

Gates Chili gives free meals on bus wheels to kids in need

Meals

Spartan Eats food bus is a project that was two years in the making

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

A big white school bus in Gates isn't picking up kids for school. It's giving school lunches a ride.

In July, Gates Chili Central School District rolled out the Spartan Eats bus, a used school bus converted into a school cafeteria lunch line on wheels.

Pulling up to a Gates apartment complex, Donna Bailey hits the horn a few times before she pulls the bus over to a stop. She beeps to alert kids that lunch is here. Families with young children were waiting on the sidewalk as Bailey and fellow district employee Jennifer Rosario set up the food.

The menu included blueberry waffles, sausage, hash browns, apples, bagels, yogurt, peanut butter and jelly, or a pizza package. Orange juice, milk and chocolate milk were the drink options. The cost to eat? Nothing.

It's still summer vacation, but kids want to get on this school bus.

Gates resident Khadedra Brown said her 7-year-old tells her, "'I'm waiting to hear the horn.' He loves it."

Developing a mobile meals bus was a pipe dream, said Debbi Beauvais, the district's nutrition director. She had heard of bigger districts throughout the nation that had a food truck. She wanted one. One day Beauvais made a comment about the bus,

and Superintendent Kimberle Ward told her they would try to make it work.

Beauvais welled up with tears as she stood outside the bus about two years later.

"The reality of it gets me really emotional because here it is. We did it," Beauvais said.

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Jennifer Rosario, right, with food services at the Gates Chili School District, serves a hot lunch including hash browns to kids at Memorial Park in Gates inside the new Spartan Eats food bus on Thursday. The bus is the creation of the Gates Chili School District. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Donna Bailey, center, with bus transportation at the Gates Chili School District, serves a hot lunch to

kids at Memorial Park. Spartan Eats is part of the district's summer food program seeking to help families in high-poverty areas. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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Spartan Eats is part of the summer food program in the school district seeking to help families in high-poverty areas. A national program allows districts that have a certain threshold of poverty to provide anyone 18 years old or younger with free meals five days a week.

More than half of Gates Chili students are on free or reduced lunch throughout the school year.

"In the summer when school is out, and these kids rely on the school meals every day, breakfast and lunch (during the school year), you wonder where they get their meals from," Beauvais said.

The district has been working to make sure every child is able to eat, Ward said. The summer meals program runs for six to seven weeks out of 14 locations.

The district serves about 1,000 meals a day at district locations and about 80 to 100 meals off the bus.

"This was an opportunity for us to get to the kids rather than the kids getting to us, which is often difficult especially for some of our high-poverty families," Ward said. The bus makes four stops: Memorial Park, Lions Park, Northampton and the Chase Woods Manor apartments.

"We don't ask any questions," Beauvais said. "We're all about feeding kids." Adults can also eat for \$4.

Karley Bodensteiner brought her 4-year-old son out to the bus about three times a week. It was a fun activity and the food was something different from what she may cook, Bodensteiner said.

Riding stop to stop, Bailey and Rosario said news about the bus has been slowly getting out since Spartan Eats began making stops in July.

"In the very beginning the only way it was going to happen was if they were able to get a bus donated," said transportation supervisor Matt Helmbold. A used school bus costs about \$20,000. "It's not something districts can just cough up," he said.

The bus was donated by Matthews Buses Inc. The paint job, decals, and appliances were also donated. The work for the interior of the bus was done in house, a point of pride for Gates Chili.

As a result, Spartan Eats has a minimal impact on the district's budget, Helmbold said.

Getting a mobile bus to "ensure that those kids have a healthy, nutritious meal throughout the summer as they do through the school year, it was a win-win for us. A no-brainer," Ward said.

When Rosario and Bailey saw new faces come aboard Thursday, they chatted about how it was good to see new faces stop and eat. By the end of the summer program, Rosario and Bailey had gotten to know their regulars. This girl comes alone, this grandma plays with her grandchildren on a swing then they run over, and "there is a boy who can't leave his house so I take it to him," Rosario said.

As the bus pulled up to a Gates apartment complex, Loretta Crutcher was watching her grandchildren on a swing, just as Rosario said she would be. Crutcher stepped on the bus and thanked the women for the meals and her experience over the summer.

"We're going to miss this," Crutcher said. Her 12-year-old granddaughter Jordan Beaty sat on the bus and said the blueberry waffles were the best she had ever had.

"They look forward to coming up to the truck," said Crutcher, who brought her grandchildren almost every day.

Spartan Eats finished its last summer meals route on Friday, but the district has plans for the bus all year

Lyons and Memorial parks are popular stops serving kids participating in Gates Recreation summer camps. Campers fill their trays with three or more items.

If camp staff forgets to mention what is on the menu, the kids will ask. “They really enjoy the choices,” said Ellen Fridman, a camp supervisor at Memorial Park.

The bus serves a significantly lower number of meals at the apartments. It’s likely that many residents don’t know it’s available. Feeding just one child is worth it, Ward said.

The district aspires to have a broader reach next summer. Gates Chili is considering expanding into more neighborhoods and exploring opportunities to serve meals at local vacation Bible schools.

Donations made Spartan Eats possible.

long, using the bus for concessions, education and community events.

The sky is the limit with Spartan Eats, Ward said.

“Nutrition is so important for growth and development, and for learning. We want them to be ready to learn when they come back to school in the fall,” Beauvais said.

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Kids at Memorial Park in Gates run to line up outside the new Spartan Eats food bus during its lunchtime stop Thursday. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“Nutrition is so important for growth and development, and for learning.” Debbi Beauvais

Gates Chili nutrition director