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Worth sampling?

District 203 singles out schools for possible hot-lunch program

By **Tim Waldorf**

STAFF WRITER

Naperville School District 203 might launch a lunch program in two of its elementary schools later this school year.

The district has designated Kingsley and River Woods elementary schools as sites for a proposed hot-lunch pilot program that would be run through the cafeteria at Lincoln Junior High School, Superintendent Alan Leis said. The proposal has not yet been acted on by the school board.

The district does not offer a lunch program in any of its elementary schools. However, Leis said, changed economic and family dynamics have led the district to explore the possibility.

"We need to see if parents would be interested in such a thing," he said.

Leis said the district selected Kingsley and River Woods for the pilot program for two reasons. They are close to Lincoln Junior High, which is the District 203 headquarters for Sodexo, the food service provider for the district's junior high and high schools. Also, they both have a space separate from their gymnasiums from which the hot lunches could be served.

Leis said the district hasn't decided whether it will follow through with the pilot program. Right now, he said, principals at the two elementary schools are discussing issues surrounding the idea with their home and school associations. As a fund-raiser, home and school associations provide weekly hot lunches to students.

Indian Prairie School District 204 launched a hot-lunch pilot program at their elementary schools in 2000 and over the past three years, gradually added schools until all 21 elementary schools were included. The district already had a hot-lunch program for the middle and high schools in place before the elementary schools, said Lori McMahon, general manager of food services for District 204. The district also has a contract with Sodexo to provide the lunches.

According to a letter sent to parents of Kingsley students from Principal Kitty Ryan, "pending confirmation of the final details, the pilot program will take place during the last nine weeks of this school year. This program will provide an opportunity for Kingsley students to purchase a lunch entree every day."

In anticipation of the program, Kingsley has already altered its normal hot-lunch program offered on Wednesdays, Ryan wrote. Parents normally purchase hot lunches for their children for the entire semester. According to the order forms provided to parents at the beginning of this semester, the Kingsley home and school association will stop offering hot lunches to students March 23, the last day of District 203's third quarter.

Sandy Wunderlich, Kingsley home and school association president, said the hot-lunch program is neither the group's biggest or smallest fund-raiser, and losing the last quarter of profits won't hurt it significantly.

Wunderlich said she wasn't sure what to think when she first learned of the district's plans, but she has heard nothing but positive comments about the idea from the parents she has talked to.

"I think it is going to be positively received by parents," she said.

01/27/05

To feed or not to feed?

By **Ann Hanson and Tim Waldorf**
STAFF WRITER

District 203 considers trial run of daily hot-lunch program

For the past few years, Naperville District 203 has watched while Indian Prairie District 204 has scurried to construct new facilities to accommodate its growing student population.

Now District 203 is where District 204 was but a few years ago; it is considering the launch of a pilot hot-lunch program in two of its elementary schools, Kingsley and River Woods.

According to District 203 officials, those schools were chosen because they have separate gymnasiums and multiuse rooms, one lunch period per grade and storage space.

"I think it has a great chance of being successful, because it's a wonderful service," River Woods Principal Ruth Badal said. "Parents are very busy packing a lunch each child will like. I think it is truly a convenience."

Badal said the participation rate among students for the weekly hot lunches at River Woods is 90 percent to 95 percent. Kitty Ryan, Kingsley's principal, said there is at least a 60 percent participation rate at her school.

In the daily hot-lunch program, meals would cost \$1.85. A reduced-cost lunch for 40 cents would be available for families who qualify, an option not available for the weekly hot lunches, Badal said.

"You either qualify for free lunch or you have nothing," she said. "We know that there are families who would probably qualify for reduced lunch. I think this would help those families over the hump."

The anonymity of children who use the free or reduced lunch program will be maintained because only the cashier will see how much each child has to pay, according to information provided by the district.

Students would be able to pay with cash or by using the district's debit system, wherein parents deposit funds into their child's account and money is deducted every time the card is swiped. Deposits could be made with cash or check, or online with a credit card.

