

FEPS Establishes COVID-19 Relief Fund

In March, in response to the rapidly growing COVID-19 pandemic in Minnesota, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz issued stay-at-home orders, many local businesses temporarily closed their doors, and Eden Prairie Schools replaced classroom learning with virtual learning. Panic, uncertainty, and loss of social connections set in, and for many Eden Prairie School District families these changes meant facing the added stress of losing critical program support they count on from the schools for their children each day. Learning of the many hardships Eden Prairie Schools students and families began to face, the FEPS Board of Directors began the thoughtful but swift process of redirecting \$25,000 to address these needs and formed the COVID-19 Relief Fund.

Under normal circumstances, FEPS would have been convening to select Grant Recipients from a pool of teacher and administrator applications, to provide funding for projects that support learning in the classroom. But these were not normal circumstances. Working closely with Eden Prairie Schools Superintendent, Dr. Josh Swanson, Connie Hytjan, Principal of Forest Hills Elementary, was selected to work with counselors and social workers district-wide to identify the most immediate needs for students and their families to support them through the hardship the pandemic brought upon them. They realized the biggest impact and loss was for continuation of programs as the school year was coming to a close and many families would lose critical support over the summer months.

They identified three areas to direct FEPS' funds: providing healthy meals especially for families of students participating in the free and reduced lunch program, supporting EPIC Camps for students at risk of falling behind over the summer, and mental health support to deal with the stressors of change.

Nourishing Students

The first program to start was the Summer Meal Distribution Program, under the leadership of Reta Johnson, Family Resources Specialist at the Educa-

tion Center. Reta and her team began planning how to use the COVID-19 Relief Fund to provide nutritious food and snacks for students and their families. Partnering with Sheridan Story, Reta purchased food that met the school nutrition standards and filled bags containing a week's worth of meals for each child in



FEPS' COVID-19 Relief Fund enabled Reta Johnson and her team to distribute over 1400 bags of food to 200 Eden Prairie students and their families during the summer

the family. They worked tirelessly to prepare overflowing grocery bags each week for pick up at The Education Center every Wednesday between the hours of Noon to 2:00 p.m. At times, there were cars lined up all around the parking lot, while Reta and her staff, armed in masks and gloves, passed each carefully filled bag into the hands of the parents and their children. Recognizing that many families also lacked transportation, Reta spent Thursday mornings throughout the summer driving around Eden Prairie and hand delivering bags to 45 children of homebound families. In total, in July and August, Reta and her team prepared and distributed 1,459 bags of nutritionally-balanced food and snacks to Eden Prairie School District students and their families. That means that over 200 Eden Prairie students per week received food bags!

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Beating the Summer Slide

Shortly after Meal Distribution got underway, another critical Summer Program kicked off — EPIC Camps. This popular annual program, overseen by Molly Patil, Director of Adult & Community Engagement Programs and run by Saul Thiesen, Youth Programs Supervisor, offers a bridge for learning to students who are at-risk of losing academic momentum over the summer months. According to Patil, “The idea behind the FEPS-funded project was to provide students who were already identified as needing extra academic assistance this summer (pre-distance learning) with an opportunity to attend an in-person EPIC camp. These enrichment camps complemented the distance learning already being provided to students, provided much needed structure, and offered an engaging and safe environment.”

The EPIC Camps generally cost \$99 per student, but because of the uptick in need for financial assistance of many of the EPIC Camp families, the FEPS COVID-19 Relief Fund allowed for scholarships to be offered to qualified students. One parent of a student stated, “My 8 year old daughter loved this camp! She was so happy to be back at school with teachers and other kids. I was impressed with the precautions put in place to protect against COVID.” Saul Thiesen reported that, of the 425 students that participated in a camp, 65 of those EPIC Camp students were able to utilize the FEPS grant to access a scholarship to attend the EPIC in-person camp.

Meeting Social and Emotional Needs

Throughout the coordination of Meal Distribution and EPIC Camp Programs, Washburn Center for Children was using FEPS COVID-19 Relief Fund dollars to offer Tele-Mental Health support to students, families,

and district staff who wanted to get mental health guidance to offset the difficulties of dealing with the coronavirus’ negative impact on their mental health. Monday through Friday, throughout the summer, professional mental health clinicians were available from Noon-1:00 p.m. to counsel individuals in need, either over the phone, at one of the schools, or at Washburn’s satellite office in Edina. In fact, Washburn quickly saw the benefit and the Tele-Mental Health format they implemented in the Eden Prairie Schools



FEPS provided scholarships to EPIC camps for qualifying students

is being used as a pilot project to potentially be rolled out in other local school districts. Marit Mechels with Washburn stated, “The Tele-Mental Health Program made possible through FEPS funding was amazing in that it not only provided continuing mental health services to students who would have received them during the school year, but it also provided an outlet for teachers and staff to learn more about how they could help support their students to better deal with the stressors of distance learning and the impact of the pandemic itself.”

Through the COVID-19 Relief Fund, FEPS provided needed funding to support our kids during this difficult time. Because of the generosity of our many corporate and individual donors, we had the funds available when they were needed most. In fact, when the COVID-19 Relief Funds was announced, YOU stepped up and added to your already generous contributions. Our fund has grown to well over \$26,000 now, and we are still identifying areas that need continued support even as the school year begins. Over 2,000 Eden Prairie students and families lives were touched by these three programs during this challenging Summer of 2020. It is one that none of us will soon forget, and we are deeply grateful to each and every one of YOU, our generous donors. Thank you!