



THE NEWS Guard

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Back to basics

School food program helps ensure hungry kids get the food they need to learn and grow

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For school teachers who know the signs, it's not hard to pick out a hungry kid. They're the ones who load up their lunch trays with extra food and eat so fast it's gone in a flash.

"They have that kind of desperate look about them that they haven't really had anything fulfilling since probably the day before here at school," says Nicole Bernardi, a first- and second-grade teacher at Oceanlake Elementary School.

It's even worse when there's a weekend and kids don't get fulfilling food for over 48 hours, she says.

Bernardi has eight kids in her classroom who used to have that look but don't any longer. Every Friday they get a backpack that is full of food to take home for the weekend.

Just a year ago there would have been no such help. But thanks to Karen Dummer, family advocate, and Pat Robertson, health assistant, at Oceanlake, almost 100 kids in Lincoln City now get food over the weekend. The two started the program, which gets food donated, packed into backpacks by volunteers, and handed out confidentially to kids at Oceanlake, and Taft Elementary and Taft High 7-12.

When they heard about the concept from an article in a magazine, Dummer and Robertson knew right away there were at least a dozen kids who went hungry over the weekends at Oceanlake alone. Sometimes, they would buy food for the kids at their own expense.

"If I needed to, I'd send them home with a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter or jelly," Dummer says. "Some of the kids, I'd actually make sandwiches for them and send them home on the weekend."

About 50 percent of the 410 kids at Oceanlake usually qualify for free or reduced lunches. This year, the figure is 71 percent. At Taft Elementary, the number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunches is a staggering 94 percent.

One man, who asked to remain anonymous, has three kids who get backpacks. They are 9, 10 and 13 years old and all attend Oceanlake. He also has a 2-year-old at home.

Until October, he was employed full time and pulling down about \$800 a week. But since he lost his job, his family's income has been cut in half. He gets \$465 a week in unemployment and \$20 a month in foodstamps.

"My kids have not gone a day without a meal," he says, "they always get a meal, but it's not always three meals a day, because I don't have the food resources for that."

His eyes tear up, and he swiftly moves on to talk about his gratitude.

When Dummer and Robertson contacted him about the backpack program, he was relieved to have help.

"They said: 'We know what's going on, and you guys definitely qualify,'" he says. "It's good nutritious food. They do smart things."

He likes the fact that the food in the backpacks is healthy, including loaves of bread, raisins, cans of tuna and boxes of tuna helper.

The rising cost of living has hit the family hard. The \$20 a month he gets in food stamps doesn't come close to paying the family's food bills, even when he looks for the best bargains.

"I hate to say it out loud but I buy the oldest meat, the stuff that has to be cooked right away. That's the stuff I can afford," he says.

He's well aware of all the people who volunteer to help with the backpack program whom he doesn't even see.

"It's just such a blessing," he says.

Lincoln City churches, businesses and many individuals have pitched in to support the program. Each backpack costs about \$14 a week to fill. The Taft Evangelical Church houses the food, and volunteers go there every Wednesday to fill the backpacks.

Some people have questioned whether the program allows parents to abdicate their responsibilities to provide for their own kids and maybe teaches children to expect handouts.

Dummer is emphatic about not forcing children to suffer because of their parents.

"I am not going to allow a child to go hungry because their parents are irresponsible," she says.

If she suspects that there is money in a family and it is being spent on fancy clothes or other luxury items for the parents, she has no qualms about calling Child Protective Services or contacting local police and asking for a welfare check.

But most families are simply hardworking people straining to make ends meet, particularly in the off-season, when Lincoln City businesses cut back.

Donna Sanders, the Taft Elementary secretary who runs the program at that school, says she has seen families take the backpacks when they need them and then notify her when they no longer do.

"When their situation got better, they said: 'Give it to someone else,'" she says.

There are 14 kids in the program at Taft now, but Sanders thinks there could be many more.

"I don't have enough volunteers," she says. "What I need is people on Wednesdays to help load the backpacks. Right now, there are three of us who do it."

She'd like to have five people. With such a high percentage of kids under the poverty level, she's sure there are more who could use the food.

Every dollar donated to the program goes to buy food, Dummer and Robertson say.

For now, the kids who get backpacks love them. They get excited every Friday and never forget to pick them up. Robertson says even if kids know they won't be in school Friday to pick up their backpacks, they'll remind Robertson or Dummer in advance so they can get them Thursday. Even first-graders are so aware of hunger, they always remember without prompting to make sure they get their packs for the weekend.

It makes a big difference, everyone involved says.

"I see kids, and they have food over the weekend. It's not like they have this starved glazed look," Bernardi says.

"They're alert. They're ready, they're there. There's not this desperate need for food."

Managing Editor Allyson Longueira contributed to this report.

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