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Lafayette parents are hungry for answers about free lunch program

By Sharon K. Sobotta

While many students across the country are benefitting from the extension of universal free lunches through the United States Department of Agriculture, which President Joe Biden approved for all children through the 2021-22 school year as a measure to help with the safe reopening of schools, some families of elementary school students in Lafayette are feeling left out. With housing costs soaring and parents also navigating the pandemic landscape, some say the universal free lunch program is the reprieve that's missing for elementary school families in the district.

Anna Connolly is a single mom of four children: three attend Happy Valley Elementary School and one attends Stanley Middle School. Connolly works two jobs while she struggles to pay her rent, keep the lights on, put food on the table and pack food for her children's lunches.

"I struggle every single day," Connolly said. "It's a lot of work to manage afterschool activities, homework, laundry, grocery shopping and then making four lunches in the morning. And it's expensive."

Connolly rents a modest three-bedroom home in downtown Lafayette for \$3,850 per month. She waits tables at two downtown restaurants and often works double shifts. "I have to borrow money to cover my rent," Connolly said. "Even in working doubles everyday, there is still never enough to cover all of the bills and the expenses."

Connolly says her life changed drastically after her divorce finalized in 2019.

"I lived an extremely comfortable life when I was married. I went grocery shopping whenever I wanted to," Connolly said. "(After my divorce) my ex was able to buy me out of the house, which gave me enough money to pay rent for a while, but after three years, the money ran out."

Connolly says she hopes people can get beyond the narrative that all people in Lafayette are affluent and that the universal free lunch program promised by the Biden Administration is an unnecessary perk in this community. "People's situations are a lot more complex than I ever realized," Connolly said. "Just because you're doing fine, doesn't mean your neighbors are."

What keeps Connolly going is simple. "My kids. I work hard every single day for my kids so that I can provide them the best life I can," Connolly said. "I'm trying to stay here as long as I possibly can so that my kids can stay in their schools."

Faten Refaat is preparing to transition back to in-person work at Levi headquarters in San Francisco after working remotely for the last 19 months. Two of Refaat's children attend Lafayette Elementary School, where there is no free lunch, and one attends Campolindo High School, where there is a universal free breakfast and lunch. Refaat says she was counting on Biden's promise of a free lunch program for this academic year and is feeling let down by the absence of one at Lafayette Elementary School.

"It was really disappointing for me," Refaat said. "My oldest daughter gets free meals (at Campolindo). I spend lots of time prepping meals for the other two and the cost really adds up."

When Refaat, her husband and their three children moved to Lafayette from Egypt five years ago, Refaat recalls thinking that everyone in Lafayette was well off until she got a wake up call. "I started offering fresh vegetables to neighbors (on the local Buy nothing Facebook group) during the pandemic and I was shocked to learn that there really are so many people in need," Refaat said. The local Lafayette buy-nothing group currently has 1,000 members with an additional 300 on the waiting list. While community members rely on each other for produce and household items, Refaat says parents are hungry for answers about school lunch.

In a letter sent to parents earlier this year, Superintendent Richard Whitmore referenced Gov. Gavin Newsom's plan to have free breakfast and lunch available in California schools by the 2022-23 school year and advised that, in compliance with Education code 49550, the schools will provide lunch to qualifying children under federal guidelines.

In order to qualify under the federal guidelines, a family of three needs to earn less than \$40,626 and a family of four must earn less than \$49,025. The average rent, according to rentcafe.com, in the city of Lafayette is \$2,829. Craigslist (in a search on Sept. 23) has one (450 square foot) unit below \$2,000, while most modest apartment units range between \$2,500 and \$4,000.

Out of the approximately 3,455 children in the district, Whitmore said 103 qualify for the previously existing free or reduced lunch program. It's unclear how many of the additional 3,352 children who don't meet the strict threshold of eligibility may actually be struggling in this community. Whitmore acknowledges that at this time, there may be a need beyond that of the strict federal guidelines.

Whitmore has explained to inquiring parents that the cost of the current vendors is higher than the reimbursement level, making it a logistical challenge. A Sodexo hot lunch at Burton Valley is about \$4.40 and a complete hot choice lunch at Lafayette Elementary School is about \$7.50. Whitmore says the state and federal programs have cost limitations and that both Sodexo and Choicelunch costs are higher than the reimbursement level.

"We don't know how the vendors will respond to the new state mandate. We're still in the planning phases," Whitmore said. In terms of how the district is supporting children who may be experiencing food insecurity while at school right now, Whitmore says that principals have some discretion.

"Principals are always sensitive to students who may not arrive each day with a healthy lunch. Every principal has access to food to support an individual student's need," Whitmore said." Whitmore added that because the Acalanes Union High School District has its own kitchens, it was in a position to make a

transition to a full free lunch program on short notice.

"We unfortunately were not and have to focus our energy on being ready for the 2022-23 school year," Whitmore said. "Even if we had the facilities to offer a lunch program this year, we would not have the manpower or the right talent to staff it on short notice."

Refaat disagrees.

"Where there's a will, there's a way. Parents can't wait another year to go to work. This is why Biden implemented the program for this year," Refaat said. "I think a lot of people in the district and in the community would gladly step up and help both with resources and with serving," Refaat added. "Kids can't wait another year to eat."

Refaat says she's watched the community rally and support one another for many causes, and she sees no reason why the same thing can't be done for this matter. While Refaat can appreciate parent and community effort to take on projects like the Safe Route to Acalanes, she says she'd like to see people just as invested in giving children in the community access to healthy food. "Before we can think about walking, we need to think about feeding our children."

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