

Summer meals program serving youth

By David Lias

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Vermillion School District officials had a hunch earlier this year that a summer meals program administered by the Child and Adult Nutrition Services of the South Dakota Department of Education had potential to be successful here.

Turns out that hunch, and the decision by school officials to apply to have Jolley Elementary be a site for the summer program, appears to be spot on.

"The first week, we averaged 160 (participants per day), and the second week, we averaged 170," said Sheila Beerman, business manager for the Vermillion School District. The summer meal program just completed its fourth week of serving at Jolley School today.

The midday meals will continue to be served at the school, located at 224 S. University, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:15 p.m. each weekday through Aug. 3.

When putting together the necessary paperwork to apply for this program, school district officials were hoping to attract about 80 participants per day – the minimum number needed for the summer meal service to be efficient.

If current trends continue, it appears that at least double that number of young people will take part in the summer meals program.

"Initially, our break-even point was about 80 children per day," Beerman said. "So we are very happy with the way the program is going."

The Vermillion School

District qualified to host this program because during the last school year, over 50 percent of students at Austin Elementary School were eligible to receive free or reduced-price school lunches under state and federal guidelines.

"That was our first indicator – Austin School's population met the guidelines for free and reduced meals," Beerman said. "We work with the Child and Adult Nutrition Services out of Pierre, which is a program under the USDA."

The company that provides the district's food service, Lunchtime Solutions, Inc., helped school officials determine what site would work best for the program. Together, they decided that Jolley School would best serve the community.

The meals that served Monday through Friday are much like a regular school lunch, except that fewer food options are available to participants.

"The meals meet all of the federal guidelines for nutrients," Beerman said.

The lunch is provided to all individuals under the age of 18 at no cost. Their families' income, which is usually a factor to determine who qualifies for free and reduced meals during the school year, is not used to decide who qualifies for this U.S. Department of Agriculture program. Anyone 18 or younger may participate.

Youth do not need to pre-register to receive a meal, nor do they need to be accompanied by an adult. They simply need to show up at Jolley Elementary between 11:30 a.m. and 1:15 p.m. to be served.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), administers the Summer Food Service Program at the federal level. In South Dakota the Department of Education administers the program for local sponsors throughout the state.

Susan Hudson, the assistant food services director for Lunchtime Solutions, Inc., took a break on June 19 to talk to the Plain Talk. She had been helping to serve hot dogs, baked beans and fruit to kids.

The goal of Lunchtime Solutions, she said, is to provide "children-friendly" meals at Jolley Elementary during the summer.

"Today's meal is almost like a picnic," Hudson said, "and using the federally-approved menus, we've just geared it toward things that work well with the kids."

"This program is really wonderful because I get to see all of the kids that I've gotten to know throughout the year from Austin and Jolley and the middle school and St. Agnes," she said.

State and federal regulations will take effect in October aimed at making improvements to the nutrition quality of school meals. Lunchtime Solutions is already taking steps to meet those guidelines, and the children participating in the summer meals program are benefitting from it.

"We've been integrating those changes this past year when we could," Hudson said.

The Vermillion Weekend Backpack Program (VWBP), which operates all year long in the community, is currently

focused on Jolley Elementary. The school, in its role as summer meal site, also serves as the perfect distribution point for the backpack program while school isn't in session.

"This is the first time we've had an opportunity (during the summer) to have a captive audience where we can distribute food items to kids that come through this program," said John Lushbough, a leading advocate of the VWBP. "This is an ideal fit for us."

Lushbough tries to visit Jolley Elementary every day.

"Sometimes I have a variety of things to hand out that I won't distribute just on Friday," he said.

Hy-Vee, for example, provides bread to the backpack program, and Lushbough distributes that to youth as it becomes available.

"We also got bread from Jimmie John's last week, and I guess that's going to be an ongoing thing that's going to happen all summer, too," he said.

The VWBP is a non-profit organization founded in January of 2009 and is sponsored by the non-profit Vermillion Welcome Table.

Its mission while school is in session is to provide students in the Vermillion area who do not have enough to eat over the weekend an opportunity to receive snacks and easy-to-prepare meals for a nutritious and fulfilling diet while away from school.

That mission is continuing each Friday this summer at Jolley.

"On Fridays, we do our distribution here," Lushbough said. "It's a program designed to help families and children that

may not have enough food over the weekend. Normally, this program has been a school-year thing. We know at that time there are a lot of children who are eating free or reduced school lunches during the week, but not might have enough food to make it through the weekend."

"Our whole purpose is to supplement," he said. "We're not feeding kids over the weekend – we're not doing that much – but we do try to supplement the amount of food available in their homes during the weekends."

The backpack program was modeled after the Feeding America Backpack Program and the Sioux Falls Backpack Program, which are designed to meet the needs of hungry children at times when other resources are not available.

Each Friday, children are given the opportunity to take home a bag containing a dozen or so different items to supplement their diets over the weekend.

"We always have two or three pieces of fresh fruit, fruit juice, a couple of what we call 'entrée' items, such as apple sauce, or a choice of canned soup," Lushbough said. "We have a couple of different things like that."

"We just encourage kids under the age of 18 to join us for lunch," Beerman said. "We are encouraged by the numbers we are seeing, and we are encouraged by how smoothly this is being operated. The school board was also excited when they heard the numbers, and how successful the program had been in just the first two weeks."

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