Jennifer Hermes, District 203's director of support services and operations, said the district estimates it will cost \$22,000 per school to get the program set up. That money is available in the self-supporting cafeteria fund. The program should at least break even, Hermes said, because schools get a bigger reimbursement under the national program than the state program.

She said District 203 will consider expanding the program to other elementary schools and middle schools based on the facilities available and the success rate at Kingsley and River Woods. The district will soon assess all its buildings, Hermes said, making it a good time to determine how much room other schools have and how much would be needed.

District 204 launched daily hot lunches in September 2000. By September 2003 the meals were being served at all its elementary schools.

"The main thing in growing the program was being able to have production sites — schools that could prepare the food," said Lori McMahan, general manager of food services for District 204.

The key to its success, McMahan said, was District 204's decision to launch its elementary hot-lunch program while it was building schools. It could create the space needed to accommodate the program.

Also, not every school needs the space. In District 204, a lot of the elementary school's hot lunches are made off-site and transported to the buildings. About 40 percent of the district's elementary students purchase the meals, at a price of \$2.25 per meal.

"Different districts will run higher percentages based on the (students') participation in the free and reduced-price lunch program in the district," McMahan said.

McMahan said participation in elementary hot-lunch programs is typically higher in districts that have more students who meet the standards for free and reduced-price lunches.

"Most of the kids that eat with us do pay," McMahan said.

But she said the students who eat for free or at a reduced price are a new hot-lunch program's base. The program starts with them and grows as other students opt to eat the school's meals as well.

McMahan said a hot-lunch program used by a lot of students is nice because nobody knows who is eating for free and who is paying.

"There's no difference," she said. "That free child receives the same meal choices and options as the student who purchases a meal."

A District 203 daily hot-lunch program will be discussed at the February school board business meeting. The district hopes to start the program over spring break. Students would practice swiping their cards at lunch the week before.

Badal said the coming weeks will be the perfect time to start the program — as opposed to the beginning of the school year — because the children won't be overwhelmed by the amount of new things they are experiencing. She said first-graders, for example, will be acclimated to the school and already understand how to swipe their cards for the library.

"The students around here are very happy," she said. "They can hardly wait. They can't quite understand why they have to wait until after spring break."

01/30/05

Hot-lunch program tops District 203 workshop menu

By **Tim Waldorf**
STAFF WRITER

After it examines 10 trends that will "profoundly impact education," the Naperville School District 203 board will examine the trends that have led to a proposed elementary hot-lunch program and the decisions it faces with regard to district properties placed on the market.

During the first half of its work session scheduled for 7 tonight at the Administrative Center, at 203 W. Hillside Road, the school board will listen to Center for Public Outreach President Gary Marx as he presents "Ten Trends ... That Will Profoundly Impact Education and Society in the 21st Century."

At 8:40 p.m. the board will move on to the second half of its agenda, which includes references to the elementary hot-lunch program and "discussion of timing on land decisions" regarding property in Walnut Ridge subdivision and along Hobson Road.

Meeting packets provided for the press did not include information regarding the land decisions, but they did include background as to why the district is proposing a pilot hot-lunch program for Kingsley and River Woods elementary schools.

According to District 203, the number of its students eligible for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's free and reduced-price lunch program has more than tripled in the past five years. An elementary-level lunch program would allow it to serve students who qualify for reduced-price lunches as well as those who qualify for free ones.

The district, which will prohibit carbonated beverage sales in its high schools next year, also cited an increased focus on nutrition and health as a reason for considering the program. Also, among its benchmark districts, District 203 is the only one that isn't providing all students "a high-quality meal at lunch time," which is a service than can "assist busy families."

"A program which compliments our nutrition and health education, provides a high quality meal for free and reduced-price lunch students, and offers an alternative lunch option for all students appears to be needed," reads a memo to the board.

The district maintains a cafeteria fund to provide meal service to students at a break-even level. However, according to the district, there is a sufficient fund balance to provide for the \$22,000 startup costs of the pilot program.

