

Hungry for a day?



Pocomoke teachers get 'fast' lesson on student hunger



“You see other people who have and you don’t. It was challenging.”

ANNETTE WALLACE
POCOMOKE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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Elizabeth Jones wasn’t feeling like herself on the morning of Jan. 29. ♦ The 17-year Spanish teacher at Pocomoke High School hadn’t eaten since she had lunch at 12:30 p.m. the day before. She woke up feeling hungry. ♦ “I know my brain’s not working the way it should be because it’s not getting any fuel,” she said. ♦ It’s a sentiment 18-year-old Pocomoke High School senior Ivy Saunders knows all too well. ♦ When she was younger, there were days when she didn’t know when her next meal at home would be. These days, that’s not a problem, she said. But because she can relate, when she has extra food, she brings it to school and leaves it in a freezer for those who may need it. ♦ “I hate seeing people who don’t have anything,” she said.

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STAFF PHOTOS BY JUSTIN ODENDHAL
A Pocomoke student grabs breakfast at Pocomoke High on Tuesday. At top, Pocomoke students pack the cafeteria for breakfast.

COVER STORY

Hungry

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A freshly cooked breakfast was waiting for Jones and her fellow teachers soon after they arrived at the school Jan. 29. Jones took part in a professional development exercise in which staff members chose not to eat from lunch until breakfast the next day, in an attempt to simulate how impoverished students may feel on a typical school day.

Many students in Pocomoke City — a municipality with a median household income of \$32,844 and where 26.8 percent of individuals being below poverty level, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — don't know when their next meal will be.

The last lunch period ends at 12:30 p.m. at Pocomoke High School. Students who take part in the school's after-school academy are offered a light dinner at 2:46 p.m. Breakfast is offered before the school day starts when the buses come in — as early as 7:15 a.m. — though most of the buses arrive at about 7:40 and about half the student body walks to school, according to Principal Annette Wallace. The first class of the day starts at 8 a.m. The first lunch period is at 11.

For some students, those meals are their only opportunities to eat for the day.

Nearly 60 percent of Pocomoke High School students took advantage of free or reduced meals in 2015, according to the Maryland Department of Education. Wallace estimates that figure is presently closer to 75 percent, with some students afraid of the stigma attached to the status. The figure is compared to 38.9 percent in Worcester County and 38.5 percent, statewide.

Free or reduced price meals status is based on family income guidelines set by the federal government.

"The thing about when you're at school is, everyone has such a good mask on, you never know who's going through what at home," said Janelle, an 18-year-old senior who requested to only be identified by her first name. "You'd never know if they're eating or not."

The student perspective

Janelle has had free or reduced price meals as long as she can remember.

Growing up, she would feed herself and her two younger brothers when her single mother was working one of her two jobs or didn't have time to shop.

"The good thing about my mom is she has always made a way out of no way," she said. "Even if we had a can of soup for dinner, we had something. We've always had something. I've never went without (food), unless by choice."

Janelle's a single mother, as well, raising a 2-year-old daughter. They live with Janelle's grandmother in Pocomoke City after her mother moved to Texas with her brothers. She decided to stay on Delmarva because she wanted to finish her senior year in one place. She has been at Pocomoke High School since her junior year and went to school in Salisbury before that.

Since her daughter was born, she has worked at a local McDonald's to provide an income for herself and her daughter.

Janelle, who has attended three high schools on the peninsula, said her experience at Pocomoke High School has been the most positive, because students are more accepting of one other. At other schools, she was embarrassed to be a student who needed to have a free or reduced price meal.

"There's just so many people who get it," she said. "We can't be passing judgement on each other if a lot of us are getting free lunch."

School staff has been understanding, Saunders said. She started at the school in September, but has had free or reduced price meals during her entire school career.

"The staff here is really supportive, especially when it comes down to the students," she said. "They care about the students more than themselves."

