

State News

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Oregon expands summer lunch programs

A bill directs more federal and state money toward meals for low-income families.

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When lunchtime rolls around, James Loflin Sr. rounds up anywhere from nine to 12 kids and travels to Bush Elementary School in Salem.

There, his three children, five nieces and nephews and up to four co-workers' children grab trays and head for the lunch line.

Depending on the day, they munch on pizza, chicken nuggets, hamburgers or sandwiches and gulp down cartons of milk.

The daily routine has been going on for the past month and a half.

"It's like a big family event," the Salem property manager said.

But what is more important to local parents isn't the menu or the social time; it's the price: free.

With Oregon ranked the hungriest state in the nation, summer lunch programs that provide free meals in low-income areas of the state are becoming essential to struggling families.

Thanks to recent action by the Legislature, summer lunch programs statewide will be able to cater to even more children during the next two years.

Legislation signed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski last month will allocate state money for summer lunch programs.

"Just as learning does not end when school lets out, neither does the child's need for good nutrition," Kulongoski said during a ceremonial bill signing Monday afternoon.

During the school year, children of families who are on welfare, receive food stamps or are below a certain income level may be eligible for free or discounted school meals; parents first must fill out an application. During the summer, however, there are no eligibility or application requirements.

"Even though we both work, this helps us out because we're still not in that middle-class bracket," said Diane Loflin, a mother of three. "If we're running short one month, we don't have to worry about what they are going to eat."

The number of lunches handed out in the Salem-Keizer School District jumped from an average of 415 per day in 2000 to 1,250 lunches per day this summer,



Charles Chapel, 10, helps his sister Ava Calhoun prepare her cheeseburger during lunch Monday at Bush Elementary School. The school is one of several in the Salem-Keizer School District that offers free or discounted meals.



Robert Calhoun, 2, assesses the flavor of an apple Monday at Bush Elementary School.

To learn more

Summer lunch programs are free to children 18 and younger. No application is required to participate during the summer months, unlike the free or reduced-price school-year lunch programs.

For more information and a list of summer lunch sites across the state, call (800) SAFENET during regular business hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.