

# NEOSHO DAILY NEWS

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## District feasts on benefits of free breakfasts

Neosho students started receiving universal free breakfasts this year. The forces that made it possible for R-5 and 10 other school districts in the nation took a tour Thursday to see how the program is being implemented in several city schools.



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Carver Elementary School students enjoy a “grab and go” breakfast as they begin their school day Thursday.

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### Funding program

The story begins with hunger relief efforts begun by the Walmart Foundation, according to Angela Collier, senior manager for corporate affairs.

“We started out most notably with our relationship with Feeding America, and we really started to expand to (answer) what are we good at as an organization? How do we build the capacity and strengths of other organizations to do great work?”

The foundation made its first large-scale commitment at of \$2 billion in 2010, Collier said, to provide hunger relief and healthy options for those who may struggle with hunger. After meeting that commitment, a new commitment focused on providing sustainable food.

“The work that we do with our school breakfast programs, with our after-school and summer meal programs and with our other programs that focus on folks who may struggle with hunger, that’s all under our access pillar,” she explained. “So we started thinking, ‘What is something that we could do that would be really meaningful in communities?’ Breakfast is one of those issues.”

It's easier for schools to break even on food costs when they do programs like universal breakfast, she said, plus it reduces the stigma of receiving free food.

"It's not only the free and reduced kids that eat lunch, it's everybody. Every student in the district eats for free," she said.

While some parents of students who don't receive free or reduced lunches may not be able to afford to pay breakfast, universal breakfast catches all students in the safety net.

"It's really important for schools to be able to do this for the kids," Collier stressed. "It's the right thing to do. Like the superintendent (Dan Decker) said, 'It's just what we do.' It's an institutional kind of program, which makes it sustainable. Even after the funding is gone, even after the Walmart Foundation is no longer involved, when AASA is no longer involved, the program still is on and it's still helping kids for years to come. I think that's super."

### Reaching out

Sharon Adams-Taylor, associate executive director for children's initiatives and program development for the American Association of School Administrators (ASSA), is part of the "On the Road" tour to visit participating school districts, the largest of which she said is Chicago.

"We provide technical assistance to districts as they do this work," Adams-Taylor said. "We don't just throw money at an issue. We want to see how it's going, we want to give them the opportunity to ask us questions, we want an opportunity to question them so that we can both improve what's going on with children in this district, but also it helps us tell that story to other districts."

The team observed the alternative school breakfast program at the middle school, junior high and at Carver Elementary School and met with superintendents, principals, teachers, food service and cafeteria managers, parents, students, office staff and school board members. They also examined the healthiness of the food.

Adams-Taylor said they were interested in the number of students who are taking advantage of the program.

"What we want to see is an increase in that, and that's what we saw in the data," she said. "For example, at one school, they had only 22 percent of kids that ate breakfast in October of last year, and in October of this year they had 79 percent of kids eating breakfast. We want to know that more kids are eating breakfast and that the food is healthy and then if there are any snafus or snags that we can help with."

Adams-Taylor noticed an efficient system for serving breakfast to Neosho students.

"Even the youngest kids, the kindergarteners, they get to go to their rooms and drop their backpack and put their coats up because it's hard for them to carry a bag," she said. "They just worked out what those little snafus were. Somebody probably noticed that as the kindergarteners were coming through, they couldn't carry that and their coat and whatever else they had. As soon as breakfast is over and that bell rings, all that stuff disappears. It's just like clockwork."

Kelly Beckwith, AASA project director, agreed. The students were very behaved, according to Beckwith, who said some classrooms were quietly involved in their work while eating breakfast.

"It was really well run," she said.

Grants help provide the schools with start-up costs of acquiring needed infrastructure for the program, Beckwith said, "to be able to get breakfast to a lot more students in a variety of different serving lanes. Some districts provide bags that get delivered to the individual classrooms. Neosho

has kiosks where the students take the breakfast and then they go into their classrooms.” Once the grants help with start-up, more students begin eating breakfast, so the district receives a greater food reimbursement from state and federal sources, enabling the program to become sustainable.

### Benefiting students

Participation in eating breakfast has grown up to 50 percent district wide since its inception, Decker said, partly because Neosho students pick up a “grab and go” bag and take it to the classroom to eat. “Breakfast is more convenient to get because you get it and take it to your classroom,” he said.

“Students who are maybe late to class who normally would have had to either sit in the cafeteria and eat their breakfast and be late for class or just skip it so they can get to class on time, they can pick it up and get to class on time and they still get to have their breakfast.”

By participating in the grant, Decker said, data is being compiled to determine how beneficial it is to provide a free breakfast for all students. One of the unintended benefits is that students are making fewer visits to the nurses’ offices.

“We’re looking for a decrease in disciplining, because if kids aren’t hungry and fidgety, are they more focused on what’s going on in the classroom?” Decker asked and then answered. “To this point, we’ve seen a decrease in the discipline. One of the things that we’re looking at too is, ‘How is it going to manifest itself as far as student achievement and academic work?’”

Decker doesn’t expect to see real results from the latter until next spring as the school year plays out and more tests are taken.

“With attendance and tardies, we’ve seen tardies decrease significantly,” he said. “We’ve seen attendance increase, so the things that we are looking at outside of academic achievement that we can measure to this point are all measuring well.”

Decker believes the \$75,000 the district received from the grant was essential to allow acquisition of equipment to start the program.

“It would make it difficult to implement the program without it,” he said. “A school that was going to do it without help, it would probably be looking at between \$75,000 and \$100,000 worth of equipment to get started, not that you couldn’t offset that over time, but that would definitely have to be a commitment for the district to put that much money up front.”

After three rounds of funding, Adams-Taylor said, Neosho is among 22 school districts in the country in which the program has helped launch a universal breakfast program.

“Now they can’t imagine a day without it,” she said. “We had several tell us, ‘This is a part of our day.’”