

Some school districts try to fill growing summer nutrition gap

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School's out, but Riverside Unified's food services department is not closing down. "Hunger doesn't take a vacation, and neither do we," said Rodney Taylor, director of nutritional services for the district.



Santa Barbara uses a former "taco truck" to bring meals to kids in parks during the summer.

Each weekday, all summer long, the district and city have barbecues in 24 parks in low-income neighborhoods. Any child from age 2 through 17 can eat, no questions asked. The district expects to serve more than half a million meals through its summer program, with funding from the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#).

"They're not getting some baloney sandwich in a brown bag, which says, 'here's a lunch because you're poor,'" Taylor said. "We're saying, 'Come join us for a picnic.'" Each day children have the choice of hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken, spicy chicken, or hot links, along with whole-wheat bread, milk, and fresh fruit and vegetables from local organic farmers.

But not all California children are as fortunate. According to a [report](#) released Thursday by California Food Policy Advocates, a nonprofit organization based in Oakland and Los Angeles, more than 2 million (84 percent) of the children who received federally funded school meals during the school year did not get free lunches during the summer in 2011.

When districts throughout California cut back or eliminated summer school in 2009 because of state budget cutbacks, many children no longer could rely on a healthy lunch when school was not in session. An [EdSource report](#) on last year's summer programs found that most of the state's largest districts enrolled only a fraction of the number of students that had participated before the start of the Great Recession.

The slide, however, began at least a decade ago, according to the California Food Policy Advocates report. In 2002, more than 800,000 children were participating in the federal summer meals program. By 2011, the number had dropped to less than 400,000.

But some districts like Riverside have found ways to offer meals, even if they no longer provide summer school. In some parts of the state, such as San Francisco, cities rather than school districts have taken on the task of feeding children. In San Francisco, which also relies on federal funds, meals are provided through summer programs, but extra meals are included for children in the neighborhood who are not participating in the program.

Sharon Ray, manager of the California Department of Education's Nutrition Services Division, says her department encourages districts to find ways, like Riverside did, to provide healthy meals to children.

"Our goal is for kids to eat healthy meals in the summer with balanced nutrition and not too many calories," she said. If it weren't for these programs many children "would end up eating fast food because it's cheap," she added. "We want to offer an alternative to that."

Districts can offer free meals through the federal [Seamless Summer](#) meals program, which requires very little paperwork, she

said. Neighborhoods where at least half of the children qualify for the federal meals program during the school year are eligible. The federal [Summer Food Service](#) program, which underwrites Riverside's summer food initiative, provides a little more support, but also requires more paperwork. The reimbursement rates for both programs are a little more than \$3 for each lunch served, typically not enough to cover the entire cost of providing the meals.

By mid-June, free lunches were being offered at about 2,500 locations throughout California by school districts and other nonprofit organizations, Ray reported. Those sites are in addition to meals offered through summer programs on school campuses. Data on those programs are not readily available, she said.

Nancy Weiss, director of food services for Santa Barbara's public schools, is also making sure children in low-income neighborhoods eat this summer. She is trying a novel approach – a Mobile Café. Former "taco trucks," now owned by the schools, travel to local parks. She also relies on the federal Summer Food Service program for funding.

"We cook right on board the truck," Weiss said. "Kids are smelling the burgers when they are cooking. It's more of a carnival atmosphere." The district also provides plastic picnic tables that lay on the grass. "They're picnicking in the park with us."

But even programs that are as successful as Riverside's do not reach all the children who need it. Taylor said he is constantly trying new ways to let parents and children know about the program. The district advertises on local radio and television stations, puts up posters at the schools, and makes robotic calls to the students' homes. Taylor also does his best to let children in neighboring districts know about the program, but he says he has not found very effective ways to reach those communities.

"Any district can do this," said Taylor. "Most will tell you that they can't afford to do it. You can't afford not to do it. We have a responsibility to our kids. We are part of this community. If they're at risk, we need to provide for them." Taylor takes an entrepreneurial approach to district food services to raise local money to support the program. For example, the district caters, runs a café, and stores frozen food for the local college. They then deliver the frozen food to five sites and charge a fee.

Taylor and Weiss say they have had calls from parents in their districts criticizing them for offering the



Santa Barbara children enjoy a summer picnic provided by their school district.

free summer meals, and saying schools are doing what parents ought to be doing for their children.

Taylor, who grew up in Compton, said he knows “hunger far more intimately than I care to admit.”

“I’m not going to worry about whose fault it is,” Taylor said. “If I have an ability to provide a safety net to children, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Weiss gets angry when she hears complaints. “It’s not the kids’ fault,” she said. “Are you going to prove a point by starving children?”

In the report, [2012 School’s Out... Who Ate?](#) by the California Food Policy Advocates, the authors Matthew Sharp and Tia Shimada recommend that the state take a much more proactive approach to providing summer meals, including:



Rodney Taylor is director of nutritional services for Riverside Unified.

- State Superintendent Tom Torlakson should initiate and coordinate a state convening to develop legislative, administrative, and fiscal solutions that will close the gaps in summer learning and summer nutrition.
- The Legislature should require the state to collect and track data describing the availability of summer school and summer learning programs.
- The California Department of Education should promote and monitor implementation of increased outreach requirements included in the federal [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#).
- Local school nutrition services departments should work with community leaders and community-based organizations to vend meals, sponsor meal programs, and disseminate information to students/families about available summer meal sites.
- Summer meal advocates, administrators, and academic partners should develop and implement a summer nutrition research agenda to better understand what nutrition resources are available to California’s low-income students.