

Schools offer free summer meals, but few kids eat them

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At lunchtime at Cambridge Elementary School, you'd never know that the last day of school was more than a month ago. For one month this summer, Monday through Friday, more than 300 kids packed the Concord school's cafeteria for free lunches.

Most of the kids gobbling up cheese pizza, chicken nuggets and carrots are participating in summer learning programs at the campus. But, as indicated by a big red banner hanging on the school's fence, anyone 18 years old and younger was invited to the free meals.

"If I see somebody out there, I'll go drag them in - 'Go eat! Go in!' " said Colleen Ivie, the school's cafeteria manager.

Still, Ivie said, the school would not have fed nearly as many kids without summer school.

Across California, the loss of summer learning opportunities has lowered participation in federally funded summer meal programs, according to a recent report by California Food Policy Advocates. Summer school provides a central location where students congregate; without it, kids are scattered and more difficult to reach.

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 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," said Tia Shimada, a nutrition policy advocate with California Food Policy Advocates. "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, the report found.

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.

The Mount Diablo Unified School District hosted 14 summer meal sites at its schools, including

Cambridge Elementary. Most ended their programs Friday, but two - Rio Vista Elementary and Shore Acres Elementary, both in Bay Point - will continue through Aug. 10.

Before the programs began, the district placed advertisements in its local newspaper, the Contra Costa Times; posted flyers at local farmers markets, churches and other community locations; and mailed information to every household in the area, said Tim Watson-Williams, a supervisor in the district's food and nutrition department.

Although daily participation has been strong, ranging from 75 to 325 kids per site, Watson-Williams said he'd like to see more people eating the free meals. The district, which is able to cover the cost of operating the programs with federal reimbursement, could easily serve twice as many people, he said.

"It's a valuable community service," Watson-Williams said. "So many of our kids, lunch and breakfast at school is the core of the meals that they're getting. These are kids that without school may not get a proper meal at all."

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