



Nourishing Kids *in the* Summer

By Juliann Schaeffer

The summertime comes with longer days and later bedtimes for kids and a much-needed break from test taking and homework assignments. Even though children need to get away from the hustle and bustle of attending school each day, they still need healthful meals and snacks for proper development during their summer vacation. That's the message of the USDA's Summer Food Service Program, which aims to fill the summer food gap for the millions of low-income children aged 2 to 18 who get free or reduced-price meals during the school year but are left without such assistance during the summer months.

As good nutrition is essential to both physical and mental growth, the Summer Food Service Program seeks to offer opportunities to continue "a child's physical and social development while providing nutritious meals during long vacation periods from school. It helps children return to school ready to learn," according to the program's website.

First created in 1968 as part of a larger pilot program, the Summer Food Service Program became its own entity in 1975, and it reached more than 2 million kids in 2012 through almost

39,000 sites. "This program allows operators such as the school system to continue to offer healthful meals throughout the entire year," says Jodi Risse, MS, RD, LDN, supervisor of food and nutrition services for Anne Arundel County Public Schools in Maryland. "Hunger and access to healthful meals are high in the priority of community needs."

While the USDA governs overall program requirements and dictates reimbursements and other details, much of the food, marketing, and other program specifics are determined at the local level. The program is run by approved local sponsors, which can include school districts and camps. Each site determines what food to serve and how to spread the word to its target population.

To reach more children in need, some Summer Food Service Programs are getting creative. *Today's Dietitian* highlights five programs in five states that are using innovative marketing tools, offering meals during nontraditional hours, and bringing food to children by truck or the all-familiar bright-yellow school bus to ensure all kids have access to healthful food all summer long.



Learn how five school districts are offering nutritious meals to underprivileged children to keep them healthy before the start of a new school year.

Maryland

Maryland's Anne Arundel County Public Schools participate in the Summer Food Service Program annually, and it's continuing to grow and expand each year, Risse says, with participating school sites attempting to reach the neediest populations. "The program includes breakfasts, snacks, and lunches in a number of schools, camps, and community locations," she says.

The school sites run on a two-week-cycle menu, with menu items determined by nutritional value, cost, and student acceptance. Chicken sandwiches, deli sandwiches, and yogurt and cheese combos are just a few of the healthier options provided. "We also offer each day a fresh fruit, 100% fruit juice, and milk," Risse says.

An emphasis on fresh fruits and veggies is a no-brainer for Anne Arundel's program. "Each day that we can have a child excited about a new fruit or vegetable is a win for the county and a win for the student," Risse says. "The menu is developed considering many factors. All sites offer entrées, fruits, vegetables, and milk. Some small sites offer cold entrée selections for ease in delivery. Student acceptance is important at all locations."

According to Risse, one of the biggest challenges the program faces is reaching everyone, particularly those kids who could benefit from the meals but have no way of getting to the school sites each day. "At school sites, you often miss the children at home without transportation to the site," she says.

To help address this issue, two years ago, the county embarked on a mobile meals program to bring the meal offerings to the children. The mobile meals are transported in an Anne Arundel County Public Schools bus, which is "bright yellow and very familiar to the students in our county," Risse says.

Mobile meals stop at seven sites in the western part of the county. "Last year, we served over 6,000 meals at the mobile meals sites," Risse says. "The sites are all located in a needy area where free and reduced-price meals are approximately 80%."

The mobile meals include the same food offerings as the traditional school setting. "We offer a few of the student favorites plus a grab-and-go option," she adds.

To spread the word so all kids learn about the summer program specifics, voice, text, and e-mail messages are sent to parents to provide them with all the necessary details. And if meal count is any indicator, the marketing seems to be working. "Anne Arundel County Public Schools not only gain meals each summer, we also gain new partners for further expansion," Risse says. "Each year, the program grows over 20,000 meals. The efforts of all parties are paying off, and we continue to expand and reach additional children each summer."

