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Summer Cuts Launch Lunch Scramble

By VAUHINI VARA

STOCKTON, Calif.—Budget cuts have left Francisca Vargas struggling to replace the academic boost her three young children once received from summer school—and the free lunch that came with it.



Michael Mullady for The Wall Street Journal

Francisca Vargas with some of her children at lunch time in Stockton, Calif., where cutbacks have hit some public-school lunch programs.

Ms. Vargas found relief at a local community center, which provides sandwiches and fruit, along with tutoring. It's less convenient than summer school—the gasoline costs add up—but the free program is a help to the family, which relies on Ms. Vargas's \$15,000 annual salary as a babysitter.

When schools in California and elsewhere closed for the summer to save money, educators expressed worries about the academic consequences. Now, many warn of low-income families losing the government-paid, and generally healthy, meals served there. Such low-cost alternatives as pasta and cereal served at home can contribute to childhood obesity, say advocates.

"For families that are already struggling, it's harder to get by during the summer months," said Crystal FitzSimons, director of school and out-of-school time programs at the Food Research and Action Center, an advocacy group in Washington.

In a typical week, Ms. Vargas spends \$100 to \$200 on groceries. When she learned that summer school was canceled, she worried her grocery bill would rise by another \$25 a week.

"When I found out, I started looking for where I could get services, where sack lunches were available," she said.

Since the 1940s, the National School Lunch Program has given out free and subsidized lunches to low-income students during the school year and summer, at a cost of \$10.8 billion in the fiscal year that ended in September 2010. A related program serves free breakfasts. The meals must meet certain dietary guidelines—avoiding saturated fat, for instance, and providing key nutrients like iron and calcium.

Such meals at school or child care help children maintain a healthy weight, and expanding access to them may be the best tool for fighting childhood obesity, according to a study published last year in *Health Affairs*, a health-policy journal.

Many low-income children already spend much of their summers indoors to avoid hanging out in unsafe neighborhoods, which also can fuel childhood obesity, said Jennifer Peck, executive director for the

Partnership for Children and Youth, an advocacy group in Oakland, Calif. "People think kids are out playing and getting more exercise in the summertime, but they're not," she said.

When schools eliminate summer-school programs, those federally funded meals are often no longer available. Schools can offer federally subsidized meals even when school is out, but many decide not to because of the cost of keeping the lights on at school buildings and hiring people to serve the meals.

Overall, the number of kindergarten-to-12th-grade students who ate summer meals through a federal program nationwide declined to 2.81 million in July 2010, down 0.6% from 2.83 million a year earlier. That is according to the most recent figures available from the Food Research and Action Center.

The decrease was driven by 19 states, including New York and Georgia. The main factor was a decrease in California, home to one out of every eight public-school children in the U.S. California served 12.8% fewer children summer-school lunches over the period, according to the center.

While state officials and non-profit groups in California have boosted participation in the alternative Summer Food Service Program also funded by the federal government, that hasn't offset the fall in summer-school participation.

Stockton, in California's parched Central Valley, illustrates the issue. During the real-estate boom of the last decade, Stockton, population 292,000, drew many residents who couldn't afford the home prices in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The city continues to grapple with foreclosure and unemployment rates that are among the nation's highest, and the economic downturn has taken a toll on the Stockton public schools, where Ms. Vargas's children attend McKinley Elementary. Among many cuts, the district winnowed summer programs to eight elementary schools, down from 14 last year and 41 in 2008. It expects to serve subsidized lunches to 74,000 children this summer, down from 190,000 in 2008—in part by persuading outside groups to serve food at community centers.

"The schools ran out of funding, and when they run out of funding, they don't have summer school," said Yvonne Migliori, director of child nutrition and food services at the district. So meals are not readily available for many low-income kids during the summer, she said.

McKinley Elementary, where 90% of 792 students qualified for free lunches in the 2009-10 school year, notified Ms. Vargas last summer that it was cutting its summer-school program. "I was disappointed that they took summer school away and gave other things priority," she said.

—Jim Carlton contributed to this article.

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