

SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM STRETCHES FOOD BUDGETS

With the start of school, parents are thinking about the many costs that come with sending their children to school. However, some families are failing to take advantage of a federal program that puts their tax dollars to work and can save them a lot of money over the school year.

Everyday, public and parochial schools, offer healthy meals to students through federal school nutrition programs. In addition, everyday, low and moderate income families take advantage of the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs to feed their school-age children for free or at reduced prices. Many Grant County schools offer both the School Breakfast and the National School Lunch Programs. Students can qualify for free or reduced priced lunch and breakfast based on their family's income.

However, many families fail to apply for these programs with their school administration to see if they are eligible for free or reduced priced meals. Parents must fill out a simple form, listing children in school and household income. Self-employed parents, i.e. farmers, need only submit a copy of their 2004 1040 tax form to verify yearly income. Monthly income is then figured by dividing taxable income by 12. All information is kept confidential and children who qualify for free or reduced price meals are not singled out or publicly identified.

With approximately 180 school days per year, parents can save about \$360 per child, depending on the cost of their school's lunch. The cost for a reduced price lunch is \$0.40. Parents whose children receive reduced price lunches can save nearly \$300 a child.

Many Grant County schools offer breakfast as well. Parents qualifying for free breakfasts could save \$180 per child per year. Families receiving reduced price breakfasts could save \$75 a year. Families with several children in school, from kindergarten to high school, could reduce their food budgets by a considerable amount; this money could then be used for other expenses.

Taking part in the programs actually makes funds available from the federal government, allowing schools to keep prices low, benefiting all the students in the school. The more students who use these programs, the longer schools will be able to hold prices at their current level. By applying for the meal program, parents not only help schools keep prices reasonable, but the number of students who qualify for free or reduced price meals determines state and federal funding for other programs that benefit students.

School offices have detailed charts giving income guidelines for both free and reduced meals. For example, the maximum income for a family of four to qualify for free meals is \$25,155 per year (\$484 per week). A family of four that earns more than this, but below \$35,798 a year (\$689 per week), can get reduced price meals.

For more information on school meal programs and an application, contact your child's school or the UW-Extension's Nutrition Education Program at...