

Free lunch rate in Greece rises significantly

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The percentage of children in the Greece Central School District who qualify for free or reduced lunch has spiked over the last year, a combination of a persistently negative trend and increased outreach by the district to sign children up for benefits. Greece, the county's largest suburb, has seen steadily rising poverty over the last decade, as have many local towns. From 2005 to 2014, the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch rose from 26 percent to 43 percent. Data collected by the district in October, however, shows a much more precipitous increase, from 43 to 54 percent.

Part of that is a continuation of the previous trend, but it also reflects the district's increased success in getting eligible children signed up. District spokeswoman Laurel Heiden listed a number of factors. For instance, all students now use a rechargeable card to pay for meals, removing the stigma for free and reduced price-paying students when everyone else is paying cash. The district has also used automated phone calls to remind families to re-enlist. The income guidelines for free and reduced lunch are based on percentages of the federal poverty line, which is currently \$24,250 for a family of four. A child in a family of four would get free

See **LUNCH**, Page **8A**

Article Continued Below

[See LUNCH on Page A08](#)

Lunch

Continued from Page 3A

lunch if her family income is at less than 130 percent of that number, or \$31,525. For reduced-price lunch, the threshold is 185 percent of the poverty line, or \$44,863.

Other local districts have not announced their 2015 data yet; the most recent data available on the New York State Education Department website is from 2013-14. At that time, only East Irondequoit (52 percent) had a free and reduced lunch rate over 50 percent; the Rochester School District, meanwhile, is near 90 percent.

Students in poverty bring a raft of costs and struggles for a school district. Poverty is correlated with worse academic outcomes, worse attendance and increased social-emotional concerns.

Suburban districts recently have been adding social workers and psychologists, and Greece hired a liaison for homeless students. "The needs are definitely changing," Yvette Valicenti, a social worker in Greece, said last year. "We're just trying to stay ahead of it."

The Hillside Work-Scholarship Program traditionally has provided mentoring and job opportunities to low-income students in Rochester, but recently has expanded to Greece Arcadia High School and the Gates Chili Central School District.

The new data will be presented to the Greece school board at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday on the third floor of Odyssey Academy, 750 Maiden Lane.

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