



May 20, 2022

Dear Helena Public Schools Families and Staff,

Over the last three months, we've seen life at school and elsewhere return to a point that feels almost normal. It's felt good to focus more on student and educator achievements in these Friday updates and less on COVID-related issues.

But our return to near-normal brings an end to a positive result of COVID, which was the ability to offer all students free meals. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the District's Food Services team has served more than 2 million breakfasts and lunches to our community's children – free of charge – with federal funding through the US Department of Agriculture.

That funding will end on the last day of this school year, returning us to our pre-COVID meal protocols.

This is a big change for families.

Families who don't qualify for free and reduced lunch will need to pay for meals, as was the case before the pandemic.

To participate in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program during the 2022-23 school year, families will need to fill out a Free and Reduced Lunch Application, which will be available July 1, or meet one of the following criteria:

- Certified to participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.
- Certified to participate in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF).
- Participate in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).
- Foster child/family.

I can't over-emphasize how important it will be to fill out the Free and Reduced Lunch Application if you *don't meet the criteria above* and want your child to receive meals free or at low cost next school year.

We will notify all families when the application is available on July 1 and will send reminders throughout the summer.

We will never turn a child in need of a meal away. However, families who have not applied for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program will be charged the regular price for meals and those charges can add up quickly. If you are concerned about paying for school meals this fall, please plan to apply as soon as possible on or after July 1.

In another, more immediate change, the “Munchtana” food truck will provide free meals in the parks again this summer, but children must be present to receive meals and food must be eaten on site (weekly take-home meals will no longer be provided.)

To bring school lunch prices for the 2022-23 school year in line with current costs, which have risen due to inflation and supply chain challenges, the Board of Trustees approved a new meal price schedule.

Please see our [Food Services page](#) for updated meal prices and additional information.

I don't need to tell you that food prices have risen exorbitantly in recent months. We're helping one of our valued community partners, the Kids Nutrition Coalition of Lewis and Clark County, to assess affordability, accessibility, and availability of healthy foods. The results will help the organization build future projects to support nutritional needs in the Helena Community.

Please take a few minutes to [fill out the coalition's quick survey](#).

In other administrative news, the District is in the process of filling two important vacancies. We have chosen finalists for the Facilities Director position and are [seeking applicants](#) for the Director of Human Resources.

This was a week of transition for the Board of Trustees, which welcomed new members and reorganized leadership at a special meeting on Tuesday to canvass election results.

The Board certified newly elected Trustees Kay Satre and Lois Fitzpatrick, as well as incumbent Siobhan Hathorne. The Board appointed Hathorne as Board Chair and Trustee Jennifer McKee as Vice Chair. I would like to thank outgoing Board Chair Luke Muszkiewicz, who will continue to serve as a regular Board member, for his gracious, thoughtful, and steady leadership during turbulent times. I also want to share our gratitude and best wishes to each of our Trustees who are taking on new leadership roles. Thank you for making this commitment to serve Helena's children.

On the topic of leaders, I have exciting new educator recognitions to share.

Today I had the pleasure of joining Helena Education Association (HEA) President Jane Shawn as she presented the [HEA Educator and Para Educator of the Year awards to Chelsey Davis, Librarian at Four Georgians Elementary, and Ben Racicot, Para Educator at Jim Darcy](#). The recognition comes with a \$500 award to each school for purchasing items recommended by the winners.

Ms. Davis and Mr. Racicot were selected by HEA membership, and their nominations say it all. Ms. Davis is described by her colleagues as "always going above and beyond" and a "true treasure." Mr. Racicot was praised as a "reliable and insightful" leader and team player who puts "kids first in everything he does." In all, 34 educators and 29 para educators were nominated for this distinction, with the winners reflecting the excellence and commitment of all. Congratulations Ms. Davis and Mr. Racicot and thank you for the incredible work you do for our students every day.

Meanwhile, Smith Elementary Montessori Teacher Katy Wright was in Washington D.C. over the weekend to receive her award as Montana's nominee for the 2021 National Education Association Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence. Ms. Wright was nominated by the Montana Federation of Public Employees (MFPE) in May 2021, however the awards ceremony was postponed due to COVID.

“Katy Wright embodies the exceptionalism of MFPE member educators,” said MFPE President Amanda Curtis. “Wright has piloted several lessons for the Office of Public Instruction and serves on both the Montessori Task Force and the Digital Promise Practitioner Advisory Board. She is also a liaison for Indian Education for All. She is the recipient of several awards including the Helena Education Foundation Distinguished Educator Award in 2018 and the Let’s Talk About Great Teachers Award in 2011.”

Please also join me in congratulating Thea Seacrease, who is the KMTX Teacher of the Month for April. Way to go Ms. Seacrease and Broadwater Elementary!

We also have new student achievements and recognitions to celebrate. The Helena High Green Group learned yesterday that it won its fourth [SMART Schools](#) award from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, which comes with a \$2,000 award. The student volunteers created “Grant Guide” documents, which were shared with schools across the state to assist with the application process for grants to install solar panels. A special shout-out to sophomores Nate Fang and Nick DeWald and senior Neal Bovington, who carried the project through the last two years.

\$500 of the award will go to the first high school to receive a grant. The rest will support the group’s ongoing educational activities. And kudos to teachers Jill Van Alstyne and Claire Pichette and Career Center Resource Assistant Abby Rausch for supporting our students’ great work.

Applause also is in order for the Bengal and Bruin Business Professionals of America competitors, who earned high placements at the recent BPA National Leadership Conference in Dallas. The CHS Presentation Management Team - Abi Grotbo, Ryleigh Bushnell, and Madelyn Holston - took 8th place nationwide and Helena High had two individual medalists with Foster Smith taking 5th place in Java Programming and Kaden Price taking 10th place in C# programming. See the full list of results on our [Student & Educator Recognitions](#) page. Both the CHS and HHS BPA chapters were recognized with “Quality Chapter Distinction” awards at the conference, and the Helena High Chapter was awarded the Membership Explosion and Community Service chapter awards. Thank you to CHS Business Education Teacher Terri Norman, HHS Computer Sciences Teacher Buffy Smith, and HHS Business Education Teacher Samantha Humphrey for helping our students get a head start on their careers.

As we celebrate our accomplishments during the school year and look to summer adventures, I want to share with you the latest opportunities for COVID vaccination and testing. PureView Health Center will offer a vaccination clinic at its new downtown clinic Friday, June 3, from 8 a.m. to noon. [Registration opened today](#). A third round of free at-home COVID tests also has been made available by the federal government at [COVIDTests.gov](#). Every household is eligible for eight free tests – a great opportunity to help curb COVID as we look forward to a safe and healthy summer.

I wish you a restful weekend.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex M. Weltz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Rex" and middle initial "M." written in a smaller, more compact style than the last name "Weltz".

Rex M. Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools