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Guidance counselor aims to get pupils off to a strong start

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Sarah Jones, new school counselor for McKinley and Jefferson elementary schools, believes the first years of school make a big difference in the type of person someone will become.

"I remember the impact my K-2 teachers had on me and that's why I wanted to go into the elementary setting," Jones said. "I want my kiddos to learn early on, how successful they can be and how they can realize their potential." Jones, who grew up in Paola, comes to USD 257 after completing a master's degree in school counseling. She attended Fort Scott Community College before transferring to

Pittsburg State University, where she earned a bachelor of science in psychology and completed her master's degree in May.

She's certified as a coun-

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 selor for K-12 students but wanted to focus on the primary grade levels.

"It's fun to see where kids start out and see how they grow and progress," she said. "It's really important to start off by building character skills, social-emotional development and career preparedness. It sets them up for success later on."

USD 257 parents and educators already have helped prepare Jones by talking about some of their primary concerns, she said. They're worried about the area's high rate of poverty. The 2017 Kids Count report from Kansas Action for Children shows that 26.04 percent of Allen County children live below the poverty line,

significantly higher than the state average of 16.9 percent. The percent of children who qualify for free or reduced lunch is 58.85 percent, compared to the state average of 48.44 percent.

"Growing up in poverty is one of the greatest threats to healthy child development," the Kids Count report said. Poverty and financial stress affects cognitive development and the ability to learn, and can lead to behavioral, social and emotional problems and poor health.

That concerns Jones, who said it's important to understand how what happens at home can influence how a child learns at school. Children have a "hierarchy of needs," she said.

"Making sure they're well-fed, they're well-

clothed and they're in a position where they can focus and be good learners in the classroom. That's what I always gear toward," she said.

Parents may not realize how the school can help a family find answers to those types of problems, she said. She plans to work with families to utilize community outreach programs and other local resources.

"I wish I had a magic wand and I could fix everything but I don't," she said. "We may not have all the answers here, but we can direct you toward the people that do. We can serve as that middle man to help students and their families get the resources they need."

JONES realized she wanted to pursue a degree in psychology while studying at Fort Scott.

"I decided I wanted to do something that was important, something

that could help people," she said.

She finished her college requirements by working a practicum at Lakeside Elementary School in Pittsburg and an internship at the middle-school level at Spring Hill.

An experience at Spring Hill taught her about the kind of impact a school counselor can have on a student.

"I had a student who was going through a personal change in her life, kind of an identity crisis-type situation. I had the opportunity to help her find the tools she needed to process her way through that," Jones said. "Later she came into my office and said, 'Thank you, Miss Jones.' I just provided the tools, she's the one who did the work. But the fact that she came in and said that really touched me. Something I gave a student actually helped her and made a difference. I'll never

forget that."

OUTSIDE OF school, Jones enjoys outdoor activities like hiking and walking her dog. She enjoys cooking and baking, activities she considers vital to her own "self-care routine."

She's looking forward to learning more about Iola and Allen County, and has been impressed by welcome she's received so far.

"Everyone is so friendly. That's something I noticed right away," she said.

She's glad to live just about an hour's drive from her hometown of Paola. Her parents and a sister, who is in the eighth grade, still live there. Another sister attends college at Emporia.

"It worked out perfectly," she said. "I'm really happy about that and I'm really thankful to be in an elementary setting. I'm excited to get to know my kiddos."