

## Help Them Eat at Home

### A report for policymakers, anti-hunger advocates and administrators of the Summer Food Service Program

#### Executive Summary

Federal school nutrition programs have done much to stabilize the diets of low-income American children during the school day by providing free or low-cost breakfasts, lunches and snacks. These programs are a critical resource for many children. In the 1970s, Congress created the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to extend this food assistance to the times when school is not in session. Any child may go to sites throughout the community and receive free meals on summer weekdays without questions or paperwork. Despite sustained effort to increase participation over the last several decades, this program continues to reach only a fraction of the children reached by the school food programs it is intended to supplement.

Researchers have identified a host of barriers to participation, and federally funded pilot and demonstration projects have experimented with different ways of addressing them. The problems identified include: unfamiliarity with sites or even the existence of the program, limited numbers of sites (especially in rural areas), the inability to get to sites, a lack of activities for the children at the sites, limited hours for meal service, a lack of interest and so forth. Efforts to address these problems have included advertising, incentives for community groups to increase the number of sites or to stay open longer, transportation assistance, backpack programs with food for the weekend, etc. These efforts to increase participation in the SFSP can be categorized as *promotional strategies* to increase awareness of summer meals and modest program *restructuring* to knock down individual barriers.

This report argues that these efforts to increase participation have failed to make several key distinctions that have significant implications for the program's ability to reach more children. *Strong sites*, like schools and camps, already have half- or full-day programming, and the SFSP funds their meals in a fashion quite similar to free school meals. *Weak sites* are centered on the summer meals program, sometimes with activities of limited duration to encourage participation. This is a distinction about how families relate to the sites: strong sites that take care of children for many hours during the workday particularly appeal to working parents. Weak sites largely require a stay-at-home parent to escort the children. Participants at weak sites can be divided into *daily participants*, who tend to have fewer resources, and *occasional participants*, who cannot consistently fit the program into their schedule (e.g., the cost of gas or bus fare undercuts the value of the meal unless the family was going the same direction for another reason). Most campaigns to improve sites tacitly focus on encouraging households to become daily participants at weak sites. While there is potential for new weak sites to have solid participation, most likely in high-density, walkable residential areas with many stay-at-home parents,

## Key Concepts

**Strong sites** have ongoing programming for much of the traditional work/school day, and the USDA funds meals in a fashion similar to how it handles school meals.

**Weak sites** first and foremost serve meals to kids. Strong sites allow parents to leave their kids and go to work. Weak sites do not have the infrastructure to take care of children in the same way. Weak sites have numerous structural problems.

**Daily participants** at weak sites often have limited resources. They often walked to weak sites. The mothers typically had three or more children, sometimes with neighbor kids in tow, and strongly identified with the role of being a full-time parent.

**Occasional participants** used weak sites one to three times a week when it could be fit into their schedule, often meaning that families went to sites when they already planned to be out, thus lowering the impact of time and gas cost constraints. Frequently, the family only had one younger child.

**Most efforts to promote the program tacitly encourage families to become daily participants at weak sites.**

weak sites are not a realistic strategy for closing the summer meal gap, as is implicitly advocated in most efforts to improve participation.

Weak sites have numerous structural problems. They expect parents to take their children to a site to watch them eat without eating themselves. The rule limiting sites to areas of concentrated poverty mean that there are no sites near many of the kids receiving free or reduced-price meals during the school year. It's impractical to bring kids to a site once for breakfast and then again for lunch. Transportation poses a number of barriers, such as the cost of gas making the program inefficient for small families and the nationwide decline of children walking alone. A significant number of strong sites that are in theory open to the wider community face substantial barriers to being welcoming to kids not already in their day programming.

Using as evidence the experience of San Diego, California as well as the findings of Share Our Strength and the USDA, we argue that specific barriers to participation at weak sites should not be seen as individual issues that can be fixed in isolation. The individual barriers should be seen as pointing to a deeper issue, namely that weak sites, while working to meet a real need that must be addressed, are based on a charity model of food distribution, which requires families to deviate substantially from norms of food preparation and eating in order to participate. The sociologist Janet Poppendieck has identified problems with charity food distribution, including inconvenience, insufficiency and impracticality.

