

## Leading with Heart in Texas

BY ELIZABETH SERRANO

### COVERING 44 SQUARE MILES

west of downtown Houston, Spring Branch Independent School District is led by Jennifer Blaine, whose approach to public communication and engagement keeps all stakeholders informed about school affairs.

Blaine earned national recognition for that facet of her school system work when she received the 2024 Bob Grossman Leadership in School Communications Award from the National School Public Relations Association. With 34 years in education, the last 24 dedicated to Spring Branch, she says trust, transparency and authentic engagement have steered the district through challenges and toward remarkable achievements.

Blaine's journey in the urban/suburban district began as an elementary principal, then advanced through the roles of associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction and associate superintendent of talent and operations. The varied experiences across divisions give her a unique perspective on the district's needs and possibilities.

Cecilia Thompson, executive director of the Spring Branch Education Foundation, describes her 20-year colleague as a transformational actor. "She considers all sides of an issue before making decisions. ... Her empathy comes through in her leadership, and I think everyone in our community feels that when she's around," Thompson says.

For Blaine, building an effective relationship with her governing board means recognizing each trustee's individuality. "I have seven trustees, and they're all different," she explains, tailoring her communications to their preferences. Blaine prioritizes knowing trustees as individuals, not just professionals. "This is a professional relationship, but I spend so much time with them, and what we do isn't always easy," she says. "I have to know who they are as people to understand

### BIO STATS: JENNIFER BLAINE

**CURRENTLY:** superintendent, Spring Branch Independent School District, Houston, Texas

**PREVIOUSLY:** associate superintendent for talent and operations, Spring Branch ISD

**AGE:** 56

**GREATEST INFLUENCE ON CAREER:** My father imparted wisdom through sports that I carry with me today. He taught me the value of hustle, teamwork and recognizing everyone's unique contributions.

**BEST PROFESSIONAL DAY:** My first day as a principal — a dream come true. Knowing the impact I could make was both thrilling and overwhelming.

**BOOK AT BEDSIDE:** *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System — and How to Fix it* by Natalie Wexler

**WHY I'M AN AASA MEMBER:** AASA connects me with superintendents across the country, offering valuable insights into how others solve problems and address national trends. The publications are especially helpful, providing informative perspectives.



how they operate."

This personalized approach fosters trust, respect and rapport. The superintendent's authentic approach extends into family engagement as well. With over 70 languages spoken, Spanish being predominant, the district works to bridge language barriers. Translation devices have been purchased for use at school events, and Spanish subtitles appear on multimedia content.

"We want to engage in a way that makes our community feel comfortable and feel like they have access to us to give us feedback," Blaine says. "This helps us get better."

In a district of 33,000 students, the superintendent's readiness to engage personally with parents and students sets her apart. "People trust her because of her approachability, her empathy and authenticity," Thompson says. "They trust she's doing the right thing even during hard times."

Under Blaine's leadership, Spring Branch has made significant strides in career and technical education and early college opportunities. A successful 2022 bond campaign is rebuilding the Guthrie Center, a state-of-the-art

CTE facility, scheduled to open in 2026. Additionally, the district just launched RISE College Academy at Northbrook High School through a partnership with Houston Community College Northwest and the University of Texas OnRamps. The program allows students to concurrently earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree.

"We were really thoughtful in how we structured it," Blaine says. "Paying for college is expensive. Some families don't have the means to do it. So if our students can come out of Spring Branch with a two-year degree on our dime, it puts them two years ahead. ... It's a happy feeling."

Her leadership style, characterized by deep community connections, strategic focus and innovative programs, has positioned Spring Branch as a district that values academic excellence and holistic student development. Blaine says: "I just love the diversity and close-knit nature of Spring Branch. ... It's home to me."

**ELIZABETH SERRANO** is senior marketing manager at AASA. E-mail: [eserrano@aasa.org](mailto:eserrano@aasa.org)