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# Sacramento City Unified brings free meals to pools this summer

By Isabelle Taft

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A healthy chicken salad school lunch, prepared under federal guidelines, is displayed in September 2012 at the cafeteria at Draper Middle School in Rotterdam, N.Y. A House committee has endorsed a GOP plan to allow some schools to opt out of healthier school meal standards. The vote comes as First Lady Michelle Obama has launched a campaign in support of the standards, holding a White House meeting this week.

HANS PENNINK — AP

Starting Monday, kids can find something not offered at local swimming spots since the 1980s: a free summer meal.

The new initiative is part of an expansion of Sacramento City Unified School District's summer meal program, aimed at providing underprivileged kids with nutritious food when schools close. The district's costs are reimbursed by the federal government, and meals must meet nutrition standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

About 7 in 10 Sacramento City Unified students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch based on low family income. Last year, the district served 5,000 meals a day at 38 sites across the city; this year, there are 42, including six city pools and the Police Activities League.

Natomas, San Juan, Elk Grove and Twin Rivers unified school districts also hope to serve more meals through greater outreach and creativity. At four sites in the Twin Rivers district, for instance, kids can watch their lunch prepared on an outdoor barbecue and learn how to make fruit smoothies this summer.

"This year really is the most unusual I've seen for summer feeding," said Brenda Padilla, nutrition services manager at Sacramento City Unified.

Padilla hopes the new sites, as well as additional outreach to parents, will help close the "summer nutrition gap": the difference between the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and the number of those who eat the free meals they're entitled to.

Tia Shimada, managing nutrition policy advocate at California Food Policy Advocates, said just 14 percent of needy students receive summer meals in Sacramento County. Statewide, roughly 1.9 million kids "fell into the summer nutrition gap" last year, Shimada said.

That large number, however, is a sign of progress compared to the 2.1 million qualified students who did not receive summer meals in 2011 and 2012.

"It's not all doom and gloom, for the first time in many years," Shimada said. "There was a very modest uptick in the number of meals served last year for the first time in a long time."

Part of that uptick may have been due to action at the federal level, Shimada said. In May 2013, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced expanding participation in summer meal programs as a major priority for the USDA. The USDA named California as one of five focus states to receive federal assistance to help school districts and community organizations communicate about the best ways to make sure kids have access to nutritious foods.

Patrice Chamberlain, director of the California Summer Meal Coalition, said districts across the state are developing innovative ways to get meals to kids who aren't enrolled in summer school – like Sacramento's new lunch-at-the-pool option and Elk Grove's library meal programs. But almost everyone shares the challenge of making sure parents know about the free meals.

"Kids have to come to us, whether we're at a school, a park, or a library," said Michelle Drake, director of food and nutrition services at Elk Grove. "I think that's what we find the hardest."

Padilla said the Sacramento city school district sent numerous fliers home to parents and plans to publish a map with all of the feeding locations and their hours of operation. But a big part of solving the outreach problem, Padilla said, is putting the food where kids are already likely to be spending time in the summer. That's where the pools come in.

Terri Webster-Schrandt, program supervisor of aquatics and adult sports at the Department of Parks and Recreation, said the six pools – Southside, McClatchy Park, Clunie, Robertson Play Pool, Doyle and Johnston – are located in areas with a high number of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

The city school district will serve lunch just outside the pool entrance, so kids don't have to pay a fee to access the food. Webster-Schrandt said that while feeding up to 100 people a day will present logistical challenges, pool employees are excited about the program.

"The last few years, the lifeguard staff were taking their own money and buying food for the kids," Webster-Schrandt said.

Eileen Thomas, director of the River City Food Bank, said the need for summer meal programs in Sacramento is acute. Without school lunches, family food budgets are stretched. The food bank serves over 60,000 meals per month during July and August, compared with about 54,000 in June and September.

"We can always get lots of people interested in supporting the food bank and our programs during the holiday season," Thomas said. "They really forget that hunger doesn't go on vacation."

Call the National Hunger Hotline at (866) 348-6479 or (877) 842-6273. [Click here to find summer meal locations across the state.](#)

View [Summer Meal Sites](#) in a larger map

Call The Bee's Isabelle Taft, (916) 321-1101.

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