

Compass Programs at Bell Center opens food shelf; with small staff and students in need, community support will be key to success

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As staff who work with the Compass Programs at Bell Center in Coon Rapids, learned more about food shelves being opened at Anoka-Hennepin middle and high schools, they decided it was a service they would like to offer their students in need, too.

In its sixth year, the Compass Program offers students a temporary placement. Students can be in a Compass Program because they are a teen parent, homebound with an illness, in chemical treatment or suspended or expelled.

No matter the reason, Compass is a place that targets students' specific needs, maintains their

academic progress and helps them gain stability as they work to go back to their neighborhood schools.

The Compass programs at Bell Center serve fifth to 12th grade students. Jennifer Hafen, who works in teacher support, said 75 percent of Compass students receive free or reduced lunch prices. Last year, a number of families applied to receive a Thanksgiving basket from the school district, a program that was not offered this year because of a lack of funding.

"We were inspired by the other schools," Hafen said. "We thought if Blaine and Coon Rapids have a lesser need and have a food shelf, we have a substantial need so we should be doing this, too. And not having the Thanksgiving baskets this season was a real eye opener for some people."

Hafen is working on the food shelf with Eugenio Coronado, the student learning advocate; Chad Fellow, a life skills teacher; Melanie Cleveland, a prevention advisor; and Beth Marolt, a psychologist consultant. As in the high schools, when teachers are aware of a student in need, they provide a backpack of food to go home with the student on a Friday. The empty backpack is returned on Monday.

"We've also found it surprising that some of our families don't have basic cooking utensils or things like can openers," Hafen said. "So we are requesting donations of food that can be opened with a pop lid as well as foods that can be made in a microwave and basic foods high in protein, such as peanut butter."

Hafen said the group would also like to keep items such as tooth brushes, tooth paste and other hygiene products. Unlike other programs in the district, Compass will not collect clothing or items like mittens or boots.

A challenge for Compass is that while high schools have a large staff and student population to draw on for donations, Compass at Bell Center has a staff of about 25 and very few students, many of them who are in need. Compass staff sent bags home with students and received donations from staff to get the food shelf up and running, but the school hopes it can count on the community to help it keep the shelves stocked. The program is also on a list sent out to area churches being asked to help Anoka-Hennepin students through the Faith Community Partnership.

"When a backpack of food goes home, we put a slip with it that says who donated the food," Hafen said. "We want to give donors credit."

Cash donations the school receives will be used to purchase gift certificates from the Anoka-Hennepin Educational Foundation (AHEF). A portion of the money from the gift certificates purchased, will go back to Compass.

Donations for the food shelf can be delivered to Compass Programs at Bell Center at 1374 Northdale Blvd N.W., Coon Rapids.