

Escondido Union High School District's Year-Round Vision = Successful Summer Meal Program



There's no doubt about it. Every school district would love to make sure that all of their students have access to adequate nutrition when they're in school *and* when school is out. But as many school districts are forced to cut summer school programs, also on the chopping block are summer meal programs.

[California Food Policy Advocates' School's Out...Who Ate?](#) reports that the number of sites serving meals through school-based summer nutrition programs fell

by more than 50 percent between July 2009 and July 2010. But according to Pamela Lambert, [Escondido Union High School District](#) (UHSD)'s student nutrition services director, re-evaluating a school district's *whole* portfolio of child nutrition programs can provide a crucial foundation for a successful summer meal program.

What Qualifies Her to Offer Advice?

Over the last four years, Pamela's department has increased participation in its nutrition programs by 300 percent.

Many schools offer summer meals through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or its [Seamless Summer Feeding Option \(SSFO\)](#) for the ease of continuing their school-year NSLPs without added paperwork. To capture the slightly higher reimbursement rate, Escondido UHSD participates in the [Summer Food Service Program \(SFSP\)](#) – the option for community-based organizations also available to schools.

Based in eastern San Diego County, Escondido UHSD not only operates a strong summer meal program, it has successful [Farm-to-School](#) and catering programs, has purchasing agreements with 15 local organic farmers, and serves meals made from scratch. "We don't like to think of schools as a business," notes Pamela. "But we are in business to educate, feed, and nurture our kids."

A successful summer nutrition program, she says, is built by taking a comprehensive look at a school district's overall child nutrition efforts.



Here are her recommendations:

- **Consider a change in culture.** Districts need to develop a comprehensive vision for schools that brings together the education services and business teams– one can't exist without the other. Food service departments need to consider whether it's time for a make-over of their own. Is "the way things have always been done" still the most economical or, for example, do switches to scratch cooking and local partnerships make more sense?
- **Assess your program.** Get to know your staff to assess skills, strengths, needs, and the culture of your program. Know your environment including facilities,

equipment, transportation, and storage. Know your menu and where the food comes from, as well as all direct and indirect costs.

- **Make effective use of your assets.** Staff is unequivocally *the* most important asset. Investing in staff development, such as offering recipes, knife skills training, and “chef boot camp,” demonstrates a belief that qualified, satisfied, and supported staff are the backbone of a good program.
- **Find key partners who believe in and will help promote community wellness.** Finding local partners whose resources can complement yours can help build capacity and forge dynamic and cost-effective community partnerships. Escondido UHSD works with a local tortilla maker and bakery to provide fresh goods, a partnership that also benefits the local economy. Neighborhood churches and a park-based soccer program have become important summer meal sites with “built-in” audiences.
- **Collaborate with other school districts.** Opportunities to pool resources and negotiate better deals can yield benefits. Pamela meets regularly with other school food services directors to share ideas. Collaborating with other directors to consolidate purchasing power has enabled them to negotiate better deals on paper and, more recently, dairy products.
- **Engage leadership.** Communication between school boards, superintendents, principals, and child nutrition directors is key. Decision makers should recognize that just as food is the building block for life, school nutrition programs – including summer food – are a key to student success. Food service needs to be a part of all school discussions and not an afterthought.



Escondido UHSD’s year-round vision has enabled it to build a robust summer meal program and sustain – even grow – its other nutrition programs. Its success is testament to a promising future for school-based nutrition programs if we take a holistic view of how we feed the children in our community. Good business sense and creative thinking are essential to adapt to today’s challenging times.