

THE LEARNING Curve

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Your weekly guide to students, schools, teachers and triumphs in Bibb County's Public Schools

Elam Alexander Academy Field Day Four-Year Partnership with Stratford Academy Brings the Two Schools Closer Together

Olympic Fanfare blasting forth from speakers and Stratford Academy Seniors and teachers applauding, students from Elam Alexander Academy file off their buses, ready for a day of fun-filled activities at Stratford's stadium.

"On behalf of Stratford Eagles, I'd like to welcome you to out fourth - 1! 2! 3! 4! - Elam Alexander and Stratford Academy Field Day," yells Stratford Foreign Language Department Head and Field Day Organizer Tracy Ruckus to a wild burst of applause and cheers. Introducing the Seniors who will be assisting the day's events, he goes over a few quick reminders (Elam teachers arrived prepared with schedules and procedures) and sets the children loose on the field.

"It's exciting," he says later on as the students move from event to event. Begun in 2002 as Elam Principal Mimi Gudenrath and Stratford Principal Margaret Ledbetter looked for a meaningful way for the two schools to partner with each other, the annual Field Day is the culmination of a year of working together.

"As we talked about our students and staff, the light bulb simply went off as to the many things we could all learn from one another," says Gudenrath. It would be "different from the lessons each of us learn in our respective buildings each day. We brainstormed about many things: Stratford

students mentoring Elam students, families from different backgrounds and experiences getting to know one another, a mutual exchange of staff when the need might arise, and yes, the culminating event each spring...Field Day!"

Stratford Seniors are already required to participate in an internship with a teacher at the school, so Rucker set it up where they could do it with a teacher at Elam instead. Once every seven school days on a rotating schedule, the students will travel to the school and spend 45 minutes to an hour with a child they have been paired with to mentor. They'll assist with homework, classroom activities, and "basically be a support person in the room. We've been blessed to have anywhere from six to 14 students each year," says Rucker.

"What a difference [the Stratford students] have made," praises Gudenrath. "Unbelievable relationships have been formed between Stratford seniors and kids with special needs; many that were formed in the first year are still going on today." Students even spend time outside of their requirements, pointing out their involvement in the school's Annual Harvest Hall and Christmas Program.

Beyond the students, the two schools continue to work together. Recently an Elam employee hosted a two-day ropes course experience for Stratford



Elam Alexander students went to Stratford Academy to participate in events like tug-of-war (above) and jumping hurdles (below).



employees as well as served as an assistant coach for their middle school football team. Near the end of this year, Stratford donated 35 computers to Elam. "This list goes on and on," says Gudenrath. "We are blessed."

The Field Day, Rucker says, is a celebration of the partnership, and "it brings the two schools together as one. It's reinforcing our partnership." Elam students travel by bus to Stratford, where they separate into groups led by Elam teachers and parents and circulate every 15 minutes through a wide variety of events. The Seniors who mentored throughout the year - as well as volunteers - help operate the events, including balloon toss, race-car rally, shot put (with a large orange ball), hula hoop race, cone jump, limbo contest, water relay, long jump, soccer, and tug of war.

Looking around the field, you see smiling students, enjoying the sunshine and activities. They're racing each other around the track, dancing to the music, laughing when a water balloon explodes near them, and, of course, running to the refreshment table every time the water coolers are refilled.

"Field Day speaks for itself," says Gudenrath. "a fun-filled day that is a collaboration between the two faculties and an added bonus of lunch prepared by the Stratford Parents Group."