

## District 15, Northwest Community tackle poor nutrition

By Kimberly Pohl | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 6/11/2010 12:01 AM

Palatine schools are used to being at the top when it comes to test scores, but officials weren't happy with one particular ranking with the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

The organization in February listed Palatine as having the sixth-highest number of children in need of meals during the summer among suburban Cook County municipalities - behind only Cicero, Berwyn, Chicago Heights, Calumet City and Harvey.

Now, Palatine Township Elementary District 15 is stepping up efforts to combat the unwelcome distinction with a pilot program aimed at feeding nutritious food to low-income students.

"I never would have thought we (Palatine) would fall into that category, but I'm thrilled with the number of initiatives we have aimed at getting our kids healthier," said Bobbie Desprat, District 15 director of school nutrition services.

Thirty-four percent of District 15 students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and officials say the meals they rely on during the school year often disappear during the summer.

District 15, with help from Northwest Community Hospital in Arlington Heights, on Monday will start a two-week summer lunch program at Rand Grove Village, a subsidized apartment complex in northeast Palatine. The hospital will supplement the free meals with fresh fruits and vegetables, in addition to sending an employee to help distribute them.

In July and August, they'll provide free breakfast to more than 100 low-income students enrolled in the Palatine Opportunity Center's summer camp. Depending on the response, Desprat hopes to expand the length of the programs and the number of sites.

District 15 and Northwest Community have collaborated for the past two years on a number of initiatives.

They held nine family fitness fairs with PTAs, drawing nearly 3,300 people this school year, and revamped the district's wellness policy, which now prohibits food as birthday treats and anything but healthy snacks in the classroom. They also targeted all fourth-graders for education on nutrition and exercise.

Kathy Baker, the hospital's director of community services, said such programs are vital because 17 percent of children in the area are overweight, compared to 14 percent nationwide. The hospital's benchmark is 5 percent.

"There are so many problems associated with poor nutrition, from health to a negative impact on a child's ability to learn," Baker said.

District 15 also started a field trip program this spring, providing 490 healthy sack lunches to kids who "would otherwise show up with a can of pop and a big bag of chips," Desprat said.

Finally, the district is continuing nutrition education at Jane Addams School even though a grant that provided \$31,000 last year was not renewed. The funding provided every student with more exotic produce like jicama and daikon three times a week, in addition to an accompanying lesson.

Next year, third-graders at Jane Addams will grow their own fruits and vegetables through a "fresh-from-the-farm" curriculum. Work began this week on raised garden beds.

"The teachable moments are endless," Desprat said.