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Connecting for Success: Every Child, Every Classroom, Every Day

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HCCSD Students Establish Food Pantry and Clothes Closet

Lexington, Miss. — Love and service; the gift that keeps on giving. This season of COVID-19 has been difficult for most to deal with, from economic depression, social distancing, distance learning and even death for some. It has been hard to see the light at the end of this devastating tunnel. However, in Holmes County, one of the poorest counties in the United States, the tragedy of COVID-19 has made this small rural community stronger, resilient and more united than ever before. COVID-19 revealed the best.

When the Holmes County Consolidated School District (HCCSD) closed its doors in March because of the pandemic, Superintendent Dr. James L. Henderson, knew he had to do something. "I knew our students, and our community at large, needed us like never before," Henderson said. "We had to lead." Henderson, his student leadership committee, cafeteria and transportation staff and anyone else that he could find, galvanized around the community and immediately began serving breakfast and lunch meals daily, to more than 3000 students. He bought additional computer devices for each household and provided access to the internet so that every student in the district would be able to continue learning during these unprecedented times. These acts of kindness did not go unnoticed.

An April 6th news article about the HCCSD meal deliveries was published by The Guardian and several other news outlets online. It prompted an unprecedented outpouring of support and donations from readers across the US who wanted to support the meal delivery program. Readers expressed the need *to do something* to help others in need. "As a retired school nurse who worked with children in rural poverty in northern California, I know only too well how important school meals are for some children in the best of times. Given the COVID-19 crisis and impact on families already on the edge of calamity, I want to send my heartfelt thanks for what you are doing."

A reader in Seattle wrote, "We are expecting to receive a stimulus check and I would like to donate some to your district." A former teacher wrote, "I get about \$800/mo. from SSI but can afford to send \$100 to someone who needs it more than I do. I have enough food every day. I am outraged and devastated by the fact that some people [you know] don't."

Overwhelmed with joy and humbled by the donations, Henderson responded to donors with a written statement of gratitude for the donors' generosity which said in part, that the donations instill hope because they remind him "there are still people who want to help the underserved and who care about the children of my hometown — Holmes County, Mississippi!"

The gifts are still giving.

The HCCSD's Board of Education approved the creation of a Lexington-based, student-run, food pantry and clothes closet, funded and stocked by donations from across the nation. Gifts from out-of-state donors provided the funding to establish the Pantry. The Clothes Closet will afford



students who face economic hardship the means to acquire school uniforms. Students and volunteers will sort and organize donations, as well as provide customer service, building life-long career skills in the process. Henderson, said, "The Food Pantry and Clothes Closet will go a long way toward easing the difficulties many of our families are having, especially during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many parents have either lost their jobs, are following stay at home orders, or caring for ill family members. Our school personnel are identifying families in need and we want to help. We look forward to having both operations open in the Fall of 2020."

The Food Pantry will establish a board of directors including community members, school district employees and students. HCCSD will hire up to four students who will work in the Food Pantry on Saturdays to organize the distribution of boxes of groceries for weekend meals to Holmes County families eligible for TANF benefits.

Holmes County Central High School student Harvey Ellington is excited about the project. "I think the Food Pantry is a wonderful idea," he said. "I hope to be able to help out because I know this will benefit a lot of people."

Sherri Reeves, member of the retired HCCSD teachers group and current program specialist with the 21st century after-school program, has led school uniform and coat drives for the past four years in the month of January. The retired teachers' group was aware that several organizations provided uniforms and school supplies in August each year, but many students needed a new set after the fall semester. Parent Liaisons at the schools let her know when there were students who had outgrown their clothes or needed new uniforms to replace worn-out shirts and pants. "I would love to volunteer some time to work with the student-run Clothes Closet. I hope we can also provide career-appropriate clothing for people to wear to job interviews in addition to uniforms and coats."

The Food Pantry will be open each Saturday morning for the pickup of boxes of supplementary food for weekend meals. Dr. Henderson said, "We're looking forward to making the lives of our students and their families better."

Media organizations in need of more information are asked to contact Ms. Deborah Antoine, Media Spokesperson by email: dantoine@holmesccsd.org, or call (314) 766-8685.

