

Supporting the Whole Student

NCHS Resource Center Helps Fight Hunger, Offers a ‘Soft Place for Students to Land’

Written by Megan Middleton

Thanks to a little help from North Crowley High School’s Panther Emporium, Jessica Sebastian did not have to cut corners when preparing her family’s Thanksgiving meal.

“Thanksgiving was wonderful,” Sebastian, a North Crowley parent, said. “I was able to pay my bills and not worry about compromising on the food. I was able to have family come to my house for dinner because we had all the fixings. You feel a lot better when you know you have everything you need. You don’t have to compromise on anything. It made a big difference.”

In its second year, Panther Emporium gives North Crowley students and families a boost — not just during the holidays but every day of the week. The campus resource center offers a food pantry, clothing closet, formal attire for special occasions as well as school supplies, hygiene products and daily snacks.

On Fridays, it also sends home “cuisine kits,” packed with fresh fruits, vegetables, proteins and recipe cards with cooking instructions, for families to enjoy over the weekend.

“We’ve grown exponentially in the services we’re able to provide and the students and families we’re able to reach,” said Kristin Easter, the North Crowley teacher who runs the Panther Emporium. “We’re very excited about how quickly word is getting around and how we’re able to meet the needs of the whole student not just the academic student.”

The emporium began as a way to better serve students’ needs and help boost attendance, which might waver if a student is battling issues such as hunger or embarrassment over not having clean clothes, Easter said.

“It’s a safe place for the students,” she said. “They feel like they can come here and say anything and ask for anything.”



The clothing closet offers a variety of resources for students needs.



Teacher Kristen Easter (right) helps a student prepare sixty take-home Thanksgiving meals from the Panther Emporium.

The resource center can impact a student’s entire family, giving parents a break and students a chance to help out, Sebastian said.

“A lot of parents do not want to go stand in lines and say, ‘Hey, I’m in need,’” she said. “But the teenagers, they are able to go home with a bag. My daughter came home with frozen pizzas, big things that you wouldn’t expect ... She came home with real food, not just for herself. She could share with the family. These kids feel empowered. They feel like, ‘We’re bringing something to the table.’”

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The resource center partners with several community organizations, including Neighborhood Needs in Fort Worth, which weekly provides food as well as clothing and other requests. Other partners include Powerhouse Retail, Villa Shoes as well as Al’s Formal Wear and several women’s boutiques that donated formal wear.

Panther Emporium - By The Numbers

60 families reached with Thanksgiving meals

About **700 pounds** of food go home through cuisine kits weekly

10-20 students a day visit the clothing closet

About **80 students** a day get snacks



See the Panther Emporium in action and hear from students on the Crowley ISD YouTube Channel.

The Chisholm Trail Education Foundation also awarded The Panther Emporium a \$5,000 grant, which paid for deep freezers and refrigerators to store food that eventually goes home with students.

“The community absolutely pulled together and wanted to participate and help launch this awesome resource center on campus,” Easter said. “We haven’t heard, ‘No’ yet. We’ve heard, ‘Yes, and here’s more.’ We’re incredibly grateful to each of our community partners, and we are looking forward to growing those partnerships.”

Rich Briggs, director of Neighborhood Needs, is among those who has said, “Yes” to helping.

“If we are helping this community, we have to help the kids,” Briggs said. “We have to help the young ones but also the ones who are in those last few years of high school. Lack of food and hunger problems are a part of what affect kids’ ability or desire or opportunity to graduate high school. I saw this as an opportunity to fix part of that, or at least make a dent in it.”



Student organizations such as Student Council, Key Club and National Honor Society volunteer at the Panther Emporium.

Neighborhood Needs provides more than 600 pounds of food a week to Panther Emporium. Neighborhood Needs receives food from the Tarrant Area Food Bank as well as several local grocery stores.

“We knew we had hit a success when a couple of the kids came running in on Monday excited to tell (Easter) that their grandmother had taken the food, prepped a meal, and the whole family was able to sit down to eat at the table at one time,” Briggs said. “Both kids indicated it was very special because it was a very unique, maybe first-time, experience.”

On campus, organizations such as Student Council, Key Club and National Honor Society volunteer at the emporium, and students with special needs also help sort food and create the weekly “cuisine kits,” which helps them develop skills that might help them after high school. Several athletic teams also have hosted food drives to help stock the emporium’s shelves.

Principal Stefani Allen said the Panther Emporium “offers a soft place for some kids to land.”

Allen said one student who enrolled at North Crowley after being displaced by Hurricane Harvey took notice of the school’s caring spirit after receiving help from Panther Emporium.

“He found me later, and he said, ‘Ms. Allen, this is a really great school. You all seem to really care about kids,’” she said. “I think the Panther Emporium is indicative of that. We really do care about kids, not just about their academic success but their overall success and how they’re doing. I think it builds a community here.”

For more information on how you can help the Panther Emporium, email kristen.easter@crowley.k12.tx.us or search “Panther Emporium” on Facebook!