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In Arlington, getting school supplies to needy kids is community effort

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The Hyde brothers never wanted for school supplies, but they knew that lots of other kids did. And many of them did poorly in class.

"School is a really big deal to us," said Nathan Hyde, 20, a Grace Preparatory School graduate and Baylor University mechanical-engineering student. "Just not having the supplies you need is a big distraction and a big deterrent to getting through it."

So five years ago, Nathan and brother Austin, who were 15 and 12, respectively, took the lemonade stand concept and turned it inside out, setting up a drive-by drop-off site in their front yard for notebooks, pencils, glue and other things young students need to succeed.

Saturday afternoon, their sixth annual drive tallied more than 1,900 items, boosting the stockpiles of Arlington charities as they again play school supply Santa in August for families in need.

"We encourage folks to let us do the things for them that might end up using their rent money," said Tillie Burgin, executive director of Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex, which provides school materials to about 9,000 students a year.

The mission has been the sole beneficiary of the Hyde brothers' collection campaigns over the years -- nearly 10,000 items total. Burgin is appreciative because she is seeing more families in dire financial straits. She's calling out for more supplies, as the mission has run low after serving only about 6,000 of the students who it expects will come for help.

"There's definitely an increase of folks trying to learn how to manage," she said.

Other organizations also are working to meet the challenge. Arlington Charities, which gave out supplies to 1,230 students last year, began distributing supplies this week. Families can pick up packets of supplies from 1 to 4 p.m. Wednesday at 811 Secretary Drive.

"We ran short of supplies last year and had to cut it off," said Executive Director Melanie Gibson. "The general economy has dragged us down for the last three or four years, while our numbers (of needy children) have gone up. We've been in a world of hurt. Our donations have not been what they've always been."

The Arlington Junior League's members collect and distribute school supplies each year for several Arlington schools. For this fourth year of the program, selected students from six south Arlington elementary schools will receive supplies at an invitation-only event this month, as well as introductions to other social services organizations that can help families with after-school care and other needs. Vision and hearing screenings are also available.

The club's program, which helped 1,000 students last year, has weathered the economic winds so far, said Andrea Chavez, chairwoman of Back to School Fair 2011.

"Every year we keep getting more exhibitors and organizations coming in, and lots of students," she said. "We're just trying to get these kids ready for school so they can be just like all the other kids."

Score a Goal in the Classroom, a nonprofit group that provides awards and other incentives to North Texas teachers and students, is holding its school supply rally for Arlington students Sept. 10. The group, which raised about \$42,000 worth of school supplies last year, will deliver this year's supplies again directly to the main Arlington school district warehouse. Principals will hand out the supplies throughout the year to students in need, said Executive Director Ernie Horn.

Also, all 85 area Kroger grocery stores are collecting donations of school supplies as part of their Stuff the Bus program. Customers have been buying \$7 school supply kits at the stores and donating them, to the tune of about \$12,000 as of Friday, said Gary Huddleston, consumer affairs director.

"We know that there are many folks who can't afford to buy school supplies, and we have customers who want to help," he said. "We're a facilitator."

The supplies will be provided to Arlington, Fort Worth and Dallas schools.

Online: Find your child's school supply list at tinyurl.com/3wyc8f6.

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