

Family Closet

*Olga Brener Elementary School
Shawano, Wisconsin*

A closet full of old coats became a center of giving last spring at Olga Brener Elementary School when staff renovated the school's former Lost and Found to create a donation area called the Family Closet.

Staff at Olga Brener Elementary School developed the idea for the closet last spring to help a growing segment of the school's population that was facing hard financial times. Located in a rural section of Wisconsin, the school serves a diverse population of 9,000 people. About one-third of the students at Olga Brener qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

The action team and staff recognized that some families need extra help. "If we provide them with those resources, they will be better able to focus on their child's education," a school staff member remarked.

The staff decided to dedicate a large closet near the school's front entrance to charitable giving. They divided the space from the lost and found area by installing rods and hanging up purple curtains.

School staff sent letters home to families about the closet. Teachers also discussed the Family Closet with their students in the classroom. Administrators wanted people to donate children's clothing—coats, snow pants, boots, and mittens—to combat Wisconsin's bitter winter weather. They also asked for games that families could play together, books, and some adult clothing for parents who did not have time to look for clothing elsewhere.

The first major donation drive took place on March 6th. Scores of parents donated bags of clothing to the closet. Staff washed clothing if necessary and separated it by size and gender. It wasn't long before families in need started to use this valuable resource. By the end of the year, the school estimated that about 20 parents and 50 students had benefited from the closet's contents.

Though it was hard to measure precisely how much impact the donations had on the

student body, the number of donated items was enough for parents and staff to declare the closet a success. "This is a great idea! I hope they continue it next year," one parent said.

The total cost to operate the closet was a nominal \$50. The school used grant money to cover the main expenses, mainly curtain rods to create the space and safety pins to attach pairs of gloves and socks.

Olga Brener Elementary will continue operating the closet. They hope to expand the space next year and enlist the help of local high school students to build more shelves. In the not-too-distant future, they plan to relocate the Family Closet inside a Family Resource Center at the school, part of a blueprint for a new building currently under review by town officials.

*Brittany Pensis
DPI VISTA
(715) 524-2131
pensisb@ssd.k12.wi.us*