



San Mateo County programs continue to feed students during summer

By Neil Gonzales
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SAN MATEO — Feke Kioa and his friends stopped by the King Community Center to play some hoops and hang out Monday.

They got their exercise and enjoyed a good free lunch to boot.

"It's nutritious," said Feke, 12, digging into a plate of hot dog and rice with a cup of milk and a sandwich for later. "They don't serve that much junk food. They have fruits and sometimes salad."

Such food programs become critical with school out for the summer. Community food banks and government programs are feeding the children during the long break.

The services are even more essential now given today's tight economic conditions, said state schools chief Jack O'Connell.

"These programs are more important than ever before because of the high cost of food and fuel," O'Connell said during a teleconference with reporters. "We want to make sure these programs are readily available. We can help families stretch their food dollars."

The number of California children getting free lunches last summer declined 1.1 percent compared

to 2006, according to a recent report by the California Food Policy Advocates. Only 28 percent of the state's neediest children got free summer meals last year.

To help turn that around, O'Connell announced that there are more than 3,200 sites statewide available for children to receive free meals. For more information, visit the 2008 Summer Meal Service Web site at www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/sn/sfs200841.asp.

Children 18 years and younger in low-income areas and persons over 18 who participate in a public or nonprofit private school program for the mentally or physically disabled may receive free meals through the Summer Food Service and Seamless Summer Feeding Option programs, according to the state Department of Education.

Both are federally funded programs administered through the state Education Department's Nutrition Services Division. The programs operate when school is not in session for 15 days or more.

Normally during the academic year, economically disadvantaged children can get at least one meal a day at their school.

"But when school is out for the summer, these same kids can miss out on these well-balanced, nutritious meals," O'Connell said.

The Second Harvest Food Bank has partnered with the Summer Food Service Program and local agencies to offer meals at the King center and other sites.

This effort will provide about 11,000 summer meals in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, according to Second Harvest.

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The King center is expected to serve meals to as many as 60 children a day, said community services coordinator David Weisgerber.

"It's nice to have a consistent place" for children to get lunch, he said. "It's definitely important for the kids."

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