Students do better after building better breakfasts

by Clare Howard

Ashley West talks fluently about vitamin C, dietary protein and sugar overload. Then she shakes her head and admits that until recently she ate Hershey's chocolate bars for breakfast.

That touched off a lively 7:30 a.m. discussion at West's table in the cafeteria at Peoria's Manual High School in Illinois among 13- and 14-year-olds who just months ago breakfasted on Twizzlers, Now and Later bars, Froot Loops and Cheetos hot chips.

BETTER BREAKFASTS - Brian Sargent reads the ingredient label on a can of vegetables to determine its nutritional value as classmate Ashley West adds chicken to make a salad in the 'Transition to Success' program at Manual High School in Peoria, Ill. The program was started after an analysis of students with behavioral problems indicated some problems may be related to diet, particularly when students eat no breakfast or a high-sugar breakfast. CNS Photo by David Zalaznik. Before them on trays were sparse remnants from a breakfast of hot oatmeal, 1 percent milk, juice, and biscuits and gravy. The transformation came from a group of earnest dietetic interns.

"All that sugar in chocolate bars used to make me tired. It was hard to focus," said West, 14.

Breakfast is both a lesson and a meal for West and her cohorts enrolled in the "Transition to Success" program at Manual High School. Students in the program had problems in their home schools. Many had been suspended. They were offered one last chance, "Transition to Success," which is now concluding its second year at Manual.

"We're so excited about this program. We are dealing with healing strategies and life skills, hunger, food and related issues that have an impact on kids," said Donna O'Day, program coordinator.

She and her staff analyzed students' behavior problems at their previous schools and noticed consistent patterns. Behavior problems spiked between 10 and 11 a.m.

"We think they were hungry because they had no breakfast, sometimes no dinner the night before, or they were crashing off a breakfast of candy and sugary cereals," O'Day said.

"Our students were eating a lot of candy, chips, soda, high-carb foods. Pop-Tarts, sugary cereal and packaged doughnuts. Many of our students come with pockets stuffed with food. Kids who don't know when their next meal will be ... so they're hoarders. They come across food and they stash it in their pockets. Some of these kids live chaotic lives. They stash their food and their belongings in their pockets. They come to school with their 'stuff.'"

O'Day said results were mixed when lessons were presented on the U.S. Department of Agriculture food pyramid. Eating patterns didn't change following health classes.

O'Day met Golda Ewalt, director of the dietetic internship program at OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria, and the two devised a program of instruction taught by Ewalt's young interns, who have just completed their bachelor's degrees. They intern at OSF for 12 months before they can become certified. The interns approach food, nutrition, life and high school students with equal enthusiasm.

"Our kids can smell fear and apprehension," O'Day said. "These interns come. They are not judgmental. They are enthusiastic. Our kids take to them."

"Transition for Success" has 38 students in grades 5 through 8, ages 11 to 16.

"Some of our students are watching their parents and grandparents die. The diabetes and heart disease is incredible. One student came in and said her grandma just had her foot removed. Another girl asked when you give the baby Coke in the baby bottle, do you add water? What about Hawaiian Punch?" O'Day said.

She recalled one girl returned to school weeks after giving birth. O'Day bent over the baby's face and immediately realized the young mother had been feeding her infant chips.

Ewalt said her interns presented five classes ranging from hand washing and kitchen sanitation to nutrition and simple cooking for fast meals.

At the start of the class on hand washing, OSF intern Emily O'Keefe passed Glitter Bug Potion among the students to rub on their hands. Then she told them to wash as they normally do with soap and water. Next the students lined up and inserted their hands under a light box that would illuminate any bug potion remaining on their hands. Like many students, Anthony Davis, 13, was surprised to see bug potion illuminated on his hands even after the second washing.

"That glow on my hands is like germs," Davis said.

"Yeah, especially for someone like me who likes to touch my face too much," said Greg Harris, 14.

Ewalt and O'Day are talking about another five-class series presented by the interns next year.

"A big issue was that students were eating a lot of fast foods," said intern Erin Jaskulke. "They ate a lot of Now and Laters, Starbursts and hot Cheetos. They'd have a burst of energy and then be tired, aggravated and irritated."

Ewalt said, "A lot of student behavior problems are not mental or behavioral but related to diet."

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