

Summer Meals at the Library

Anne McLaughlin, Head of Youth Services; West Warwick Public Library, Rhode Island
annemn@wwpl.org

Lunch at the library? Imagine a children's librarian jumping up and down in excitement at a meeting with other community agencies. That was the response of this children's librarian reacting positively to the proposal that perhaps the public library would be interested in being a summer meal site for 2016. Our library was meeting with other community agencies concerned with the health and well-being of the town.

Our connections in these Health Equity Zone meetings, including the Food Access committee, led us to connecting with the school department lunch company provider, Sodexo. They already offered summer meals at summer programs based at the school and were very willing to expand to providing summer meals at the public library.

The 2016 CLSP summer reading theme "On Your Mark Get Set, Read" focus on health and fitness provided a perfect launching pad for offering summer meals at the library. A wonderful partnership was formed with the school department and Sodexo, and since 2016 our library has offered summer meals four days a week for six weeks, serving just under 600 meals the first summer to over 1000 the third summer.

Lunches are delivered to the library and trained library staff(usually 2 of us) hand them out. Lunch is very much a social event with no stigma for children up through age 18. Families with children of all ages, including a sizeable group of teens, eat and socialize in our air-conditioned program room where we set up about 8 tables and 40 chairs with many preferring to sit on the floor picnic style. There are coloring pages, games to play, and a box of "free" books to take home. Summer learning programs are now structured around lunch and have included morning family music programs, playgroup and legos, free ballet class, storytime, a book discussion group, and field trips.

Afternoon programs right after lunch have included science clubs, Wii gaming, chess and board games. Our youth staff includes two full-time librarians and two part-time support staff so teen staff – paid and unpaid - have been invaluable for room set up and clean up plus help with programs.

Most programs are presented by staff, but we also have a volunteer who teaches ballet, a family music program at a nominal fee, and we have even had school librarians present programs. Teen volunteers play the piano and flute during lunch and play games with children after lunch.

We have made the most of connections in the community with summer youth employment programs, the local community garden, and a local farm which supplies food for farmer's markets. For three summers now we have hosted a farmer's market, and had family field trips to the local farm, and the local community garden, all centered around lunch. Our library has never been busier in the summer and books fly off the shelves.

What could be better than that?