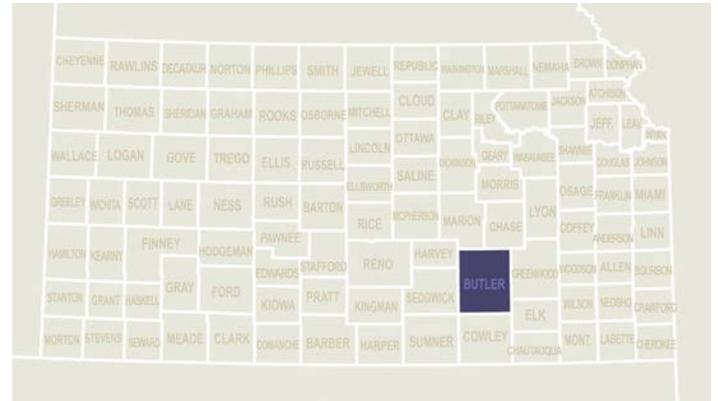




The storefront of Bluestem Mercantile in downtown Leon, KS.



Background

The City of Leon is located in the south-central region of Kansas in Butler County and sits about 30 miles east of Wichita. The Unified School District (USD) 205, also known as Bluestem School District, is based in Leon and runs Bluestem Elementary School (pre-K through 6th grade) and Bluestem High School (7th through 12th grade). The school district spans much of southeast Butler County. While the city only has a population of about 600 people, the Bluestem School District serves nearly 350 square miles of the surrounding area serving about 500 students and 300 families. The school district provides local jobs, countless community events throughout the year and is an important player in the community of Leon.



Coolers at the Bluestem Mercantile.

About the Community

CITY POPULATION*	614
COUNTY POPULATION*†	66,698
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME*	\$57,125
MEDIAN AGE*	38 years
CHILDREN LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL ** †	13.0%
FAMILIES LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL ** †	6.8%
LOW INCOME & LOW ACCESS TO GROCERY STORE**†	6.8%
PEOPLE WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE**†	26.4%
CHILDREN WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE **†	6.9%

*ACS 2019, **Kansas Health Matters, †County Level Data

The Issue

Over the past 10 years, Bluestem High School has offered an entrepreneurship class for its students. The class has focused on different types of business ventures over the years – from selling candy to operating a coffee shop in the school library. Students in the entrepreneurship class learn about business planning and operations and gain practical, hands-on business experience. The school district superintendent, Joel Lovesee, always encourages the entrepreneurship class to think outside of the box.

To the staff of the Bluestem School District, Superintendent Lovesee is the “idea man.” In the back of his mind, he envisioned opening a business in downtown Leon for the entrepreneurship students to run. To consider their options, Superintendent Lovesee assembled a team of school staff that included Amie Oltman, a special education teacher, and Max Beaver, the high school’s entrepreneurship teacher.

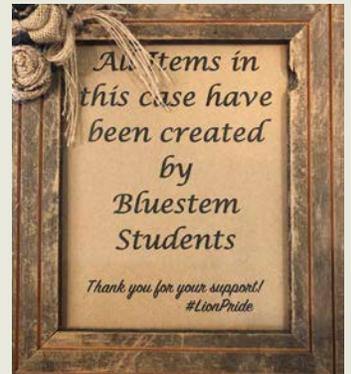
The team considered a restaurant and a laundromat – both businesses that didn’t exist in Leon. Finally, when the old grocery store building came up for sale, the idea of opening a grocery store started to come together. There were educational opportunities for all sorts of students in running a grocery store, and it would fill a need in the community since Leon did not have a grocery store. The nearest grocery stores were in cities at least 15 miles away.

“The three ways we look at any program here since I’ve been superintendent is, what is the best for our kids educationally? What would benefit the community? Is it something that’s feasible for the school district? In our little town there are a lot of things that would benefit this community, but that doesn’t mean it’s feasible for the school.” – Joel Lovesee, USD 205 Superintendent

From school to store - locally-produced, farmed, and purchased

The Bluestem Mercantile effort is wholly supported by the Bluestem School District.

- The entrepreneurship and special education students participate in store operations by assisting with ordering and managing inventory. They’ve even made a game of finding the best deal when shopping for their weekly orders. Nothing like friendly competition to encourage thrifty purchases!
- The Bluestem Agriculture Academy students supply meat and eggs to the grocery store.
- USD 205 clubs and classes make handmade items like candles and woodworking crafts that are sold at the store.



The Bluestem Agricultural Academy students supplies meat and eggs for sale at the Bluestem Mercantile.

