



Breakfast on the house

Morning meal now faster and for more

OCALA -

For eight months, local elementary schools have offered free breakfast to all students regardless of income status.

Now eight of those schools are testing a new program aimed at feeding more children in a shorter period of time.

Considering that cafeteria officials at 28

elementary schools have only 20 minutes to feed breakfast to an estimated 20,000 students, the School District decided to launch Breakfast Breaks, a pilot prepackaged breakfast program.



Jermar Smiley, 6, pours milk onto his cereal in his classroom at College Park Elementary School in Ocala on Monday. Below, other College Park pupils line up for their free breakfasts.

PHOTOS BY ERICA BROUGH/STAR-BANNER

Children call the boxed meals "breakfast lunchables." Based on interviews with students, including College Park kindergartner Ricardo Gonzales, the program is a success.

"I like the animal crackers," said Ricardo, 6, as he stood by his desk, munched on some crackers and pointed to his new blue rubber bracelet. The bracelet came with Monday's meal. Ricardo recited the words imprinted on the rubber: "Got Breakfast?"

The program, offered at the eight schools on Monday and Friday only, began April 9 and will continue through the end of the school year.

Each prepackaged breakfast includes 100-percent juice, graham crackers and a reduced-sugar, whole-grain cereal. The school system also serves 8 ounces of whole milk to the children.

April Liles, the School District food service coordinator, said the trial program is a response to time concerns.

"We needed a way to serve more children, and to do it much faster," Liles said.

Liles said that in the 2004-05 school year, before free breakfast was made available to all students, College Park Elementary served a daily average of 325 meals to 44 percent of the school's students.

Last year, College Park was one of four schools selected for the initial free breakfast program. During that year, 375 meals, going to 48 percent of the students, were served on average each day.

Before the Breakfast Breaks program, College Park had increased its daily average participation to 450 meals, or 53 percent of the students.

Last Friday, during the second day of Breakfast Breaks, a school-record 500 prepackaged meals - going to 62 percent of students - were handed out in 15 minutes.

Schools participating in Breakfast Breaks fed 15 percent more students last Friday than they did on the same day the previous week.

"As you can see, the numbers are increasing," said Liles, adding that 15 percent more students, or roughly 3,000, are eating breakfast throughout Marion County when compared with the 2004-05 school year.

Since most elementary school cafeterias can't handle their entire student populations at one time, some schools send children to classrooms to eat. That means spills, and many teachers don't like to start the day cleaning up messes.

At first, College Park, teacher Lisa Winstanley really didn't like the idea of her students eating breakfast in the classroom. But now she figures there is no reason to cry over spilled milk.

Winstanley said the bottom line is that they now have a system where students make less of a mess and learn some responsibility at the same time. She said all milk with floating cereal gets dumped in the classroom toilet and all other liquid hits the sink. The trash is bagged and set outside the classroom every morning, which eliminates the possibility of smells later in the day.

Winstanley said she thought most teachers will like the Breakfast Breaks concept. "It is much less messy," she said.

Though the children and teachers seem to like the concept, Liles said students will get bored with the prepackaged breakfast.

College Park cafeteria manager Sheila Charles said the kids still need variety.

"We like the variety," said Charles, who won the school system's Heart of the Program award as the top cafeteria employee.

Students throughout College Park like writing to Charles, whom they affectionately call "Ms. Sheila."

"Thank you for our breakfast lunchables," Winstanley's class wrote in a letter. "We really liked them. Can we get some vanilla healthy cow milk?"

Winstanley said the jury is still out as to whether the free food is making a difference in learning. The idea is that eating a good breakfast means improved test scores, increased memory skills and helping reduce childhood obesity.

"I really don't know if it is the breakfast, but all of my children can read," she said of her kindergarten class.

The bottom line, said kindergartner John Quiles, 6, is that the new Breakfast Breaks meals are cool and good to eat.

"I like it all," he said.

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