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SUMMER MEALS WITH A CALIFORNIA TWIST

*Local farmers, schools teaming up to offer no-cost summer meals
featuring fresh California fruits and vegetables*

School districts in California serve almost one billion meals to children each year. Improvements in the caliber and nutritional value of these meals can literally impact a generation of young people.

Twenty-five California school districts are seizing the opportunity this summer, with help from California farmers. School districts in Sacramento, San Diego and Contra Costa are set to serve hundreds of thousands of summer meals made just for kids and featuring fruits and vegetables grown locally, including strawberries, melon, peaches, cucumber, carrot, tomato, avocado and squash. The meals are available at no cost to everyone age 18 and under.

Vince Caguin, Director of Nutrition Services at Natomas Unified School District in Sacramento, has curated a summer meals menu that includes recipes like Southwest Black Pearl Shaker Salad, made with cucumbers, tomatoes and corn; Sesame Chicken Noodle, with purple cabbage and snow peas; and Bow Tie Salad, with tri-color bell peppers.

Many crops are at their peak during summertime, and school districts that purchase summer crops from local farmers are able offer kids the freshest, tastiest produce. And farmers enjoy selling to the districts because they are nourishing kids, benefit from reliable buyers, and helping kids understand where their food comes from carries other rewards.

Chris Cochran of Solutions Farms in Vista, CA, speaks to hundreds of kids each year about farming and sustainability. He gets a kick out of surprising kids who harbor suspicion toward leafy greens. “They expect it to be bitter but it’s on the sweet side of the scale. They don’t expect to be won over by a vegetable that’s spikey and red!” Solutions Farms provides school districts with romaine lettuce in a spring mix.

Getting the Word Out

Participating school districts are working hard to make sure that parents are aware that there is no cost to participate in the summer meals program, no paperwork, and no need to sign up. Many of the districts are hosting special kick-off events, family-friendly gatherings to showcase the summer meals program and allow kids to taste test recipes featuring California specialty crops.

To raise awareness of summer meals and make sure parents get the location information they need, California Food for California Kids® has developed a new, bilingual, mobile-friendly website: summermeals.org. The site will be updated often with the latest information on meals, times and locations, provided by the California Department of Education. An ad campaign, in bus shelters and on radio and Facebook, is also underway to draw parents’ attention to summermeals.org.

“Summer is the perfect time to expose our children to new tastes, flavors and textures of foods grown close to home,” said Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy, which created California Food for California Kids®.

California Food for California Kids®

School districts affiliated with California Food for California Kids® receive support with recipe development, procurement, culinary skills, and ways to market fresh food so that it’s appealing to students and parents.

Funded by the USDA, summer meals programs around the country are intended to meet the nutritional needs of children whose families are vulnerable to hunger.

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