

Lodi Unified School District serves thousands more free summer meals

By Jennifer Bonnett/News-Sentinel Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, August 2, 2012 12:00 am

The number of Lodi Unified School District students who received free breakfast and lunch through a federally funded summer meal program quadrupled from last year with the addition of a new site, bucking a statewide trend that fewer students participated this year.

Statewide participation in July 2011 — an average of nearly 387,000 children per day — was 6 percent lower than it was a year earlier and nearly 30 percent lower than it was in July 2008, the California Food Policy Advocates report found. Yet the number of low-income children served by the National School Lunch Program during the academic year has grown in recent years.

"This summer nutrition gap is harming kids," Tia Shimada, a nutrition policy advocate with California Food Policy Advocates, said in a written statement. "Along with that lack of opportunity for learning and enrichment during the summertime, there's also a lack of access to meals."

Last July, summer meals reached just 16 percent of California children who ate free or reduced-price lunches during the school year, which means more than 2 million students missed out on the meals, according to the report.

In Lodi, there are typically two available sites where students can get a free meal. This year, Lodi Unified School District co-sponsored a site with the city's Parks and Recreation Department at Lodi Lake.

In the past, Millswood Middle School and the Lodi Boys and Girls Club served as program sites.

But this year, the district added Lawrence School and served both breakfast and lunch from June 5 through last Friday. Staff distributed flyers to all the schools in that area and sent a district voicemail alerting families of the new site, according to Warren Sun, the district's director of food services.

Last year, the district served 563 breakfasts and 1,477 lunches under the summer feeding program. This year, the number jumped more than 350 percent to 4,304 breakfasts and 4,967 lunches.

The huge jump is because there were about 100 students from the migrant education program at Lawrence this summer, Sun said.

"We determined that these locations would be able to cover more needy families in the area and have better supervision when it comes feeding time," he said.

Until July 13, Valley Oaks Elementary in Galt was open for both free breakfast and lunch to anyone 18 and under. The program started June 18.

Site figures were unavailable.

California Food Policy Advocates' Shimada said schools, which are the most common sponsor of summer meal programs, should promote the opportunity before the academic year ends and make sure families know where to go. The state Department of Education lists summer meal sites in every county that are open to all children.

Focus groups recently convened by Share Our Strength, a national nonprofit working to end child hunger, also said meal locations should be within walking distance of homes or transportation and be safe, supervised environments, like schools.

Contact reporter Jennifer Bonnett at jenniferb@lodinews.com. For more information about local education issues, read our *Education Café* blog.