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## Rolling out universal meal service at schools has joys and disappointments

By Sora O'Doherty



Donald L. Rheem Elementary School students get hot lunch on Aug. 12. Photo Sora O'Doherty

As Lamorinda kids went back to school in August, social media erupted in a barrage of comments. While parents were concerned, there was largely a tone of understanding, as Lamorinda schools began to roll out the universal meal program adopted by the State of California. With the beginning of this school year, California became the first state in the nation to implement a statewide Universal Meals Program for school children. California's Universal Meals Program is designed to build on the foundations of the federal National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP).

The new California program requires that all students be offered breakfast and lunch at school. According to Lafayette School District Superintendent Brent Stephens, schools have a choice about whether or not to sign on to the federal program, which comes with particular requirements, but schools that do not sign on to the federal program will not receive funding from the

state, while still being required to meet the new state requirements on meals. Thus, for Lamorinda schools, which already face tight funding, there really is no choice but to sign up for the federal program. Having done so, each school will receive reimbursement for each meal served.

All three Lamorinda school districts, Orinda, Moraga and Lafayette, chose Sodexo food service after a bidding process last spring. Lamorinda schools face unique challenges, as many local schools do not have full kitchen facilities. The rollout was somewhat uneven, with Moraga apparently doing better than Lafayette or Orinda. Stephens acknowledged this, and explained some of the problems the district experienced during the first week of meal service. "Up to day one," he said, "it looked like most of our planning was solid. But on day one, we encountered problems."

Stephens spoke about the difficulty of providing adequate food to students with less than adequate staffing and delivery challenges. On day one, the driver hired by Sodexo failed to report for work. Lafayette has to bring food from the preparation sites at the two Lafayette schools with kitchens to the three schools without kitchens. The rollout of the meal program was not immune from the current national labor shortage and supply chain problems. Sodexo's staffing was running at 50% of what Lafayette needed. However, Stephens was quick to point out, parents who saw what was happening immediately came forward and volunteered to help in the short term. The Lafayette superintendent sent out a letter to parents explaining the difficulties, promising to work on improvements, thanking them for their help and offering suggestions for their children, such as advising the schools of any allergies and perhaps packing food for their children just in case.

Things seemed to go more smoothly in Moraga. Although some food choices were not available, generally students were able to get something to eat and be back in class on time. Moraga School District Superintendent Julie Parks posted a video report on YouTube answering frequently asked questions about the new program, which she called new and exciting. "This is big news, a big change here in Moraga," she said, lauding California's move to be the first state in the nation to offer universal meal service to students as amazing progressive legislation. "We are learning each and every day how to manage this new and exciting project." In just the first two days, Moraga served 722 breakfasts and lunches at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School and about 2,000 breakfasts and lunches at Moraga elementary schools. This compared with the previous program that served about 150 students per day.

Moraga served meals with four Sodexo staff, eight district office staff, and 24 volunteers. Donald L. Rheem Elementary School Principal Brian Sullivan, presiding over lunch service on the last day of the first week of school was glad to hear that Moraga seemed to be faring better than Lafayette or Orinda, but, he said, in fairness, the other two districts have a lot more students to feed.

In Orinda, Superintendent Aida Glimme at the end of the first week sounded a bit surprised as she reported that some Orinda schools were seeing a 95% uptake on school meals when 50% had been predicted. Even children with packed lunches in their hands wanted to try the new school food. "It's been a messy rollout," she admitted, with long lines and choices and even food running out. "It's not OK for now," she said, adding that Sodexo has been very responsive and they were hoping for a major change the second week of school. OUSD board member Carol Brown added that Sodexo sent out so many of their employees, including their CEO, to help with the rollout of the school meals programs.

The parents are very understanding of the tough rollout, she said. Glimme also mentioned that, although the schools are being reimbursed for each meal served, they were not given any funding to update infrastructure. Although some comments on social media suggested that students had been told to hold off on school lunch to allow those who need it more to go first, Glimme said she was unaware of any such requests. "I've been at every school every day," during the first week, she said. "I've yet to see a child

turned away. It is open to all, and we encourage you to try it."

Parents on social media expressed relief at no longer having to pack school lunches, as well as concerns about the quality and quantity of the food. There was certainly an awareness that it was still early and there was a willingness to help. Liz Johannesen is a parent of two at Springhill Elementary School in Lafayette. She has a great deal of experience in school food service, including working seven to eight years at Stanford. Her main concern is to keep the program going. She feared that early implementation problems might cause some parents to drop out of the program and urged parents, "Don't just walk away." One in six children suffer from food insecurity in our nation, she said, and even when it is not evident, some children can fall through the cracks. As a parent, Johannesen was very happy with the popular Choice Lunch program offered in Lafayette in the past, which were high quality and allowed for upsizing portions.

The Moraga School District sent out feedback forms to all families at the end of the first week of the meal program to gather information. "Moraga has never run a program like this," Parks said, "and we really appreciate everyone's patience as we navigate a complicated system."

Acalanes Union High School District Superintendent John Nickerson reported that he believes the AUHSD food service program has gone pretty well this year. The high schools, unlike the elementary and middle schools, have already been doing universal meals for a year. "They are still working out kinks in lines and we are slightly understaffed," Nickerson said, "but I hear reports that it is going well."

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[back](#)

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