

Free breakfast and lunch will be available to all

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When Columbus City Schools students return to classes Wednesday, Aug. 20, free breakfast and lunch will be waiting -- for all of them.

By GARY SEMAN JR., ThisWeek Community News

When Columbus City Schools students return to classes Wednesday, Aug. 20, free breakfast and lunch will be waiting -- for all of them.

The percentage of families in the district eligible for the federally subsidized free and reduce-priced lunches program has been increasing for several years.

It's now about 80 percent, which means the district has qualified for free meals for all students through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's lunch program, said Jeff Warner, spokesman for CCS.

Warner said that means 50,000-plus students, regardless of family income, could be on the winning end of a free meal at no food cost to the district.

"There's no change in the food," he said. "We still have to meet all the nutritional requirements set up by the USDA.

"There's no compromise of the food quality or quantity or anything of that nature."

"Students perform better academically when they're not having to deal with food-insecurity issues," Warner said. "The research is very clear on that."

It also eliminates the stigma for children who receive assistance, he said. As before, students must enter a personal identification code in the lunch line so the school can track the meals, Warner said. However, no student will be required to show a lunch tag or ticket identifying the need for assistance.

“It also eliminates the stigma of families applying for it,” he said. “There are some families who just don’t want to ask for help.”

With the assistance of the Children’s Hunger Alliance, the district has offered free breakfasts for a number of years, Warner said.

1st ‘Mastery’ school

In other back-to-school news, the district will open Hubbard Mastery School Neighborhood, a combination lottery-neighborhood K-6 school at 102 W. Hubbard Ave.

Warner said it’s a brand-new concept for the district, where students’ progress is based on their complete understanding of material and less on grades.

For example, a student who’s reading at a fourth-grade level and rapidly progressing would be given more advanced material.

On the contrary, if that student is struggling, he or she would be given more attention. Still, all students must meet all state requirements and assessment testing.

Also, each school is getting its own individual website, complete with video capabilities, mobile compatible subscription services and an abundance of school news.

The district also is launching a new math initiative this year. The comprehensive program will ratchet up diagnostic assessments to identify student strengths, weakness and gaps in math learning.

It also ratchets up professional development for staff members. As part of the project, the district will identify a math task force with representatives from each grade level -- both teachers and administrators -- as well as parents, community members and college educators.

The task force's ultimate goal is to develop a comprehensive math program and identify steps for an implementation plan.

Administrators will work with senior leadership to implement pilot programs in two elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools to include McGraw-Hill texts, online Connect Ed and the web-based ALEKS program.

"We're not making the progress on math that we need to," Warner said.

In addition, CCS will continue to work in-house and with the Columbus Metropolitan Library on reading initiatives that were launched last year.

At building-level news, Stewart Alternative Elementary School will open this winter. Its students were displaced to Beck Elementary School in 2010 after a fire badly damaged the school.

Also, students at Ecole Kenwood, the district's French immersion school that serves grades K-6, will be relocated in January while the building is razed and rebuilt. The children will be reassigned to Northgate Elementary School during construction.