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Most important meal of the day

WNY students celebrate Breakfast Week with state and federal officials

by Lana Rose Diaz

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When students at West New York's Public School No. 2 were asked if school breakfast is a good idea, the packed cafeteria of kids responded with a resounding "Yes!" and one particularly jubilant student added, "It's a very good idea!"

The students kicked off their school day on Friday, March 11 with some very special guests for a breakfast of whole grain bagels, cereal, fresh fruit, and juice.



New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas H. Fisher and United States Department of Agriculture Administrator Patricia Dombroski visited Public School No. 2 as part of the celebration for National School Breakfast Week, which took place

March 7 to 11.

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The message Fisher and Dombroski were spreading was the importance of starting the day by eating a healthy breakfast so that students can learn at optimum levels – a message many of the students already agreed with wholeheartedly.

Nicole Marmejeos, who eats breakfast at the school every day, said it's a great way to prepare for the school day ahead.

“It makes you feel healthy and you have energy,” said Marmelejos.

Fellow student Naomi Ramos agreed and added that the breakfast her and her friends get at the school is usually better than the one she gets at home.

Good for academics and behavior, too

West New York Superintendent of Schools John Fauta said that administrators have found that, in addition to improved academic performance, students who eat a good breakfast also behave better in school.

“In an urban school setting, increased participation in a breakfast program is a necessity, as this program provides nutritious meals to children who might otherwise not eat breakfast,” said Fauta.

According to the Department of Agriculture, approximately 100 of the 650 students at School No. 2 eat breakfast in the cafeteria before school begins each day. Throughout the district, about 900 of the 4,500 students participate daily.

“We are working with USDA to increase the number of students who have breakfast available in school,” said Fisher. “And also make it easier for students to participate in the program.”

According to Dombroski, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act will allow more children to participate in school feeding programs and greatly improve the quality of meals served in schools.

Signed into law in December 2010, the act focuses on improving child nutrition and authorizes USDA child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program, which serves nearly 32 million children each day at reduced rates.

Fresh squeezed fun and learning

A highlight of the breakfast celebration last week was the unveiling of a brand new juice machine, which squeezes fresh orange juice for the kids right before their eyes.

Kids lined up eagerly for a taste and even faculty members were excited for the new addition to the cafeteria.

Sal Valenza, regional director for Nu-Way Concessionaires and food service director of West New York School District, helped bring the machine to the school.

Valenza said he believes it is the first of its kind in any of the local area school cafeterias and possibly the only one in cafeterias nationwide.

And it’s just part of an overhaul of healthy initiatives that have included big changes to the cafeteria, like the juice machine, and small ones like convincing

the baker who provides the bagels for the school to make them whole grain.

But what makes such initiatives special in West New York is the integration throughout the school.

“West New York School District wouldn’t be what it [is] if everyone didn’t work together,” said Valenza.

So when the orange juice machine was brought into the cafeteria, kids began learning where oranges come from and about the juicing process.

In addition, learning will be brought out of the classroom this spring when the students visit Fernbrook Farms in South Jersey to learn about Garden State agriculture. All West New York public schools recently received a Target Field Trip Grant for the trip.

“They see where food comes from,” said Valenza. “It affects them for life.”

‘Two Can’ do attitude

The West New York School District was chosen as the place to celebrate the breakfast initiative with state and federal officials because of the various health initiatives the district has been successful at implementing, according to Janet Hawk of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.

And School No. 2 was chosen in particular for its “can do” attitude, said Sal Valenza.

The cafeteria there is aptly named the “Two Can” (a play on the bird, “toucan”) Cafe.

The school, which received Silver Level recognition from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, is one of three schools in the district participating in the federally-funded Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, administered by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.

The program provides fresh produce to students free of charge, to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption. Almost all of the produce for the program is purchased from New Jersey farmers.

The school also is in the process of installing two school gardens to teach students about healthier lifestyles.

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