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A not-so-seamless summer for hungry kids

Low-income families missing out on free meals during the summer months

by Kevin Forestieri

Theuerkauf Elementary has been a busy, bustling hub for kids and families in Mountain View over the last month. The school is one of only a few sites in the city where children can get a free bite to eat, an essential resource for families who struggle to afford food.

But this week, the campus will be closing the door on its summer food program, leaving a three-week gap until school starts, with its free and reduced hot lunches. And it raises questions about whether the city's neediest kids will have to go hungry.

Every summer, the Mountain View Whisman School District hosts its "Seamless Summer" lunch program, giving anyone under the age of 18 access to a free meal, paid for by federal funds. This year the district served up its regular school food menu along with a full salad bar at Theuerkauf and Stevenson Elementary, distributing lunches to more than 1,000 kids each day.

But inevitably, school districts in Mountain View and throughout California are running into the same problem – many of the students who rely most on the free meals during the school year are not showing up during the summer.

A recent report by the research group California Food Policy Advocates found that a vast majority of students from low-income families are missing out on the free meals they rely on during the school year. The report found that about 2 million students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals in California participate in the school lunch program during March and April, but that number plunges to less than 300,000 during July – meaning 85 percent are no longer accessing the meals they relied on during the school year.

The causes for the drop in participation are manifold: the number of places where kids can get a free meal drops significantly during the summer, making transportation a challenge, and programs typically only last for a portion of the summer months, leaving families with gaps at the start and end of the summer break.

Participation in summer food programs hardly improves when looking solely at Santa Clara County, where 84 percent of the kids who benefit from subsidized lunches don't have access to school meals during the summer – an estimated 44,501 children, according to the report. Of the 5,084 students enrolled in the Mountain View Whisman School District last year, 1,855 qualified for free and reduced lunch.

It's hard to avoid the sudden loss of accessibility during the summer, according to Kathy Jackson, CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. School districts go from operating food services at every campus during the school year to just a small handful of locations. Just getting to the sites can be a big hurdle, Jackson said, and working parents may not be around to drive their kids to a campus across town. This could be particularly tough for Mountain View families this year because both summer food sites – Theuerkauf and Stevenson – share the same campus, effectively focusing all of the food services at a single location.

"All of the arrangements that you have during the school year, whether it's child care or food, it all changes during the summer," she said. "Summer is kind of the season of childhood hunger."

School districts are responsible for operating most of the roughly 115 summer food sites in Santa Clara County. Similar to the Mountain View Whisman School District, these programs typically last anywhere from

four to six weeks, which Jackson said leaves a gap that can be difficult to fill before school starts in August.

District staff did not respond to an inquiry by the *Voice* on why the summer lunch program last just six weeks when summer vacation lasts 10 weeks.

Although Second Harvest serves primarily as a food bank, Jackson said the organization plays the role of a "megaphone" during the summer months, alerting residents to any food programs in the area. The hope, she said, is that families will be able to seek out nonprofits, pantry services and soup kitchens once school districts shut the door on short-lived summer lunch programs.

District officials at Mountain View Whisman say they have done their part to feed as many kids as possible during the summer. Deborah Austin, the director of child nutrition, said the district has been serving up more than 1,000 meals per day, and has extended its reach by allowing staff from Trinity Methodist Church and the city of Mountain View's Recreation Department to pick up and deliver meals across town. It's unclear how many of these meals reach children from low-income families because kids in those programs are served the lunches regardless of need.

"I'm trying to get meals to as many places as possible, because you never know who is hungry in our city," Austin said. "Food is so important for our children."

The Seamless Summer program is paid for by reimbursements from the federal government based on the number of meals, giving school districts an incentive to serve as many children as possible. Whether the reimbursements cover all the costs depends on how much it costs to cook, and how many kids show up. At a board meeting in May, Chief Business Officer Robert Clark argued that the district should soak up any deficit spending on the program if it means feeding more families.

"Even if (the budget) didn't quite fit, it's the right thing to do," Clark said.

While the data collected by the California Food Policy Advocates paints a bleak picture about summer hunger, there are signs that it's getting better. Anna Colby, a nutrition policy advocate for the nonprofit, there's been a "modest" bump in the number of children getting a free meal in recent years, meaning availability and access could be improving.

"We have seen an increase in the number of meals served across the state, which is definitely a change of direction," Colby said.

The report on summer hunger, co-authored by Colby, does not make major policy recommendations to food providers like school districts, and instead seeks to pressure state lawmakers to support a Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) for Children program (formerly referred to as food stamps). The federally-funded program has been test-driven in other states, and is designed to help families purchase food during the summer while school is out. Colby said it's important for state lawmakers to have the systems in place to implement a summer EBT program and take advantage of federal funding if the opportunity comes along.

Colby said it's hard to point fingers at any one agency for the low level of participation in summer lunch programs, and that school districts are likely doing whatever they can to improve outreach and serve as many children as possible. More school sites could be opened during the summer, she said, but it's going to take a multi-faceted approach to help everyone.

"Even if summer meal programs were operated everywhere they could, some kids would still fall through the cracks," Colby said.