

Edmonton Catholic Schools serve up food hampers to needy student families

Danny has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

No one in his family has the disease, but they certainly feel its effects. The Edmonton father recently lost his job in the oil and gas sector because of a lack of work and plummeting prices. The job helped support his three children and his wife, who has an incurable brain disease and compromised immune system.

However, in the midst of these financial uncertainties and health risks, his family has received some much-needed support: a food hamper of fruits, vegetables and non-perishable items from Edmonton Catholic Schools.

"We're in tough times and I really appreciate the help. This pandemic has hit my family like a double-edged sword," said Danny, whose children are students at St. Joseph's high school.

Grandin Media has agreed to withhold his last name to protect the identity of his family.



Cheryl Shinkaruk

The family was one of 296 who received a hamper full of carrots, onions, flour and 15 other items from Edmonton Catholic Schools on April 7. ECSD will deliver these hampers to families every two weeks for the rest of the school year.

School attendance was suspended on March 14 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior

to that, the district ran a nutrition program that gave daily meals to more than 1,000 students at 19 schools. Only students who used this nutrition program are eligible for the hampers.

“For a family like ours to get these kinds of items, it definitely won’t go to waste,” Danny said. “Because of my wife’s health we really have to be ahead of the curve and quarantine ourselves. Right now we’re all healthy, so we’re just trying to keep everyone at home and survive through this.”

This initial hamper drive included \$29,000 worth of food, funded by the Alberta government and charities like Breakfast for Learning and the Breakfast Club of Canada. The hampers are expected to feed families for at least two weeks.

“It’s a new way to serve our families,” said Cheryl Shinkaruk, manager of programs and projects at Edmonton Catholic Schools. “Our students and our families are dealing with a lot of unknowns right now. Some may be social isolating and can’t get groceries, or they may have lost their job and times are tight.

“So we started putting this idea together right after spring break to show our support to those struggling.”

The financial struggles of families like Danny’s are an all-too-common story for Jennifer Manzulenko, a family liaison worker at St. Brendan Catholic School in east Edmonton.

Sixty per cent of businesses in the city have had to lay off staff, according to the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce. RBC projects a 10 per cent drop in oil and gas production in Alberta. And Premier Jason Kenney expects the province’s unemployment rate to rise to 25 per cent because of the COVID-19 pandemic – the highest in the province’s history.

“With the students and families I work with, finances are now the biggest stress,” said Manzulenko, who was one of seven Edmonton Catholic employees who helped prepare the hampers. “A lot of families are experiencing layoffs and are struggling to figure out this new normal.

“It’s a big learning curve for everyone. The students have to get used to the online classes and the parents have to fulfill their new roles with the children home all the time. It’s tough. There are a lot of struggles they’re facing.”

As families cope with these struggles, Manzulenko hopes this hamper drive will provide some much needed relief.

“It’s just a way to ease their stress and let them know we’re here for them,” she said. “Because their children go to our schools, it’s like they’re a part of our family as well. Our students are what drives us. So we’re trying to fill that loss and stay connected with them, even while we’re separated and

physically distancing.”

All hampers also came with an attached letter and prayer for God’s protection during the pandemic.

Shinkaruk said if the need to support families grows, they may seek future donations from Catholic groups like the Knights of Columbus and Catholic Women’s League.