

# Summer lunch gap persists for Sacramento-area students

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During the academic year, more than half of students in Sacramento and Yolo County public schools are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals.

But thanks to recessionary budget cuts in local programs and a lack of awareness, less than 10 percent of needy kids in the two counties take advantage of the nutritionally balanced free meals available in summer, state Department of Education data show.

"Sacramento has been a real hot spot (for underserved children) and there haven't been enough sponsors and sites," said Patrice Chamberlain of the California Summer Meal Coalition, part of the nonprofit Public Health Institute. Chamberlain said a lot of families "just don't know about them."

Districts reduced or closed summer school classes as they faced state budget cuts, cutting off one avenue to providing student meals. Local governments faced their own budget problems, and two years ago the Sacramento City Parks and Recreation Department cut funding for its summer meals program for children.

But some districts this year are touting innovative programs to entice kids to eat meals funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture while getting the benefit of summer learning.

The Elk Grove Unified School District is collaborating with the Sacramento Public Library on a pilot program this summer that provides lunch during the summer reading program at the Valley Hi-North Laguna library in south Sacramento.

Word spread quickly. Within about two weeks, participation increased more than threefold, said Christie Hamm, manager for youth and community services for Sacramento Public Library.

On Wednesdays, story time for kids is most popular, drawing more than 90 kids by last count.

"There are so many kids who rely on that meal during the school year," said Michelle Drake, food services director for the Elk Grove school district. "The concern is, what are they eating when they are not in school? Is it nutritious?"

"It behooves school districts and community partners to get involved."

This year, schools, community and church groups are providing free meals at nearly 200 sites in the Sacramento region through the California Department of Education, which oversees the program and administers funds from USDA.

At Woodbine Elementary in the Sacramento City Unified district, a sign fastened to a chain-link

fence carries a pitch: "Kids and Teens - Free Meals - Come and join us today!"

On average, 100 children attend daily for summer education sessions, which run Mondays through Thursdays until Aug. 1.

Last Thursday morning, parents dropped off children from nearby neighborhoods for a half day of learning and fun, combined with free breakfast and lunch.

The theme of the summer program: outer space.

"Our teacher, Miss Hoyos, taught about astronomy and she showed us how to make telescopes" using a paper cup and plastic, said Isidro Vasquez, 10, who enters fifth grade this fall at H.W. Harkness Elementary School.

Breakfast that day consisted of cereal, graham crackers and milk.

For lunch, the fare was sunflower butter and jelly sandwiches - like peanut butter sandwiches, but without the risk of triggering peanut allergies - along with chips, fruit cups and milk.

"Lunch is awesome," Isidro said, noting kids earlier in the week made their own pizzas.

David Constancio is program manager for the district's partner, THINK Together, which operates at more than a half dozen sites locally and in several Southern California counties.

In 2011-12, the latest data available, summer participation rates in the region began to increase, according to the state Department of Education. But the volume of summer meals remained sharply lower than five years earlier.

Statewide, Tia Shimada of California Food Policy Advocates in Oakland estimates that about 2 million children miss out on a federally funded meal in summer.

"It would really take an incredible effort to help close that gap," Shimada said.

In Twin Rivers Unified School District, nutrition services director Jill Van Dyke said 2,500 students each day participate in lunch programs so far this year, a number that could climb to 3,000. Another 600 children receive breakfast.

Still, those numbers are dwarfed by the 25,100 kids eligible for free or reduced-price meals during the school year.

"The word is out there. The principals push the program," Van Dyke said. "I wish I had the answer as to why we don't have more participation.

"We're actually offering healthy meals, fresh foods, vegetables and milk and whole grain."

## **HOW TO FIND FREE-MEAL SITES**

For free-meal sites for children in the community and selected school districts:

- In Twin Rivers Unified School District, visit [www.twinriversusd.org](http://www.twinriversusd.org) and choose the "Nutrition" button at the bottom of the page to find the free-meal site list. Or call the district at (916) 566-1600, ext. 50502.
- In Sacramento City Unified School District, visit [www.summeratscusd.org](http://www.summeratscusd.org).
- Elk Grove Unified School District began serving free lunches in early June at 10 sites. Visit the Web at [www.egusd.net/nutrition](http://www.egusd.net/nutrition) for details.
- San Juan Unified School District is offering its "Summer Fun Cafe" at four locations. For a listing, visit [www.sanjuan.edu](http://www.sanjuan.edu).

- In Folsom Cordova Unified School District, summer meals are being served at three locations. Call (916) 635-4301, ext. 141, for details.
- In Woodland Joint Unified School District in Yolo County, parents can visit the Web at [www.wjUSD.org](http://www.wjUSD.org) and choose "food services" under the business services link.
- Spanish-speaking parents can call the Hunger Hotline at (866) 3hungry or (866) 8hambre to ask about summer meals or other food services.
- The California Department of Education lists free meal sites at the start of each summer. To search an interactive guide by ZIP code or city, visit [www.cde.ca.gov](http://www.cde.ca.gov) and search for 2013 Summer Meal Service Sites.

– Loretta Kalb

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