

Back to School: Focus lunch prep on food safety, kid-friendly choices

By Pat Melgares, K-State Extension news service

As the back-to-school season kicks into high gear, a Kansas State University food safety expert is encouraging parents to think beyond notebooks and pencils and focus on another classroom essential: the lunchbox.

Whether it's a soft-sided tote or a hard plastic shell, today's insulated lunch bags offer more than nostalgia. K-State food scientist Karen Blakeslee says they're part of a larger strategy to keep kids healthy and energized throughout the school day.

"Food safety is a key factor," said Blakeslee, who also is coordinator of K-State's Rapid Response Center for food science. "Always aim to keep cold foods cold, hot foods hot, and avoid cross-contamination, especially if your child or another has food allergies."

Insulated lunch bags, paired with appropriately sized ice packs, help prevent perishable items like meat, cheese, and yogurt from spoiling before lunchtime. The size of the ice pack matters. Blakeslee says if it's too large, it crowds out the food; too small, and it won't keep items cold long enough.

Many schools may not provide refrigeration for packed lunches, so parents should check policies ahead of time. Experts also recommend knowing when your child will eat lunch to help gauge how long food will sit unrefrigerated.

Beyond safety, lunchtime planning is also about efficiency and nutrition, according to Blakeslee.

"Make it easy to eat," she said. "Know how much time your child has for lunch, and involve them in selecting or packing the food. They're more likely to eat it that way. This can also reduce leftovers or food waste."

Pre-packaged snacks like fruit cups, yogurt tubes, and snack bars can be convenient, but families can also make their own meal kits using small containers with compartments to separate meats, cheeses, and crackers — often at a lower cost.

And while reusable containers and resealable bags help reduce waste, they should also be easy for young children to open without assistance. Blakeslee suggests including utensils and napkins if sending peeled fruit or cut vegetables; even a small wet wipe can help kids clean up quickly.

Planning ahead — even prepping some items the night before — can ease hectic mornings. But soggy sandwiches are a real concern. Blakeslee suggests preparing items like peanut butter sandwiches ahead of time, while leaving moisture-prone options like deli meat or tomatoes for morning assembly.

Parents should also aim to build a balanced lunch that includes protein, grains, fruits, and vegetables. Cheese, yogurt, pretzels, or low-sugar snack bars are all kid-friendly options, while 100% juice boxes or frozen yogurt tubes can double as cold packs until lunchtime.

And, Blakeslee says,

don't fret too much about mayonnaise: "Mayonnaise has long been blamed for food poisoning, but the real culprits in dishes like potato salad are the eggs, potatoes, or meat — not the mayo, which is actually quite acidic."

Blakeslee also suggests buying a backup lunchbox; kids often forget to bring the primary lunchbox home.

"Get the lunchbox, get the ice packs, and stock up your cabinets now with packaged foods that are shelf-stable," she said. "And always remember the core food safety principles: wash your hands; keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot; and keep raw foods separate from ready-to-eat items."

More information on food safety is available in a pair of publications available from the K-State Extension bookstore: At-Home Safe Food Handling: It's in Your Hands, and Safe Food Storage, or visit the K-State Extension local office in your county or region.

State of Kansas
Special District

2026

NOTICE OF BUDGET HEARING

The governing body of
Pawnee Watershed Joint District No. 81
Hodgeman County
will meet on August 18, 2025 at 7:00 PM at 20476 SE Highway 283, Jetmore, Kansas for the purpose of hearing and answering objections of taxpayers relating to the proposed use of all funds and the amount of tax to be levied. Detailed budget information is available at 20476 SE Highway 283, Jetmore, Kansas and will be available at this hearing.

SUPPORTING COUNTIES
Hodgeman County (home county) Gray County, Ness County, Edwards County, Lane County, Rush County, Finney County, Ford County, Pawnee County

BUDGET SUMMARY
Proposed Budget 2026 Expenditures and Amount of Current Year Estimate for 2025 Ad Valorem Tax establish the maximum limits of the 2026 budget. Estimated Tax Rate is subject to change depending on the final assessed valuation.