In addition to expanding mobile meal sites and its collaboration with the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation and Parks, this year the program is looking at an exciting addition: backpacks of food to sustain kids over the weekend.

"This summer we're planning to offer backpacks of food to go home with children every Thursday on the Mobile Meals Bus, as well as the open sites in schools," she explains. Open sites, which operate in low-income areas where at least one-half of the children are from households with income at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines, provide meals at no charge to any child who shows up. "Every Thursday, all open and mobile meals sites will receive a bag of food for each student at the meal site. We're working with the Department of Health, family and community partners, and the Anne Arundel County Food Bank. This is a great way to showcase how our county works with internal and external partners to best meet the needs of our students and community."

Based on her experience with the summer program, Risse recommends it to all school nutrition professionals and all RDs who are interested in getting involved in some way. "Not only is the program financially sound, it provides a much-needed benefit to all children in needy areas during the summer," she says. "Each year, we receive favorable comments and notes that clearly state the evident. Parents and children aren't only happy with meals but feel this service is something they cannot live without."

New York

Debbi Beauvais, RDN, SNS, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, works with summer food programs in three Rochester, New York, community school districts where she's the school nutrition director. "In all three of these school districts, we have poverty rates that exceed 50% of the student population," she says. "These are the children we hope will take advantage of the program in the summer."

According to Beauvais, these programs offer breakfast and lunch meals at school sites, including Gates Chili School District and other sites tied to community recreation programs and parks in the community. She says choosing the sites with the easiest access can allow for greater turnout and more kids served.

The summer menu runs on a three-week cycle, and much of the food offerings mirror what's offered during the school year, with menu items including meatball subs and chicken sandwiches. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and yogurt are offered as substitute entrées daily. "Our motto is to have something on the menu every day that every child likes to eat," Beauvais says. "In my experience, hot meals at lunch are more appealing to kids."

Though she admits that some fresh and healthful foods can cost more, Beauvais says a little creativity can go a long way in helping programs do more with less. "Yes, whole grains, fresh produce, and lean protein foods tend to cost more," she says. "You have to evaluate the federal reimbursement and your budget and fit all the pieces of the puzzle together to make it all work."

According to Beauvais, finding volunteers to assist paid program workers can be a huge cost savings. "Being a school nutrition program offering summer meals, we have many

practices in place that reduce costs already, such as cooperative bidding and adequate facilities to prepare and serve food," she says. "And we received a grant from Action for Healthy Kids that allowed us to purchase the equipment needed to transport meals to various locations in the community."

Marketing is a huge piece of the program, and she notes that word of mouth can move mountains to get more children to the sites. "If you serve good food and people enjoy and understand the program, they will tell others and participation trends up," Beauvais says. "This is my second program year in two school communities, and I hope to see this increase this summer. I'm in the third year in the other program and saw an increase last year, as many said they heard about it from friends."

For many, the time spent enjoying the summer meals serves both as mealtime and social time for not only the kids but the adults as well. For this reason, Beauvais' program offers its meals at a modest price for adults who bring their children: \$1.50 for breakfast and \$3 for lunch.

Beauvais admits she's always looking for more avenues to expand the summer program and reach more families and says a mobile food truck may be an addition in the coming years. But as the program stands, it has reached many—an average of 275 breakfasts and 429 lunches per day in 2013—and those many have shown appreciation in spades.

"I have to say that each summer to date the adults bringing in the children offer many thanks to the staff for these meal programs," she says. "Many are very honest with the struggles they have to provide meals to their children when school is out. This is such a rewarding program to be involved with, and it's really valued by the people it serves. It has put a tear in many of our eyes when you hear the stories of families struggling to feed their children."

Florida

Robin Safley is the director of the division of food, nutrition, and wellness at the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which administers the federal summer food program to Florida sponsors. "We are the pass-through agency for the reimbursable meal funds distributed to our sponsors," she explains.

