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Local school breakfast programs catch on

BY MATT MANNING
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FREMONT -- Second-grader Anthony Mata and his sister Cierra, a first-grader, were eating breakfast in the cafeteria at Lutz Elementary School on Wednesday when they heard the 9 a.m. bell ring to start the day.

The school supplied the breakfast which consisted of fruit, yogurt, a graham cracker and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and kids usually get one hot item per day with their meal.

The brother and sister said they both eat their breakfast every morning at the school.

"They got great fruit," Anthony said.

Lutz is just one of the nine schools in the district that offers the breakfast program.

Fremont City Schools Food Service Supervisor Michaeleen Rogers said 600 of the district's 4,100 children are eating breakfast at school daily -- an increase of 70 students a day from a year ago.

"We try to give the kids what they like," Rogers said. "I wish more kids were taking advantage of this."

School districts around the U.S. have been trying new ways to get more students to use the federally reimbursed school breakfast program, especially as more children become eligible for free and reduced-price meals amid the U.S. recession.

States like Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida are handing out bagged meals in or out of classrooms offering breakfast to all students, not just those from low-income families.

Nationally, about 8.5 million children participated in the school breakfast program on an average day during the 2007-08 school year, according to the nonprofit Food Research and Action Center in Washington, D.C.

School nutrition research shows breakfast is vital to children's health and academic success, and greater participation in the free and reduced-price programs also can help schools financially by increasing reimbursements.

Jackie Hess, the director of food services for Bellevue City Schools, said she can see a difference in students' behavior.

"Kids aren't hungry anymore," Hess said. "I wasn't quite sure in the beginning how it was going to go. ... The kids really seem to like it."

She said in the first year of the program, which is only available to the five elementary schools in the district, 32 to 38 percent of the students participated in the program daily.

In Gibsonburg, Hilfiker Elementary serves breakfast to about 75 to 80 students a day out of the school's total 472 students.

"I think they make less trips to the nurse's station," said Director of Food Service for Gibsonburg Exempted Village Schools Jeanie Brink.

Next year, Hess said the district is expanding the program to Bellevue Junior High School and to Bellevue Senior High School.

However, Clyde-Green Springs Exempted Village District has already established a district-wide breakfast. Vicky Nieset, the director of food service, said they serve about 250 students daily in their five schools.

"I think it's a great program," Nieset said. "Breakfast is really important."