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Grant for Library restoration supports student readers

When Lori Ruso became the librarian at W.T. White High School, she made it her mission to revive the school library, which had not operated to its fullest potential since the Covid-19 pandemic. Now in her second year at the campus, Ruso is helping to transform the space, with the support of a grant from the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries.

Ruso was one of 200 educators selected nationwide to receive the 2026 grant for $5,000. Funds will be used to expand and diversify the library's collection.

"A beautiful library offers students a refuge from screens, a place where imagination, curiosity, and critical thinking can flourish," Ruso said. "The grant provides the momentum needed to continue the library's transformation."

Ruso's journey to becoming a librarian began with a lifelong love for reading and writing. She became fascinated by the craft of storytelling and eventually explored writing as a writer and through songwriting.

"Education is my love," she said. "After being a classroom teacher for my entire career in education, I wanted to continue challenging myself in another way."

She earned a Master of Library Science degree from Texas Women's University, shifting her focus from the classroom, and has served as a librarian in Dallas ISD for seven years.

While pursuing her master's degree, Ruso took a course in grant writing and discovered she liked it. That later inspired her to apply for funding from the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries.

The foundation provides funding to school librarians across the nation to support student achievement and literacy initiatives. Studies have shown that strong school library programs can positively impact reading scores and academic success.

Located at the center of the school hallway and surrounded by classrooms, the school's library has become a gathering place for students. W.T. White principal Beth Wing, described it as "the

heart of the school." It is a place where students can discover new ideas, find a quiet space to recharge, or connect with a community of readers.

For many students at W.T. White, manga has become a favorite genre. The Japanese comic and graphic novel style has grown in popularity among young readers in recent years.

The books have helped create a niche community of students who share an interest in anime and storytelling. Manga's unique right-to-left reading format and serialized chapters also introduce students to elements of Japanese culture while encouraging reading.

Once tucked away on a shelf in a corner, manga books and the culture surrounding them now have become a central part of the student reading experience in W.T. White's library.

"We have manga events where we explore the history of anime and manga," said Ruso. "The students get together to talk about books and film series connected to the books. I was excited to create something special for that group of readers."

Ruso said she also has seen the educational benefits of graphic novels and manga among students.

"I've noticed that picture-word association is a very strong component in learning for many students," she said. "Studies are showing that graphic novels, or manga, are often gateway books that lead students to chapter books."

To celebrate students who actively used the library throughout the year, Ruso hosted an event recognizing the school's top 100 readers based on book checkouts.

The library is also a hub for student collaboration and support. It houses the Academic Success Program, which provides comprehensive college counseling to help students gain admission and scholarships to college. Students earning college credit from Dallas College through the B-TECH program also spend the morning in the school's library.

With the grant, Ruso's vision of the library being a vibrant and welcoming space for all students is closer to being realized.

"This generous gift represents far more than financial support," Ruso said. "It is a symbol of hope and renewal for a library that has long been silent.