

ALL CROCKETT COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT LOCATIONS NOW HAVE FREE MEALS



Above: Whitney Thornton, School Nutrition Director, and her daughter Wesley, one of the middle school's top softball players.

By Ron Barry

After sorting through the governmental avalanche of acronyms and crunching all the right numbers to determine an accurate and appropriate satisfaction of all the required benchmarks, Crockett County School District Nutrition Director Whitney Thornton has a New Year's gift to the district's students and parents: For the remainder of the school year – and probably for the next two, and maybe three years – all school meals in the district will be free.

That's right... FREE.

As good as that news is, however, Thornton wants to stress something just as important: Now that the meals are free, as many students as possible need to eat them, because the district's reimbursements and the possible future extension of the program depend on it.

"Now that we have met the governmental qualifications for offering the meals for free," Thornton said, "it's important that students take advantage of them. The more students that eat, the more reimbursement money we get as a district, and the higher the likelihood that we will continue to qualify in the future."

Thornton admits that the rules and regulations to qualify for the free program can be quite complicated, but now that she has all Crockett's schools in the mix, the simplest and most important thing for the students to do is EAT!

Crockett's schools have qualified through a complicated blend of the Tennessee Department of Education's Medicaid Demonstration Project and the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) from the National School Lunch Program. How to arrive at a qualifying percentage is extremely complicated, but Thornton's efforts have boosted the Crockett numbers above the required threshold. But to stay there, students need to participate in the program and actually consume the free meals.

"Most people don't realize that we (the School Nutrition department) aren't an allocation of the regular school budget," Thornton said. "We are basically self-sustaining, depending on USDA reimbursements and what the non-qualified students have actually been paying for their meals. So now that every student is considered qualified based on our overall percentage being above the threshold, the most sure way to stay there is for more students to actually eat the meals."

While all meals will now be free for the rest of the school year, those students who were not previously qualified and have established a debt will have to pay off the standing balances. Non-qualified students were previously paying \$2.85 for lunches. Breakfasts have already been free at district schools.

"We're excited to have reached this qualification level and to be able to offer free meals to all students," Thornton said. "So now – just EAT!"