

## Kona charter school offers first free breakfast program - Hawaii News - Honolulu Star-Advertiser

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Kona Pacific Public Charter School students now start the school day off with a free breakfast in their classrooms as part of a pilot project launched last week that established the first universal breakfast program at a Hawaii public school.

Nearly all of the Kealahou school's 230 students in grades kindergarten through eight are participating in the program, regardless of a family's ability to pay. The effort is being sponsored by a grant from the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice.

A growing body of research -- including studies by the Food Research and Action Center, a national anti-hunger organization -- show that schools providing universal (meaning free for every student) breakfast programs have more focused students, higher math and reading scores, fewer disciplinary and behavior problems, and increased attendance.

Kona Pacific's executive director, Chris Hecht, says the school is already seeing benefits in the classroom.

"We were concerned about taking away instructional time, but the 10 minutes we spend in the morning makes it so that teachers feel they're getting twice as much out of each hour. There's no question it's worth those 10 minutes, even 15 minutes, to have a great rest of the day," Hecht said.

Offering the meal free of charge to all students helps remove the stigma for low-income children to participate in school breakfast, according to the Food Research and Action Center. And providing it in the classroom further increases participation.

More than half of Kona Pacific's students -- 68 percent -- qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a key indicator of poverty. Under federal guidelines, a Hawaii family of four earning \$35,659 a year or less qualifies for free meals this school year under the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. To qualify for reduced-price meals, a family of four cannot earn more than \$50,746.

Forty-four percent of the school's students come from households that are not economically self-sufficient, meaning they receive some form of government assistance.

"Nationwide what we find is when you take school breakfast and lunch and make it universal, you dramatically increase participation by low-income students," Hecht said. "If you only offer it free to some but it costs money for others, what usually happens is the better off, more affluent students choose not to eat. The other students who qualify feel embarrassed, or get the feeling that only poor students eat school meals. If you make it universal, that won't even come up. It just becomes part of the day."

Out of the 70,000 Hawaii public school students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, 40 percent eat school breakfast, the Hawaii Appleseed Center says on its website. Hawaii's participation rate ranks 45th in the nation.

"Students who come to school hungry cannot focus, and children suffering from food insecurity are unable to grow to their full potential," says the center, which has made promoting universal breakfast a top priority. "Countless studies have shown that increasing breakfast participation improves academic and health outcomes for children."

Hecht said Kona Pacific teachers had started noticing behavioral problems in students who would come to school hungry.

"We've always served lunch and a morning and afternoon snack, but teachers started reporting students suffering from hunger in the mornings, things like stomachaches, headaches, and causing a distraction and other behavioral issues," he said.

After researching solutions, the school last spring conducted a small-scale, three-week pilot providing breakfast in four of its classrooms.

"It was wonderfully successful," Hecht said of the pilot, also subsidized by the Hawaii Appleseed Center.

Kona Pacific rents a kitchen in a neighboring church to prepare its school meals. (The school began making meals in-house two years ago after the only federally reimburseable vendor in West Hawaii shut down.)

"We do all scratch cooking of whole foods without any refined sugar or flour. We're trying to cook food that looks like something you might eat at home," Hecht said.

Monday's breakfast menu, for example, consisted of frittata with vegetables, potatoes and cheese; brown rice; mixed fruit including local mango; and milk.

This school year Hecht is budgeting \$15,000 to \$16,000 for the program. He said he expects to bring the cost down to between \$8,000 and \$10,000 in future years.

"Because of Appleseed's generous support, this grant gives us some breathing room, it gives us a year to work on getting our costs down so that the program is sustainable," Hecht said. When the grant ends, the school will either cover the cost or find partners to help pay for it.

The yearlong program will be used as an academic study that Hecht hopes other schools will be able to replicate.

"We're really looking at this as an opportunity to develop a model that we can then work to share out statewide, almost like create a kit for other schools ... to really take some of the handwork out of this," he said, noting the large amounts of state and federal paperwork involved.

"The goal is, how can we set this up so that we make it easier for other people to follow in our footsteps?"