

Food for thought at Greater Lowell Tech

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TYNGSBORO -- The new "Gryphon Market" at the Greater Lowell Technical High School is tucked away at the end of a nondescript hallway, but on Friday, dozens of people buzzed around to celebrate the food pantry's opening.

The project, a partnership between the school and the Merrimack Valley Food Bank, set up a pantry of various foodstuffs -- ranging from canned goods to peanut butter to juice boxes -- available free of cost to support students and families in need. After a soft opening this summer, the pantry began assisting the school and the surrounding community this year.

School officials and leaders of the Merrimack Valley Food Bank gathered Friday to mark the occasion with a formal ribbon-cutting ceremony.



Tracy Encarnacao, director of guidance at Greater Lowell Technical High School in Tyngsboro, cuts a ribbon to mark the opening of the school's new food pantry on Friday. Sun/Chris Lisinski

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Jill Davis, left, Greater Lowell Technical High School's assistant superintendent and principal, addresses students at a Friday ribbon-cutting ceremony for the school's new food pantry. Watch video at lowellsun.com. Sun photos /Chris Lisinski

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"These students will have meals to help them live, learn and work, and that is so important and meaningful to us," said Jill Davis, the school's assistant superintendent and principal.

Plans for the new food pantry -- named after the school's mascot, the gryphon -- came about over the past year. The Merrimack Valley Food Bank had already partnered with Greater Lowell Tech to provide food to summer programs, and after opening a similar pantry at Lowell High School, its leaders began considering expanding the effort to the technical school.

"It's easy for us, I say, to gather the donations, make those connections and help organizations and institutions enable people to access healthy foods," said Amy Pessia, executive director of the Merrimack Valley Food Bank, in remarks during the ribbon-cutting.

"You're the ones that are educating our youths. You're the ones that are training them for opportunities so that they can support themselves and their families. That's the only way you can end hunger: enable people to access education and jobs and make them sustainable and productive members of our community."

The Food Bank will provide a majority of items available at the Gryphon Market, roughly 60 percent to start and perhaps more at times, according to Pessia.

Students at the school will also run food drives during the year, often as a group or club activity, to help fill out the pantry's offerings.

Critically important

Davis described the pantry as a critically important offering in the school to help students and families live better lives. She did not cite a specific figure, but said hunger among the school's population is "widespread enough for us to want to start a pantry here."

Officials designed the market's logistics to be as accessible as possible while making those who use the pantry feel comfortable. Students who wish to acquire food can contact their guidance counselor confidentially, who will allow them into the room to get what they



Boxes of food sit in the new food pantry at Greater Lowell Technical High School on Friday.

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need. The school offers bags that look like backpacks as a nondescript way for students to transport food without drawing attention to themselves.

A key focus, Davis said, is that the pantry will be a "collaborative project" that keeps students involved.

"Our students are going to be maintaining the pantry, going to the (Merrimack Valley) Food Bank to pick up the food, taking the inventory," Davis said. "It's really students helping students."

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