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Charter choices: good food, free food, no food

Some campuses say they lack the means to provide nutritious meals — or any meals.

[January 01, 2011](#) | By Mary MacVean and Alexandra Zavis, Los Angeles Times

At Larchmont Charter School in Los Angeles, a former restaurant chef whips up pasta with fresh vegetable sauce for lunch one day; on another he offers a salad bar with figs grown on campus.

But 500 miles north, in tiny Red Bluff, lunchtime at Sacramento River Discovery Charter School is decidedly different: Students must either bring their own lunches or place orders with parent volunteers who make a daily run to Taco Bell, Burger King or Subway.

Cafeteria food at traditional public schools has long had a bad reputation, but at least children can count on a meal that's free for needy families.

Mealtime is more complicated at the more than 900 publicly financed charter schools in California. Unlike traditional campuses that must follow state nutrition regulations for schools, charters can make independent decisions about what's for lunch. Some charter school officials decide not to serve it at all, even if that might mean that the nutrition needs of some of the state's poorest children are not being met.

"Charter schools are about family choice," said Phyllis Bramson-Paul, director of nutrition services for the state Department of Education. "On the other hand, there is a lot of hunger in California, and we know children who are hungry don't learn as well."

In fact, state education leaders have urged schools to [expand existing food programs](#) to include breakfast, citing consistent research showing that hungry children struggle to learn.

More than 3 million California students are eligible for help because they come from households that meet federal income requirements, currently \$40,793 a year or less for a family of four, according to Department of Education officials. Although charters — just like traditional public schools — can get a cash [subsidy from the U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) to help provide meals to needy children, they are exempt from a state requirement to serve at least one nutritionally adequate subsidized meal a day to qualifying children.

Advocates for low-income families worry that those struggling to put food on the table can be left to decide between a traditional public school that offers their children adequate nutrition and a charter that may have smaller classes or more enrichment programs.

Lunchtime on some charter campuses "indulges the students' worst impulses and obligates the parents to pay for meals that USDA is willing to fund," said Matthew Sharp, a senior advocate at California Food Policy Advocates.

Colin Miller, vice president for the California Charter Schools Assn., said the schools are intended to give parents choices over their children's education and "parents are fully aware of what the school can and cannot offer."

Miller said he did not know how many children eligible to receive subsidized meals attend schools that don't offer them.

A recent [state audit](#) was conducted in part to try to answer that question. Auditors were able to determine that more than half of the 815 charters active in April did participate in federal breakfast or lunch programs.

However, auditors found that the state education department lacked reliable data on charters' nutrition programs. Attempts to get answers directly from charter schools met with no response in dozens of cases, leaving auditors unable to provide a complete picture of nutrition in schools that serve about 341,000 children, or 5% of public school students.

Some charter schools told the state that they provide an alternative meals program without government funding. Even with access to government funding, other charter schools report that they do not have the resources to feed students on campus or to comply with the numerous food safety, nutrition and administrative requirements to participate in federal meal programs.

At Sacramento River Discovery Charter School, more than half the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, according to Larry Newman, the principal. But he said the school, which has 60 students in grades six to 12, does not have the kitchen, staff or funding to operate a meal program.

Catering options are limited. The school tries to buy the most nutritious takeout items but, Newman said, "It's fast food.... It is not ideal."

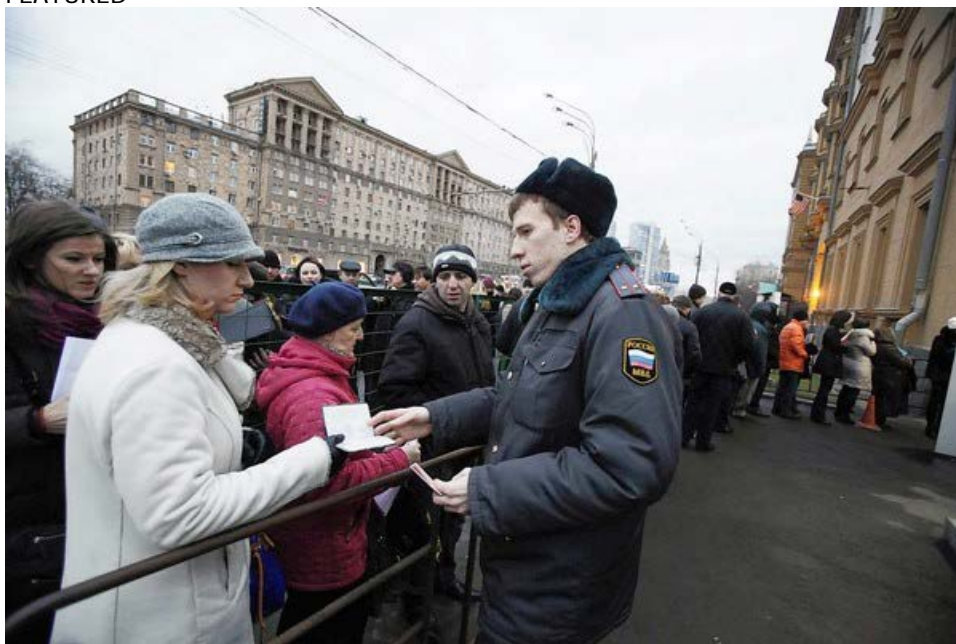
Some charters contract with the local school district to use its meal service, especially when they share a campus with a traditional school.

A number of caterers have also emerged to serve the charter movement. One of the largest, Revolution Foods, was started in 2006 by two mothers in Northern California. It now feeds about 60,000 meals a day to children in California and several other states.

"We heard from so many schools that it was a huge burden for them to figure out how to run a meals program," said Kirsten Tobey, one of the founders of Revolution Foods. "There's a huge record-keeping requirement in all these programs."

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