My name is Shannon Sefcik and I am a teacher in Youngstown. My reason for starting a pantry within our school can be traced back to my early experiences as a teacher in Youngstown. When I first moved to the city, almost three years ago, I had a family ask where they could get taxable items like laundry soap and hygiene products. I didn’t understand why they were asking about taxable items and it was explained to me that food stamps can only be used on non-taxable items such as food products. Therefore, at times getting a hold of toiletries, hygiene products and laundry soap can be difficult.  I told them of the pantries that I knew of, but they only had food.

As a teacher in the Youngstown City Schools, I saw that students would come in on a Monday and eat so much breakfast and then also not wanting to go home on Friday because their source of food just wasn’t there.  I started up a backpack program, with the permission of our principal and just in my classroom had five families that would receive a backpack full of food for the weekend. These parents filled out forms for me to help me understand which foods were helpful and not helpful so I could better understand what needed to be put in the bags.  I then went to ten backpacks being sent home on the weekend; our social worker would pass out the backpacks to those that needed them. Every week I would go to Aldi’s and fill up a cart and bring it to school to pack the bags. This was done with the blessing of my husband and funded from my salary as a ten year teacher with children of my own at home.

My principal told me that someone in the community wanted to start up a backpack program in our school and I was so excited that someone shared the same passion about making sure our students had food.  I used their nonprofit status to get an account opened up at Second Harvest Food Bank, where we could purchase the same items at sometimes a much lower rate. However, when I got the ok to start placing orders, the money from the outside agency was NOT in our account, it was just the money that I had personally donated.  I was told that they were pulling their funds, but would still let me use their nonprofit status to keep the account open, again, on the salary of a ten year teacher and a husband that makes well below the poverty line on his pension.

Last year my neighbor that works at a school said they have extra milk that they were not using and it was getting thrown away.  She started taking home these crates of milk and I would pick them up early in the morning and bring them to school to put in our staff fridge.  At the end of the day, I would pack up the milk for the families to take home and sometimes this was the only milk they would have.

With the need for those taxable items I started researching on the internet how to make laundry soap.  A friend gave me a recipe she had used and I started making laundry soap in my home for not only use with my own family, but also to donate to the pantry.  To date, I’ve made about 170 gallons of laundry soap to be donated.

I’ve managed to keep the pantry going through donations from fellow staff members, family and friends. I have had to be very savvy with the shopping. I have received NO help, support or acknowledgement from the district or CEO even though he mentioned the district pantries as being a success under his administration.

I started to receive calls from other teachers and principals in the district wanting to start pantries of their own to help the families of Youngstown.  I was able to share some of the items I had large amounts of, such as toothbrushes and deodorants, with other pantries. In just this last year at one elementary school, we’ve had over 200 families that have received food and hygiene items that have been documented.

I have families text me asking for assistance because there is not enough money left at the end of the month and they need help filling in the gap.  Jobs get lost or hours get cut back and ends still need to be met.

In addition, when tragedy occurs there have been multiple times when my own family’s dinner, has disappeared from my refrigerator and been hung on the door of apartments because, sometimes being a mom is the hardest job and making sure your children are fed and not always as easy as some may believe. Our family’s also have personal tragedies such as the loss of a spouse or child and we want to always be there to help and support in any way we can.

For example, I had a first grade student this year that was in and out of the homeless shelter and he had been in four schools by January.  His test scores were close to gifted, but I worry as he gets older and the instability continues we will see his scores drop and he become a child that falls through the cracks. After he left our school because of another move I saw him at a free meal at a local church. His mom gets a ride to receive these free meals and at times this is the only way she can feed her family.

With the supports that were promised from the original HB70 I am sure we would be able to do so much more to help our struggling families in Youngstown by providing services within our schools. Teachers, who themselves our struggling at times on their salary to take care of their own families, should not have to fund and operate these pantries on their own.

With the support of wraparound services I would love to see an expansion of help offered to our families. We have many empty homes in our neighborhood. How wonderful would it be if we could turn one of these homes into a shelter for our families who find themselves in a homeless situation. NO child should have to worry about where they will be sleeping tonight. No child should have to sleep crowded in a car. Yet this is not unusual for our children. We cannot talk about academics and test scores if we don’t ensure that our children’s most basic needs are met. Please help us as we continue to do all WE can to take care of our kids so they CAN learn.