

Andover High School offered first high school food shelf in district

Thursday, June 2nd, 2011

"English, math, athletics - and now food shelves," was the headline of a recent Star Tribune article about the food shelves at four of five Anoka-Hennepin School District high schools. While Coon Rapids, Blaine and Champlin Park high schools all began their food shelves this school year, Andover High School has had some form of food shelf for the past four years.



In 2007, Anna Wilken, the student learning advocate at Andover, began offering students food they could take home.

"I had a lot of kids coming in who were hungry and talking about not having food at home," Wilken said. "There was a lot of talk about families going to one income. It was a hard time. I would call families before dropping off food and they would be upset that I called and say they didn't need help. Many times they would call back and say they were sorry for getting upset, but it was just so hard for them to admit they needed help."

Since 2007, the effort has grown and grown. Two years ago, the food shelf was moved from her office to a room on the second floor of the high school.

Jeff Thomson, an Andover social studies teacher and the advisor to Student Organization for Helping Others (SOFO), and his students helped with the effort through organizing the food shelf and hosting a food drive.

"The situation is that the food shelf has become a necessity," Thomson said. "One of the students we help on a consistent basis was hesitant at first, but now he accepts the help. He sees this as a way he can eat."

When a student needs help, he or she speaks with a teacher or counselor. The adult visits the food shelf for items, packs them into a bag and then gets the bag to the student. Wilken has also delivered food to families in their homes.

"A couple of days ago I delivered three boxes of food to a family," Wilken said. "The need is everywhere, it's amazing how this economy is hitting everyone."

Even with the food shelf, Wilken continues to keep items in her office for students to grab on the go. Wilken said a family donates fresh fruit to her that she provides students. She also keeps granola bars, string cheese and yogurt on hand.

The school also has a "We Care" fund that distributes money for students to purchase milk, meat and other fresh items that cannot be stored in the food shelf. The fund also provides coats, shoes, gift cards for personal necessities, money for a student's lunch account, or emergency items to students. The fund has also provided funding for students in need of prescription medications.

"Students are welcome to use the food shelf at any time," Wilken said. "I always tell them their situation is temporary and there is help here. This is about people helping people."

People interested in donating to the food shelf can drop off items or gift cards for Wilken at the school's office. Checks can be made out to the school with "Food Shelf" or "We Care Fund" written in the memo line.