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Kids Eat Free

Free school meals show over 50% of children live at poverty level.

by Ashley Murphy

In today's struggling economy, more and more people are looking for relief to their everyday financial burdens. One such burden is the cost of education. Not the education itself, but the cost associated with it. Not only can the cost

of public schooling be a hardship on those in lower income families, it can also be a hardship to many struggling middle-class families. These costs aren't just incurred from the purchases of textbooks, supplies, or extras for specific classes, but also from school breakfast and lunch time

meals. To make sure every student can afford their meals, schools offer several programs to help families in need to help with the cost. However, federal spending for these programs total in the billions and continue to rise.

In Bradley County, more than five out of ten school

children receive free or reduced taxpayer subsidized meals designed to help families facing hardship or living at the poverty level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau for 2007, there were only 15.7% of families below poverty level in Bradley County, but the use of free school meal programs suggests the number should otherwise be higher. If school meal programs are being administered as intended the numbers indicate over 50 percent of local families with school age children are living close to poverty level, and unless there is widespread meal program abuse, statistics show a similar level of poverty across Tennessee.

One particular program, known as The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), was established in 1946 under the National School Lunch Act and signed by President Harry Truman. The program provides federal assistance to all public schools, nonprofit private schools and residential child care facilities. Every educational institution in Tennessee is part of the NSLP.

Each school here in Cleveland and Bradley County must offer breakfast and lunch to all students. At elementary level, meals for breakfast are \$1.25 and lunches are set at \$2.00. In middle schools and high schools, lunches are only a quarter more at \$2.25. Reduced breakfasts for all grades are \$0.30 and lunches are \$0.40.

Statistics provided by Cleveland City Schools Child Nutrition Supervisor Shelly

Copeland, show there are 62.01% of students receiving free or reduced lunches and breakfasts. Data shows that as of November 30, 2009, there were 5088 students enrolled in the City School system. Of that 5088, there are 2765 students receiving free meals and 390 receiving reduced prices, for a total of 3155 students. Only 1933 students actually pay the full \$2.00 or \$2.25 for their lunch or the \$1.25 for breakfast, which the school system is required to supply.

Based on the information provided by Bradley County Schools Nutrition Supervisor Emily Brown, there are 53.3% of students in the Bradley County school system receiving free and reduced meals. The county school system has over twice the students of the city school system, totaling 10423. Of that total number, there are 5555 students receiving free or reduced meals. This leaves 4868 students paying the full price for their school supplied meals.

A chart from the Statewide Report Card 2006 from the State of Tennessee posted on the Tennessee Education Association website (www.teateachers.org) placed Bradley County 42nd out of a list of 136 counties in the state offering free and reduced meal status. Cleveland City Schools was placed 77th on the list.

For the 2005-2006 school year, Williamson County was lowest on the list with only 8.9% of its students in the program. Following is Wilson County at 23.2% and

Maryville City with 23.4%.

In the last three slots for 2005-2006 are Humboldt City with 82.3%, Hancock County with 82.6% and Haywood County at 84.6%. The overall average for the State of Tennessee was 52.9%. These percentages were the latest available to *The People News*.

If a family wishes to participate in the free and reduced lunch program, it is necessary for a parent or guardian to apply at the child's school, where an application form can be obtained. The entire application must be completed, and then returned for processing before approval. The application states that children in households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits or Families First are automatically eligible for free meals. Families in the WIC program (Women, Infants and Children) could also obtain free or reduced price meals. Also, regardless of income, most foster children are eligible for free meals.

The NSLP application also states that those who are not United States citizens, the child or anyone in the family, may also qualify for free or reduced meals being received from the school system.

Household income is a major factor in whether a child can receive free meals. This is based on the Federal Income Guidelines chart laid out by household size. The school will provide a copy of this chart with an application. The chart is adjusted each year based on Federal income poverty guidelines. More information can be found on the National School Lunch Program website at www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/.

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