

Funding increases for school meals amid education budget cuts

May 23, 2012 | By [Adolfo Guzman-Lopez](#)



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Chinese chicken salad with three sides is served to Tustin public school students through a new, federally funded after-school supper program.

Amid all the bad news about budget cuts to public schools there is a bright spot: More money is now available for free and subsidized school meals, and not just for school breakfast and lunch.

For about a decade, federal grants allowed schools to serve after-school snacks like juice and crackers. But youth nutrition advocate Matt Sharp says educators had concerns about the program.

“Which is that the amount of snacks are too small, too few, driving some students to run off campus to purchase much less healthy options from vendors outside school gates or convenience stores,” he said.

A year and a half ago, a boost in the federal allocation expanded that snack into a meal. The goal was to tackle two problems: rising childhood obesity and families’ growing inability to buy healthy food.

The Tustin Unified School District is the first in Southern California to offer students supper after school. A third of the schools in that district, including Marjorie Veeh Elementary, currently serve an after-school meal.

On one afternoon, after-school worker Ashley Walden handed out meals on campus after the final bell rang. They flew out of a cooler as a pack of hungry elementary school kids snatched them and went to sit with friends.

“We have some graham cracker, we have fresh orange slices, milk, and Chinese chicken salads,” she said. On other days she serves pizza, ham subs, or Caesar salad, and the district’s working on getting teriyaki chicken bowls.

[recording can be found here: <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2012/05/23/6268/funding-increases-school-meals-amid-education-budg/>]

Walden said the meal offers barely enough fuel for the mega combustion engine that is a child's body.

"They come in the morning and they have, sometimes they have a snack in nutrition, but that's at 10 in the morning, and then at around 11:30 or 12 they'll have their lunch but they only have about 20 minutes to eat so by the time they come to us at 2, 2:30, they're already hungry again," she said.

Fifth grader Ayleen de la Cruz took a final gulp her milk. She'd finished everything else, and was ready for the learning that continues after school.

"When we get out of snack we usually go to homework," she said. "And from homework we go to catch, and from catch we usually do activities like math blast, and science, and sometimes reading."

De la Cruz said a typical dinner at her house is hamburgers, or hot dogs, or pasta. She calls it junk food.

The school's principal, Ryan Bollenbach, said the afternoon meal the school provides is the last some students will eat during the day. "Some might get a dinner at home, others might eat breakfast tomorrow at school. It would not be this quality. It would be Del Taco or some other fast food, low cost, unhealthy option," she said.

Veeh Elementary serves about 100 suppers a day. Federal officials estimate that new allocations will make it possible for public schools to distribute 21 million meals in the next three years. During that time, other Southland school districts will join Tustin and offer after school meals.

Federal subsidies for California school meals are expected to grow by \$107 million next fiscal year, says nutrition advocate Matt Sharp, but it's not enough to carry out schools' principal mission.

"The after-school meal program is just a small component, a valuable component, but the real challenge and weakness is making sure adequate after-school enrichment are available for at-risk youth," Sharpe said.

Money for those after school programs and programs during the school day comes from Sacramento, however, and lawmakers don't expect to stop cutting the budget in the foreseeable future.