

Teachers notice students respond well to Meriden school breakfast program

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MERIDEN — At 8:45 a.m., the halls of Hanover School are relatively silent. Classrooms are empty. Teachers are scattered throughout the building.

A bell sounds and within moments, dozens of first-, second- and third-graders begin to file in.

Before entering classrooms, most students stop at a cart to grab a bag containing whole-grain cereal and snack, juice, fruit and milk — a breakfast that has been offered to all elementary school students at no cost to the students since Oct. 1.

“It sustains them throughout the morning,” Hanover Principal Joanne Conte said. “Teachers have responded favorably to it and have shared that students are doing very good work. The breakfast is due in part to that fact.”

About 75 percent of Hanover students take a breakfast each morning. District-wide, about 69 percent of elementary school students take a breakfast.

The type of breakfast varies, but all have to include whole grains, fruit and low or non-fat milk. In addition to cereal, whole-grain muffins have been popular with students.

The initiative began at Casimir Pulaski School about four years ago, when the school added an expanded learning time program each morning.

“Students were coming into the building at 7:30 a.m.,” said Susan Maffe, food and nutrition services director. “Pulaski was the model.”

John Barry, Roger Sherman and Israel Putnam followed suit about two years ago. Earlier this month, Benjamin Franklin, Nathan Hale, Thomas Hooker and Hanover began to offer breakfast.

“You pile it in at one school, and if it’s successful, you consider doing it at other schools,” Superintendent Mark Benigni said.

A \$130,000 grant helped supply the funding needed for the program, covering infrastructure, marketing and communications.

“We needed to provide a profile for the district and show we were ready,” Maffe said.

Benigni said the program is offered at no expense to the district or local taxpayers, as the food service department is reimbursed by the federal government for meals.

“Talking to students, staff and administrators, it seems to be going well,” Benigni said. “We’re confident it will continue to be a successful program.”

Maffe said the program not only promotes eating breakfast, but also a healthy lifestyle.

“It’s a national trend, not just here in Meriden. About half kids that eat lunch, eat breakfast,” she said. “Unfortunately we have a lot of food-insecure households. We’ve been trying to do a better job of making our program focus more on wellness, not just food. We want to educate students and educate families just like they learn about any other subject in school.”

Currently, the district offers breakfasts at the middle and high schools for \$1.10 and \$1.25 each. Eventually, Maffe would like them to become free to students.

“It’s still up in the air,” Maffe said. “From the beginning, we’ve said that’s been our end goal. We’re not ready to take that leap of faith yet, but we’re hoping to.”

Response from students has been exceptional so far.

“It’s been amazing. The participation exceeded my expectations,” Maffe said. “We’re very happy to be able to bring this to Meriden. It’s definitely a step in the right direction. People embraced it. It’s been very successful.”

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