

August is... BACK TO SCHOOL month!

Free and reduced meals: What this program means to our districts and their families

BY BARBARA PROFFITT
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The free and reduced meals program, available through your local school district, is an important part of registering your child for school.

According to local school officials, many families don't sign up for it when in fact it could benefit many children who are not already receiving help.

"Most school districts participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)," explained USD 362 Food Service Director Todd Wollard. "This is a federally funded program, through the USDA, to subsidize state School Nutrition Programs (SNP)."

"It provides significant financial relief to low-income families, ensuring their children receive at least one healthy meal per day without straining the household budget," added USD 346 Superintendent Shawn Thomas. He explained, "The program often includes nutrition education, promoting healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime. This is crucial in combating childhood obesity

and related health issues."

USD 344 Superintendent Don Epps echoed those thoughts, noting, "Most folks do not realize how simply applying can benefit their district, and possibly, their families - the eligibility requirements are not the same as other benefit guidelines."

"Prairie View USD 362 and most districts around participate in this program through the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), Child Nutrition and Wellness (CNW)," Wollard added.

Wollard went on to explain that the district SNP's are reimbursed for school meals that meet the required nutrition guidelines.

"The amount of reimbursement is determined by the qualification of each district household as Free, Reduced, or Paid status," he noted.

"Also, schools that participate in the free and reduced lunch program may receive additional funding and resources from federal and state governments," noted Thomas. "This can support other educational programs and infrastructure improvements."

"It directly affects the status of the district their student is in and can affect other fund-

ing," stated Epps.

Wollard explained that the benefit determination is made through applying for benefits, based on household income, and/or Direct Certification by the state. The monthly number of meals served, for each of these categories, is submitted to KSDE and then the district is 'reimbursed' for these meals, which go directly to the food service fund. In addition, the number and qualifications of household applications received by each school district, calculates a percentage of the number of Free, Reduced and Paid meals for that district.

"This is why it is important that all households for each school district complete an application," stated Wollard, adding, "It determines their qualification for meal costs, and contributes to the calculation for Free and Reduced benefits for the district. This percentage is used to determine the status of that district, such as an At Risk District."

He then explained that the classification resulting from that determination for the district as a whole can help school districts meet other possibilities for federal and

SEE **FREE, A7**

Incoming freshmen face new graduation requirements

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With classes resuming within the next week for Linn County students, incoming freshmen (the Class of 2028) will face not more but different graduation requirements from their upper-class peers.

Still in place among the state's minimum 21 credits needed for graduation are three required credits each in mathematics, science, and social studies, as well as one in fine arts. Changes for freshmen will include the four general credits in English/language arts (ELA) now to be 3.5 credits in ELA and a half credit in communications. As well, one general required credit in physical education (P.E.) will now be a half-credit specifically in both P.E. and health.

The changes come as a result of a November 2022 decision by the Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE) that establishes a different approach to electives.

WHAT HAD BEEN six electives before will now be reduced to 4.5 elective credits because an additional credit in advanced STEM (science/technology/engineering/math) will be required, as will a half-credit of financial literacy. And the 4.5 elective credits will be required to be tied to the students' Individual Plan of Study (IPS).

In addition, incoming freshmen will need at least two post-secondary assets to meet graduation requirements. Among assets listed by a March 2024 Kansas State Department of Education communique, though not all-inclusive, are industry-recognized certification, at least 40 community service hours, youth apprenticeships, WorkKey level of silver or higher, nine or more college hours, IPS-related workplace learning, an ACT score of 21 or higher, an SAT score of 1200 or higher, senior-level exit projects, at least two high school athletics/activities, 95 percent high school attendance rate, or state

program sets its own definition for what counts as 'locally grown or raised.'

Can local meats be served in child nutrition programs?

Yes. Livestock and poultry must be processed under federal or state inspection.

assessment scores of 3 or 4 that demonstrate college readiness in ELA, math and science.

SENIORS ALREADY AT all three Linn County high schools are required more credits, as set by the local boards of education, than the state minimum to graduate: 25 at Pleasanton and 24 each at Jayhawk Linn and Prairie View.

Administrators at all three districts said they foresee no major obstacles in meeting the new requirements. In fact, Kate Gronquist, Prairie View High principal, said that, at her school, "The students won't notice much. It will be more noticeable at the administrative level," with the added required IPS and asset layers.

