

## School District food pantry teaches compassion, generosity

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The Sparta Area School District has another reason to be #SpartanProud.

A year ago, a food pantry opened to serve the needs of hungry families with students who attend Sparta Area School District schools. Since then, the pantry has served 1,100 families and 4,494 family members, averaging approximately 30 families every week.

The food pantry was created as a joint effort among the Second Harvest Food Bank, the Gospel Baptist Church and the district to address both hunger in the area and its affect on learning.

"It's pretty hard to operate if you're hungry," said Meadowview Middle School Principal Jeff Krull.

Krull says that 50 percent of students in the district are signed up for free or reduced lunch, but pride often gets in the way of parents filling out the paperwork.

"It's probably 10 to 15 percent lower than it should be, just because of that pride factor," he said. "I understand that though. There's a negative stigma that can be attached to it, but everybody needs help sometimes."

"We have people working two or three jobs, and they still come here," said the district's nutrition services supervisor Cindy Thesing. "Time are tough, and people are grateful – they leave with tears in their eyes and gratitude in their hearts."

Along with monetary and food donations from individuals and businesses in the community, the food pantry relies on Second Harvest Food Bank to ensure families are getting well-rounded meals.

"They're going to come and get meat, grain, fruits, veggies, milk, eggs and dairy," said Thesing, who goes to local grocers each week to ensure diversity in the selection. "It's a nice variety weekly, and it changes weekly."

Recently, Thesing was commended for her role in implementing universal free breakfast in most of the schools in the district, among other initiatives.

Krull says that the success of the food pantry goes to show that there is a definite need in the community, and opening students' eyes to that, no matter their background, is important.

"For our kids, it's just about giving back to the community, and understanding that some of their classmates don't have the food at the end of the day, which is a big issue," he said. "It's a lot of life lessons – compassion for fellow man, taking care of each other."

Krull added that the success of the food pantry is reflected in the willingness for district employees, including custodial and kitchen staff and volunteers throughout the district, the EDGE students who put away groceries every Tuesday, and volunteers from the Gospel Baptist Church who partner with the district to create a vital community resource.

"Vicky Jo (Bruggeman) is the one who runs it every week," he said. "She deserves all the credit."

"I just love doing it," Bruggeman said. "[Our pastor's] idea is just to love on them. Bring them here, feed them, and love on them. Show them that that's what we're here for."

Krull also says that this time of year, with the holidays coming up, is a very important time for families to take advantage of the pantry for other reasons as well.

"You'll see that in some students, their behavior changes before a long break because they don't want to go home because there's no food," he said.

"There's no obligation here, it costs nothing, and people can know that they're doing good for their families," Thesing said.

As the demand on the district food pantry has continued to increase, so has the need for additional food and supplies, especially during the holiday season. Individuals and businesses can make food and monetary donations by dropping them off at Meadowview, or the Administrative and Educational Center.

The food pantry is open to all families with a child or children enrolled in the district. The pantry is open every Wednesday, with the exception of December 28, from 4 to 6 p.m at Meadowview School.

Dana Sherin and her daughter Olivia use the Sparta School District Food Pantry to help ensure everyone in their family gets three nutritious meals per day. Volunteer Becky Ayala helps them fill their bags.

Middle School Principal Jeff Krull, Nutrition Services Supervisor Cindy Thesing and Gospel Baptist Church volunteer Vicky Jo Bruggeman help drive success in the Sparta School District's food pantry.