

DPS offers a fresh take on school meals

New equipment allows district to work more efficiently and provide students with a wider variety of fresh, sealed meals.

By Alex Kincaid

A whole wheat bun, chicken patty, fresh mixed fruit and a scoop of corn are added to a plastic tray by a group of Dayton Public Schools employees as the tray makes its way down a conveyor belt. At the end, a “liddler” machine seals each one and prints instructions for reheating the meal in a microwave or oven on the plastic cover.

The meals are then packaged with a breakfast meal and a snack, such as an apple, orange, string cheese or baby carrots — a favorite among students, Nutrition Services employees say.

This process has changed the game for the district because student meals can be assembled faster — and include more variety — than they did before.

The purchase of the liddler in August has allowed the district to provide students with the same lunch meals they would normally receive in their school’s cafeteria. Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes — another student favorite — is now available to them at home, for example. In addition, the district can provide more meal options because the items no longer need to be purchased in individually-wrapped packages. It also allows the district to produce meals more efficiently. At top speed, the assembly line and machine can prepare 26 meals every minute.

“This machine allows us to have more options,” said Cathie DeFehr, director of Nutrition Services. “We can send students home with fresh fruits and vegetables and create a wider variety of meals for students.”

All DPS students can sign up to receive daily meal delivery during virtual learning. Beginning Monday, January 4, 2021, breakfast, lunch and a snack will be delivered directly to homes rather than being available for pickup, as they were during hybrid instruction.

In addition to their weekday meals, each student receives grocery items to get them through the entire 7 day week. Grocery items rotate, but might include a loaf of bread, bag of potatoes, gallon of milk, package of cheese and jar of peanut butter.

DeFehr said the liddler machine was purchased out of concern for continued supply chain availability. As more schools began to offer meals while students learned remotely during the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, the continued availability of individually-wrapped items became uncertain. If at any point individually-wrapped carrots become unavailable, for example, the district can purchase them in bulk and still give students the well-balanced meals they need.

Overall, the district has distributed 353,288 student meals since the first day of school in September.

Throughout the spring, summer and beginning of the school year, Nutrition Services has adapted the meal pickup process to the ever-changing needs of families. Although the pandemic has posed difficulties, the team continues to find creative ways to still get meals into the hands of students. From assembling a team of volunteers to help package meals in the spring, to distributing from various community sites in the summer, to purchasing the ladder to make the process more efficient and to expand the offerings in the fall, the district is determined to make sure students have well-balanced meals each day — regardless of whether they are in school buildings.

All DPS students can sign up to receive daily meal delivery during virtual learning.

Online sign up form: <https://bit.ly/DPSfooddelivery>

Phone sign up: 937-542-3950