

Lefler starts 'grab-and-go' breakfasts to help make first meal a habit



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Nancy Stuckey's Lefler Middle School sixth-graders started their Friday with a spelling test, writing words on lined paper.

* modernize

* positive

* storage

Most of the sheets of paper shared desk space with breakfast — Cheerios, yogurt, applesauce.

School administrators hope the new "grab-and-go" breakfasts offered to students as they walk through the school doors in the morning will create healthier habits and reduce interruptions caused by growling stomachs -- and lead to more correctly spelled words.

"We know research shows (kids who eat breakfast) have better attendance, do better in school. And kids who eat at school do even better," Lefler Principal Jessie Carlson said.

The idea of providing grab-and-go's at Lefler began with school nurse Sharon Baker, who was well aware how many students came to school hungry, because many of them ended up in her office.

Last year, she said she had about 2,000 visits from students who were hungry and knew she'd have fruit or granola bars provided through a grant program.

That's an average of 11 students a day who leave class because they are hungry -- about 14 percent of the students Baker sees each year.

Part of keeping kids healthy is making sure they eat.

"That's my job. I need to keep kids well and in their seats," Baker said. "Our role as nurses is not just to put Band-Aids on."

All LPS schools participate in the before-school breakfast program. Districtwide, about 6,500 students, or 17 percent, eat breakfast daily, said Nutrition Services Director Edith Zumwalt. About 80 percent of those are on the free- and reduced-price lunch program, the district's major measure of poverty.

At Lefler, 90 to 100 of 600 students ate breakfast each morning on the traditional plan, Carlson said. Of those, 12 percent were on the free- and reduced-price lunch program, although schoolwide 55 percent are on the federally funded program for low-income

students.

That's why Baker wanted to try something else: Give kids breakfast as they walk in the door and let them take it to class.

Three grants totaling about \$10,000 paid for start-up costs including metal coolers for yogurt and milk and trash cans that sit outside each room.

Lefler enlisted the help of volunteers from the YMCA, which operates the after-school program, nursing students from Bryan College of Health Sciences and a nutrition major at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to help spread the word to parents, make signs and educate students. The school's student council helps with distribution in the morning.

A couple of logistical challenges popped up. Lefler has stairs but no elevators, and insurance regulations prohibit carrying anything downstairs from the cafeteria. So, district nutrition services workers deliver the food to the school's three entrances.

Every morning, they set up tables, and 10 minutes before the bell rings, students can grab breakfast, put it in a plastic bag and go to class.

They get a protein, dairy, fruit and grain product.

On Friday, they took a cracker, a container of milk, a cereal and chose from yogurt or a cheese stick and from juice, applesauce or strawberries.

Once they get to class, students have 10 minutes after the bell rings to eat.

They pay the same price as any school breakfast: \$1.40, or 30 cents for students on the reduced-lunch program.

Zumwalt has told school officials they need to serve 200 breakfasts a day to make the program viable. They're not worried: In the initial two weeks of the program the number served increased from 89 to 186.

Sixth-grade language arts teacher Libby Oliver said in the two weeks since the pilot program began she's noticed fewer complaints.

She used to try to reduce trips to the nurse because students are hungry -- if they tell her that's why they want to go -- offering them whatever she had in the room, or suggesting they focus on something else.

Since the program started after spring break, that's been less of an issue.

Schoolwide, Baker said there's been a 7 percent reduction in the number of hunger-related visits to the nurse.

The concept of grab-and-go breakfasts isn't new. Norris Public Schools has a successful program, as does Grand Island Public Schools, Baker said.

Lincoln Sen. Bill Avery introduced a bill in the Legislature this year to create a grant fund for innovative school breakfast programs aimed at increasing participation. The bill remains in committee.

In Nebraska, 34 percent of public-school students participate in the school breakfast program. That's among the lowest rates in the country, according to a study by Food Research and Action Center, a national nonprofit that works to fight hunger.

Lefler is the only LPS school with a grab-and-go program, but Belmont Elementary has a modified version, Zumwalt said. Students eat breakfast in the cafeteria, but if they don't have time to finish the meal before class, they can take it with them. Elliott plans to do the same thing next year.

At Lefler, grab-and-go's replaced the traditional program, and about the only complaint Oliver has heard from students is that they no longer get "hot" breakfasts. Carlson said she's looking at a way to provide those.

Kids don't eat breakfast for a variety of reasons -- some don't have food at home, others don't take the time, some may eat an hour or two earlier, she said.

Baker and Carlson hope the grab-and-go's make eating breakfast a habit, part of Lefler's culture.

"What we want to do is catch them at middle school," Baker said. "Kids who don't eat (breakfast) in high school, that habit started in middle school."