

Food sacks attack weekend hunger for kids at two Denver schools

By Yesenia Robles *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*
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On Friday, more than 600 students at two elementary schools in Denver got a sack of food to take home to their families, ensuring they won't go hungry over the weekend.

"We know there are a large number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch in Denver, but when we actually learned what the income had to be to qualify, we were stunned," said Mike Wray, assistant professor at Metropolitan State College of Denver. "It's dramatically low."

The college partnered with the Arvada Sunrise Rotary Club to fund and coordinate the sack lunch program, which they're calling Food for Thought, at Columbian and Fairview elementary schools.

"Often the last meal some of these children have gotten is Friday at lunch, but how can they possibly be prepared to learn like that?" Wray said.

The group has so far raised more than \$40,000, mostly from the Rotary Club's foundation.

Fairview principal Norma Giron said she hopes to fill a need she already sees when some of her students look for leftover cafeteria food to take home.

"We hear about the problems, mostly from our kids saying they're hungry, asking if they can take home extras from lunch, or from snacks we hand out in the afternoon," Giron said. "Hopefully we can help eliminate that fear that they won't have food at home."

Giron's school had been approached twice before by other organizations, but each were only able to send food home once.

"I'm most excited this will be consistent," Giron said. "They need something consistent they can count on."

Currently, one other similar program, started two years ago, operates in 12 other Denver Public Schools.

It started when Patricia Vaughan, a counselor at Lowry Elementary, noticed dramatic changes in one of the school's most popular kids, a tetherball player.

"Back a few years ago you were a rock star if you were a good tetherball player. That was this kid," Vaughan said.

"He won every game. Then we saw he started losing a lot of games."

Vaughan noticed the fourth- grader started carrying an oversized backpack after school every day, so she asked him what was in it.

"He opens it up and it's full of food from the cafeteria," Vaughan said. "He was so excited; he said he traded with everyone at his table. He would get their food and let them win at tetherball. I was so stunned."

Vaughan, who coordinates the DPS food program on a volunteer basis, told the story to Whole Foods and landed a \$60,000 grant to kick-start the program.

Even though the program helps kids at the 12 schools Vaughan coordinates, there is still need at each of them.

"Our goal is to grow the volunteer base at each school to create the sustainability and autonomy of the program at each site," Vaughan said. "My hope is we can keep that strength going. It seems to be happening now that people are learning about it."

That's also the goal of the Rotary Club and Metro State program.

"We are trying to create a model that could be replicated by anyone who has a heart to do it," said John Thielen, another Rotary board member coordinating the program.

Later on, Wray plans to include volunteers from the college, providing the opportunity as service learning projects relating to studies for students in the nutrition, human services, hospitality or education departments.

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