

Summer lunch program serves about 35,000 meals

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With summer vacation wrapped up and the first week of school under way, the Austin school district is doing a lunch count.

The fifth year of the free summer lunch program served between 35,000 and 37,000 meals for the summer, according to an estimate from Mary Weikum, director of food and nutrition for the district.

All kids 18 and under could get a free and nutritious meal through the lunch program at Ellis Middle School and Austin High School weekdays this summer. Parents and adults could join them for \$3.50 a meal.

The final tally of meals served this summer isn't available yet, but 27,500 lunches were served through July between both sites.

In 2010, it was a "crazy, outstanding year" where the program served more than 40,000 lunches, she said.

"So that's a lot," 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, such as those who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program during the school year.

"I know that parents are very happy that we do this," Weikum said. "It's a really nice benefit that we give our families in Austin."

They appreciate the variety of foods the program offers, including the choices of fruits and vegetables on a daily basis, she said.

"Most times, it's the same families over and over that come," Weikum said. "So I think they really like it because they keep coming back."

The program offers hot menu items, a variety of cold sandwich choices and healthful side items such as fresh fruit and baked chips.

So what was the most popular dish kids liked to chomp on?

"They always like chicken patties," Weikum said. "Really, every kid's happy when it's chicken patty day."

For something new this summer, the cooks tried out a new Hawaiian chicken wrap. Apparently, the wrap was a hit, because it's now on the September lunch menu for students at AHS and Ellis.

The district is planning on holding the program again next year, Weikum said. She said she would be shocked if it were cut, especially since Michelle Obama is strong on helping in the areas of nutrition and helping the hungry, Weikum said.

Healthful snacks in school

Austin is also expanding its healthful snack cart program this school year. For \$40 a year, one student can receive a snack during the day. The program was at Sumner Elementary School and Woodson Kindergarten Center last year; it's expanding to the rest of the elementary schools this year.

Studies show that it's difficult for kids to get the recommended daily allowance of calories if they're eating healthful foods during meals, Weikum said. Snacks between meals help attain the calories kids need in order to help their bodies grow.

"Kids really need snacks," she said. "This is just a way to try to provide healthy snacks as opposed to sometimes what we would find in our cupboards at home."