, disaster relief and direct assistance programs, while keeping old shoes out of landfills.

District 6: Award recipient Claudia Favela presented by SBOE member Donna Bahorich

A cancer survivor herself, Claudia Favela, a senior at Klein High School in Klein ISD, is dedicated to increasing awareness about childhood cancer in her community. Favela created the Be Bold, Go Gold organization to raise awareness about cancer and the need for greater research funding. She talks to young children about the importance of empathy and she and her team have volunteered at numerous fundraising events.

District 7: Award recipient Alexandria Swett presented by SBOE member Matt Robinson

At the beginning of the school year, Alexandria Swett, a third-grade student at C.W. Cline Elementary School in Friendswood ISD, told her teacher that her personal goal for the year was to seek those who need encouragement and help them. Over the course of the year, she arranged for a special needs child to sit with Swett's class to help the student make new friends. She also got permission for a lonely child to join them for lunch. She gave a boy who was upset and cried frequently a worry stone for him to rub when he felt stressed. Swett also asked to be seated by a classmate who frequently became frustrated and upset. Once seated beside the student, Swett would reach out and take the student's hand whenever the student became frustrated and assure her classmate that she was there to help.

District 8: Award recipient Eduardo Verastegui presented by SBOE member Barbara Cargill

Eduardo Verastegui, a senior at Lewis Career and Technical High School in Pasadena ISD, was a shy student who spoke little English when he first enrolled in the Pasadena school four years ago, but he stood out because of a rare birth defect called Goldenhar Syndrome that created distinctive facial features. Because of his love of video production, he began creating positive, uplifting videos that explained about Goldenhar Syndrome and showed him adapting to a new culture and language. He now has 400,000 YouTube followers and 5 million people viewed his video about his syndrome. Verastegui also used his audio-visual skills to provide more than 100 hours of community service for various projects such as recruiting students to his school and assisting with the McDonald's Texas Basketball Invitational.

District 9: Award recipient Joshua Silva presented by SBOE member Keven Ellis

Joshua Silva, a junior at Robert E. Lee High School in Tyler ISD, is a student leader with the Best Buddies organization, that pairs students receiving special education services with general education students. The buddies often eat lunch and attend school parties together. He has used his compassion and empathy to build strong relationships with many students.

District 10: Award recipient Epiphany Wilson presented by SBOE member Tom Maynard

Epiphany Wilson, a senior, has developed a reputation for quickly taking on any task that needs to be completed at her school, Royal Early College High School in Royal ISD. She spearheaded an effort to create a program celebrating Black History Month. When her class is hosting a fundraiser, she'll make cupcakes from scratch. She befriends students who are feeling isolated and provides inspirational readings to residents at the Brookshire Residence and Rehabilitation Center.

District 11: Award recipient Stella Austin presented by SBOE member Pat Hardy

Stella Austin, a student at Heritage Elementary School in Keller ISD, combined her passion for helping others with her sewing ability by creating stuffed kittens to give to children in need. She's provided more than 110 stuffed animals to children who are hospitalized or living in homeless shelters. She says having a stuffed kitten to cuddle makes children feel less alone or scared.

District 12: Award recipient Quinn Loach presented by SBOE member Pam Little

Quinn Loach is a senior at Allen ISD's Allen High School, a school with more than 5,000 students. Because he remembered how challenging it was for him to acclimate to Allen High when he was a sophomore, he makes it a point to be outgoing and involve other students in any project he's tackling. Every Friday, students in a group called Spread the Loaves make about 900 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless. Many of the students who participate in Spread the Loaves are involved because Loach recruited them. He has also made many presentations recruiting students for the school's International Baccalaureate program.

District 13: Award recipient Merissa Rieken presented by SBOE member Aicha Davis

Merissa Rieken, a senior at Harmony School of Nature in DeSoto, has volunteered hundreds of hours to help organizations such as the Dallas Children's Aquarium, Mission Arlington, Carter Blood Care, and Teen Trendsetters. She informally helps teachers and staff with school events and day-to-day activities. As a school leader, she helped establish new programs that benefit the school and students.

District 14: Award recipient Meah Jones presented by SBOE member Sue Melton-Malone

Meah Jones, a fourth-grade student at Old Settlers Elementary School in Lewisville ISD, has turned a secret family cookie recipe into a recipe for good works. She and her brother Colt established Buddy and Boo: Kids Impacting Kids Through Kindness in 2017 to raise money to help those less fortunate. They baked hundreds of cookies and raised money so that they could provide a book, a pair of socks, a jacket, and a toy to students in need. The first year, Jones helped one second grade class at a nearby Title I school. Last Christmas, this project helped all the second-grade classes at the school.

District 15: Award recipient Landon Morrow presented by SBOE member Marty Rowley

Landon Morrow, a senior at the Sands School in Sands Consolidated ISD, is a well-rounded leader in his 1A school. He welcomes students on the first day of school, assists with school supplies, and displays courtesy by holding doors open and helping teachers unload their cars. He volunteers with the yearly canned food drive and helps serve food during the school's annual Thanksgiving meal and Sweetheart Breakfast.