

Va. First Lady Recognizes HCPS Breakfast Program

By ELLIE POTTER Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — The first lady of Virginia recognized Harrisonburg City Public Schools for its school breakfast program Thursday.

Through a broadcast on Facebook, Pamela Northam announced the divisions that had the greatest increase in morning meals served from October to December 2017 compared to the same time frame in 2015, something the state evaluated as part of the Virginia Breakfast Challenge.

HCPS won for its category with about a 56 percent increase. From October to December 2015, nearly 138,000 breakfasts were served; two years later, that number jumped to more than 214,000, said Andrea Early, the division's executive director of school nutrition.

The divisions were compared to others with similar enrollment. Augusta County Public Schools also won its division.

About 71 percent of HCPS' students qualify for free and reduced-priced lunches, Early said, which suggests that many children rely on school meals to meet their nutritional needs.

"We want to make our meals across the board more accessible to all families," she said.

Northam worked with No Kid Hungry Virginia, a campaign working to improve access to nutritious meals, on the Virginia Breakfast Challenge, according to a news release from the campaign. More than 1,500 schools in 127 divisions across the commonwealth participated in the challenge, according to the release.

About 1 in 7 Virginia children live with families that struggle with hunger, she said.

"Ending childhood hunger in Virginia isn't just the right thing to do," Northam said in the broadcast, "it's the smart thing to do."

HCPS has expanded its breakfast program over the last several years.

In 2015, the division launched a pilot program at Keister Elementary, serving breakfast in the classroom rather than having hungry children go to the cafeteria, Early said.

There was a stigma for some of the kids who went to the cafeteria alone for their meals, she said, while others need breakfast but may miss the serving time.

Last year, HCPS rolled out the program to all elementary schools. The program's cost is covered by federal reimbursements, Early said.

Each morning, students or teachers wheel a packed cooler to their classrooms for children to eat, free of charge.

On Thursday morning, Keister Elementary School served grapes, fruit juice, muffins and string cheese for breakfast.

Fifth-grader Manuel Flores, 11, son of Cristina and Rigoberto Flores, said he likes eating in the classroom with his friends rather than by himself in the cafeteria. Manuel agrees that he can focus on lessons better after eating, adding that yogurt is his favorite school breakfast option.

"Then, you have a better mindset on how your day's going to be," he said.

His teacher, Mary Dean, believes her students focus better after they eat together.

"When their needs are met," Dean said, "they feel a lot safer in our classroom, and they're a lot more ready for the day."

In HCPS' middle schools and Harrisonburg High School, students go to the cafeteria for breakfast. Later in the morning, the division offers a second-chance breakfast, Early said, which is served in a grab-and-go fashion for children to take to class.

That program began in HHS during the 2007-08 school year, she said, and was introduced in the middle schools this academic year.

Students who qualify for free lunches also get a free breakfast in the middle and high schools, Early said. Reduced-priced breakfasts cost 30 cents for those who qualify, and a full-priced breakfast is \$1.

If students eat at the first and second-chance breakfast, the second meal is not subsidized and costs \$1.50.

Early said she was grateful for the teachers, staff and administration for helping to expand the breakfast programs.

"It definitely is easier to set food out on a serving line one time first thing in the morning and then be done with breakfast for the day," she said. "But we know we don't feed enough kids that way. We do these extra steps to make sure that our kids get good nutrition."

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