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## Kids at 17 O.C. schools get free backpacks, toys

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Mario Juarez smiles at his classmate Kevin Antunez, right, as their first grade class gets new backpacks filled with school supplies, books and toys at Diamond Elementary in Santa Ana.

*Photo - STEINHARDT, O.C REGISTER*

For thousands of low-income children across Orange County, it's a much-needed mid-year boost that will help keep them motivated and ready to learn. That's the spirit in which about 2,000 backpacks filled with school supplies, books and toys were given out beginning today to low-income first-graders at 17 elementary schools across Orange County. The backpacks are being donated through Volunteer Center Orange County's annual Spirit of Giving program, which also will lead classroom discussions with the first-graders about sharing and kindness.

"Each of our volunteer storytellers reads stories about the value of giving to the students," Volunteer Center Orange County President and CEO Daniel J. McQuaid said in a statement. "Then, they ask the children to 'pay it forward' by volunteering their services at school, in their neighborhood, or by performing an act of kindness in their home or family environment."

The backpacks feature a variety of school supplies, as well as fiction books and small Nerf rocket toys. This is the ninth year the center has given backpacks and supplies to low-income kids in Orange County. The selected schools – from La Habra to Huntington Beach – were chosen because they have high concentrations of low-income students; are all designated Title I campuses under federal poverty guidelines. Every first-grader at these schools will receive a backpack. Most of the backpacks were distributed today, except at Garden Grove's Skylark Elementary, where the giveaway will take place Tuesday.

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"Many thanks to the sponsors and volunteers for Spirit of Giving who help us achieve our mission to strengthen our communities by mobilizing volunteer action and accelerating nonprofit success," McQuaid said in a statement.



Volunteer reader Kimberly Billett, 16, of Corona Del Mar High School tells a tale about sharing to a class of first-graders at Diamond Elementary in Santa Ana before they are surprised with backpacks filled with school supplies, books and toys.

*KEN STEINHARDT, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER*