

SCHOOL BUSES, NOW EMPTY OF STUDENTS, BUT LOADED WITH FOOD

- By MICHAEL MORTENSEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
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Woodland Heights Principal Eric Johnson hands a box of lunches to a volunteer on a school bus, for delivery to students along the city's school bus routes on Tuesday. (Alan MacRae photo/for The Laconia Daily Sun)

- Alan L. MacRae

LACONIA — Seven school buses rolled out of the Woodland Heights School parking lot in Laconia at noon Tuesday, delivering hundreds of meals to children around the city.

The distribution in the city was launched just two days after Gov. Chris Sununu ordered the closing of all public schools through April 3, one of many extraordinary steps taken as a precaution to stem the coronavirus outbreak and rising number of COVID-19 cases in the state.

The buses followed the usual bus routes, delivering 1,200 breakfasts and 1,200 lunches, according to Tim Goossens, Laconia School District's food service director.

Between 10 and 12 food service workers, aided by about 20 volunteers, worked in the school's kitchen much of Tuesday morning packaging the meals before the bags were wheeled out on food service carts, where drivers from First Student bus company helped load them onto the buses.

Got Lunch! Laconia, the Santa Fund, and Cereal Heroes helped in the effort.

Laconia was one of a number of school districts which are or soon will be using buses to get food to needy children while schools are closed.

The Inter-Lakes School District, which serves Meredith, Center Harbor, and Sandwich, hopes to begin a similar delivery program today, according to information posted on the district's website. The Shaker Regional School District, which includes Belmont, plans to start using buses for deliveries next Monday, Superintendent Michael Tursi said. The Governor Wentworth Regional School District, based in Wolfeboro, will have a similar program.

Goossens said the meals are made up of non-perishable food items, including shelf-stable juices, and milk, and fruit cups and apple sauce.

There are 2,000 students enrolled in the Laconia school system. But because the district has received a waiver from certain federal school lunch regulations, any child in the city can receive the food. And because more than half of the city's school children — 52 percent — qualify for free or reduced lunch, the food can be distributed without charge, Goossens said.

Another regulation which the federal government has waived during the pandemic is the requirement that the food be eaten at "congregate feeding" sites, Goossens said.