

Read and Feed to meet the need

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Volunteers at [Faith Missionary Baptist Church in Rowlett](#) wanted to make sure children in their neighborhood didn't fall behind during the summer—nutritionally, educationally or spiritually.



During the Read and Feed summer program at Faith Missionary Baptist Church in Rowlett, Jema Cook leads educational enrichment activities focused on basic core subjects. Jema Cook launched the Read and Feed program at her church four years ago. For the last three years, the church served as a site for the City of Garland Fair Housing Services summer nutrition program. It makes free meals available to children living in proximity to Garland Independent School District campuses where at least half the students receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year. Faith Missionary Baptist Church partners with nearby Herfurth Elementary School.

Of the 2.8 million Texas children who participate in subsidized meals during the school year, fewer than 12 percent participate in summer feeding programs. However, the number of sites has increased in recent

years, and churches provided more than 530 summer meal sites in 2013, the Texas Hunger Initiative reported.



Children spend a half-hour each morning writing in journals during the Read and Feed program at Faith Missionary Baptist Church in Rowlett. For six to eight weeks during the summer, Faith Missionary opens its facility to low-income children ages 4 to 18—not only to provide nutritious meals at breakfast and lunch, but also to offer educational enrichment.

“Some just come to eat, but some stay all day for the program,” Cook said. “We found kids generally lost a lot in the summer if they were not engaged academically.”

Each day of the summer Read and Feed program, children spend at least 30 minutes writing in journals and at least 30 minutes reading and completing reading comprehension exercises.

“When we started, I was amazed at how many of the (preschool and early elementary) kids could not even write their own names,” she said.



Elijah enjoys breakfast at the Read and Feed program at Faith Missionary Baptist Church in Rowlett. During the program, students complete worksheets related to language arts, math, science and history.

“The first year, we realized a lot of the kids could not count money,” Cook said. So, she developed games and activities to help them develop basic math skills.

“We focus on the basic core subjects,” she said.

Every morning, Cook also leads a devotional. To teach children to listen attentively, she follows the presentation with questions and asks students to repeat a Scripture memory verse.

Cook, a leadership and management consultant with 20 years experience in juvenile justice, also seeks to help the children and teenagers develop social skills. She invites guest speakers—business people, attorneys and other successful people in the community who grew up in homes similar to many of the young people—to present positive role models.



Volunteer Alandria Ford helps serve lunch to children at the Read and Feed program at Faith Missionary Baptist Church in Rowlett. “I want them to see that it’s possible to succeed, but it takes time and effort to do it the right way,” she said. “It’s not hard getting easy money. It’s hard living with easy money.”

Most of the children and teenagers in the Read and Feed program are not members of the church, Cook noted. She hopes families in the neighborhood learn to see Faith Missionary Baptist Church as a community of Christians who care about their community.

“These kids have all kinds of needs,” she said. “Some of the teenagers already have been in trouble with the law. Some need a safe place to be. Some need community service hours, and we can put them to work cleaning up and helping out—learning to give back.

“We want to offer safety, structure, spiritual development and educational

assistance. We're here to meet them where they are."