Toyota’s ‘Teacher For a Day’ Pilot Program Gives Volunteer Time to Local Schools

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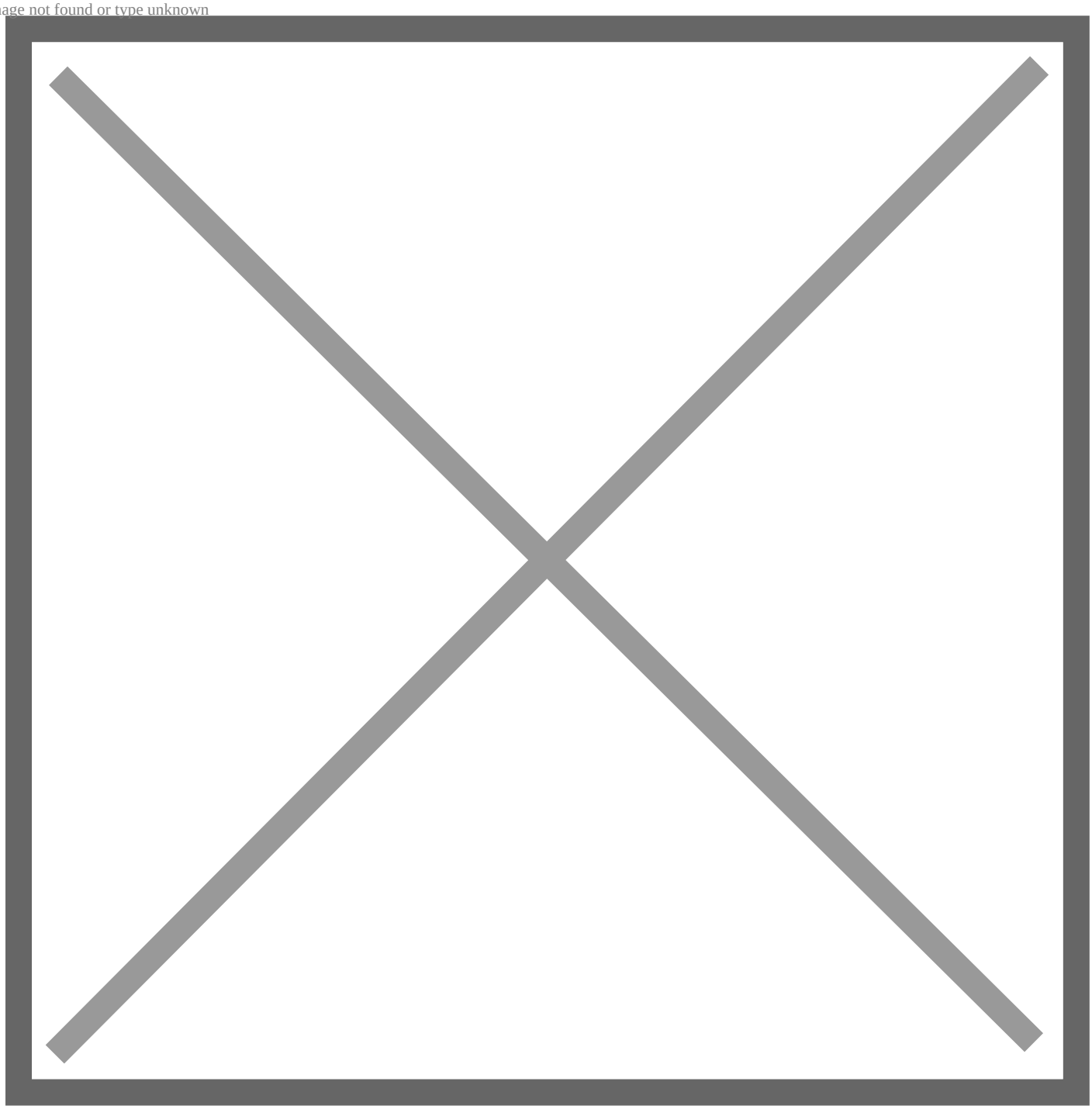

Two Toyota parents are proving you can be the change you wish to see — especially when it comes to helping schools in their community.

Emily LeMay Gaitan, a senior manager for After Sales Technology Strategy under OneTech, said she recently noticed there was a severe substitute teacher shortage at her kids' elementary school and wanted to do something about it.

"My heart is with our teachers," she said. "They have one of the most important jobs on the planet."

Gaitan said after reaching out to her kids' principal to offer up her services as a substitute on vacation days, she thought of an even better idea.

"Toyota is in Plano, [Texas] and we have a huge volunteer arm right here in the same city," she said. "Maybe there's a way to bring us together to address this growing staffing issue."

Gaitan reached out to one of her mentors, Dr. Colleen Casey, who connected her with Karlynda Brazeal, a program coordinator for Shared Impact under Sustainable Development at Toyota who also has a child in the Plano Independent School District.

"She's already doing a ton of incredible work within the community for Toyota and as a Plano resident," Gaitan said.

The team set up meetings with the school district and came up with a proposal, eventually landing on a program called Teacher for a Day. They designed a pilot and were able to volunteer to provide adult supervision and lead school-provided lessons for multiple grade levels last October.

"The teachers loved it, the students loved it," Gaitan said. "My kids loved knowing that I was somewhere on their campus representing Toyota and contributing in a new and different way. It made me so proud of our company that we could propose a community initiative like this that is directly aligned to our company values of sustainable development."

Volunteers who sign up will be sent to a school in pairs to work their "shift" in the classroom, earning hours through Toyota4Good.

"That was a great experience because the school is willing to let Toyota come in as volunteers," Gaitan said. "So, it's not a paid job. It's a Toyota volunteer opportunity."

"We really want to empower them to take on that responsibility as a pair, so it's easier for someone who doesn't have a background in education or doesn't feel comfortable being the adult responsible in the room for 20 kids," Brazeal said.

She adds that they're expanding the pilot at Wells Elementary to a small number of volunteers after spring break, then officially launch next school year.

Teacher for a Day could eventually turn into guest teaching opportunities too, Gaitan said, since STEM technologists and professionals in other departments will be able to connect with students.

"If we've got Toyota-centric STEM activities where we could partner with the school and develop programs to use that time in a meaningful and educational way, I think that the opportunities are just so powerful," she said.

"The reason we're piloting this is because we know there's a shortage of substitute teachers across the nation, not just here in Plano," Brazeal said. "So, we're figuring out how to create this model and then replicate it in all

of our operational communities.”

Gaitan said she’s thankful to work for a company where there is an openness to testing new and innovative ideas.

“It’s wonderful that Toyota is open to team members who have ideas and want to make a difference. I loved being able to socialize it, connect dots and create something meaningful for the greater good,” she said. “From ideation to implementation, it’s incredible to work for a company that enables that.”