At the end of the school year, the district will evaluate the success of and interest in the program.

"If there is continuing interest in operating the program, the concept will be considered for all elementary schools as part of the facility planning committee," the memo reads.

02/07/05

Success of hot-lunch program depends on how many dig in

District 203 to test popularity at two elementary schools

By **Tim Waldorf**
STAFF WRITER

Naperville School District 203's Board of Education approved Monday a hot-lunch pilot program for two elementary schools after hearing how the program could be expanded to the rest of the district's elementary sites.

Jennifer Hermes, District 203's director of support services and operations, said the district's goal is to offer daily hot lunches in all 14 of its elementary schools within a few years. How it will do so will be determined primarily by how many students participate in the program, she said.

The program will be launched in Kingsley and River Woods elementary schools after spring break, and if 50 percent of the students in those schools participate in the program, then the district might be able to offer it in two or three more schools sometime next year, Hermes said.

It's a different story if 75 to 80 percent of students in those schools participate, she added. That kind of demand for meals means the district may not be able to immediately expand the program, she said. After all, all of those meals must be prepared somewhere, and the kitchen at Lincoln Junior High School, which is where they would be prepared, would be operating at or near capacity.

So expanding to more than two or three schools, said Hermes, would require the creation of another meal preparation site at a junior high school.

Allen Albus, District 203's assistant superintendent for finance, said the creation of such a facility would be calculated into the costs of running the program, which is intended to be self-sufficient. The initial \$22,000 spent to purchase equipment for the pilot came from surplus funds in the district's cafeteria fund.

Ideally, said Hermes, finishing kitchens would also be created in each elementary school to solve some of the logistical obstacles to expanding the program. Albus said whether such kitchens could or should be created for the elementary schools will be determined as the district prioritizes projects during the ongoing development of its master facilities plan.

However, the lack of such kitchens doesn't mean the program can't be offered at all elementary sites, said Superintendent Alan Leis. Pending long-term facilities upgrades, modifications could be made to the program's menu for schools that present logistical problems, he said.

"I believe we should offer this. I think that it's something that in the future, as we get increasing numbers of students on free and reduced lunches, it's absolutely critical," Leis said. "But I don't want to do it in a way that drags on our finances."

Leis said the pilot program will help the district determine how fast it can roll out the program in a cost-efficient and effective manner, or if it can or should roll out the program at all. If participation in the program is low, the district may shelve the idea for a few years, he said.

"The issues for me are financial and to see if parents support it over more than just the first week when it's new and exciting," Leis said.

02/24/05

Hot-lunch program getting warm reception

Quality, quantity scoring high with students, parents

By Tim Waldorf
STAFF WRITER

You don't typically have to talk kids into eating pizza. Most are ready and willing to wolf it down. Corn, however, isn't as popular.

But both were offerings on River Woods Elementary School's lunch menu Thursday, and both were devoured within 15 minutes by four hungry classes of first-graders, Barb Brown said as students en route to recess carried their disposable plastic trays to trash cans.

"One of the things I always look at is what's left on their plates," Brown said as students walked past her. "And there's not a lot. They even ate the corn."

As Sodexho's general manager for Naperville School District 203, Brown ran the elementary-level hot-lunch pilot program the district launched in River Woods and Kingsley elementary schools this spring. It's a program that appears to have been a huge hit, as an average of about 55 percent of the students at River Woods and Kingsley purchased hot lunches each school day since the program started after spring break. In April and May combined, the program served 22,603 meals, an average of 580 per school day.

"Kids know what they like and what they don't like, and they will tell you," Brown said. "So what we want to serve is foods that the kids will eat."

Early start

Serving such foods starts early every school day in a kitchen three miles away from River Woods. Cooks arrive at 7 a.m. at Sodexho's headquarters at Lincoln Junior High School and start preparing meals for the day. Typically, the menu prepared there for the two elementary schools is a portion of the menu offered to Lincoln students.

On Thursday, Lincoln's students and those at Kingsley and River Woods were offered Smart Pizza, a low-fat pizza with a crust made with whole-grain flour.

