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By Judy Chiss

Books and Breakfast: A Big Impact in Just an Hour a Day



Providing schoolchildren a free healthy breakfast was an idea that took hold in Evanston in the late 1980s and is still growing and developing to fill a gap.

Thirty years ago, a group of proactive parents at Dewey Elementary School saw a problem they thought they could address: children repeatedly coming to school without having had breakfast. Starting the school day with a healthy meal would mean greater readiness to learn, so those Dewey parents kicked off a before-school volunteer initiative that helped address a serious need for many kids. The program, Books and Breakfast (B&B), has gone through several iterations over three decades, but it is currently serving more than 120 children in District 65 who qualify for federally funded free or reduced lunch but do not attend schools authorized to provide it. The

students participating have been recommended by teachers and finally selected by principals, using financial need as a criterion.

In 2012, when the volunteer-led initiative at Dewey School suffered from a shrinking number of volunteers, a decision was made to re-invent rather than dispose of the program. The sustainability of B&B was addressed in part by making the program an independent not-for-profit with a broader vision than previously existed: a three-pronged program including nutrition, academics and relational connections became part of what has been “served up” since 2013. While B&B began as a nutritional support initiative at one elementary school, it has morphed into a larger and more holistic program that currently serves students attending Dewey, Lincolnwood and Kingsley elementary schools.

“When Books & Breakfast was re-launched as a not-for-profit in 2013, we re-tooled things to create a more stable model for supporting students,” said Executive Director Kim Hammock. “In the new B&B program, we added a social-emotional piece, as well as a strong focus on homework preparedness – and of course, we still provide a tasty and healthy breakfast.” Ms. Hammock said that “changing our culture” into one strongly focused on nurturing and emotional support was a response to the organization’s mission of having every child entering the classroom physically, emotionally and academically prepared.

“We know that a child’s not doing homework can turn into a cycle, but having a bit of support for starting each day prepared with homework can give a child a confidence boost,” said Ms. Hammock. She noted that annual teacher surveys have communicated significant positive feedback about the program’s impact on participants’ behavior, academic preparedness and confidence. “And with students attending the morning breakfast program there has been a lowered rate of office referrals,” said Ms. Hammock.

B&B's not-for-profit status has bolstered the program in many ways, including the project's ability to fundraise and to leverage other community resources. For five years Northwestern University has been a valuable partner for the B&B project and provides a sizable number of talented undergraduates as tutors. The college students come through the University's Office of Leadership Development and Community Engagement, and they are part of a punctual, well-trained and enthusiastic cadre of young adults who augment the parent and community volunteers to help students with homework, to read aloud to students and to show affectionate support to the students. The Books and Breakfast program is a good fit for Northwestern students who have been immersed in education equity, community development dynamics and socioeconomic issues in the community. One Northwestern tutor expressed her gratitude for being part of the program by saying Books and Breakfast is "one shining light helping to change the status quo."

Tasha Triplett, a parent of three school-aged children, is one of the three B&B Site Directors and an early riser. Before the B&B students arrive at Kingsley at 8 a.m., Ms. Triplett has organized the room into three activity stations of breakfast, "brain work" and enrichment games or art activities. She has also seen that the food delivery and breakfast preparation is in place, has organized mentor and student pairings according to the number of Northwestern tutors and parent and community volunteers on deck, and has noted messages from teachers or parents that might influence the day's focus for particular children. She oversees tutor trainings, stays in touch with parents and teachers and is attentive to how the morning activities are going and which children might need an extra hug.

At Kingsley the B&B program uses the library. "The children consider the library where we meet their own space," said Ms. Triplett. "The furniture can be moved, and our daily get-togethers feel like a club to the children." Ms. Triplett said that instead of there being a stigma attached to being selected for the program, current

participants often spread the word to younger children they know, telling them “You should come too.”

Books and Breakfast is a community effort. Parents, the Evanston Community Foundation, Foundation 65, Evanston YWCA Evanston/North Shore, the Evanston Art Center, District 65 and school PTAs and individual donors are some of the stakeholders strengthening and growing the program. Generous funders and a partnership with the YWCA has enabled B&B to offer a summer program for rising first through fifth graders. The summer program features gift book packages and letters from a summer reading buddy, as well as weekly swim lessons at the Evanston YWCA. Every two weeks, students receive a package of books selected especially for them by their classroom teachers, who know the children’s interests and reading levels. The summer program is a fun-filled way to keep literacy in the forefront, to help students build competency in the water and to continue enjoying supportive relationships with adults who are invested in their success. On June 9, approximately 50 volunteers of all ages showed up at Dewey to sort and pack the 2,500 gift books to be distributed over the summer months.

Books and Breakfast intends to grow and serve hundreds more children healthy breakfasts, homework help and emotional support in their hour-a-day initiative. In the past year the program has served 7,500 healthy meals and helped kids finish 5,000 pieces of homework – but it is not resting on its laurels. In 2019 B&B plans to expand programming to Lincoln, another District 65 school where students in need do not have access to a healthy morning meal or help with homework. Books and Breakfast is working to level the playing field for District 65 elementary students and will continue to recruit volunteers and community partners so they will be able to add a school a year to the program.

And Even Before Books and Breakfast

Being a writer often means one is a keen observer, and Susan Sussman is both. Ms. Sussman, author of 24 fiction and nonfiction books, had volunteered to do a month-long artist-in-residency gig at Orrington Elementary in the late 1980s when she observed something curious. All of her writing classes were “having a grand old time” except for the class starting around 10 a.m. Students were engaged and focused until around 10:30, when many seemed restless, unfocused and unable to sit still. Ms. Sussman said, “It took me about a week to figure out that 10:30 was exactly when the smells of food wafted up from the cafeteria.” Ms. Sussman said she saw that it was the same kids every day who were affected, and finally the writing teacher realized “these children were hungry.”

Ms. Sussman could not ignore what she was observing, so she brought it to the attention of Orrington’s Principal, Joann Wilkins, who kept milk and graham crackers available for her own small informal “breakfast club.” She cheered on Ms. Sussman’s efforts to work with teachers to identify the names of at-risk children who might benefit the most. Soon Ms. Sussman had permission to use the art room before school. She filled the long art tables with provisions – a buffet of fruit, juice, milk, bagels, peanut butter and cream cheese. The food was half of the plan; the other was having a special guest reader who would be out of the ordinary and exciting for the students. “I contacted the Evanston Police Department and asked if they had an officer who might like to be our first ‘reader’ for the Books and Breakfast program.” It was a 200-pound, muscle-bound uniformed officer who showed up, and once students filled their plates with food and sat down, the officer began reading the first chapter of “Pippi Longstocking.”

Ms. Sussman began buying food in bulk and storing it in an old refrigerator in the school’s basement. She had a roster of volunteer readers (teachers, parents, even visiting actors) and enlisted her own

children to carry in supplies, serve and clean up; and soon many parents were helping out. Then the PTA stepped in and wrote a grant for \$3,000 to help fund the program. Ms. Sussman contacted a prominent organization that reviews children's books for quality books to give as gifts to the 24 children in the Orrington program. Ms. Sussman continued her breakfast program until she moved away from Evanston in about 1996. Later she learned that a neighbor who had come to visit the Orrington program in action, went on to start the Books and Breakfast program at her neighborhood school: Dewey.