

Lunch @ the Library: Supporting Children's Health and Learning When School's Out

Introduction

Summer vacation presents a different reality for many impoverished children in California. In addition to limited access to summer learning and enrichment programs, many low-income children struggle to have basic needs met, with reduced access to healthy food and safe places to congregate. By serving meals and offering complementary literacy programs during the summer months, libraries participating in the 2013 *Lunch at the Library* project improved the summer experience for low-income children and teens and engaged families with their local public library.



Libraries are trusted, accessible spaces that promote learning:

- Located in the heart of the community, libraries welcome all and provide free access to resources and an environment that engages the entire family. From early literacy activities to technology classes for seniors, libraries offer resources to serve lifelong community needs.
- According to a 2013 report from the Pew Research Center, 95% of Americans ages 16 and older believe “that public libraries play an important role in giving everyone a chance to succeed” and feel libraries are very important to their communities. Library services and resources were more likely to be ranked as “very important” among low-income households or those with a lower level of educational attainment.ⁱ In addition, 81% of parents felt that libraries’ value lies in providing children with “information and resources not available at home.”ⁱⁱ
- Public library summer reading programs encourage and enable children and teens to set reading goals, engage them in activities that extend the reading experience, and connect youth with librarians who can help guide their reading choices and become positive adult role models in their lives.

Libraries are ideally suited to combat the summer nutrition gap:

- In summer 2012, summer meal programs in California reached only 17% of eligible children.ⁱⁱⁱ The impact of budget cuts on schools and park and recreation districts—both major providers of summer learning/enrichment and summer meal programs in California—have left communities struggling to find new ways to offer cost-effective and sustainable ways to provide programming and new mechanisms to deliver summer meals.

- Programming and site safety are key drivers for families in their decision to visit summer meal sites.^{iv} The library’s ability to offer a safe, temperature-controlled venue and programming with reliable, trusted staff, makes it an attractive option for summer meal providers.
- Libraries exist in communities across the nation, presenting an opportunity to leverage existing systems. Most are easily accessed by public transportation and are often located near other community services.

Participating Libraries and Providers

In 2013 we facilitated partnerships between the following libraries and meal sponsors:

Fresno County Public Library (Central Library) | Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission
 Los Angeles Public Library (Central and Pacoima Branch Library) | Los Angeles Regional Food Bank
 Sacramento Public Library (Valley Hi-North Laguna Branch Library)| Elk Grove Unified School District
 San Diego County Library (Lincoln Acres and Vista Branch libraries) | Feeding America San Diego

Program Highlights

Reaching Children & Families

- 13,348 lunches and 432 snacks were served to children and teens in Fresno, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Diego; Oakland Public Library served 1,000 more meals than last year. **Fresno EOC reported the library was among its most successful summer meal sites.**
- The program brought whole families into the library, which can be key when trying to engage children with library and summer meal programs. It also introduced new families to the library by offering new resources.

“We have been coming several times a week over the summer. I am seeing improvement in my kids’ reading ability! Thank you to those who make it possible.”

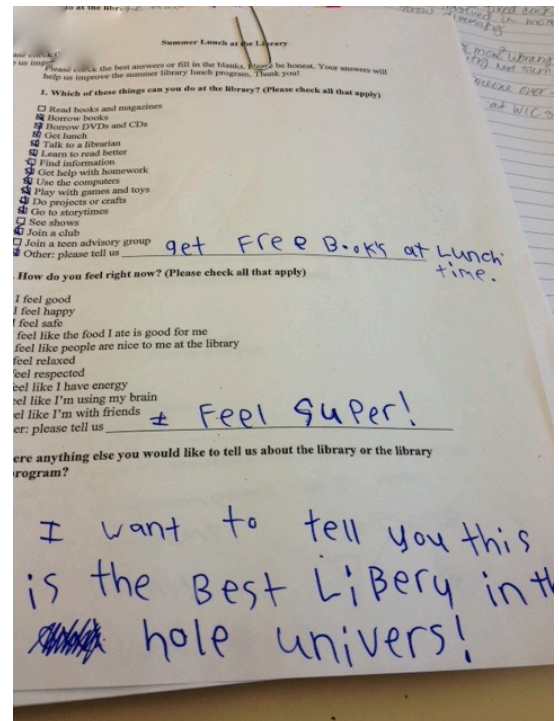
--L@L Parent



- Librarians reported improved behavior and attentiveness among child patrons, attributing the improvement to the lunch element; it is well documented that hunger can impact attention, concentration, and behavior and thus, impact academic readiness.
- Libraries reported an increase in summer reading sign-ups and library card issues over the previous year, which they attribute in part to *Lunch at the Library*. **Sacramento Public Library called the effort “transformational.”**

