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Jeffco Schools pivot — expand Grab and Go food program

Community group thinks it's a good first step but wonders if it's enough during pandemic

BY BOB WOOLEY
BWOOLEY@COLORADOCOMMUNITYMEDIA.COM

Amid criticism of its Grab and Go meals program, and in a move to be more nimble in providing food aid to students during the return to at-home learning, Jeffco schools rolled out a bus delivery pilot program Dec. 21.

This new addition to the distribution model provides another way for families and students to pick up Grab and Go breakfast and lunch packages.

According to Jeffco Schools' Executive Director, Food and Nutrition Services, Beth Wallace, the bus delivery program launched with three routes, with each bus making three to six stops per route. Each student received 14 meals (seven breakfasts, seven lunches). The first route covered the Arvada area, making six stops and serving 68 students. A second route delivered in the Bear Creek area, making three stops and serving 32 students, and the third route covered the Eiber Elementary area, making five stops, serving 65 students. The program will expand to a total of seven bus delivery routes on Jan. 7, 2021.

Wallace said partnering with the district's transportation department and Title I group, allowed her department to pin point the best areas for the routes.

As of now, the District will continue bus meal service on scheduled days of service while in the remote learning model, which is schedule to end on January 19, 2021 for elementary students. The last day of bus distributed food (at this point) is January 14, 2021.

The move by Jeffco is the latest in a string of changes made to try to align the Grab and Go program more closely with the needs of district families. Other recent changes to the program include increasing the number of

MORE INFORMATION

Details about the pilot delivery program and all other Jeffco Schools Grab and Go information can be found by visiting www.jeffcopublicschools.org

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Jeffco Public Schools food service employees Brittany Knight, Ronda Swenson and Asta Lock staff the Wilmot Elementary holiday food pick-up station in Evergreen. On Dec. 21 stations like this one provided multiple meals for Jeffco Public Schools students across the district.

PHOTO BY GLENN WALLACE

FOOD

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pickup sites to 19, from 15, as well as pushing back and lengthening pickup hours to avoid interfering with online learning times.

Push for improvements

Recently, Jeffco's program has been under fire from leaders in the faith, nonprofit, service and education communities. A virtual forum was held Dec. 9, 2020, hosted by the group, Coloradans for the Common Good (formerly Colorado IAF). Pastor Reagan Humber, House for All Sinners and Saints, led the meeting. Taking the District to task for what he considered inadequate access to the program for families in need, Humber called on Interim Superintendent Kristopher Schuh to meet with representatives from the group to discuss changes. In a separate interview, he said the CCG coalition's main concern was what they perceived to be deficiencies in Jeffco's program in comparison to similar programs.

"Denver and Cherry Creek are open every day for kids to be able to get hot lunch," Humber said.

While he agrees the recent expansion of hours and locations is a step in the right direction, his group is still concerned about distances between pickup points creating long walks for kids who have no other transportation options to pick up meals.

Regarding the newly launched bus delivery routes, Humber said his group is thrilled the District has begun this pilot program, and

delighted to know their efforts in highlighting the issue paid off.

He also sees issues with meals the district provides that require reheating, pointing out the need for ready to eat options for families who are homeless or living in cars.

In Denver, there are 35 school sites for daily pickup between 11 am and 1:30 pm, and two schools with pickup only on Wednesdays. In addition, DPS delivers food to 16 sites, mostly at apartment complexes Monday through Friday.

Wallace, however, thinks a direct comparison to the DPS program doesn't take into account that Denver Public Schools has roughly double the amount of free/reduced lunch eligible students that Jeffco has.

Demand has been tricky to predict, she said, noting that in pickup sites at some Title 1 schools, there has been considerably less participation than expected.

"On the other hand," she said, "at Columbine, it's going gangbusters."

Wallace said the District has been flexible in trying to determine the amount of need and is willing to change and adapt as they see what's working and what isn't. She said no system is perfect, but the criticism the District has faced isn't rooted in data.

"We've been serving school lunches for a long time and we're learning every single day," she said. "We're always open to any pointed, specific need that someone brings to our attention."

As for the meeting between Schuh and the CCG folks, Humber said the Interim Superintendent has tentatively agreed, but no date has been set.