



AN AFTERSCHOOL MEALS CASE STUDY

FUELING YOUNG READERS YEAR-ROUND

When Erin Collins started working at the Whitney Library in 2011, she noticed something surprising. Rather than briefly dropping by the library to browse and check out books, many kids stayed all day during the summer. Some showed up by themselves in the morning and left by themselves at closing time, well into the evening. The pattern continued during the school year, with some kids arriving directly from school and leaving when the library closed. The library was their safe space while their parents worked, she realized. Even more surprising was the fact that these children never left for lunch or snacks. Occasionally a child would ask the staff for food, leading Collins to assume that many more were silently hungry. Collins was aware that some children and families must struggle with hunger in this transient community – there are several nearby motels advertising weekly and monthly rates – but she felt powerless to help.



Then an opportunity presented itself. Three Square Food Bank, one of the largest non-profit sponsors of afterschool and summer meals in the Las Vegas area, agreed to provide meals over the summer. Once the library's board approved of having food in the library, kids could get lunch and an afternoon snack at no charge without having to leave the safety of the library (or its air conditioning). A few years later, after Collins became the Youth Services Department Head, the opportunity extended to afterschool meals during the school year.

Since the 2016-2017 school year, the Whitney Library has served afterschool meals Monday to Thursday. Because the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) requires sites to offer structured afterschool enrichment activities in order to serve meals through its At-Risk Afterschool Meals component, the Whitney Library offers tutoring at that time. The Las Vegas-Clark County Library District's foundation pays for tutors through a non-profit that employs teachers as well as a program that employs college students.



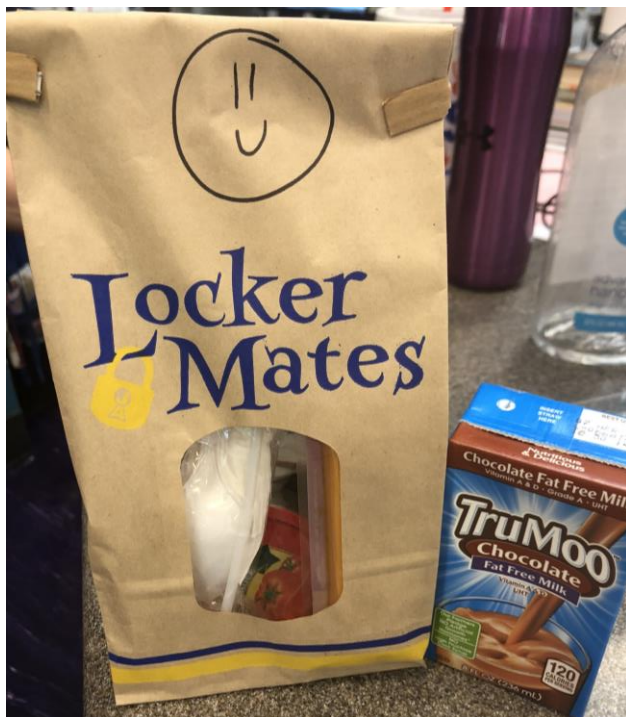
Most kids walk from a nearby elementary and middle school, plus a local high school has a bus stop to drop off students right in front of the library. Collins worked to create a teen zone separate from both the children's section and the rest of the library. While many kids come on their own, there are parents present. On an afternoon in early September, a man walked in with his son to ask if it was true that the library offers free tutoring. He looked relieved to hear a yes. Then a mother arrived with three children. When the youngest was asked about her favorite part of coming to the library, she excitedly replied, "The snacks! The snacks! And the books."

The Whitney Library works with Three Square to provide fresh lunches during the summer. Three Square brings in a refrigeration unit and provides staff to help serve the meals. During the school year, though, the library's own staff serve shelf-stable meals that Three Square delivers earlier in the day. Although the bagged meals meet the requirements to be reimbursed as "suppers" through the CACFP, the library

brands them as “snacks” due to the timing and types of foods offered. They have a three-day menu rotation that includes options like sunbutter with whole-grain graham crackers, string cheese and salsa cups with whole-grain corn chips, and canned tuna with whole-grain crackers plus veggie juice, fruit cups, and shelf-stable milk boxes.

“The kids are in a total routine – at 3:30, they’ll start lining up. They’ll follow the cart as soon as I bring it out,” Collins said. Sure enough, at 3:30 PM, Collins grabbed the cart from a storage area just off the children’s section. It was already neatly stocked with rows of bagged snacks and shelf-stable milk boxes. A boy saw the cart and told his friend, “Wait, hold on, I’m going to get my snack,” and he proceeded to follow the cart to the counter where Collins set up the serving area. Within moments, five were lined up and ready. They clearly knew the drill: use a pump of hand sanitizer, sign the attendance form, and then take a snack.

Collins takes the time to write each child’s name on the bag and draw a smiley face. Writing each name has a practical purpose: if children leave behind their bags, the staff can gently remind them to throw them away. Just as important to Collins, it also gives her a moment to interact with each child and convey how much the staff cares about them. She thinks that the goodwill generated by these interactions as well as by the food itself has built a more positive environment. “Since we got the food, it’s helped us to manage behavior,” she noted.



When asked whether spilled food or discarded bags are an issue, Collins shrugged and asked in return, “Would you rather have hungry kids and clean floors or full, happy kids and some sunflower seeds on the floor? I would take the sunflower seeds any day.” Still, she has a vacuum, and she assigns staff to wipe down the tables throughout the afternoon. A “share bin” on the serving counter provides a convenient place for kids to put unwanted items while also allowing kids who need more food to take it.



For the 2018-2019 school year, they started off ordering forty snacks per day and served around thirty on the very first day of school. Soon those forty snacks were disappearing within twenty minutes. Within a few weeks of starting the school year, they were up to ordering sixty snacks per day. Less than a month into the school year, nearly all of those sixty get served within an hour. Collins loves that the kids don’t have to sign up in advance to get a meal, and she also loves that the meals are free for all of them.

“Some kids may go home and eat dinner later, but for others, I know this is their only dinner. But there’s no stigma, so the kids who really need it don’t get made fun of. A huge part of getting meals to kids who need them is giving them to everyone.”

- Erin Collins, Youth Services Department Head, Whitney Library, Las Vegas-Clark County Library District

According to Collins, more people are coming through the doors since they started offering meals, and they serve more people through the meal programs than any other formal program offered by the library. She can’t say that the meals have boosted the library’s circulation, but she noted that decreasing circulation is an issue across the library district and beyond. That said, offering meals is one way for libraries to stay relevant in the digital era.