

FUSD's summer food program open to all children

By Mackenzie Mays
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Jose Alvarado tried to grab students' attention as they piled into Roosevelt High School on Friday afternoon. He alternated between "hello" and "hola" as students reached for burritos, honeydew, corn and jugs of milk.

"For some of these kids, this is the only meal they get," said Alvarado, director of food services at Fresno Unified School District. "It really helps families here stretch their dollars."

About 900 free meals were expected to be served at Roosevelt High on Friday, with similar setups at more than 40 locations across the city. The Fresno Unified summer food program served nearly 200,000 free meals last summer, always featuring locally grown produce.

While the summer program is not associated with the Community Eligibility Provision, a federal program adopted by Fresno Unified last year that provides meals for all students at no cost, the goals are the same: feed kids for free, regardless of circumstance.

The Community Eligibility Provision, overseen by the USDA, allows school districts where at least 40% of students qualify for free lunch to provide the entire student body — regardless of income — with breakfast and lunch at no cost. Fresno Unified, where more than 80% of students come from low-income families and qualify for free lunch, signed up as soon as possible, becoming one of the first, large urban districts to roll out the program last year. The program lessens paperwork for administrators and fosters an environment where all children are treated equally, Alvarado said.

"It eliminates the stigma that's associated with who eats free lunch," he said. "It's one less thing parents have to deal with, too."

The current summer program has a similar universal philosophy. While many of the meals coincide with summer school or community programs, you don't have to be a Fresno Unified student to eat — you just have to be between 1 and 18 years old. About 1,500 students — or 14% — of the students who receive meals each day from the summer programs don't actually attend Fresno Unified, but are from nearby communities.

87%

Percentage of students who qualify for free meals at Fresno Unified

"Kids will just walk in, it's not a big deal," Alvarado said. "If there's a bus of kids going on a field trip from Sacramento to LA, they can pull in here and we'll feed them."

Food services manager Terri Spencer, who has been serving meals to Fresno Unified students for several years, said the summer program is crucial — not only to guarantee students a healthy meal, but to provide them with a community experience that some may miss out on when school is not in session.

"It's not hard to see that some of these kids don't communicate a lot with their families. We connect with them. We're some of the first faces they see when they get on campus," Spencer said. "We make them say 'good morning,' and it puts a smile on their face. And that puts a smile on my face."

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Details

A full list of feeding sites is available at www.fresnounified.org. Contact the Fresno Unified Food Services Department at (559) 457-6250 for more information.