



June 2010

# Policy Brief

## Providing Access to Nutritious Meals During Summer

### Background

Without access to healthy meals that combat hunger, children are not attentive and ready to learn. Socioeconomically disadvantaged children in California are eligible to receive at least one nutritious meal a day during the school year. But when school is not in session during the summer, many of these children will not have access to these meals.

In 2008-09, more than half of the student population in California public schools was enrolled in the state's free and reduced-priced meal programs. Even more children are expected to enroll as California's economic crisis continues, meaning that even more children will be in need of healthy, free meals. The number of families applying for assistance to afford food is increasing and lines at food banks are growing longer. In fact, 17 percent of low-income families with children experience "very low food security," which is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as occurring when the food intake of household members is reduced and their normal eating patterns are disrupted because the household lacks money and other resources for food.

While state law requires summer schools to offer meals, budget cutbacks at the state level have limited the number of districts offering summer school. In July 2008, more than 500,000 low-income children ate lunch at free summer nutrition programs. Eighty-five percent of those children got meals from summer school programs that will not be open this summer. With the decrease in school-based summer food sites, there is additional impetus for new community sites to serve the summer nutrition needs of children. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Feeding Option (SSFO) helps children get the nutrition they need to learn, play and grow throughout the summer months when they are out of school. As a result, summer food programs that operate through partnerships and outside school grounds have been increasing.

Local school districts and county offices of education can help to promote these summer food programs that fill the gap for healthy, free summer meals for children. School districts and county offices of education (COEs) can partner with community advocates and organizations, food banks, and other government agencies to provide access to summer meal programs that prevent hunger while promoting nutrition and obesity prevention.

### Program Overview

The USDA's SFSP helps children get the nutrition they need to learn, play and grow throughout the summer months when they are out of school. Children who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs are not always aware of the SFSP. While millions of children depend on nutritious free and reduced-price meals and snacks during the school year, only a small percentage receive the free meals provided by the SFSP during the summer months.

The SFSP operates when school is not in session for 15 days or more. The SFSP allows a local sponsor to combine a feeding program with a summer activity program. The program sponsor can be a school district, a public agency or a nonprofit organization in the community. Summer meals can be served not just at summer schools, but also at municipal parks and recreation centers, community centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, churches, day camps, residential summer camps, housing projects, migrant centers or on Indian reservations. To determine a site's eligibility, 50 percent of the children enrolled in the nearest school must qualify for free and reduced-price meals. Census tract information must show that 50 percent of the children living in the area are low-income. SFSP sponsors receive payment from the federal government for serving healthy meals and snacks to children and teenagers, 18 years and younger, at approved sites in low-income areas.

The summer meal sites must serve meals that include milk, fruits, vegetables or juice; grain products; and meat or meat alternate. The program allows sites to serve each day: two meals, a meal and a snack, or if at a camp, three meals a day. A sponsor may prepare its own meals, purchase meals through an agreement with an area school, or contract for meals with another vendor.

The SSFO is a program that encourages more districts and COEs to provide meals in low income areas during summer and certain other school vacation periods. The SSFO reduces paperwork and administrative burdens by continuing the same meal service rules and claiming procedures used during the regular school year. This option makes it easier for sponsors to feed children in low-income areas during traditional summer vacation periods and during school vacation periods of longer than 10 days for year-round schools.

---

## Case Study

### San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD)

In 2004, SDUSD became a sponsor of the Summer Food Service Program with 16 park locations and served 11,000 meals. By 2009, the district had 67 SFSP sites, including 44 schools and 23 recreation centers, serving 250,000 meals and snacks. Key components to the successful growth of this program include advance planning and collaboration. The summer lunch program planning process starts early in the year, with meetings of the SDUSD Food Services department. The district also works with the City of San Diego Park & Recreation department to estimate participation levels, project staffing requirements, and anticipate summer school locations. During this planning phase, menus are also developed for the summer food program, with slightly different offerings served at school locations than at park locations, even though all menus follow USDA guidelines. It is anticipated that hot food will be added to the menu offerings in 2010.

Marketing of the SDUSD Summer Food Service Program has also been critical to its growth. Program publicity occurs through multiple mediums, including banner signs at all participating locations, fliers, posters, announcements on school marquees and newsletters, and through dissemination by partner organizations. These organizations include the City of San Diego Park & Recreation Department, Hunger Coalition, Network for a Healthy California, The Food Bank, SAY San Diego, County of San Diego Department of Health and Human Services - Nutrition Services Division, the Mexican Consulate, and San Diego Gas & Electric. Fliers are sent to local libraries; participating recreation centers; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

offices; and local daycare centers. The information is also shared with various councils of churches, community health clinics, news media and to other groups that request it. Additionally, the superintendent of the SDUSD sends an automated telephone message to families inviting their participation in the SFSP. The impact of this comprehensive marketing effort involving community partnerships has been significant to the success of the program.

