

## Chico Unified Brings the Right Ingredients to a Successful Summer Meal Program

Chico Unified School District (Chico USD) has just kicked off its first summer meal program. Based in Northern California's Butte County, Chico is a close-knit rural community with a rich history and is also home to one of the oldest universities in the California State University system.

According to [Kidsdata.org](http://Kidsdata.org), forty-five percent of Chico USD's students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches during the 2010-2011 school year. Recognizing the need in the community, Child Nutrition Director Vince Enserro stepped up the district's efforts to ensure continuous nutrition for its students by offering summer meals.

### Summer Meal Time is Family Time

Chico USD Child Nutrition Director Vince Enserro wants the entire family to feel welcomed at summer meal sites. To achieve this, his staff sets up picnic tables that are inviting and provide opportunities for families to sit and talk with one another. Parents can purchase breakfast for \$2.50 and lunch for \$3.50. This relatively small step goes a long way to keep families connected and to build community.

Enserro's program provides meals at a variety of locations including school campuses, local parks, community pools, and the local Boys & Girls Club. Off to a good start, his program served 800 meals on its first day. Some of the tools that Enserro is using to boost participation in Chico USD's program include:

- **Offering More.** Chico's program offers breakfast and lunch, which has a cost-benefit advantage in addition to nutrition benefit. The menu includes five—yes, that's right—*five* high-quality choices to keep kids interested.
- **Incentives.** One of Enserro's suppliers awards "points" for purchases and Enserro was able to use those points to secure 26 bikes. Each day that kids eat at one of the sites, they can fill out a raffle ticket for a chance to win a bike in a weekly drawing at each site.
- **Support from the Top.** Chico USD's leadership has been very supportive of the summer meal program, a critical element for school districts in facilitating interdepartmental collaboration and communication with parents.

"We estimate that we will serve 70,000 meals this summer," said Enserro. "And not only that, we're keeping 14 staff employed. There are many reasons this program is important to our community and at the core of every one of them is that we are supporting the well-being of people that live here."

Like many summer meal providers, Enserro shares the challenge of maintaining participation as the summer progresses. Despite advertising, media coverage, and distribution of 25,000 flyers, participation dropped following the end of summer school.



For some providers, boosting participation could be as simple as adding new activities, contests, or menu items to attract families. For others, it may require a complete re-evaluation of outreach strategies or bringing in new partners and advocates. Outreach messages may need to go beyond listing the program's "when and where" to highlight *why* families should come. Parents/caregivers are an important source who can provide feedback.

"We continue to try new strategies to get the word out because there are still families out there that don't know about the program," said Enserro as he started contemplating his next outreach plan of attack.

Kudos to Vince Enserro and Chico USD for getting the summer off to a healthy start for students. Here's to a successful first summer and beyond.

*(This article originally appeared in the June 2012 Summer Meal Coalition newsletter)*