Together, these discourage participation at weak sites. The strength of the regular school meal program is that it provides one or two meals to children every day while they're already at school. It's logical. It's convenient. In contrast, weak sites of the SFSP program demand much more of families. They must:

- Have ready access to a nearby site (or if not, transportation).
- Have an adult available to escort the children to a site who is willing to watch someone else eat a meal without eating themselves.
- At a time of someone else's choosing.
- Up to twice a day.

- Without anyone being too sick to leave the house or being contagious.
- Without the weather being unbearably hot or stormy.
- Without any concerns about food allergies or sensitivities.
- Without any concern whether the children like the food or are picky eaters (but assuming that the children want to go).
- For every summer weekday that school is not in session.
- For potentially twelve years.

This is asking too much of families, and seen in this light, the low participation numbers make sense. Promoting weak sites, however, is not the only way of reaching more children.

One federal demonstration program had substantially greater reach than other efforts. It simply put money on EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards for the summer and allowed households to purchase food for children to be eaten at home. This addressed virtually every barrier to participation in the program ever studied. Further, compared to the control group, those who received the summer EBT cards ate modestly more servings per day of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and drank fewer servings of sugar-sweetened beverages. **The summer EBT is a far more promising long-term solution to expanding the reach of the summer meals program and improving food security among low-income families and should be supported to the greatest extent feasible.**

In the meantime, however, local advocates for summer meals have opportunities to increase the number of children helped by the current program. They could form new alliances with other advocates for children's welfare to help promote the creation of additional strong sites and to increase the capacity of existing ones. (The programming at these sites, in many cases, suffered cuts during the Great Recession, especially school summer session, and should be restored.) To cut through the white noise of modern information overload that makes it difficult to hear messages about the availability of weak sites, advocates could work to make their promotional efforts follow a word-of-mouth model from parent to parent. They could also more aggressively frame the program as an extension of school. The quality of sites and could be improved when and where resources are available.

## **Recommendations**

**Congress should expand the Summer EBT for Children (SEBTC) nationwide as soon as practical.** For the last two years, the federal government has had a demonstration project that puts money on an electronic benefits transfer card for children who receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year to help pay for their lunches and breakfasts while school is out during the summer. The results show that this is a powerful tool for combating summer food insecurity. This should be continued and expanded: it has the potential to reach vast numbers of low-income children not currently served by the program.

**School districts, local nonprofits and summer meals advocates should expand the number of strong sites in each community.** School districts and nonprofits that have the capacity to create longer programming for kids can improve the food security of local children. Local and state advocates should help them by building wider alliances to expand and create half-day and day-long programming that includes free meals.

**School districts should continue to reinvest in summer session.** Summer session of school represents one of the best places for kids of limited means during the summer. School districts were forced to retrench on summer session during the Great Recession but are now seeing improved budget pictures, particularly in California with the Local Control Funding Formula. Rebuilding the summer enrichment portion of the school experience could benefit many students.

**Summer meal sites and sponsors as well as advocates should, when talking to families, frame the program as a continuation of school and not as a separate program.** The program's congregate meals are outside of most families' experiences—except at school. Promoters of the program could take advantage of the program's connection to the school year to make the program feel like an extension of the familiar.

**Summer meal sites and sponsors as well as advocates should encourage the spreading of information about the program through word-of-mouth.** Parents at weak sites usually give site-specific explanations about how they found out about the program, like seeing a sign when they were visiting a site for another reason or someone from a site literally walking up to them and telling them about it. Impersonal campaigns to educate families about the program appear to be of limited effectiveness, at least as currently done. Parent-to-parent and teacher-to-parent contact could increase the 'hand selling' of the program without requiring an inordinate amount of additional resources.