

Board considers increase in lunch prices

School board will vote on 25-cent increase

By PAMELA JOHNSON
REPORTER-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Next year, school lunches could cost 25 cents more under a proposal before the Thompson School District Board of Education.

The board will consider approving an across-the-board increase that would apply to lunches and breakfast meals at all schools in the district to cover increasing costs, including the amount that the district pays for its food. The higher price would make school meals range from \$1.75 to \$3.25 depending upon

the grade level, and bring in an extra \$159,993.

The Nutrition Services Fund, which covers the district meal program, is a special revenue fund, meaning the money that goes directly into this fund must pay for all the costs with no general fund dollars. Next year, the proposed budget anticipates

SEE FOOD, 8A

If you go

What: What: Thompson School District Board of Education meeting.
When: 6 p.m. Wednesday.
Where: District offices, 800 S. Taft Ave., Loveland.
More info: thompsonschoools.org.

FOOD from page 1A

\$5.5 million in revenue and \$5.6 million in expenses with \$100,000 from the nutrition services reserves fund.

So even with the price increase, the Nutrition Services Fund will not have a balanced budget, leading at least one school board member earlier this month to question whether the district should consider a higher increase to break even.

District officials stressed that they did not want to increase the prices any more than 25 cents to avoid making the costs too high for families that may be on the cusp and do not qualify for free or reduced lunches.

"I don't want to price any child out of a lunch," board member Pam Howard said when reached by phone. "To me, that's the number one priority, making sure they are accessible and affordable to all our students."

She added, "I am not willing to have the prices go up more than a quarter. I know we have to cover our costs, but at the same it is important to make sure it is accessible to all students."

Under the proposal, if approved, elementary students would pay \$1.75 for breakfast and \$3 for lunch, while secondary students

would pay \$2 for breakfast and \$3.25 for lunch.

The increase would apply only to full-price meals, not the amount paid by students who receive discounted lunches based upon their families' incomes. Those special prices range from free to 40 cents, and the district receives reimbursement from the United States Department of Agriculture as well as state grants for a portion of those students' meals.

This is the first increase to district meal prices in four years and is basically to cover inflation.

The cost of the food that the district buys is going up, much like residents see in their grocery carts, and the district is working to provide more fresh and locally produced ingredients, which while boosting health and the local economy, could cost more, said Lisa Kendall, director of nutrition services.

Milk, a requirement for schools, has increased "tremendously" in price, Kendall offered as an example of price increases.

Plus, the meal program will spend about \$90,000 more next year in wage increases for employees based on raises previously approved by the school

board and a hike in the statewide minimum wage, which the district is implementing at the beginning of the school year instead of waiting until January, Kendall said.

"We have very dedicated employees who work very hard," she said. "It's money well deserved."

The move toward less processed foods, toward scratch-made meals, in the long run is expected to save money through efficiencies that will move the district toward a balanced nutrition services budget, she explained. This includes meals made at three larger kitchens then distributed to the different schools and cooked on site.

Larger production will cut down on supply costs and waste, Kendall explained. She used a simple spice as an example, something the district buys in bulk for each kitchen.

"A smaller school that needs only a few tablespoons may have a pound," said Kendall. "That creates waste."

The proposed 2018-19 budget includes \$5.5 million in revenue for the Nutrition Services Fund. Of that, nearly \$3 million is in reimbursements from the United States Department

of Agriculture, while \$1.9 million is from breakfast, lunch and à la carte sales, according to figures from Gordon Jones, the district's chief financial officer. The remaining piece is from commodities as well as state grants, according to information from Jones and Kendall.

Meal prices have remained the same since the 2014-15 school year when breakfast prices went up 15 cents and lunch prices increased 25 cents, according to information from the district. The previous increase was for the 2011-12 year — 10 cents for elementary breakfast, 15 cents for secondary breakfast and 25 cents across the board for lunch.

The school board is scheduled to vote Wednesday on both the proposed district budget for the general fund as well as other funds, including nutrition services, as well as on the proposed increase in meal prices.

"We definitely want to keep things affordable," said Kendall. "I think our meals are really a value ... We do try to serve the best quality food we can."

Pamela Johnson: 970-699-5405,
johnsonp@reporter-herald.com