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Para Los Niños, a charter elementary and middle school in downtown Los Angeles provides free breakfasts, lunches and snacks, largely thanks to federal government funding. On the menu one recent day: 1% milk, chicken salad, corn and beans, a banana and a whole-wheat roll. (Robert Gauthier, Los Angeles Times / November 4, 2010)

Charter choices: good food, free food, no food

Some campuses say they lack the means to provide nutritious meals — or any meals.

By Mary MacVean and Alexandra Zavis, Los Angeles Times

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At Larchmont Charter School in Los Angeles, a former restaurant chef whips up pasta with fresh vegetable sauce for lunch one day; on another he offers a salad bar with figs grown on campus.

But 500 miles north, in tiny Red Bluff, lunchtime at Sacramento River Discovery Charter School is decidedly different: Students must either bring their own lunches or place orders with parent volunteers who make a daily run to Taco Bell, Burger King or Subway.

Cafeteria food at traditional public schools has long had a bad reputation, but at least children can count on a meal that's free for needy families.

Mealtime is more complicated at the more than 900 publicly financed charter schools in California. Unlike traditional campuses that must follow state nutrition regulations for schools, charters can make independent decisions about what's for lunch. Some charter school officials decide not to serve it at all, even if that might mean that the nutrition needs of some of the state's poorest children are not being met.

"Charter schools are about family choice," said Phyllis Bramson-Paul, director of nutrition services for the state Department of Education. "On the other hand, there is a lot of hunger in California, and we know children who are hungry don't learn as well."

In fact, state education leaders have urged schools to [expand existing food programs](#) to include breakfast, citing consistent research showing that hungry children struggle to learn.

More than 3 million California students are eligible for help because they come from households that meet federal income requirements, currently \$40,793 a year or less for a family of four, according to Department of Education officials. Although charters — just like traditional public schools — can get a cash [subsidy from the U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) to help provide meals

to needy children, they are exempt from a state requirement to serve at least one nutritionally adequate subsidized meal a day to qualifying children.

Advocates for low-income families worry that those struggling to put food on the table can be left to decide between a traditional public school that offers their children adequate nutrition and a charter that may have smaller classes or more enrichment programs.

Lunchtime on some charter campuses "indulges the students' worst impulses and obligates the parents to pay for meals that USDA is willing to fund," said Matthew Sharp, a senior advocate at California Food Policy Advocates.

Colin Miller, vice president for the California Charter Schools Assn., said the schools are intended to give parents choices over their children's education and "parents are fully aware of what the school can and cannot offer."

Miller said he did not know how many children eligible to receive subsidized meals attend schools that don't offer them.

A recent [state audit](#) was conducted in part to try to answer that question. Auditors were able to determine that more than half of the 815 charters active in April did participate in federal breakfast or lunch programs.

However, auditors found that the state education department lacked reliable data on charters' nutrition programs. Attempts to get answers directly from charter schools met with no response in dozens of cases, leaving auditors unable to provide a complete picture of nutrition in schools that serve about 341,000 children, or 5% of public school students.

Some charter schools told the state that they provide an alternative meals program without government funding. Even with access to government funding, other charter schools report that they do not have the resources to feed students on campus or to comply with the numerous food safety, nutrition and administrative requirements to participate in federal meal programs.

At Sacramento River Discovery Charter School, more than half the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, according to Larry Newman, the principal. But he said the school, which has 60 students in grades six to 12, does not have the kitchen, staff or funding to operate a meal program.

Catering options are limited. The school tries to buy the most nutritious takeout items but, Newman said, "It's fast food.... It is not ideal."

Some charters contract with the local school district to use its meal service, especially when they share a campus with a traditional school.

A number of caterers have also emerged to serve the charter movement. One of the largest, Revolution Foods, was started in 2006 by two mothers in Northern California. It now feeds about 60,000 meals a day to children in California and several other states.

"We heard from so many schools that it was a huge burden for them to figure out how to run a meals program," said Kirsten Tobey, one of the founders of Revolution Foods. "There's a huge record-keeping requirement in all these programs."

The company makes its meals from scratch in its own kitchens, including one near downtown Los Angeles. On a recent day, the kitchen is simultaneously busy and quiet. One worker counted apples going into a box. At stations with stainless steel counters, others folded whole wheat tortillas containing beef, cabbage and homemade refried beans. Elsewhere, previously used boxes were readied to transport new meals.

Such services come at a premium, though. Although companies like Revolution Foods say they work hard to keep prices down, many charters find that the government reimbursement rate in California — up to \$2.96 a meal for lunch and \$1.98 for breakfast — doesn't cover the cost of hiring a caterer.

Century Community Charter School in Inglewood, which opened in 2004, waited two years before its application to participate in the National School Lunch Program was approved. Even with reimbursements, the middle school, which serves about 400 students, was still falling \$2,000 to \$5,000 short each month, according to Principal Teri Norris.

"They have to stop calling it free lunch because it is not free to the schools," she said.

One of the problems, she said, was that many students skip lunch and the school was reimbursed only for meals served. After numerous attempts to get the children to eat, the school canceled the program four years ago, Norris said.

Now, on most days, the children bring lunch from home. On Tuesdays, the kids can buy pizza from Pizza Hut for a dollar a slice, and on Fridays, parents cook hot dogs.

"We're going to give them what they are going to eat, and kids eat pizza and hot dogs," Norris said.

Tatiana Rivas, a 14-year-old in pink braces, said Tuesdays and Fridays were her favorite days. She often has nothing to eat, she said, because her mother works as a nanny and doesn't have time to prepare food in the morning.

"I eat their food," she said, pointing to friends who had brought sandwiches and tacos.

The school encourages the children to make their own lunches and teaches them about nutrition. For those who forget their lunches, it provides peanut butter sandwiches and snacks.

"No kid is ever hungry," said Norris, who bought pizza for several children one recent Tuesday.

Still, she acknowledged the lack of a lunch program might be keeping some of the poorest families from sending their kids to the school. When the school opened in 2004, 85% to 95% of the children qualified for free or reduced-price meals, but the figure has fallen to about half.

Food policy experts concede that because charters range from small independent operations to large well-funded nonprofits, it would be hard to set standards that should be applied to all.

But Sharp, of California Food Policy advocates, said he would like to see school boards ask charter operators about their nutrition plans before approving new schools and require them to make provisions for students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals.

At Larchmont Charter, near both wealthy and low-income neighborhoods, students who can afford to pay \$6 for lunch help cover the cost of providing free or reduced-price meals to the 30% who qualify for assistance. Parent volunteers help to run the meal program, which also keeps overall costs down.

All the food is made from scratch by Robertino Giovannelli, a chef who has a kindergartener at the school, and he uses locally grown, organic ingredients when possible.

"It's what children deserve," said Julie Johnson, who heads the school lunch committee. "That's what they all should get."

In downtown Los Angeles, Para Los Niños, which operates a charter elementary and middle school, provides free breakfasts, lunches and snacks to all 400 of its mostly low-income students. The federal government reimburses the school for all but \$35,000 of the \$329,000 annual cost, and the education nonprofit solicits donations to cover the balance.

The food is made by Unified Nutrimeals, which delivers meals daily in sealed containers that are kept in a warming oven or refrigerator until served.

"Some of these kids, this is their only food throughout the day," said Gisselle Acevedo, president and chief executive of Para Los Niños. "You can't expect them to ... learn everything they are supposed to learn, and be engaged, if they don't have appropriate nutrition."

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