When Janelle didn't eat between leaving school and coming back the next day, she described the feeling as draining.

"You're not yourself when you're hungry," she said. "That is a true statement."

"It was challenging"

The staff exercise was developed by school instructional coach Traci Record as part of a day devoted to the student voice. She interviewed 13 students and asked them questions about life as a student.

The hunger exercise was one situation she could try to emulate, she said.

"Unless we know where some of our students are coming from, we won't be able to relate to them on a meaningful level," said Karen Mohammadioun, a math teacher who grew up on the Eastern Shore as a child in poverty.

For Jones, the exercise helped her gain a better understanding about how some of her students feel on a daily basis — why they may be in a



STAFF PHOTO BY JUSTIN ODENDHAL

Many students in Pocomoke City don't know when their next meal will be.

bad mood or seem lethargic. During her fast, she started to feel hungry at about 8 p.m. She struggled to sleep because her belly was growling, she said.

"I think it's more common than a lot of the teachers here realize," she said. "It's very easy to have empathy for somebody but unless you don't have anything to eat, you don't really know how that feels."

Wallace also took part, not eating from about 12:30 p.m. until 8:55 a.m. the next day.

"I was here at school until 9 last night and the kids were eating all around me," she said. "I think that's what kids face, though. You see other people who have and you don't. It was challenging."

Students who spoke with The Daily Times were surprised to hear about the staff exercise. About half the school staff took part in it, Wallace said.

Janelle thought it would be unlikely for the exercise to happen at a different school, adding that Pocomoke High School staff care about students beyond attendance and assignments.

"I'm really proud that my teachers did that at my school, but at the same time it's hard to emulate something like that because you know the next day you're going to go home and eat," she said. "For a student who doesn't know where their next few dollars is coming from, it's going to be completely a different experience because a lot of people lose hope."

While there was good logic behind the staff taking part in the exercise, Saunders would like to see more fundraisers and support for the local food bank, she said.

"It was a good logic to do it," she said. "But it will be a bigger and better logic to have a backup plan just in case there's a kid who doesn't have anything."

Incentives and insisting

School administrators are aware of the discrepancy in the free and reduce meals (FARMS) population at the high school versus its feeder schools. The FARMS rate at Pocomoke Elementary School in 2015 was 71.3 percent and at Pocomoke Middle School it was 64.7 percent, as op-

posed to the aforementioned 59.6 percent at the high school.

For high school students, there's incentive beyond a free meal for those eligible to sign up for free and reduced meals.

Students enrolled in free and reduced meals are able to take dual enrollment courses for free and pay a reduced price for advanced placement courses, Wallace said, adding the lower prices was the catalyst for two students to recently enroll in the program.

"It has implications on more than them just eating and they don't realize that," she said.

In the last four years, the number of students who have taken part in AP and dual enrollment courses has increased by more than 50 percent, Wallace said. Money had previously been a hindrance, she said.

She believes education is their ticket out of poverty.

"When you start taking down those road blocks for kids, you start seeing more growth from them," she said. "If we can get them to school and get them the education beyond high school, really they no longer have to live in poverty."

Over the years, school administrators have learned the most effective way to reach out to parents is to conduct home visits. They also use a Facebook page to help spread the word, as parent-teacher conferences are not always effective.

Kennis Austin, one of the school's assistant principals, has conducted many visits, including one to a home in town that had no electricity and was covered in trash.

He acknowledged to the staff how Pocomoke is a small town with big-city problems. It's a tough place to teach, he said, but they are ultimately the ones who make a difference in a student's life.

"I think the danger is, we've become desensitized to what's going on in the community," he said to them. "We see so much of it, (but) we still have to be cognizant of where these kids come from."

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STAFF PHOTO BY JON BLEIWEIS

Pocomoke High School staff members are served breakfast during a professional development session Friday, Jan. 29. The staff fasted from lunch the day prior as a way to emulate student hunger.