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After-school program under new management

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By SARA KINCAID
Bismarck Tribune

Local after-school programs will be under new management next year.

The Missouri River Educational Cooperative, which is a consortium of school districts in the region, will be in charge of the Bismarck, Mandan, Standing Rock and Menoken before- and after- school programs. The reason is that the state decided that in giving out money for those programs -which normally went to school districts - to give preference to the state's regional education associations, of which the MREC is a member.

The state receives federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grants, which fund the before- and after-school programs, then awards the grant money to schools that meet the grant criteria.

Through this school year, the school district has been the recipient of the grant. Now regional education associations will be the preferred recipients of the grants. Unassociated school districts can apply, but will receive fewer points during the application scoring process, said Dale Patrick, Department of Public Instruction 21st Century Community Learning Centers program director.

"We are encouraging our REAs to reach out to them," Patrick said.

In turn, the associations will develop plans to operate the before- and after-school programs. Many associations are likely to take on a management role, like the MREC, based in Bismarck. The MREC will use the grant funds to hire an administrator and contract for employees for the before- and after-school program. The MREC has 38 members, including Bismarck State College and the University of Mary. The Bismarck School District is the largest member of the local association.

For some districts, the switch could open up opportunities to start a program. In other school districts, it gives them a chance to continue a program after grant funding expired, without committing more money.

The schools within a district that participate in the before- and after-school program through the cooperative must meet the grant's criteria for participation. The school must have 40 percent or more of its students participating in the free- and reduced-lunch program or it must be a Title I school, which is a designation for schools that have proportionally more low-income families and disadvantaged students.

Previously, schools could apply for a minimum grant of \$50,000. Some schools would qualify, but not at the minimum percentage of free- and reduced-lunch participation. Most of the money went to larger communities because they met the discounted lunch program requirement.

Sometimes, rural schools that did qualify would not participate because of staffing and transportation issues, Patrick said.

"We have unique problems to overcome in North Dakota," Patrick said.

The state hopes the funding change will encourage more rural schools to participate.

Applications from the regional educational associations are being reviewed, and the state will give the final word in May.

Eligible schools within the associations already told the associations if they wanted to participate. In the MREC, there are 12 schools that will participate. The application is for \$850,000. In the past, Bismarck would receive \$350,000. Next year, the Bismarck district could have the equivalent of \$300,000 to \$350,000 spent for programming here.

The grant award to the MREC will not bring in more money than what was awarded to the school districts in the past, said Bill Demaree, MREC data assessment coordinator. He wrote the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant for the MREC. With the addition of some programs, this means existing programs will have to maintain programming with fewer dollars. This is where the MREC hopes trimming management helps cut enough costs.

"It's a fairly costly item," Demaree said.

This would eliminate full-time program coordinators at each existing program site. In its place, each site would have a part-time site coordinator. The MREC will hire teachers and other employees for the program through Youthworks, which will be one of the program sites.

The MREC wants to partner with Youthworks because it attracts "college-type" people, Demaree said. Also, it uses procedures for background checks that will be similar to what the school district will use. A new law requires new employees to be fingerprinted and get a background check.

The schools that will participate are Myhre, Riverside, Saxvik and Will-Moore elementary schools in Bismarck; Menoken Elementary School, Custer, Fort Lincoln and Mary Stark Elementary School; and Cannon Ball Elementary School, Standing Rock Elementary School, St. Bernard Mission School and Selfridge Public School. The schools on Standing Rock already have a program, but do not have a summer program, which will be new next year.

The grants are approved for three years, with the option to renew two additional years.

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Patrick estimates about 130 schools will participate through the regional education associations next year. Currently, 80 school districts receive grant funds. Each district can have more than one school site, depending on eligibility.

The grant money cannot be used to replace money already spent on before- and after-school programs, but it can be used to expand those programs. Also, the districts must present a plan that shows how it would pay for the program with its own funds after the grant expires.

"The program cannot be used to pick up the tab," Patrick said.

For the Bismarck district, the grant expires after this year, and it has used its extensions. The change in who administers the program saves the Bismarck district from paying for the program because it is now the MREC's program.

Demaree said he hopes to use as much existing staff as possible. The program is supposed to use highly qualified teachers, as defined by law, to run the program. They intend to use teachers, but hire them through Youthworks. When it is run through the school districts, the district can extend the teacher's contract and pay the extension with the grant money.

The MREC's aim is for 40 percent of students to participate in the programs. Currently, the program offers students a chance to play, work on school assignments and do hands-on academic activities. The coordinators implement any academic adaptations needed because of special education services.

"They don't realize they're learning," said Lodee Arnold, YMCA director of children and family services. "It's more fun, game-type learning activities."

Arnold is in charge of the Bismarck Kids Club and the Mandan Kids Club. Her job will be eliminated by the change. After the summer program, the MREC will take over the before- and after-school programs.

One change students will notice next year are tests. Even if they don't realize they're learning, the adults running the program need to know. The students participating in the program will be given a pre- and post-test to measure student learning through the program, Patrick said.

Fees should be similar to what is charged now. The program costs \$75 per month, although there are scholarships and child-care assistance that can reduce this amount.

(Reach reporter Sara Kincaid at 250-8251 or sara.kincaid@bismarcktribune.com.)

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