The SFSP in the SDUSD would not exist without community involvement. Program volunteers help oversee sites, serve prepared food, deliver meals, and organize and implement activities. Volunteers include the parents of district students, service clubs, faith-based organizations and community groups, corporations and businesses, youth groups, students from high schools and colleges, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H, teachers on summer break, government and municipal agencies and AmeriCorps.

Each year, the goal of the program has been to spread information about the SFSP to as many groups, community members, and organizations as possible through presentations, fliers and the media in hopes of encouraging additional participation. Educating all stakeholders, including staff, management, site leaders, and volunteers about the importance of this program to children, families and the community as a whole has also contributed to its success.

---

## Board Considerations

School districts and COEs can be active partners with other stakeholders in the community to ensure that children who depend upon these federally funded meals will have access to food in the summer. Whether a school district or COE becomes the sponsor of a summer food site, acts as a vendor supplying the food to another sponsor, or works to publicize and support a summer food program being provided by another sponsor, it can help to ensure that children obtain federally funded summer meals. Districts and COEs are uniquely positioned to communicate with children and their families about where to find these lunch sites.

---

## Key Questions

- Have the summer food needs of children within the community been identified and discussed? How can the district or COE, even when constrained by budget cutbacks that limit summer school offerings, partner with local community organizations and food banks to ensure that adequate summer food programs are being offered to all children in the community?

- Do board decisions about summer school offerings, site selection and budgeting include a discussion of food service needs?
- If summer food programs are in place, is the district or COE helping to build participation in these programs by providing information about summer food sites and increasing outreach to parents and children?
- Has the district or COE convened food service staff, city parks and recreation staff, food banks, community health advocates, and other stakeholders to identify gaps in summer food site availability and marketing?
- Has the district or COE weighed the costs and benefits associated with acting as a sponsor of federally reimbursed SFSP meals for children?

---

## The Board's Role

- **Set direction:** Develop an understanding among the board, district/COE staff and the community regarding the link between healthy eating and student achievement, at all times of the year, including summer.
- **Establish structure:** Adopt and align policies to address the needs of the Summer Food Service Program.
- **Provide support:** Ensure the district/COE explores cost-effective methods and collaborations to ensure that children in the community have adequate access to summer food programs.
- **Ensure accountability:** Monitor implementation of summer food policies and ensure that reports are provided to the board by district/COE food service personnel or summer food program sponsors who serve the children within the district.
- **Engage the community:** Cultivate strong partnerships among the district/COE and city parks and recreation staff, food banks, community health advocates, and other stakeholders to ensure that parents and children are aware of summer food sites and utilize the resources being provided.

---

## Resources

**California School Boards Association:** Provides sample board policies, policy briefs, publications and other resources on a variety of topics related to nutrition and student wellness, including sample board policy and administrative regulation 3552 – Summer Meal Program. See [www.csba.org](http://www.csba.org)

**California Department of Education Nutrition Division:** Provides resources and information related to child nutrition, nutrition education, food distribution programs, and the Child Nutrition and Physical Activity Advisory Council. See [www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sf/](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sf/)

**The Network for a Healthy California:** Represents a statewide movement of local, state and national partners collectively working toward improving the health status of low-income Californians through increased fruit and vegetable consumption and daily physical activity. See [www.healthy-laUSD.net/Teachers/Summer\\_Food\\_Service\\_Program.aspx](http://www.healthy-laUSD.net/Teachers/Summer_Food_Service_Program.aspx)

**California Center for Research on Women and Families:** Publishes policy primers to educate policymakers, program providers, and the general public about policy issues in California. CCRWF is a program of the Public Health Institute and led the creation of the Summer Meals Program Coalition. See [www.ccrwf.org/tag/summer-meals/](http://www.ccrwf.org/tag/summer-meals/)

**US Department of Agriculture:** Is responsible for developing and executing federal policy on farming, agriculture, and food. Its mission includes assuring food safety, protecting natural resources, fostering rural communities and ending hunger in the United States and abroad. See [www.summerfood.usda.gov/states/meal\\_service.html](http://www.summerfood.usda.gov/states/meal_service.html)

**Food Research Action Center:** Is a national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and under-nutrition in the United States. See [www.frac.org/CA\\_Guide/summer\\_funding.html#](http://www.frac.org/CA_Guide/summer_funding.html#)

**California Food Policy Advocates:** Is a statewide public policy and advocacy organization dedicated to improving the health and well being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious and affordable food. “School’s Out...Who Ate? A Report on Summer Nutrition in California.” See [www.cfpa.net/summerfood/sowa2009.pdf](http://www.cfpa.net/summerfood/sowa2009.pdf)

This policy brief was supported by a grant from California Project LEAN.