

50388 Students face poverty

Statistics show 49.7%
in Medford qualify for
free or low-cost lunches

BY ANITA BURKE
Mail Tribune

Roughly half of the students returning to Medford schools this fall come from families struggling with poverty.

According to information the Medford School District gathered in May and compiled for the start of the school year, 49.7 percent of students in the district qualified for free- or reduced-price lunches, a common measure of poverty.

The number is on the rise, said

Julie York, Medford schools' special services supervisor. York oversees federal programs designed to help low-income students.

"This is my fifth year with the district, and the average was 33 percent when I started," she said.

Countywide, 40 percent of public school children were eligible for free or reduced-price meals last year, Children First for Oregon, a statewide advocacy group reported in December.

Families that make up to 130 percent of the federal poverty

The district hires expert on poverty
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level qualify for free meals. Last year that was \$15,756 for a two-person household or \$23,920 for a family of four. Reduced-price meals are offered for students whose families make up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level—\$22,422 for a two-person household or \$34,040 for four.

Families are reapplying for school-meal assistance now, and new data will be compiled in October, officials said.

York suspects that Oregon's generally weak economy in recent years has pushed families toward poverty.

"It is a soft economy," said Guy Tauer, a regional economist with the state employment department. "Job recovery is slow

everywhere, and population growth here (in Jackson County) is a little faster than the rest of the state."

In Jackson County, wages in jobs covered by unemployment insurance average \$28,780 annually, less than the state average of \$34,442. The combination of lower wages and high housing costs pinches many families here, Tauer said.

Kids from impoverished homes often start school with limited exposure to reading, York said. Education might have a low priority in a family struggling to make ends meet, and school officials have a hard time getting informa-

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Percentage by school
Percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals at Medford schools:

Districtwide	49.7
Abraham Lincoln	23
Griffin Creek	28.6
Hoover	23.9
Howard	66.4
Jackson	88.8
Jacksonville	20.5
Jefferson	59.6
Kennedy	40.9
Lone Pine	18.4
Oak Grove	74.1
Roosevelt	72.4
Ruch	38
Washington	91.4
Wilson	67.3
Hedrick	30.3
McLaughlin	47
North Medford	21.8
South Medford	26.7
Medford Opportunity	24.1

Source: Medford School District