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Filling a need

Food pantry at Campbell Junior High benefits many

By Steve Foley
The Winchester Sun

For Tara Cruse and Martina Hensley, it's simply about filling a need.

Cruse, the district health coordinator for Clark County schools, and Hensley, the Youth Services Center coordinator at Campbell Junior High School, began talking about incorporating a food pantry at the school last year.

"We already do a backpack program and we have a church (Central Baptist) which brings us 30 bags a month," Hensley said. "We found there kids to bring home food for themselves for the weekend."

With the increasing need for food among students not only at Campbell, but throughout all Clark County schools, the two decided to start a food pantry at Campbell.

The pantry, which is located near the Campbell Youth Services Center office, is available to any student and features a variety of both perishable and non-perishable food items.

The food pantry late last week featured a variety of soups, cereals, breads and frozen goods including hamburger

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Robert D. Campbell Junior High School registered nurse and district health coordinator Tara Cruse organizes food items on the shelves of the Campbell food pantry last week, top photo. Cruse, left, and Campbell Youth Services Center Coordinator Martina Hensley look over items inside a deep freezer from the Campbell food pantry last week, right photo. Cruse and Hensley want to expand the school's food pantry and services throughout all Clark County schools.

freezer and a refrigerator.

"Somedays we may not give one box away, somedays it's four or five boxes," Hensley said. "Sometimes I've had just emaciated students and have sent food home with them."

with food pantry services after running a food bank at Grace Bible Church, said the food pantry is pretty much self-funded as of now.

"We've been advertising it on Facebook and

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on several websites, but right now we're relying on each other for food and we have some other people who have been donating.

"The focus here is on the kids," Cruse said. "If they need it, they'll get it. If they say they're hungry, we'll feed them.'"

Hensley added with the recent restructuring of how food stamps in Kentucky are distributed, often times certain families are now forced to wait half a month before receiving food stamps.

"We've gotten some calls regarding that and the recent snow days we had have been hard," Hensley said. "Most parents plan on feeding their kids in the afternoon because they're getting free or reduced lunch here."

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Campbell Youth Services Center Coordinator Martina Hensley, left, and District Health Coordinator Tara Cruse stand inside the Campbell Junior High food pantry last week. The self-funded food pantry aims to help all Clark County students and families in need.

Data collected as of January by the Clark County School District shows 62 percent of students district-wide receive free or reduced lunch. Clark County Preschool has 92.6 percent participating in the program, while Phoenix Academy is at 92.5 percent.

Campbell Junior High is at 57.8 percent, George Rogers Clark High School is at 52.1 percent and Shearer Elementary is at 73.3 percent.

"It's a scientific fact that kids can't learn if they're hungry," Cruse said. "It just is. They're not focused and their behavior is changed. It's hard for them to focus on what's going on and listen to their teacher if they're worried about what they're going to eat tonight. That's what brought this (food pantry) all on."

Hensley said the majority of those using the food pantry are those from Campbell, but the goal of the food pantry is to expand to the other county schools.

"We really want to see this grow and succeed because there is a need," Hensley said. "For us, it's all about the students and the students know when they're hungry. Sometimes their parents don't know or don't care, sometimes people are just too proud and don't want to ask for help.

"Sometimes it just takes a child to simply say 'I'm hungry.'"

Dustin Howard, principal at Campbell Junior High School, said he's extremely proud of the efforts of both Cruse and Hensley.

"We're very blessed to have people like them within our school system and others who are doing what's right for these kids," Howard said.

Hensley is also planning on expanding the size of the food pantry at Campbell to the H Wing, which would more than double the size of the current pantry to that of a classroom.

"It's a growing program and we have an advisory committee," Hensley said. "Alice Shearer, who attends Central Baptist, and her ladies group have taken us on and she shops and brings in food. There's been food drives here at the school and the kids have incentives for bringing in food."

Hensley said since the program's inception, she's never had a family or student call back or complain about the food they've been given.

"We try to do things where they can make multiple meals out of the box," Hensley said. "They can use hamburger to make chili, hamburger helper or spaghetti."

For more information on the food pantry, to donate or to volunteer, call Hensley at 745-5200, or visit Robert D. Campbell Junior High School's Facebook page.

"If anyone has food they want to drop off, they can even drop it off at the front door at Campbell," Cruse said. "We can even do monetary donations as well and you can receive a tax write off."

Hensley said other school coordinators are aware of the food pantry's services, and she's hoping the pantry can branch out throughout the community.

"Not only do we help the kids and their families, but we'll take the food to the child's home because generally it's too much for them to take to an entire family on the bus," Hensley said. "Food for a lot of them is just one small thing they're dealing with. They're in foster care, a parent has passed away, they're being raised by grandparents, they're being beaten or sexually abused. We have a lot of that here."

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