



By [JON MARK BEILUE](#)

The harvest is ripe in Gruver — and the bounty is only just beginning. The crop is corn, but the harvest is a college education.

“I think it’s unheard of,” Gruver principal Troy Seagler said. “It’s pretty unique.”

The Gruver Independent School District is turning a section of farm land into a tuition/fees scholarship for four years — for every Gruver High School graduate.

Yes, that’s pretty unique.

“This could change people’s lives financially,” Gruver superintendent David Teal said. “We’re going to be able to free up a college educational burden of a lot of families with this.”

This only-in-a-small-town story begins with Karl Nielsen, born in Denmark in 1879. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1901 and settled in Gruver shortly thereafter. A bachelor farmer who lived with his sister, a grateful Nielsen gave GISD a section of land upon his death in the 1970s.

“He apparently was just appreciative of living in America,” Seagler said, “and wanted to give back.”

For most of the time, Gruver leased the land for around \$25,000 annually. That bought textbooks and chemistry lab beakers, but there was a sense that Gruver wasn’t maximizing the gift.

So Teal, Seagler, local farmer Mike Yanke and others put their heads together a couple of years ago. The land could be sold, maybe for as much as \$1 million, but it would go into the general revenue fund and the state would get a good chunk of it.

Hmmm, what else?

“David approached me at a junior high football game and asked me what I thought of turning that farm into something that could really benefit the school?” Chad Logsdon said. “It has just taken off. It was his brainchild. We’ve made it go. We’re the legs, but he was the brains.”

The idea: What if GISD took back the land? What if the school added another well on the land? What if corn was grown on the 440 farm land acres out of the 640? And what if a group would farm it with donated time, equipment and expense? What if seed, chemicals and fertilizer also could be donated?

Then what if that money from this year’s crop — estimated to be as much as \$500,000 — could be invested through the Gruver Scholarship Foundation? And, maybe, just maybe, what if that money this year and every year in the future could be used to provide every Gruver graduate beginning with the class of 2016 a four-year scholarship to pay for tuition and fees based on a point system of participation and achievement?

This week, those what-ifs became reality.

On Monday, there was a lunch with community and school leaders at the acreage about two miles west of Gruver, which is 85 miles north of Amarillo. Donors were recognized shortly before two combines made their swaths through on the corn that could bring around 250 bushels an acre, much of which already has been purchased by local feedlots.

Talk about a cash crop. Ag Partners, a group of local farmers, has been the sweat behind it. But many others have contributed, knowing their kids, grandkids or neighbors could one day benefit.

“This is really a community endeavor,” Seagler said.

When this year’s sophomore class of 29 graduates, it will be the first group to reap the rewards. Those who reach the highest level of points during a four-year career could get the full cost amount of 16 hours a semester, over eight semesters, based on the cost of approximately \$3,500 at West Texas A&M University. Total tab of savings per student who maxes out: \$28,000.

All will receive some aid on points totaled based on UIL academic and athletic achievement and participation, extra-curricular work, academic grades, statewide and ACT testing and citizenship. In six years, at its height when four classes would then be on the tuition scholarship, there could be in theory as many as 130 Gruverites at colleges or vocational schools thanks to the corn crop.

“I can tell you right now, with one at Oklahoma State and Texas Tech, what this could have done for me, golly dang,” said Logsdon, president of the Gruver Scholarship Foundation. “College cost is just atrocious.”

And there are some side benefits, too. The point system should foster higher participation in more activities and better grades. And if a family wants to transfer its high school kids to Gruver legally for some financial aid, well, come on up, Teal said. More students mean more money for the school district.

But the prize is major tuition help for all who want it at a time when spiraling college costs can leave a graduate staring at an in-state average of \$22,000 in student-loan debt.

“This gives kids an opportunity to advance their education past high school and to avoid huge debt,” Seagler said. “For our little community, it gives them a chance to be competitive later in life and gives them the best chance to be successful.”

It's not quite manna from heaven, just corn from a field. But, if you grow it, they will learn.

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How it works

- Gruver ISD owns a section of land west of town. A group of farmers, as well as other businesses, donate time, equipment and expenses to farm more than 400 acres of corn.
- Money from the crop, harvested this week, will go to the Gruver Scholarship Foundation, a 501c3, which will invest this and every year's crop sale. Estimates for this year's crop are \$500,000.
- Beginning with the Class of 2016, graduates can receive as much as the full cost of 16 hours of tuition and fees based on the price at West Texas A&M University at the college or vocational school of their choice. It would last for eight consecutive semesters.
- The amount of tuition scholarship is based on a point system that begins as a freshman and runs through senior year. Points accrued are based on academic and extra-curricular participation and achievement, as well as statewide testing, ACT score and citizenship.
- To maintain the scholarship, a student must have at least an overall 2.5 GPA and be in good standing.