The addition of the half-credit financial literacy requirement is not an issue at Prairie View as it has already been in place as a full-year credit for graduation, and Gronquist expects no change. Though the new half-credit communications requirement can include debate, forensics, journalism or public speaking, she anticipates that most will gain it through a semester speech course.

IPS has been in place statewide for a decade, but only now will it become state-required for the 4.5 elective credits and audited. Gronquist, noting she is a "big (IPS) fan," said that students prepare their initial individual plans of study at the eighth-grade level through a "career and life planning" exercise.

Gronquist admitted that a few students "may struggle with meeting assets," but she said that the inclusion of participating in at least two athletic/activities during high school will help.

PLEASANTON, LIKE PRAIRIE VIEW, also already has required a full year of consumer/personal finance that meets the financial literacy addition. And, like at Prairie View, eighth-grade students work on their IPS, exercises that include personal assessment and strength

Both USD 346 and 362 are participating in the Farm to Plate initiative, with USD 346 recently accepting bids and donations from several sources for meat and USD 362 working with several local producers to provide locally raised beef and produce for their district.

Can fresh chicken eggs be used in child nutrition programs?

Yes. Eggs must meet Grade SEE **KANSAS, A7**

finding, said Sara Conley, high school principal.

She said the new half-credit communications requirement is "imbedded now in our curriculum." Even so, she said plans are to offer a half-credit public speaking course.

Conley said their current STEM curriculum has advanced math and science in place but would need to consider advanced technology and engineering.

She said that, at Pleasanton already, "we try to align with their IPS" for their electives, though she admitted that a student's IPS focus can change during their four years, such as when a student decides as a junior or senior a new interest in being an emergency medical technician.

For students to meet the new asset requirements, Conley admitted that her school's close physical proximity to STARS (Southeastern Technical Academy for Rural Students) "will be a big helper in students getting industry-recognized certification." Not only the STARS partnership with Fort Scott Community College, but Conley also cited on-line courses being taken by Pleasanton students in offerings such as graphic design and farm/ranch management through Allen Community College, Iola, also qualify as post-secondary assets.

AT JAYHAWK LINN, Shawn Thomas, district superintendent of schools, said the new half-credit of financial literacy is already a part of the school's senior-level social studies curriculum. And he said the school "is in great shape" for meeting the new advanced STEM requirements.

"We have a lot of different options," said Thomas about the STEM credit, specifically mentioning Geometry in Construction offering.

Where the school will require a "minor fix" is in meeting the new half-credit communications requirement, he said.

"We can tweak our ELA to put specific curriculum pieces in," Thomas said. "And we have time."

He said that, in the several years that IPS has been in place, Jayhawk-Linn has tied it to electives--and will now beyond the required 4.5 elective IPS credits.

About the new IPS and asset requirements, Thomas said that "the state wants to beef everything up. It's a great opportunity to help kids plan for the future and to see the opportunities in front of them."

Kansas Farm to Plate and how it aids our producers and our kids

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The Kansas Farm to Plate initiative incorporates the use of fresh, healthy foods from local sources into a myriad of programs ranging from the school breakfast and lunch program to summer food service programs.

But the question is how does Farm to Plate benefit the producers and Kansas kids?

Through this program the producers can diversify their customer base, creating a more stable market for products, while increasing finan-

cial opportunities by selling to an institutional market. When local foods are offered participants are more likely to consume the menu item, meaning less food waste and an increased consumption of vital nutrients.

This not only helps our schools waste less food, it also means our kids are getting the best local products available.

"The Farm to Plate initiative is a USDA and KSDE effort to connect school districts who participate in the federal and state Child Nutrition and Wellness programs with regional or local farms and ranchers to serve healthy

meals using locally procured foods," explained USD 362 Food Service Director Todd Wollard.

"Beginning this school year, 2024-2025," Wollard continued, "the USDA and KSDE has passed legislation which has left the definition of 'local' to the discretion of each school district. Meaning there is no requirement that locally grown and locally raised products need to be within a certain area or distance. The Prairie View USD 362 School District is fortunate to have several local producers within a few miles of our District area and many are community patrons of the District."

What are local foods?

Local foods can be from any food group - meats, eggs, grains, fruits, vegetables or dairy. Each child nutrition




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