

News Clips

Headlines

Rocky Mountain News

Monday, December 3, 2007

- Fund gives school kids basic needs

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Fund gives schoolkids basic needs

By Bill Gallo, Special to the Rocky

The Denver Public Schools Pupil Assistance Fund provides students from low-income households with items ranging from winter coats to eyeglasses. Students who meet federal guidelines established for subsidized school lunches are eligible. A school nurse and a school social worker or psychologist reviews each request. Whenever possible, families are urged to share the costs.

In this interview, director Kim Erickson talks about the needs and how the fund can help. The fund is among agencies that have applied for Season to Share funding.

How is your program administered?

Through school social workers, psychologists and nurses. In DPS' 150 schools, these are the people who see the immediate needs of the students and connect them with services.

Have pupil needs changed recently?

We have been seeing an increased need for mental health services, and luckily that coincided with a large (posthumous) gift designated for that purpose. Last year, \$173,000 of our budget went to mental health needs.

Mental health problems have increased over the last 15 to 20 years, but in the last seven years we've seen them really spike among students and parents.

What's the next most pressing need?

We've seen an increased need for eye exams and eyeglasses and for clothing, like winter coats. When the economy is struggling and gas costs \$3 a gallon, it's hard enough to pay for food and shelter. There's not much left for the other basic necessities, not even toothbrushes and toothpaste or shampoo.

But eye care is especially important: A student who gets eyeglasses is more able to learn and is ready to learn.

Kids are always self-conscious about their appearance; does the clothing program help them fit in with their peers?

We can provide only basic things - underwear, shoes, coats. Sometimes the students are wearing the same clothes every day because they don't have anything else. We can provide only emergency clothing, and that does affect their self-esteem.

Are some areas of the city hit harder than others with problems?

I don't have specific figures on that at hand. We probably get more requests from some schools than others, but we serve children in every one of our schools - including the most affluent ones - because the needs exist everywhere.

How did you come to this work?

Prior to DPS (1 1/2 years ago), I worked for Jefferson County Public Schools and was also the homeless liaison for Jefferson County. I ran the school Medicaid program over there and I do the same here for DPS.

You see the same kinds of problems both places - kids in need of health insurance or clothing, who may be homeless, who just don't have the resources they need to excel in school.

Denver Public Schools Pupil Assistance Fund

* **Mission:** This citywide program provides mental health support, winter coats, clothing vouchers, eye exams and glasses, and hygiene items to the two-thirds of Denver Public Schools students who qualify for free and reduced-cost lunch.

* **Founded:** 1940

* **Pupils assisted:** 42,547 (2006-07)

* **Staff:** One part-time staffer

* **Volunteers:** 150

* **Budget:** \$252,000

* **Web site:** paf.dpsk12.org/