

Twin Cities schools getting lesson in economic struggles



Richard Tsong-Taatarii, Star Tribune

At the The Ralph Reeder Food Shelf run by the Mounds View school district, Mary Claseman helps stock the shelves with food that will go to many families who have kids in the school district.

Seeing the recession reach deeper into classrooms, Twin Cities schools are taking more steps to help families get needed resources.

By **GREGORY A. PATTERSON**, Star Tribune

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Michael Lovett doesn't need to watch the Dow Jones industrial average plummet on CNN to know the recession is deep and severe.

Lovett can simply talk to the elementary school lunch ladies who ladle out the food, chaperone recess and frequently hear kids voice fears when a parent loses a job or plans to move the family because of a job loss.

That's why Lovett, superintendent of White Bear Lake's schools, recently reached out to the community in a school newsletter, telling kids, parents, teachers and staff that if they are under financial pressure, the district may be able to help.

"If your family or a family you know is facing economic hardship, your school community is there to help," he wrote. "Families when confronted with lean times aren't always sure where to turn."

Lovett is among school leaders from across the metro watching the economic problems pile into their classrooms. From Forest Lake to Osseo, Richfield and Robbinsdale, schools are responding by seeking resources that families need. Sometimes it's a free lunch or school supplies, and sometimes it's help paying the rent so the family can stay in the district.

Schools have long doled out services for students from hardscrabble backgrounds through free lunch and breakfast programs, and nonprofit agencies have in recent years stepped in to help with backpacks and school supplies. But the amount and depth of the requests are changing, and schools are being more active in meeting needs.

More middle-class kids are having a harder time, says Marisa Zimmerman, a social worker at Richfield High School. Those students are often tougher to help because they are unaware of the available resources because they've never used them, she said.

In the Mounds View school district, help often comes in the form of groceries, meted out at the Ralph Reeder Food Shelf, which is operated by the district.

"We're always doing more and more outreach," says Lisa Baker, supervisor of the New Brighton-based shelf. Demand at the food shelf, which serves 350 families per month, is up nearly 20 percent from a year ago.

The shelf counts as clients people such as Elizabeth (who didn't want her last name used for privacy reasons) whose family has been caught up in the mortgage crisis and the sliding economy. She has two school-age children, an interest-only mortgage that now costs \$200 more a month than it had, and a husband who works for an auto supplier that has sharply curtailed his work hours.

The school district's food shelf has helped her family meet the mortgage payments, she said. "It's been a godsend."

Similarly, when families go to parent-teacher conferences in the Forest Lake school district, they hear how their child is doing in school, and also about services they could receive. School counselors set up tables full of information, including application forms for free or reduced lunches, and other information on how to cope during difficult times.

More free lunches

In White Bear Lake the percentage of the district's 8,500 students eligible for the free or

reduced lunch program has climbed from 22.5 percent two years ago to 28 percent currently.

The district also has a nonprofit education foundation that funds scholarships and teacher projects, and has an "angel fund" that helps people in a tight spot get necessities.

"The actual need seems to be up 30 percent," said Dudley Ryan, president of the foundation whose angel fund will distribute nearly \$20,000 this year. (In addition, the foundation typically awards about \$120,000 annually in scholarships and grants.) So far this year the angel fund has been able to meet all the requests that the district has made.

"But it's getting harder," Ryan says, "because the recession has affected the value of the foundation's investments."

It's not just investments that are affected by the downturn.

"Some kids are so worried that their parents are going to lose their house or their jobs that they cannot really focus in school," says Graciela Hammeken, a cultural liaison for the White Bear district.

Teachers, too

The West St. Paul school district also is focusing on family needs. Kelsey Thornton, a social worker assigned to Garlough Elementary school, says she's noticed that the needs have grown since fall. Garlough is a magnet school with an environmental focus and a student body in which 75 percent of the kids are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Thornton's job is to help raise reading scores of the most troubled kids, which often requires her to help their families with obstacles to their school work -- including driving parents to and from teacher conferences.

In one of those drives recently Thornton learned a family was about to be evicted and would be forced to move. She aided the family by connecting them with an agency that helped them make the rent.

"They just needed that extra support," Thornton said.

But students and families aren't the only ones hurting in school communities.

"There's been a big impact on staff, too," said Barbara Swaiman, a social worker at Lakeview Elementary School in Robbinsdale. "I've had teachers come to me and say, 'I'm in foreclosure; what do I do?'"

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