



Kindness Closets open doors across District 200

Sometimes kids and families need a hand up, something those who work in public schools know firsthand. So what better place to offer one, than a safe nook inside of those buildings.

That's the concept behind Kindness Closets, which are becoming fixtures at schools all across Woodstock Community Unit School District 200. Inside, students can find winter clothing, some food items, a toothbrush or deodorant or other things students have a difficult time finding at home.

Items are donated by school families, civic organizations such as Woodstock Rotary and the Woodstock Food Pantry, school staff and community members. At many schools, students or families pick up items or drop off donations on a daily basis.

The first Kindness Closet began three years ago when Woodstock High School teacher Mariah Koleno and counselor Anne Rogers were advising the senior class who wanted to make the concept their legacy. They held food drives, sought donations from staff members and the Kindness Closet has continued to evolve.

Since then, Kindness Closets have opened at Mary Endres Elementary School, Verda Dierzen Early Learning Center, Northwood Middle School, Woodstock North High School and are in the process of opening all over District 200.

Koleno said she and Rogers are so excited to know that the idea is spreading across the entire district and hope it continues to spread beyond. Staff across District 200 have been very supportive and have been among the biggest donors of clothing and food items.

"I love it. It takes ripples to make waves and that's just beautiful to me. That's the whole purpose and point of all of it," she said.

Cristina Mazzanti, a parent educator at Verda Dierzen Early Learning Center said they average about 10 families a week visiting their Kindness Closet. Some of the people who came in for help even come back to make donations themselves.

"At our school, we're very lucky this is most of their first starts. Usually the kids start here so it's super important that they have that feeling that people care about them. We want you to be here. We want you to feel welcome," Mazzanti said.

Mazzanti said there are other things visitors need besides hats and gloves. They've helped point people toward community resources and employment opportunities. She said she's also been heartened by people who've taken items they needed and brought back items to donate to others.

Keri Pala, principal at Mary Endres, said one woman so appreciated the help from the Kindness Closet that she volunteered to organize the donated items, which took considerable time.

One of the other benefits is that many high school students volunteer helping organize the Kindness Closets, which opens their eyes to needs in the community that could develop into a lifelong awareness.

"It's really become a whole community project," Rogers said.

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