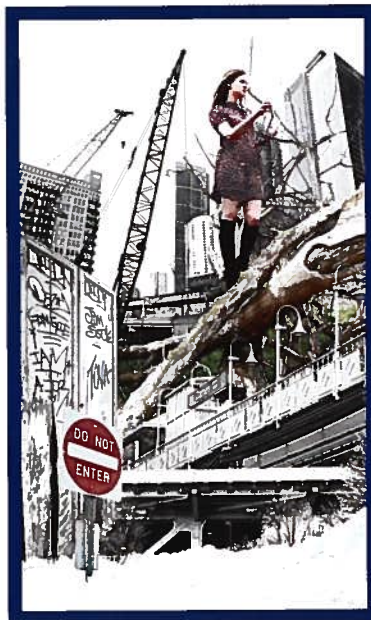


# *The* ILLINOIS SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL

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## *Creative Minds*



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# Benefits of breakfast program extend beyond students

By Jennifer Bova

Jennifer Bova is a public information specialist with Woodland Community Consolidated School District 50, located in Gurnee.

Partnerships can be defined as relationships that mutually benefit all parties involved. However, one particular partnership took this concept a bit further to support a community in need.

Last fall, Woodland District 50 implemented a district-wide breakfast program for all students. During the first week, over 2,500 breakfasts were served. The program's purpose was to ensure that all students who do not eat breakfast at home have access to it at school. Research shows that the school breakfast program supports student learning. The program helps students improve their grades, do better on standardized tests, and pay better attention in school.

"It is our responsibility to educate students and provide them with the necessary resources so that they will be able to thrive and succeed in their learning environment," said Woodland Superintendent Joy A. Swoboda.

Located in the far northeast suburbs of Illinois, District 50 is an elementary district made up of grade level centers supporting just under 6,000 students. Over the last several years, the district has seen a change in its demographics, with nearly 40

percent of students qualifying for free and reduced meals.

To date, nearly 90,000 breakfasts have been served to Woodland students. Primary, elementary, and intermediate students were served breakfast in the cafeterias, while the middle school served breakfast via kiosks so students could "grab and go" and head to class. Within the first few weeks of introducing the breakfast program, two realizations occurred. One, the breakfast program was indeed a benefit to students in the morning. The second was that not all the food was being eaten. Woodland needed to determine what to do with unopened juice, milk, and food.

And so another plan was put into place.

After researching options under the Federal USDA program and guidelines for food donations, Woodland decided to donate the leftover food to COOL Ministries. Based out of Waukegan, COOL Ministries helps support families throughout Lake County. The partnership is unique: COOL Ministries does not share a partnership like this with any other school district in Lake County.

"This partnership has made a huge difference," said pantry

operations manager Gayle Olson. "We are able to get fresh items to our guests more often. They love getting milk and juice."

It's evident that this partnership is indeed mutually beneficial and its impact touches much more than children.

"We are fortunate to have strong partnerships with local businesses and organizations throughout our community," said Swoboda. "The fact that COOL Ministries supports Woodland's initiative is a benefit that goes beyond the doors of our schools."

Last fall, several staff members from the district made a special trip to meet Olson and her staff at COOL Ministries.

"We felt it was important that we make that personal connection," said Associate Superintendent Robert Leonard. "We have staff at Woodland who helped make a difference.



Columns are submitted by members of the Illinois Chapter of the National School Public Relations Association



Taking time to visit COOL Ministries and see how Woodland's breakfast program has impacted those in need was powerful."

Because hot lunches are served at Woodland schools, the district can only donate items from its breakfast program. Breakfast items are all tightly sealed and can be refrigerated.

Woodland intends to continue the partnership.

"No other school district has made us this offer," said Olson. "I was excited for the opportunity to work with Woodland."

After nearly one school year of the program's implementation, Woodland recently hosted the Illinois Hunger Coalition, Arbor Foods, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Village of Gurnee in mid-February to showcase the success of the program and visually convey how hundreds of students can begin their day having breakfast and start each school day off strong. No Kid Hungry/Share Our Strength provided the financial, technical, and moral support that helped establish the program in the fall of 2015 with the support of these grants and additional resources.

On a daily basis, 10 to 13 percent of Woodland students have breakfast at school.

"Our board of education shared our collective vision to support the family as a whole," said Swoboda. "Even though this district is not legally required to offer breakfast to children, we saw a need and an opportunity. As a district, we saw a need and an opportunity to research, develop, and execute a plan into action."

The results have been powerful. Compared to last school year, the amount of students seen by school nurses for hunger dropped by 82 percent at the middle school and 93 percent at the intermediate school.

"We are extremely proud of this program not only because of what it has done for our students, but because of the fact that our district team came together to support this initiative," said Swoboda.

The vision of developing the program came from the inherent desire to help children. Paraphrasing the famous line from the film, *Field of Dreams*, Swoboda said, "It's a simple concept. If you serve them, they will come."



Look at it this way; Books don't crash, they don't get viruses, and they don't need screensavers.



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