



Submitted photo

A room at the East Campus is packed with bagged food for Oconomowoc area families who need help putting meals on the table. With the COVID-19 pandemic, many families who relied on the free and reduced lunch program at school have been grateful the Oconomowoc Area School District has offered the bags of food.

Community pitching in to help students

*Food, gift cards,
internet access provided
for families in need*

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OCONOMOWOC — Prior to schools officially shutting down on March 18, Oconomowoc Area School District Superintendent Roger Rindo sent a letter to families in the district saying arrangements were being made to provide support to families who relied on the district day-to-day.

Part of that support includes free and reduced lunch programs, daycare and access to technology.

“I heard recently that as communities, the best way to fight this pandemic is through a pandemic of kindness,” Rindo said in the March 12 letter. “We will get through this together.”

It seems the community has taken that to heart as OASD has been working to provide those families with the support they need.

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In a statement from the district, Sodexo Food Service has been distributing weekly breakfast and lunch packages for families using the free and reduced meal program. In addition, this past weekend, the district offered the same package for any OASD students in need, even if they aren't using the program.

Tina Hohlfeld, general manager of Sodexo's food services in the OASD, said being rooted in the community and helping these students and families means everything.

"I grew up here in Oconomowoc and my employees are all rooted here with kids, friends and family, so we view this as our community too," Hohlfeld said. "We feed these students five days a week normally, we know families need this support and these students hold a big piece of (our) hearts."

Hohlfeld said it has been emotional to see the families' reaction when they receive the food they need.

"It can be humbling during a crisis like this, to see how much need there actually is in our community," she said. "While this crisis has been extremely difficult, this has been a bright spot in our days."

The district has also received donations of grocery store gift cards and restaurant gift cards that the district's social workers have been giving to families in need.

"Learning Strategists and Related Service Providers are working hard to meet the needs of all learners in this new virtual learning environment," said Lisa Dawes, director of student services for OASD.

Since schools will be closed for the foreseeable future, students have needed to adapt and begin working from home — which means families without internet are at a disadvantage. But thanks to the Oconomowoc Area Foundation and the Oconomowoc Public Education Fund donating money to purchase hotspots, those students have been able to continue their education.

Oconomowoc Area Foundation Coordinator Maribeth Bush said she received an email from one of the teachers in the district telling her how the shutdown would soon affect the students.

"They called and asked if we could assist them," Bush said. "Our students need to be kept on course."

Bush said the OAF Board approved the donation of funds to buy hotspots by the next morning.

"Our purpose is to support the community, whether it be

through an initiative or a project. These are different times and the board right now is looking at ways we can help the community," Bush said.

In addition the Oconomowoc Public Education Fund, also donated money toward the purchase of hotspots for students.

OPEF Marketing and Communications Coordinator Katie Westerman said when OPEF learned that the district had an immediate need for additional hotspots, they wanted to support those efforts.

"These are uncertain and unprecedented times for all of us, so it was important for us to help ensure that all our OASD students have access to virtual learning," Westerman said. "We are so fortunate to live in a community that consistently rallies together to support one and another and our school district."

Westerman also said the support from the community has been overwhelming positive and generous.

"Many local organizations are stepping forward and just want to help anyway they can," Westerman said.

"These are trying times for all of us and uncharted territory for our educators and students, so having all the necessary supports in place is crucial to the well being of our students."