

Imagine getting ready for school and forgetting the most important thing---breakfast. However, it wasn't forgotten; it was inaccessible. Now, it is time for school and your stomach is growling. Though your school may offer free or reduced breakfast or lunch, you don't want to be isolated from your peers, so you decline it.

Sadly, it is not uncommon for students to attend class hungry. Hunger has a substantial impact on a child's academic success. According to Feeding America, 1 in 6 children struggle with hunger in Illinois. Food insecurity, the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food, negatively impacts cognitive development in children.

Aurora, Ill. is an area where the largest demographic living in poverty are children from ages 6-11. Areas such as this depend heavily on food pantries. The Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry (MWFP) understands this dependence and lives by its mission statement of relieving hunger and nourishing lives.

In 2018, MWFP launched a program called 'Food 4 Students,' which is a second pantry located at East Aurora High School (EAHS). On the first and third Thursday of each month, food is shared with students to ensure "all young Aurorans have access to wholesome, nutritious food."

At the end of their school day, from 3 to 4:30 p.m., all students are invited to 'Student Food Day' to grab groceries in the hallway by their culinary arts kitchen. MWFP is environmentally friendly, so reusable bags are given to students and they are encouraged to bring the bags back to receive a sweet treat the next time they visit.

The only requirement is to show their student ID to prove they are an EAHS student. If they are new to the system, they fill out a registration form with sections asking for their name, home address, number of people in their household, and other relevant information. Students who have siblings that would like to participate can partake as well by filling out the form.

Food 4 Students provides twenty pounds of groceries including: breakfast and cereal, dairy, peanut butter, fresh fruit and vegetables, canned soups, rice, spaghetti and tomato sauce, and frozen meat. Snacks such as Doritos and Oreos are also provided, along with a recipe on easy meals to prepare with the food provided. Alongside the food are also essentials in a baggie such as shampoo, lotion, and body soap, donations from hotels.

One student explained, "The snacks last about a week thanks to my little brother, but the food lasts way longer." The MWFP ensures that the groceries could last for about two weeks, so that the next time they come the families are ready for re-stocking.

Without volunteers, this program would not exist. MWFP is entirely volunteer-based. People can sign up for different roles such as unloading the truck, restocking or even distributing food. East Pantry leader Cathy Ferrel and volunteer Dick Schindel are instrumental in recruiting and

organizing volunteer support. Many come from the Retired Teachers Association, and are passionate about helping students succeed.

An alumni of EAHS, Sharon Johnson, volunteers with the stocking and giving of the food. She explained, "I want to give back to my community." She found out about the program from her church.

100% of students at EAHS receive reduced lunch. Despite a stigma for those who receive these benefits, these students are very comfortable with accepting the generous donations. Students of all races, grades and gender take advantage of this offer and many look forward to these Thursdays.

"My mom doesn't have time to buy groceries because of work, so this is my way of helping her out," said one student.

These words were a general statement made by students who walked through the line. Many explained that they were trying to alleviate stress from their families and have the groceries ready for them. There were also others who took advantage of the given recipes and prepared meals for their siblings.

Ginger Neenan, a committed worker to the Food 4 Students program creates the recipes. "They are in high school, and it is time for them to become independent and I want to help make the process as simple as possible for them," explained Neenan.

Though some are forced to adapt to an independent lifestyle, it still promotes self-care and prepares students for the real world. Most of the recipes Ginger creates for the program are very simple such as spaghetti with meat and vegetables.

Many of the students who walk through the lines bring their best friends. Their friends help them carry their bags or just walk and talk with them, without judgement.

"This distribution is very helpful. My mom just had a kid and my dad works a lot, so we rely on this," explained a sophomore student.

With the assistance of their principal making announcements and flyers being pinned on walls, students around the school are informed about this program. The MWFP has a system where students tell who informed them about the Food 4 Students program. Whichever staff member tells the most, receives a prize.

The entire school is on board and engaged with this system, making it easier for students to be accepting of others as well as become participants of the program.

Students are highly appreciative of the donations with 'Thank You' coming out of all the participants' mouths.

Food 4 Students is just one of the many outreach programs the MWFP does to ensure they are minimizing the number of hungry people in the Aurora community. According to the USDA, 40.4 million Americans rely on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs monthly to provide for their families, with two-thirds going to families with children.

Many children do not know when their next meal will be. Many go to school hungry and struggle to pay attention making it hard for them to succeed as a student.

The MWFP wants to be another helping hand for those in need. In 2019, 7,215 household members received groceries from the 'Food 4 Students' program. Two thousand and five hundred thirty-three of those recipients were younger siblings. By volunteering and donating, hunger will be relieved and lives will be nourished.