Sodexho buys the pizza, as well as its hamburgers and chicken nuggets, in bulk. Other menu offerings such as tacos, pastas, casseroles, sandwiches and salads are made from scratch at Lincoln. All foods served are prepared according to Nutrikids recipes, Brown said. That way, Sodexho can provide parents with nutritional analysis when they see the lunch menu, she said.

In a normal month, pizza is one of the few repeats on that menu, but Sodexho offers two entrees per day, so the rare student who doesn't like pizza isn't stuck eating a piece for lunch. For example, on Thursday students at River Woods chose between a slice of Smart Pizza with a serving of canned corn, or an All-American Sub with a package of Doritos and a cup of grapes.

Sodexho also offers a daily Fun on the Run option, which is a bag lunch consisting of either a bagel with cream cheese or a large soft pretzel, a cup of yogurt, a container of fruit juice, a stick of string cheese and a package of baby carrots.

"I think one of the things that surprised us the most was the popularity of the Fun on the Run lunch, the vegetarian lunch," Brown said. "I think we're serving double what we anticipated."

At 10 a.m., Sodexho starts to transport these meals to the two elementary schools in two runs. First it hauls the cold foods to the schools in large ice chests. Then it delivers the hot lunches in what Brown calls "hot boxes." Delivering the

hot food last means it arrives as close as possible to the schools' first lunch periods, which start around 11 a.m., she said.

Lunchtime

At River Woods, the food is kept in a small kitchenette flanking the multipurpose room until it is needed on the servicing line, which is made up of two red plastic carts that are pushed up against the wall when not in use.

The first cart stands about waist high on your average third-grader, and it contains the disposable trays, napkins, straws, sporks, condiments and cold menu offerings, as well as the Fun on the Run lunches. The second cart stands a bit higher, as it's where the Sodexo employees serve the day's entrees to students.

When a lunch period begins at River Woods, students form a line outside the multipurpose room to receive their milk cartons and their student identification cards, which they use as debit cards to purchase meals. Inside the room, the students split into two lines, depending on which menu options they chose earlier in the day.

The process runs quite smoothly — an entire grade typically moves through the line in five minutes, Brown said.

"They don't think twice what to take," she said. "They know what to do and they move through quickly."

Well-received

After initial investments for equipment, the elementary-level hot lunch pilot program is designed to be self-supporting, the cost being covered in the price of the meals.

However, extending the program to other elementary schools would present the district with a few logistical issues, Brown said.

Lincoln's kitchen was designed to accommodate more than just the students who would attend Lincoln, she said. The kitchens in the rest of the district's junior high and high schools were built to serve their respective student populations.

So to expand the elementary hot-lunch program, District 203 will have to determine where Sodexo will prepare the additional meals for elementary-schoolers.

"The production part is really the key issue," Brown said.

Then, Brown added, the elementary schools must have space where Sodexo can stage the lunch program without conflicting with other activities. For example, students eat their lunches in the gymnasiums at many District 203 elementary schools.

"So we'd have to figure out how to coordinate the timing of lunch with what they use the room for for other purposes," Brown said. "And I think that's just going to have to be on a building-to-building basis."

Whether the program will be continued or expanded will be decided by the school board, which Brown said should see complete participation numbers and satisfaction survey results sometime this summer.

"It's totally up to the board where we go from here," she said.

The satisfaction surveys have shown parents and students are pleased with the program, Brown said. They liked the quality and appearance of the meals, and their price was right, she said.

"People wrote on there, 'I can't pack a lunch for \$1.85 and include everything they get at school,'" Brown said.

Participation numbers tell a similar story. In May, an average of 58 percent of Kingsley's students in grades 1 to 5 purchased hot lunches. At River Woods, 51 percent of the students in those grades bought lunches every school day in May.

"I think it's so convenient for the parents," River Woods Principal Ruth Badal said. "But not only that, it's the quality of the food. The students seem to really have liked the lunches."

6/8/05