

Mondays with less hunger

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Students in School District 2's vocational training program, from left, Philip Bailey, Will Madrial and Christina Frank, pack boxes of lunches for elementary schools at the SD2 warehouse.

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500 students at 10 elementary schools get extra food

Meals tucked discreetly into backpacks at the end of the school day are feeding almost 500 Billings children every weekend.

The BackPack Meals Program was launched at 10 School District 2 elementary schools earlier this year and sends four ready-to-eat meals home each Friday with students who do not have enough food at home.

"It's four meals for a weekend, so it's not meeting the total need," said Ginny Mermel, co-coordinator of the program. "The idea is to help families stretch their resources."

By last week, 472 children had signed up for the grant-funded program, Mermel said. Meanwhile, 33 percent of SD2 students eat free or reduced-price meals during the school day, which is an increase of 700 students over last year.

“Part of it is definitely the economic slowdown,” Mermel said. “But even in good economic times, we have a surprising number of kids who need free or reduced meals.”

The backpack meals contain food that does not need to be refrigerated or cooked. A meal might be a can of chili, shelf-stable milk, canned fruit, fruit or vegetable juice and granola.

There is little variety from week to week, but students don’t mind, said Kim Anthony, principal at Newman Elementary.

“The kids are so excited about it,” Anthony said. “That’s how critical the need is. Not a single person has said, ‘Oh, not this again.’ They wouldn’t be excited if they didn’t truly need it.”

Since the backpack program began, students who once were clearly starving on Monday mornings are visibly less hungry, Anthony said.

Many teachers have encountered students who dread weekends and school holidays because they know they will go hungry.

“When I was teaching, I saw kids who didn’t like weekends,” said Karen Dawson, co-coordinator of the program. “They didn’t have anything to eat.”

The BackPack Meals Program sends home meals for holidays as well as weekends. More than 11,000 meals will be distributed to cover the 12-day winter break in December and January.

Meals are packaged and shipped to Billings from the Montana Food Bank Network in Missoula. Students in SD2’s vocational training program repackage the meals for each elementary school.

The schools are Beartooth, Bench, Broadwater, Burlington, McKinley, Miles Avenue, Newman, Orchard, Ponderosa and Washington.

A federal grant and local donations, including \$8,000 from First Interstate Bank and its employees, pay for the food. Each meal costs \$3.69.

Items are chosen for their shelf-life and nutritional value.

“A lot of the things that are cheap enough (for families) to buy are candy or chips or soft drinks,” Mermel said. “These meals are selected by their dietary content.”

Families have been receptive to the program, which at most participating schools was offered through a note sent home with students.

“I do think it’s making a difference with some kids,” said Sue Runkle, SD2’s homeless education liaison. “They’re telling us that they have food.”

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