

End of school means end of meals for some children

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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Ask any child what's the best thing about summer, and he or she is likely to reply, "No school!" For many students in Liberal, however, the end of school means less nutrition. That isn't the case for those children and teens enrolled in the USD 480 summer school program. Through the district's main cafeteria, those students have continued to receive sack lunches all month, at the summer school locations of Washington Elementary, Cottonwood Intermediate and Liberal High School. The district also delivers sack lunches to one satellite location, the Liberal Parks and Recreation Building at Blue Bonnet Park.

"We make the lunches available to anyone 18 or younger, but most of the kids that have been participating are enrolled in summer school," said nutrition services director Connie Vogt. "Right now, our numbers are running around 750, 800 every day."



Because the summer school students are trying pack as much learning into the day as possible, Vogt said, “what we do is a little bit different than our regular meal pattern. The teachers just want to get the kids fed, and back into education, so we pack the lunches, they grab them, and go right back into the classroom. It’s almost like a working lunch.”

When summer school concludes at the end of June, however, those brown-bag meals will also stop. And for children from low-income or unstable homes, that could mean a hungry summer.

“It’s a six-week period until school starts up again, and that’s a long time for kids that are hungry,” Vogt said. “I know we have hungry kids in Liberal. We do our best to provide them as much nutrition as we can, but at this point, the district just does it during the month of summer school and that’s it. I can only hope that those kids will find food.”

One possibility is the walk-in meal program at Stepping Stone Shelter, located at 1015 N. Washington Ave. Just a few blocks north of Washington Elementary School, it is accessible for families and young people who live in the northeast Liberal neighborhood.

Stepping Stone director Pat Allsbury sees an increase in walk-in meal traffic during the summer months.

“Last July and August, our walk-in numbers jumped from around 500 to nearly 700,” she said. “I don’t have breakdowns for which meals were breakfast, lunch or supper, but we definitely saw an increase.”

To participate in the shelter’s free meal program, people “just have to come through the door,” said Allsbury. “We do have a simple meal ticket plan to ensure that everybody who wants them can get 30 meals for the month.” There’s no requirement about how or when the meals are consumed. “Some people will come and eat three meals a day for 10 days until their paycheck comes in, and some will use the ticket to have one meal a day all month,” she said, noting that the ticket system was devised to prevent people from taking unnecessary advantage of the shelter’s services.

“I figure a meal a day is enough to keep anyone from starving, and it also keeps people from abusing the system,” said Allsbury. She added that those potential abusers “aren’t the children. I don’t like the idea of any child going hungry through the summer.”

In the past, Allsbury has seen unaccompanied children as young as 12 come to the shelter to eat. Occasionally, an older, teenaged sibling will bring a group of younger children to the walk-in program.

“I would really hesitate to advertise to children younger than 12, because I don’t think they need to be on the street by themselves,” Allsbury said.

However, like Vogt, she is pained at the thought of hungry children in Liberal.

“I know the Kansas Food Bank has a backpack program that tries to send shelf-stable foods home over the weekends [during the school year] for children who are identified as having food instability,” she said. “I’m not sure if anyone in Liberal has gotten involved with that. I know some churches in town use the Kansas Food Bank to help stock their food pantries.” Allsbury would like to see the community address the problem of hungry children, though she said Stepping Stone is already maxed out in terms of its ability to provide services and programs. Vogt, too, sees the problem but is uncertain about solutions.

“I don’t know what the right answer is,” she said. “I work year-round, and so when the summer school program wraps up, I’m getting ready for the free and reduced-lunch applications for the upcoming school year, and getting everything in line for the students. Everything thinks there’s nothing to do in the summertime, but there is a lot.”

As for the hungry kids, “I can only hope things go well for them,” said Vogt. “I really do. I don’t like thinking about them leaving school and having nothing to eat.”

Shelter feeds community through walk-in program

Stepping Stone Shelter opens its dining room to any person in the community who is hungry and unable to obtain food. The walk-in meal program provides 30 tickets per calendar month, with no restrictions about when or how the tickets are redeemed. Meals are free, and last one hour:

Breakfast — 7 a.m.

Lunch — 12 noon

Dinner — 6 p.m.

Everyone is welcome, said director Pat Allsbury.