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Wednesday, July 2, 2008

Kids eat free — for the summer, anyway

New program feeds hungry students in the Kennedy cluster, whether they're in summer school or not

by Marcus Moore | Staff Writer

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Apparently, there is free lunch in Montgomery County.

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And on today's menu: turkey bologna and cheese on a hamburger roll, raisins, baby carrots, apple juice and milk. Tomorrow: a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a plum and fruit punch.

On Monday, the county and the school system unveiled a free summer open lunch program at Georgian Forest Elementary School in Silver Spring, the first such site in the county.

The school system, with money from the federal Summer Food Service Program, provides free lunches at 79 sites throughout the county, but only to students who are enrolled in summer programs.

The idea for the new program is to feed children who are eligible for free and reduced-priced meals, an indicator of poverty. Sixty-nine percent of Georgian Forest's students have been on a reduced-price meal plan at some point during the 2006-2007 school year, according to school system data.

"It gets them out of the house, and I don't have to make lunch," said Donna Rouse, a mother of four, whose son, Alijah, is in the Georgian Forest program. "It gives them something to do beside vegging out all day."

There are roughly 3,500 students in the Kennedy cluster, and 50 percent – or 1,750 students – are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, said County Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring, who has pushed for the John F. Kennedy Cluster Project since her 2004-2006 tenure on the school board. The project is supposed to reduce barriers that hinder academic success.

At Arcola Elementary School, for example, some 77 percent of its students have been on a reduced-price meal plan, which is the highest FARMS rate in the Kennedy cluster.

"They don't stop getting hungry after June," said Ervin, chairwoman of the County Council's Education Committee.

The open lunch program is especially important to families, given the rising cost of groceries. And financial burdens increase on parents during the summer because their children are home more often, Ervin said.

"What we're doing is addressing the child as a whole organism," she said. "We believe this is the responsibility of good government to provide services."

The food for the new program is being paid for by the federal program, with \$12,000 in transportation costs being split evenly by the county and the school system.

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Nationally, about 16 million children are on free or reduced-priced meal plans and only 20 percent – or 3.2 million children – are fed during the summer, said Herman Schwartz, a law professor at The American

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University's Washington College of Law.

"These kids probably go hungry during the summer," said Schwartz, who helped Montgomery launch the open lunch site on Monday. "This is the beginning of the continuing effort that will go on for some years until we get up to a respectable number."

There's also what Schwartz called the "September effect": Children who don't eat regularly and aren't in summer programs regress when they go back to school.

"Is it really going to impact the kids' learning?" Ricky Ford, coordinator of the John F. Kennedy Cluster for the Montgomery County Council of PTAs, asked of the open lunch program. "I know we want to feed kids, but I'm not sure what impact that's going to have on school and learning. I do think it's a wonderful thing, depending on how things really work out."

For the past five years, the Washington school system has provided free breakfasts and lunches to children during the summer. Last summer, more than 1.5 million free meals were served to roughly 30,000 children at 404 sites, according to the D.C. school system.

"They're getting a very nutritious lunch. It was free. It was open to everybody. We decided, 'Why not?'" said Kelley Eiskant of Silver Spring, who has two children taking advantage of Montgomery's program. "I'm certain that if we were not at home, they'll be eating a lot of junk food."

Who's eligible?

Students – 18 and younger – who attend John F. Kennedy High School, Argyle Middle School, Georgian Forest, Strathmore and Bel Pre elementary schools in Silver Spring. The program runs five days a week, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., until Aug. 15.

How to get there

A "lunch circulator" bus picks up children at eight neighborhood sites, beginning at 10:30 a.m., and runs every 30 minutes until 1 p.m. See schedule at www.gazette.net/links. Ride On and Metro buses will give free tokens to students who take the bus to Georgian Forest. Tokens can be picked up at any of the five schools. Call 301-840-8170.

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