

Meals for all the students

August 29, 2019



In years past, families were required to formally apply if they wanted free or reduced-price school lunches for their children. Not anymore.

Every student in all of the Del Norte County schools, kindergarten through high school, will be able to eat both breakfast and lunch free of charge this year, regardless of the student's socioeconomic background.

For the first time ever, all of the public schools in the Del Norte County Unified School District qualify for the Community Eligibility Program (CEP), which enables the county to feed students two meals during the school day.

"We're excited. It's all about feeding kids and feeding them the best foods that we can," said Deborah Kravitz, the school district's nutrition services director.

The district piloted the meals program at Margaret Keating Elementary School in Klamath two years ago. Last year, officials implemented the program at all of the county's K-8 public schools.

Impressed with the program's quality and acceptance, the Del Norte Nutrition Services Department studied the data and determined the concept could be expanded to the high schools as well.

That benefited the county's residents because the cost of students' meals once they reached high school could put certain families in financial distress, said Michael Hawkins, the director of grants and community outreach.

As for the meals themselves, as often as possible they will contain locally sourced food, which in turn benefits local vendors, said school officials.

"Our district and Deborah, she definitely goes out of her way – more than she's required to by the state – to include local partners, local farmers, local dairy producers, local ranchers," Hawkins said. "She's done an absolutely fabulous job doing locally-sourced foods."

Adding the high schools to the school meals program was no easy process. It took the combined efforts of Kravitz, information technology director Ryan Bahten, student information data specialist Elise Hoff, nutrition services secretary Julie Clark, and Ronda Stemach, a data visualization and reporting manager, to gather and analyze the data before reaching a decision.

The program's availability is determined by what's called the identified student population - the number of students who directly qualify for the free meals. A student directly qualifies for the Community Eligibility Program if he or she is homeless, in foster care, or if their family receives government provisions from certain sources such as the Food Distribution Program on Indian reservations.

"To determine whether or not (the program) is viable or makes sense financially to the district, we have to look at all of those direct certifications and compare that to enrollment," Kravitz said.

Once those factors were analyzed, the district opted to move forward with including the high schools in the free lunches.

So, what does this mean? According to Kravitz, free meals for all takes away any stigma the former free and reduced-price program might have generated. And it offers every student the same number of nutritious meals, to enable them to better focus on their studies.