



Equipping School-Based Food Pantries for Success

Featuring:

Susie Fangmeier and Dee Nadjkovic,
The Great Falls Public School Foundation

Overview

According to Feeding America, 16 million U.S. children face hunger every day. Food banks across the country are dedicated to reducing childhood hunger and one of the most effective ways to do that is to make nutritious food available where children spend a lot of their time: at school! Since 2012, The Great Falls Public School Foundation in Montana has utilized Oasis Insight to help their school food pantries record and report the results of their program. This reports features interviews with two of their school food pantry volunteers who utilize Oasis on a weekly basis.

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*3 out of 4 teachers say students come to school hungry.

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“I was working at the elementary school volunteering in my children’s classrooms then I got a part-time job working with the most at risk kids in the school,” says Susie Fangmeier of Great Falls Montana. Susie could see that kids could just not focus if they were hungry. “Kids would act out, not engage or not engage in the right way. I had a little gal come to me crying one day. She told me, ‘Momma came home and put orange juice on my cereal instead of milk.’ I told her ‘Here baby let me get you something to eat,’” she says.

These experiences with childhood hunger and the classroom affected Susie to the point she wanted to make a tangible difference. When her kids moved to the middle school, she filled out the form to volunteer in the school’s food pantry, where she now serves as coordinator. “I see up to 35 students a week in our school food pantry,” she shares.

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Like Susie, Dee Nadjkovic signed up to serve in a school food pantry. Each week she helps between 10–20 students shop for food at North Middle School before they hop on the bus to go home. What started out as a simple way to be involved in her son’s school has turned into a passion for fighting childhood hunger. Dee shares, “Two years ago when my son went into middle school I was involved in the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). Each parent joining PTA was asked to volunteer for a committee. The Food Pantry was on the list and for some reason I thought this sounded like fun and more interesting than counting box tops.”

Dee has found that this volunteer role is a very direct way to help her son’s peers. She shares, “You can see a child with same shoes and phone as all the other kids and think that he or she isn’t in need, but I’m learning that children are going to school without what they need. We can do something about hunger.

How School Food Pantries Work

Each week shopping is done by the school volunteers at the local food bank, then volunteers sort and stock the shelves at the room in the school designated for the pantry. Every Thursday, Dee, Susie and their volunteers at each school help students “shop” for nutritious foods so they can be more focused on their schoolwork and less distracted by a growling stomach. “We give them two grocery bags full because most of them can’t take any more than that on the bus. They can choose a meat, like chicken or ground beef and then make a meal around that. A volunteer will help them complete the meal, also making sure they get cereal and other items. Before they leave, we write down the amount of food in weight and say ‘See ya next Thursday!’” says Susie.

There is no paperwork for the student to fill out and no qualifications. The teachers and the counselors make referrals of children who could benefit from the additional food. Susie shares “If a child needs something in the middle of the week a counselor can certainly take them down there to get something if Thursday is too far away. Some kids come periodically and some are there every week.”

Collaboration is Key

Sustaining school food pantries in the Great Falls School District is a collaborative effort. The Great Falls Public School Foundation pays the bill for food at the local food bank while Parent-Teacher Associations at each school purchase some additional items for special distributions.

According to Dee, on special occasions, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, even more students visit the pantry and bigger boxes of food are distributed. “We don’t necessarily do these special boxes for the holiday, per se. We do it because of the extended time out of school for these kids,” says Dee. The boxes often include items for a holiday meal, but are

also stuffed with lunch, breakfast and snack foods to help see the students through the breaks from school.

Oasis Benefit: Maintaining Good Stewardship

In 2013, when Dee first started helping in the pantry, another volunteer, Jackie Slovak, showed her the ropes. Jackie mentored Dee on the importance of tracking and reporting, which was done by hand on weekly logs. Dee shares, “We felt a tremendous sense of stewardship and responsibility for making sure we were getting the most out of the money donated and for showing the PTA donors and foundation how the funds were being spent. It was important to be transparent.”

Believing there had to be a more secure and efficient way than paper logs and Excel worksheets to track the use of the school pantry, Jackie went in search of a new system. She found Oasis Insight, and after a demonstration and trial period, she presented a request to The Great Falls Public School Foundation to fund the system. They agreed to fund the implementation of Oasis, and each school pantry in the district can choose to participate.

Oasis Benefit: Saving Volunteers Time

Dee was one of the first school-based food pantry volunteers to upgrade her pantry recordkeeping by using Oasis Insight’s cloud-based case management. “The paperwork was daunting to me, and it used to take over an hour a week and two to three hours a month to create reports with my miscellaneous papers and Excel spreadsheets. Using Oasis has taken the chore feeling out of it and saved me a lot of time,” Dee explains.

Susie agrees: At the end of the month, instead of totaling that up by hand, I just click and I am done. I am networked with the other schools in the district.” She was initially skeptical of change and a little resistant. She shares, “I thought it was just one more thing to do, but,

honestly, Oasis is so easy to learn and it is actually easier to do in the long run.” Susie now assists with introducing and training new Oasis users during food pantry training for safe food handling and pantry orientations.

Oasis Benefit: Push-Button Reporting

Every month, school food pantries prepare reports for the food bank. Included on the report are the number of new families served, number of households served and the weight of the food. During the implementation and customization process, that report template was provided to the Oasis team.

Dee says, “I don’t know how they found it. All I can tell you is that industriesave them the copy and now we push a button and that report comes out completed in Oasis! We also customized our database so we can link a family together and we created a custom field for student identification number.”

Helping Families Get By & Children Focus

While the school food pantry is not designed to be a primary food source for the children or families served, it is able to help families get by, or make it through to the end of the month. Nationwide, Feeding America’s School Pantry program serves more than 21 million meals to nearly 110,000 children. Dee shares, “This work is something that has become incredibly important to me in my life. I will always make sure that I am doing what I can to help children with food.”

To learn more about School-Based Food Pantries, call your local food bank. To locate your local food bank, visit www.feedingamerica.com. To learn more about Oasis Insight, visit www.oasisinsight.net.

- [1]Feeding America, accessed October 19,2015, <http://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/we-feed-families/school-pantry-program/>
- *3 out of 4 teachers says their students come to school hungry. Source: <https://www.nokidhungry.org/the-problem>, Accessed Oct. 20, 2015
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