FUND	Prior Year Actual for 2024		Current Year Estimate for 2025		Proposed Budget Year for 2026		
	Expenditures	Actual Tax Rate*	Expenditures	Actual Tax Rate*	Budget Authority for Expenditures	Amount of 2025 Ad Valorem Tax	Proposed Estimated Tax Rate*
General	795,920	2.657	826,900	2.731	3,089,226	601,367	2.631
Debt Service							
Totals	795,920	2.657	826,900	2.731	3,089,226	601,367	2.631
						Revenue Neutral Rate**	2.631
Less: Transfers	0		0			0	
Net Expenditures	795,920		826,900			3,089,226	
Total Tax Levied	601,367		601,367			xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	
Assessed Valuation	226,394,988		220,148,316			226,591,999	

Outstanding Indebtedness,
Jan 1,
G.O. Bonds
Revenue Bonds
Other
Lease Pur. Princ.

	2023	2024	2025
	0	0	0
	0	0	0
	0	0	0
	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0

*Tax rates are expressed in mills.
**Revenue Neutral Rate as defined by KSA 79-2988

Randy Still
Manager

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Child development expert urges parents to make time to talk with children

When it comes to helping their children achieve academic success, it sure doesn't hurt if parents remember how to multiply fractions and diagram sentences.

But Kansas State University child development specialist Bradford Wiles said there is a more basic way that parents can spur their children's growth.

"First and foremost," he said, "parents need to be present and engaged with their children."

"Parents are children's first teachers (but) as they get into formal schooling, you don't want to maintain that primary teaching role; you want that to be an in-classroom experience. But the support from the child's family — or, the home and school congruence — is really critical to success."

Wiles describes parent involvement as an effort to understand what is happening in their children's lives.

"It really starts with an environment where what happens at school is something that adults are inquisitive about; that is, they want to know what's going on," he said. "That includes being able to have discussions with children about what's happening at school. Parents should be engaged with their children's lives."

Parents should consider volunteering at school activities and boards, such as PTO, if possible. They should talk to the child's homeroom teacher regularly, as well as other school personnel such as administrators, coaches, librarians and non-homeroom teachers.

Wiles said: "Ask them questions like, 'are they paying attention and doing what they're supposed to do?' And then involve your child in those discussions. Learn to develop a comprehensive lens that includes your own view, your child's view, and the teacher's view in order to understand the full picture."

"Success in school really does start with having an open line of communication with your child's classroom and the school at large."

Wiles said the early years of a child's education are especially important: "A lot of children are really anxious to get older, and yet there's a lack of appreciation for what it takes to be older and successful which are — in my view — the things you learn in pre-kindergarten through sixth or seventh grade. We need to recognize that is part of the developmental process. All the things they will learn after are built on that foundation."

Wiles encourages parents to establish a "family culture" that centers around two things: "My child is important and what they're learning is important for their future."

"Even if they are telling you they are doing things they shouldn't be doing, that is not the time to be upset, angry or disappointed," he said.

"The important thing is to let them know you care about them and you're glad they shared with you. Once you've had a chance to process what they've said, you can figure out what needs to change. But being grateful and encouraging your child to share with you is the foundation of really solid adult-child relationships through late childhood, early adolescence and all the way through to emerging adulthood."

More information on child development is available online from K-State Research and Extension.

THANK YOU

To Everyone Who Contributed
To The Huge Success Of The
2025 RCAC Community Carnival
and
The Rush County Fair

Your Cooperation, Assistance, Donations,
Volunteerism, Support, and Attendance
Are Greatly Appreciated!

We also sincerely appreciate the
wonderful cooperation given to us by
All Our Fine Sponsors, Commercial Exhibitors, Food
Vendors, 4-H Participants
and their parents and all department heads
and their assistants and judges at the fair!

Rush County Amusement Company
and
Rush County Fair Association

~We Hope To See You All At Next Year's Fair~