While different sites determine their own meal offerings based on federal requirements, Safley says each sponsor site takes into account various location aspects when deciding on menu choices. Especially since Florida is a melting pot of many cultures with large pockets of rural and urban areas, Safley says culture considerations are a must when deciding on specific food offerings. Sponsor sites still are finalizing summer menus for the 2014 season, but sample menus include turkey and cheese wraps with pineapple tidbits and Latin hoagie sandwiches with raw baby carrots, both of which come with either 100% fruit juice or low-fat milk.

But where Safley and her staff really make inroads in Florida's summer food programs is their outreach efforts, finding new ways to get these programs to more children each year.

"We provide outreach to our sponsors to build awareness in their community where the summer feeding sites are located," she says. "We ensure program compliance of our sponsors to the federal regulations. We work with the Department of Children and Families to identify these households who have children that qualify and overlay that data with our summer sites. Once those areas are targeted, we continue to work with our community partners and existing sponsors for expansion."

To spread the word to parents, Safley says the department has partnered with 2-1-1, a call center that helps parents identify summer food sites in their area. It also has partnered with the Department of Children and Families to identify those participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Once families are identified, oversized direct mail pieces advertising the program are mailed to those households.

Billboard marketing, TV/radio advertising, Facebook, and other avenues are used to reach families in need as well as myriad community partners that help spread the word. "We also have regionalized our staff, since Florida is uniquely shaped, to be closer to assist our sponsors with technical visits and assistance," Safley says. "This year we also have hired a consultant to advise faith-based communities on how to become an effective summer sponsor or summer feeding site."

"We've seen a 16.4% increase in summer meals served in the last two years," she adds, noting that the department won't be satisfied until its state summer programs are reaching all kids in need. "Last year, our Florida sponsors served over 2.7 million breakfasts, 6.3 million lunches, 122,000 suppers, and 2.1 million snacks," she says. "But the goal of the program is to reach all 1.6 million children in Florida who are receiving free and reduced meals throughout the school year. Currently, we're reaching approximately 300,000 of those students. Through our partnerships, we will continue to identify areas to increase summer sites/sponsors."

Miami-Dade County Public Schools made the news for introducing food trucks in 2012 as part of its summer program. Safley says that mobile feeding is a great avenue for expanding reach, and she's hoping a new app may help the cause. "We're working on launching a Summer Feeding Site mobile app this summer," she says. "The parents/children can locate a summer feeding site in their area and be able to [use] GPS to [find] the location."

"We're also working with our statewide library system to offer meals during their summer activities," she adds. "And we're working with the local housing authorities to bring food to those children where they live. We continue to encourage and build capacity through mobile feeding."

Georgia

According to Donna S. Martin, EdS, RDN, LD, SNS, director of the school nutrition program for Burke County Board of Education in Georgia, the biggest issue she sees regarding summer feeding is access. "The most common problem is how to access the children who need the program the most but who do not have transportation to get to a location that offers the program," she



says. “The children that are most needy tend to be in remote rural locations with no access to a site offering the program.

“My program is located in Burke County, Georgia, which is the second largest land mass county in the state of Georgia, she adds. “The county is extremely rural, with 836 square miles of land and only 22,000 residents. Fifty percent live in the main city of Waynesboro and the rest live scattered out all over the county. We try to reach the children all over the county.”

With more than 84% of students qualifying for free and reduced meals and 63% on food stamps, there are many children to reach over a large area. But Martin and her colleagues have combated this challenge by taking the food offerings to kids in buses. “We run 14 bus routes all over the county for eight weeks during the summer,” she says. “We start the program a week after the last day of school and continue until the week before schools start back.”

According to Martin, the program serves approximately 3,000 meals per day from its buses. “Each bus stops at between six to 10 stops a day,” she says. “Some stops feed as many as 150 children. They start feeding at 9:30 AM and go until 2 PM.”

