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## Universal lunch & brunch program reaches Lafayette elementary schools

By Sharon K. Sobotta

As a working mom of a 9-year-old who attends Lafayette Elementary School, a 12-year-old who attends Stanley Middle School and a 16-year-old who attends Acalanes High, Lorena Perez is always on the go. Perez begins each day by prepping lunches for her kids before the daily hustle of getting them to their three separate schools and getting herself to her case management job in Berkeley on time. By fall 2022, parents like Perez can breathe a little easier as the Lafayette School District prepares to roll out universal meals to all children in August.

Although the Biden administration had extended the universal free lunch program through the 2021-22 academic year, elementary schools in the Lafayette district had been left out due to the lack of infrastructure. However, with the rollout of California's universal school meals program for the 2022-23 academic year, the Lafayette school district is gearing up to participate. Beginning in fall, all 3,200 children in the district will be offered a late morning snack and lunch. The food will be prepped at Burton Valley and Lafayette elementary schools and will be transported to the other elementary schools, following a code of safety regulations. Burton Valley already has a fully functioning kitchen and will begin piloting the program this April. Lafayette Elementary School will undergo kitchen renovations this summer so that it's ready to go by August.

LafSD Superintendent Richard Whitmore says this is an important statewide program that may be more relevant here than people think. "It's great to see the state taking steps to make it (the universal meal program) happen."

Parents like Perez couldn't be more thankful. "This is something to celebrate," Perez says. "Now I don't have to spend chaotic mornings packing three separate lunches." Perez says she won't miss Choice Lunch, the current vendor. "When they adjusted their prices (to the ala carte model), it was costing me nearly \$10 per kid. That adds up to \$150 a week or \$600 a month. We couldn't afford it anymore."

As a single mom of three Happy Valley students and one Stanley middle schooler, Anna Connolly says the lunch program will save her time and money. "I'll be able to be more present with my kids and less stressed in the mornings," Connolly says. "And it will be a big financial help."

Faten Refaat is the mother of two LES students, who will soon have access to the universal meal program, and one Campolindo High School student, who already has access. Refaat says she's a little bit overwhelmed with the food being served to her high school daughter and she's hoping for less processed food and more fresh food.

"I don't care about the quantity, but I care about the quality," Refaat says. "If it is junk food or food that is highly processed with things like corn syrup and sugar, I'd prefer them not to have it."

Refaat, whose family is Muslim and doesn't eat pork, says she's hoping that the school district will provide options that accommodate dietary restrictions and preferences. "I really hope they offer fresh foods with options for all kids," Refaat says. "(If this is the case) my kids will be happy to enjoy meals with their friends at school."

While the vendors for fall haven't yet been finalized, Whitmore says he believes healthy options will be provided.

"There's detailed federal requirements for anyone participating in the national nutrition program. Meals need to be balanced. There needs to be fruits and veggies included, Whitmore says. "We've moved far beyond the days when former President Ronald Reagan considered ketchup a vegetable." Whitmore says he has faith that the vendors will be mindful of dietary restrictions and preferences. "Vendors work really hard to listen to family and student voices about restrictions and needs, so I expect there to be good sensitivity to that."

Ann Kim, principle of Lafayette Elementary School, couldn't be more excited about the rollout of the brunch and lunch program. Kim says in addition to feeding children, the meal program has the capacity to enhance education and serve as an equalizer. "Children who have full stomachs are more engaged and able to focus on their school work and this also carries over to their social emotional well-being," Kim says. "Our district, along with each of our schools, has a focus on equity for our students. A program such as this ensures that all students have equal access to one of the most basic of human needs: food."

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