

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Weekend Food Program helps provide necessities

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🕒 October 6, 2018 📁 Local News 💬



Marcia Holl, a teacher at the South Butler Intermediate Elementary School and founder of the Weekend Food Program, packs food items into a bag on Friday for a needy student to take home.

PAULA GRUBBS/ BUTLER EAGLE

JEFFERSON TWP — A new program at two South Butler School District buildings provides nourishment and just a little love to 42 students.

The Weekend Food Program was started in January by Marcia Holl, a Title 1 reading and math teacher at the intermediate elementary school.

In the program, National Honor Society students from Knoch High School pack food into plastic bags for intermediate elementary and primary school students participating in the free- and reduced-lunch program to eat on the weekend.

Holl said each bag has two breakfast, two lunch and two dinner items, plus two snacks, fruit and a drink, and sometimes fresh produce, if it's available.

“And sometimes, too, we also throw in a little piece of candy,” Holl said.

She said the district has kids in many situations who can use the food over the weekend.

“We have quite a few grandparents raising children right now, bless them, and a lot are on fixed incomes or Social Security and, wow, they don't always have the money to feed a child,” she said. “We also have a few homeless kids who live with another family.”

The teachers at the two schools receive the bags and many tuck them into the students' backpacks to prevent any stigma that may crop up at the sight of the bags.

“We talked to the teachers about stigma, and they (see that the students receive their food) on the sly.”

Breakfast items might include a breakfast bar, individual-serving cereal or oatmeal.

“I've got every kind of Pop Tart right now that is made,” Holl said.

Lunch and dinner items may be individual-serving macaroni and cheese, canned pasta, ramen noodles, canned chicken or soup.

“I'm hoping these families have other things to supplement, but this puts something in their tummies,” Holl said.

This month, Holl found herself looking at a 10-pound bag of potatoes in the former maintenance office that she has outfitted as a pantry.

So she printed out instructions on how to prepare a potato in the microwave and secured them to each potato with a rubber band.

The instructions say to scrub the spud, then poke holes in it with the tines of a fork.

“Tines!” said the enthusiastic Holl. “I'm a reading teacher, so I'm getting vocabulary words in, too.”

She also has a box of apples and includes one in each of the 42 bags before the NHS students arrive to pack them with food.

“We have a mission here in South Butler that we will provide a quality education for all students so they can become productive members of society,” Holl said. “Well-fed and educated children will have accomplished this goal.”

She said the students get excited about their Friday bags.

“One little girl doesn't hide her bag in her backpack,” Holl said. “She carries it home every Friday as proud as a peacock.”

The parents and grandparents of the students are very appreciative and touched by the program.

“I got a note from a mother who declined the program, even though she really needed it,” Holl said. “She said 'Please help another child who is more in need than my child, but I am going to use this to teach my child to do something for someone else.’”

Holl and her partners in the program, guidance counselors Laurie Tresky and Jade Thrower, received a \$1,000 grant late last year from the Knoch Knights Legacy Foundation. They used the funds to purchase the program's initial batch of food.

Holl received shelving for food when the old library at the high school was renovated, and an unused cafeteria table serves as the packing station.

An old computer cart allows her to ferry the bags to the various classrooms.

Holl receives monetary and food donations from a variety of sources.

“Our PTOs have been tremendous at both schools,” Holl said. “They have supported us completely.”

She received \$600 from the Laps for Learning program, in which students at the intermediate elementary school ask friends and neighbors to sponsor them when they walk laps around the track at the football field.

A list of food items accepted for the Weekend Food Program was sent home with each student before the Laps for Learning walk, and the students and teachers stuffed the white pickup truck owned by the principal with food as the student walked their laps.

“That's how I got all these Pop Tarts,” Holl said.

The teachers and staff at the schools also donate a significant amount of food to the program, Holl said.

Teachers who wear jeans on Friday are asked to bring two canned good in exchange for the privilege.

“The teachers are all excited about (the program),” Holl said. “They're always bringing three or four things.”

A food drive at the South Butler Community Library in Saxonburg also brought in a big load of food.

“Our residents are the most kind-hearted people,” Holl said. “They're very giving and supportive of the children.”

David Foley, South Butler superintendent, had nothing but praise for the program. He noted that learning is difficult when a student's basic needs are not being met.

“Mrs. Holl is going above and beyond and really has a passion for the students in our district,” Foley said. “She's just doing a really solid job at supporting her kids in more ways than just instruction.”

The public is welcome to support the program through monetary or food donations.

Monetary donations can be given by logging onto the district's website, www.southbutler.org, clicking on the Legacy Foundation link, and using PayPal. An address where checks can be sent is also on the website.

Those who want to donate food can find a list of items that are accepted for the program on the Foundation link.

Those items can be dropped off during school hours at the intermediate elementary school on Knoch Road.

Holl hopes the Weekend Food Program will continue at South Butler, and that someday there will be no need for it.

“The kids and families are very thankful,” she said.



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Paula Grubbs is a Butler County native who has been with the Butler and Cranberry Eagle newspapers since June 2000. Grubbs has covered the