The Process

TIMELINE

2009

The first entrepreneurship class is taught at Bluestem High School. The students are loaned a candy vending machine and tasked with selling the candy and paying back their debt.

2014

Leon's locally-owned grocery store closes its doors.

May 2019

Superintendent Lovesee receives approval from the Bluestem School Board to purchase the grocery store building on Main Street in downtown Leon, Kansas.

Nov. 2019

- Representatives from the Bluestem School District attend the Rural Grocery Initiative's Regional Rural Grocery Workshop in Parsons, Kansas.
- Bluestem School District applies to the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative for financing to support opening the Bluestem Mercantile.

March 2020

The Bluestem Mercantile opens for business in downtown Leon after a little over a year of preparations.

When, in 2019, the old grocery store building was for sale, superintendent Lovesee saw an opportunity and approached the school board about purchasing the building. Over the years, the school board had assisted with startup costs for projects like this. For example, when the school's agriculture program wanted to build a barn to expand its agricultural education offerings, the school district approved the initial cost to build the barn with the expectation that the agriculture program would handle the operations and cover their costs through sales.

The school board was required to pass a motion for any cost over \$20,000, and in this case, the school board approved the purchase of the building for \$27,500 with the understanding that the grocery store sales would cover operational costs. The previous owners had completed substantial renovations prior to the school district purchasing the building. As a result, the upgrades needed to set up the grocery store were minimal. Still, there were some costs to revivce the grocery store. The Bluestem School District applied to the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative for financing to cover roof repairs and the purchase of coolers, shelving, a point-of-sale system, and the initial store inventory. The Bluestem School District received about \$30,000 from the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative in a grant/loan combination.

Since the store's primary focus is on providing educational opportunities for its students, the store acts like a classroom - classes are taught in the store 6 hours per day. The store has a seating area with tables, built by the school's shop class, that are used by classes and patrons throughout the day. The store is open to the community for more than just groceries. For instance, on Wednesdays – fried chicken day at the café across the street – the store offers its extra seating to café patrons. The seating area is also available for community groups, such as local clubs and Bible study groups, who want a place to meet.

"We try to partner with everybody... anyone can come and use [the seating area] free of charge. Our school is very open with the public to use our facilities as their own."

– Joel Lovesee, USD 205 Superintendent

While the Bluestem Mercantile is not a full-service supermarket, the store is stocked with the essentials. When the Bluestem Mercantile opened in March 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, it immediately became a lifeline for the community of Leon. Local residents preferred visiting the Bluestem Mercantile instead of traveling to larger stores in cities further away - plus they were able to connect with the students working at the store that day.

"The goal was an educational side, and now it's really turned into just a great community benefit overall."

– Joel Lovesee, USD 205 Superintendent

Lessons Learned



Everything is an educational opportunity.

Superintendent Lovesee saw the need for financing to establish the Bluestem Mercantile as a learning opportunity. The school district received a loan-grant combination from the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative and used the funding as a learning opportunity to teach students about paying back loans. Bluestem High School teacher, Amie Oltman, developed a “shopping game” for her students to encourage finding the best deals to stock the store.



Small towns can move fast.

The development of the Bluestem Mercantile moved quickly. By offering both educational and community benefits, the idea of a school-run store was generally met with positive support. With local buy-in and input over the idea, the superintendent was able to move the project forward in a little over a year.

“I love little towns, I grew up in one, I don’t see myself ever leaving one at all. I can move a lot faster in little towns, no bureaucracy here”

– Joel Lovesee, USD 205 Superintendent



There’s no need to reinvent the wheel.

The more examples of school-run businesses that open, the better. Bluestem School District wants to be a resource for other school districts pursuing this model. In small towns where a necessary business is missing, the school district might be able to play a role in providing a service to its community and educational opportunities for its students – a win-win.

Project Successes

The Bluestem Mercantile has succeeded because of its ability to see educational opportunities everywhere. They’ve taken advantage of the flexibility that can exist in a small town and they are now a model for other school districts that may want to take on a project like this in their community.



The front door of the Bluestem Mercantile.

KHFI Impact



The city of Leon has a source for healthy food even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Students gain practical business and financial literacy skills at the Bluestem Mercantile.



The store provides a touch point for families in Leon without school-aged children.

Icon Credit: The Noun Project by Davo Sime, Eucalyp, and Rinaros 79

 109 S. Main St, Leon, KS

 Bluestem Mercantile

 www.usd205.com

This success story is written by Erica Blair and Rial Carver for the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative. All photos were taken by Sarah Jolley. Published March 2021.