

High School Hunger

The national Backpack Program focuses on elementary-age children, but older students are hungry, too. Perry High School is helping teens who fall into that gap.

Tami Valline, school counselor at Perry High School in Perry, Iowa, knew something was wrong when she started hearing kids say they didn't eat outside of school. Deciding to do something about it, Valline talked with her principal about the need for some kind of help inside the building.

When a classroom opened up, they began a school food pantry with the help of a retired English teacher, an at-risk associate and other school staff.

"We were worried about the weekends especially, when some of our parents might be working, out of town or just not around," Valline says about the decision to open a pantry. "We worried about what the students were eating—or if they were eating."

For a small school in a small town, Perry has a high number of students receiving free and reduced-price meals. Although the town has a food pantry, its distance from the school and some of the students' lack of transportation meant that teenagers weren't using it.

"When we got started, we were looking to fill



Photo: Jon Larson

A few shelving units and lights were all it took to turn an unused room in Perry High School into a food pantry.

that void of students who were falling through the cracks," she says.

Valline found that starting the pantry was much easier than she initially thought. A team put up some shelves, a few lights and a camera for security.

Donations started coming in from drives for food and personal care items at football games, as well as from citizens who dropped off checks. The city pantry also provides some food.

The pantry is open every day, all day, during

the school year and serves between two and six kids a week, many on a regular basis. There are no qualifications for who can use it or how often.

Students see one of the school counselors when they need food, and the adults either pack a backpack for them or take them to the pantry in a low-traffic area of the school to pick out what they want.

Valline says that some of the kids using the pantry live on their own or don't have much adult supervision.

They prefer simple items they can easily prepare, such as macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, tuna, cereal, canned fruit and vegetables and pasta.

"The kids who use it regularly are probably more connected to the school," says Valline. "Any time it feels that people care about them, want them to succeed and are willing to go above and beyond to make sure they have what they need, it's more likely they are going to perform better in school."

Starting a School Food Pantry

Tami Valline advises schools interested in setting up a pantry to jump in. The cost, she says, is less than you might think. Here are a few important tips:

- **Find local supporters**, such as a Rotary or Kiwanis Club. Talk to members of those service clubs in your community to help fund and organize the pantry.
- **Solicit nonperishable foods**. Since use of the pantry may be sporadic, canned and packaged foods with a long shelf life are best.
- **Promote healthy choices**. Encourage donors to consider nutrition as well as kids' preferences. Teens may love sugary snacks, but they need foods that will give them nutritive value.
- **Be patient**. Know that you are helping students, even if only a few need it. "Sometimes, we will have a whole week where it's not used at all, and that's fine," says Valline. "The kids know it's there when they need it."

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