Partnerships, Promotion and Visibility

- A successful kick-off event was held at the Sacramento Public Library, in partnership with Elk Grove USD, California Department of Education and USDA Western Region Office (WRO). The event served as USDA WRO's anchor kick-off event. Kick-off event activities were provided by the Health Education Council (*Network for a Healthy California*), Mission Readiness, and The California Endowment's WeConnect. A free farmers market was offered by Elk Grove USD. Speakers included State Superintendent Tom Torlakson, USDA WRO Administrator Jesus Mendoza, Acting State Librarian Gerry Maginnity, and Sacramento Library Director Rivkah Sass.
- There were many different types of partnerships within the program. Fresno received a grant from CSU Fresno and partnered with the Boys & Girls Club to provide interns and free books; Sacramento and 916 Ink held (popular) writing workshops for kids; San Diego partnered with Olivewood Gardens to conduct nutrition education classes and garden activities (and Zumba).
- Executive boards of libraries and providers alike were enthusiastic about the project, thus increasing the visibility among key influencers in the community.
- Significant media attention helped raise awareness of the program, food insecurity, library offerings, and summer learning loss. **Other library leaders have reached out to CLA and the Coalition after reading about the effort.**



Serving Multiple Audiences: Staff and Teen Development Programs

- *Lunch at the Library* was a meaningful and effective teen development program during which teen volunteers acquired workforce-readiness skills. In Sacramento and Los Angeles, librarians actively used the program to help teens build resumes and acquire skills and language to pursue future employment.

"[This program makes me] feel like the community cares about us."

--L@L participant

- The librarians were encouraged by the support that they received from staff and library leadership. Library staff often live in the very community served by the program.
- Staff were able to spend time with one another volunteering, and spend more time engaged in activities with patrons. **According to the Los Angeles Public Library, "It showed staff what a library can be."**

Program Impact

Lunch at the Library contributes to statewide efforts to address summer learning loss and disparities in grade-level reading. The library can now engage community members who are not traditionally library users. In addition, innumerable opportunities exist to develop strong, sustainable partnerships that leverage existing resources and engage new audiences. Participating libraries and summer meal providers alike are enthusiastic about continuing the program and expanding to additional sites. All libraries felt that their efforts captured the majority of the six elements^v conducive to a positive summer experience. The initial year helped librarians develop a solid understanding of managing a summer meal program and library staff feel confident that they can dedicate year two to focusing more fully on developing a robust programming element.



Elevating the issues and opportunities

The California Summer Meal Coalition and the California Library Association were able to leverage *Lunch at the Library* to advance the conversation about the need and opportunities to support summer learning and nutrition through collaborative community partnerships. In addition, it provides a model that can bring together existing community resources to address the needs of low-income families. Highlights include:

- Presentations at conferences for the National Summer Learning Association, California School Nutrition Association, California Library Association, California School Boards Association, League of California Cities, BOOST, Association for Library Service to Children, and the Childhood Obesity Conference, featuring library and provider partners from the project.
- Significant local and statewide media coverage, National After School Association's magazine, and a feature on the USDA blog.
- Visibility among state and national partners as a potential model for coordinating summer nutrition and learning efforts.

Moving Forward in 2014

The Coalition and CLA have been working with USDA to determine opportunities for promotion and replication at the national level. In California, 2013 participating libraries will expand, collectively, to twelve new branches. These systems will focus on developing intentional programming to coincide with the lunch service (e.g., STEM, nutrition education, and youth development). Additional communities have been selected to participate in 2014 including:

Contra Costa County Library (Pittsburg and San Pablo) | Pittsburg USD and West Contra Costa USD

Alameda County Library (REACH Ashland Youth Center) | Hayward USD

Riverside Public Library (Main branch) | Riverside USD

Kern County Public Library (tentative) | Kern County Superintendent of Schools

CLA and the Coalition will provide support to San Mateo County Public Library, San Francisco Public Library, San Diego Library, and Multnomah County Library (Oregon).

ⁱ Pew Research Center. December 2013. *How Americans value public libraries in their communities*. Retrieved December 13, 2013 from: http://libraries.pewinternet.org/files/legacy-pdf/PIP_Libraries%20in%20communities.pdf

ⁱⁱ Pew Research Center. May 2013. *Parents, libraries, children and reading*. Retrieved December 13, 2013 from: <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/05/01/parents-children-libraries-and-reading/>

ⁱⁱⁱ California Food Policy Advocates. June 2013. *School's Out... Who Ate?* Retrieved December 13, 2013 from <http://cfpa.net/sowa-2013>

^{iv} Share Our Strength. March 2013. *Summer Meals Survey*. Retrieved December 13, 2013 from <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/SOS%20-%20Summer%20Meals%20Survey%20Report%20FINAL2.pdf>

^v The six elements of a great summer learning program emphasize a “whole child” approach that promote healthy habits, foster cooperative learning, offer variety, and expose children to new experiences. The elements are available at: <http://summermatters2you.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Six-Elements-of-Great-Summer-Learning.pdf>

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