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Young people growing up in poverty are a growing issue in our community. Poverty is defined as “the extent to which an individual does without resources (Payne). As local families face the current economic stresses in our community they are finding it harder to meet the most basic of needs for their children. Without these basic needs being met children find it hard to concentrate in classes, acquire the social skills needed to be successful, and help create habits for a healthy lifestyle. “Low achievement is closely correlated with lack of resources and numerous studies have documented the correlation between low socioeconomic status and low achievement” (Hodgkinson). Giving young people a “hand up” is a way to help break the cycle of poverty that is becoming more and more prevalent in our community. Boomerang Backpacks is a program that addresses the growing need in our community while assuring that no young person goes to bed hungry.

Tippecanoe Valley School Corporation has seen growth in the numbers of students lacking the necessary resources to be successful in school. Last year 39% of Akron Elementary Students were eligible for the free lunch program, while 11% were eligible for the reduced payment program (Indiana Department of Education). At Mentone Elementary School 36% were eligible for the free lunch program and 13% were eligible for the reduced payment program. This year those numbers jumped 8% meaning that 58% of the students at both schools were eligible for the free/reduced lunch program (Indiana Department of Education). This means that over 500 students in grades Kindergarten to 5th grades do not have the resources needed to be successful. To address

this need, our KLA group decided to pursue a Boomerang Backpack program for Tippecanoe Valley School Corporation.

The Boomerang Backpack program in its current form originated at East Noble High School (Boomerangbackpacks.org). The basic premise is to provide healthy meals and snacks for elementary students over the weekend. Currently schools can provide two meals a day funded by the federal government. Students eligible for the program are identified through application for the federal free and reduced lunch program; however, this program does not cover weekends and children are going hungry. The Boomerang Backpack program sends home healthy snacks and meals with students to help provide for them on the weekends.

Letters are sent home to parents, whose families qualify for the free/reduced lunch program, who let the school know of their interest in participating in the Boomerang Backpacks program. High School interns order food based on the response from the elementary schools. Interns then inventory food when it arrives and organize the meals for packing. Interns help work with mild/moderate special education students to pack the backpacks and deliver them to the elementary schools on Fridays. These backpacks are then delivered to the classrooms where they are distributed at the end of the day. On Mondays, elementary students return the backpacks to the elementary schools where they are picked up by the interns and inventoried. The process then starts over again.

There are three sets of benefits for our school children that are provided by the Boomerang Backpack program. The positive affects are evident in the elementary schools, as well as the students involved in the high school.

The first set of benefits concern the elementary students. Aside from the obvious nutritional needs that are being met for elementary students, children utilizing the program have fewer disciplinary issues and better attendance than before the program was used (Cockroft). The improved behavior is due to the fact that students can focus on studies and socialization rather than being concerned with basic physical needs not being met. The attendance for these elementary students improves on Fridays and Mondays as a way of having their needs addressed for the weekend.

The special education students who are involved in packing backpacks also receive benefits from the program. The mild/moderate students at the high school level are students who schools work with to provide work skills and a sense of community. By working with the backpack program, the soft skills of responsibility, work ethic, and working with others are addressed. Providing these students with structure in which to develop these skills are invaluable. Mild/moderate students have not been included in many programs or projects in many schools. Having them work directly with general education students providing a service for others enables them to develop relationships that they would not normally be exposed to, as well as develop a sense of community.

Finally, general education students involved in the program as interns develop skills that are not readily available in the common classroom. They also develop a sense of philanthropy. Interns are involved in almost every aspect of the Boomerang Backpack program. Interns work with media to help promote the program to the general public,

help write grants, order, inventory, and help pack the food products, and deliver the food to the elementary students on Fridays.

The Boomerang Backpack program also addresses two of the five pillars of drop-out prevention: A healthy start and a healthy future, and a chance to give back to peers and community (Milliken). Getting students the nourishment that they need in the elementary grades will only help them to have more success in school. Providing the opportunity for high school students to give back to the community allows them to feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that few programs in schools offer.

Funding is the most prohibitive factor for the Boomerang Backpack program. Food is provided through the Food Finders organization located in Lafayette, Indiana. The meals and snacks provided for one student for one-weekend costs \$5.00. Currently Tippecanoe Valley School Corporation has over 500 students at the elementary level who qualify for the free/reduced lunch program. To provide for all eligible students for the whole school year (36 weeks) it would cost over \$90,000. To sustain this type of program and help it spread to the other school systems is a huge financial commitment. Currently Tippecanoe Valley Schools are providing this program to Kindergarten and 1st graders who qualify for free lunches. 50 families have signed up for the program and have begun receiving their backpacks. Plans are in place to expand the program to 2nd grade students next year.

The KLA Boomerang Backpack Group is working through the Northern Indiana Community Foundation and has set up a 503c account for donations. Our KLA group

has collected over \$3000 in donations to help start our program. Local service organizations have been kind enough to allow us to present our information to them. The United Way of Fulton County is considering making the Boomerang Backpack Program a designated agency that is eligible to receive funds from payroll deduction. The Kosciusko County United Way is currently considering a proposal to help fund a pilot program. The KLA Boomerang Backpack Group is committed to looking at the effectiveness of the program through attendance and discipline data, as well as teacher survey. Only through continued effort can we make this program sustainable and workable for future children.

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