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Backpack Program sends kids home with food

By ERINANDERSEN

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It was 10 a.m. when the 4-year-old arrived for preschool.

Too late for breakfast. One hour too early for lunch.

The child was hungry and crying, recalled Diana Pasco, coordinator at Clinton Elementary School.

School staff gave her a bowl of cereal and milk to hold her over.

But Pasco worried. Was this a one-time thing, or was the family unable to afford food?

She checked with the 4-year-old's third-grade sister.

Oh no, the child explained. They had a big meal of fried chicken and macaroni and cheese the night before. It was really tasty.

Ultimately, the third-grader confessed. All they had was cereal. Food was in short supply. The cupboard and refrigerator were close to bare.

At Clinton, 92 percent of students eat free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches on school days.

But what children eat on weekends - or whether they eat - are questions school officials can't answer.

At least until now.

Beginning Friday, 50 Clinton students will receive backpacks of food to take home for the weekend. Filled with nutritious, easy-to-prepare or pre-prepared foods, the hope is it will help tide families over the weekend.

The Backpack Program is a joint project of Clinton School and the Lincoln Food Bank.

Every Friday, students receive a backpack stuffed not with papers, but with cereal, fruit, vegetables, peanut butter, jelly, macaroni and cheese, juice and Spaghetti-Os.

Children take the packs home for the weekend and return it on Monday, when it will be refilled and ready to be taken home again the following Friday.

The Backpack Program was inspired by a similar program in St. Joseph, Mo. The Abel Foundation and Duncan Aviation helped provide funding to run the pilot program throughout the entire school year - 34 weeks, with the exception of Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Last spring, Clinton families were invited to sign up for the program, Pasco said. Participants were selected based on need and the size of family. Fifty families will participate in the pilot program, and another seven are on a waiting list.

So as not to call attention to recipients, the backpacks are generic looking, said Nancy Evans of the food bank.

Students from North Star High School's functional skills program for profound to severely disabled children come to the food bank every week to stuff plastic sacks

with a weekend's supply of food for the students.

North Star teachers Cathy Clare and Wayne Schaber accompany the students on the venture and supervise the sack stuffing.

They say a project such as this teaches student numerous skills, from math and reading to problem solving, to job readiness, to social interaction to learning to volunteer.

Although it's in its pilot year, Pasco and Evans say they hope to expand the program.

Of the 32,603 students in Lincoln Public Schools last year, nearly 28 percent received free and reduced-price meals, said Edith Zumwalt, LPS food service director.

Applications are still being collected for this year's program, but Zumwalt anticipates the numbers will go up -meaning more children than ever will rely on the federal government to make sure their stomachs are full for school.

The Backpack Program won't completely eliminate the financial problems facing Lincoln's families, Pasco said .

"But we hope even this little bit will help," Pasco said.

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