

School's out, but lunch program isn't

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On a typical day during the school year, 6,222 Yuba County children are served free or reduced-price lunches.

On a typical day during the summer break, just 77 are served.

A study released by California Food Policy Advocates on Monday reported thousands of Yuba and Sutter County children go without those meals each weekday during summer vacation.

Kit Molinari, nutrition services eligibility specialist for Marysville Joint Unified School District, said the gap might be due to several reasons, like transportation, serving times or people simply not knowing about the program.

"We've really been working hard this year to get the word out," Molinari said. "We have a large demographic of children who qualify (for free or reduced-price lunch). We try to offer them as much as we can."

She said MJUSD has been putting up and handing out fliers all over the community: the post office, community centers, on the Yuba-Sutter buses and at family community events, and making public service announcements.

Amber Watson, director of nutrition services for MJUSD, said that figure of 77 served per day last July could be due in part to only one MJUSD site offering free meals. This year, there are three sites available: Kynoch Elementary, Ella Elementary and Cedar Lane Elementary.

Watson said in an email averages from the first few weeks this month show each site is serving around 60-80 each day (Kynoch: 75-80; Ella: 60-65; Cedar Lane: 75).

In Sutter County, during the school year, an average of 6,657 children are served free or reduced-price lunch each day. During July, that number dropped to 418 each day.

The report — "School's Out... Who Ate?" — is based on data provided by the California Department of Education and looks at the average daily free or reduced-price lunch participation from March and April 2015, in comparison with the same participation in July 2015. The report can be viewed online at <http://tinyurl.com/gvbne7t>.

"The need for nutritious meals doesn't end when school is out for the summer," said Anna Fischer Colby, nutrition policy advocate for California Food Policy Advocates, in an email. "Children must have consistent access to healthy food to combat hunger and food insecurity and support optimal growth, development and year-round learning."

Schools around the area are offering free summer meal programs — both breakfast and lunch — for all children aged 1-18, with no proof of income required.

Families can find a list of sites under the Yuba City Unified School District at <http://tinyurl.com/z4e9q9j> and ones under Marysville Unified School District at <http://tinyurl.com/jpvlokkn>. Or, they can search using a zip code through the USDA website: <http://tinyurl.com/o3am8rx>.

"We have sites in our needy areas," said Mary DeLong, director of Student Nutrition for YCUSD. "It's great to know that with the food insecurities with our children, we are able to provide two meals to them every day."

Ag Department sets guidelines for who qualifies for program

California public schools provide lunches during the school year with help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which provides a set of guidelines for those students who can qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Students who come from families living at or below 130 percent of the poverty level receive free meals. Those with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level get reduced-price meals, for which the student cannot be charged more than 40 cents. Those with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty level pay full price. (For reference, 130 percent of the poverty line is \$30,615 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$43,568.)

According to the California Department of Education, 68.4 percent of students (9,568) in Yuba County qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and 61.8 percent of students (13,261) in Sutter County qualify. Families can see the breakdown for Sutter County at <http://tinyurl.com/hqdgbe2> and for Yuba County at <http://tinyurl.com/h2dujc6>.

The USDA's National School Lunch Program has also updated science-based school meal standards to increase fruits, vegetables and whole grains, as well as worked with more than 4,800 community sponsors to provide millions of meals through the Summer Food Service Program.

About the bus routes

Yuba-Sutter Transit's local and rural routes run during the summer and offer a youth fare for 50 cents one-way. Many routes run by schools. Routes are listed online at <http://yubasuttertransit.com/>.

The buses provided by the school districts also run for sites that provide summer school. Each summer school site offers free lunch, even for children who are not students.