Unlike the food trucks, the buses don’t just bring the food to children; they provide a place for children to eat as well. “The students get on the air-conditioned bus and eat the meal and then get off and go back home,” she explains.

Martin plans the menus and says she aims to offer two hot meals each week, such as chicken filet sandwiches, and provides cold deli sandwiches the other three days. Beverages of milk and juice also are offered as well as fresh fruit.

She says the deli turkey breast and ham help to make her limited budget go further. “We also buy some local in-season fruit, such as peaches,” she says. The program follows a week-long menu, and Martin works hard to ensure the children like the food and that it’s easy to eat and prepare. “It also cannot be too messy because the children eat on the bus,” she says.

Program staff members distribute fliers to parents the last week of school as well as to churches, grocery stores, and gas stations to spread the word about the program and the buses. “We put signs out at the bus stops to let everyone know that that location is a [summer feeding] site and what time the bus will be there,” she says. Martin works with the local churches to provide meals for vacation Bible school programs. “If our children go to a vacation Bible school program, they would usually miss their meal, so we give the meals to those vacation Bible school programs,” she says.

In addition to meeting children’s nutritional needs, the summer food program is something many kids look forward to at the end of the school year. “Our children get excited toward the end of school and start asking the bus drivers if we’re going to offer the program in the summer,” Martin says. “We’ve had numerous parents tell us how much the program means to them and to their children. They say the children love it, and it helps them so much to know the children get a good meal. The vacation Bible schools say they’re able to serve more children because we provide the meals for them, too.”

Washington, D.C.

Sandra Schlicker, PhD, deputy state superintendent for the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, oversees the District of Columbia Free Summer Meals Program, which reaches children in all four quadrants of the city. “The district summer program targets areas in which poor economic conditions exist, areas in which at least 50% of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Programs,” she says.

In addition to meeting all federal requirements, Schlicker says the district program complies with the local D.C. Healthy Schools Act requirements to ensure that all meals served meet the meal pattern recommendations of the USDA’s Healthier US School Challenge at the gold level.

Each approved sponsor determines the meals it will serve based on these requirements as well as cultural and other considerations. Typical entrées offered last summer included chicken salad on a whole wheat bun with carrots, Ranch dressing, and a mixed fruit cup or a chicken taco salad with black beans, a whole wheat dinner roll, and a fresh orange.

But Schlicker says creativity relating not just to meal content but also how and when meals are offered can help expand a program’s reach. “For fiscal year 2013, the district encouraged sponsors and sites to serve meals in the evening, on weekends, and holidays,” she says. “The state advocated for the needy children by urging our sponsors to provide nontraditional meal service times.” After implementing such nontraditional mealtimes, Schlicker says participation increased 14%.

“D.C. has been the No. 1 summer foodservice program in the country for the past nine years,” Schlicker says. Much of that success she credits to the focus that public officials put on spotlighting the summer program. “Mayor Vincent C. Gray, our state superintendent, and elected officials highlight the summer program and are active in the city building relationships with city agencies to sponsor the program,” she says. “The mayor is vigorous in placing strong emphasis on a One City Summer Initiative, with summer kick-off events demonstrating the importance of a holistic approach to maximizing activities and nutritional opportunities for all district children.”

In addition to expanding its practice of offering meals at nontraditional mealtimes, Schlicker says in the future the district may explore working with sponsors to institute mobile feeding sites and having sponsors make meals available during the school year at times when schools are closed due to inclement weather.

Looking at the Summer Food Service Program as a whole, Schlicker says she hopes to one day see federal legislation changed to permit not just two, as currently allowed, but three meals per day to children during the summer months, which would provide much more nutritional and other benefits to the many children in need of a well-balanced meal.

— Juliann Schaeffer is a freelance writer and editor based in Allbutris, Pennsylvania, and a frequent contributor to *Today’s Dietitian*.