

Free summer lunch program back in Austin for another helping

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Chicken patties were the hot items on the menu Thursday at Austin High School for the free summer lunch program. Kids could add to their entree with a banana, chips, carrots and milk.

This first week of summer for kids in Austin Public Schools marks the start of the sixth annual free summer lunch program.

All kids 18 years and under can participate in the lunch program from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Ellis Middle School or Austin High School throughout the weekdays this summer for a free and nutritious meal. Parents and adults can join them for \$3.50 per meal.

Mary Weikum, director of food and nutrition for Austin Public Schools, said it's an important program because many families in Austin are food insecure. More than half of Austin students are part of the free or reduced lunch program during the school year.

"The need for that does not go away in the summer months," Weikum said. "So we feel it's really important, to have at least one nutritional meal."

Jessica Rembao and her five children stopped by the high school for a bite Thursday. It's convenient because it's within walking distance for her and her kids ranging in age from six months to 10 years. The free meal is delicious and appealing, she said.

"It helps because we are lower income," Rembao said. "It's one more meal that we don't have to worry about."

The food staff in Austin served about 35,000 lunches last year, and more than 40,000 in 2010. Weikum said they think this year will be about 35,000 again. In fact, staff members already served 1,000 kids during the first day this past Monday, she said.

"Yes, it's been busy," Weikum said.

The program is made possible through a federally funded program called the Summer Lunch Feeding Program. It's open to anyone, and there are no conditions regarding economic standing.

"There's really not a better use for our tax dollars than feeding our kids," Weikum said.

Activities will also be offered at the lunch sites, things like crafts, interactive programs and summer reading centers. A variety of books are available to read and borrow in the free book exchange, for children and families of all ages.

The lunch program is offered weekdays through July 27 at the high school and through Aug. 29 at Ellis. Lunch will not be served on July 4, and no registration is required.