



Recruiting students for meals program pays off for East Side Union

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With millions of dollars in extra state funding at stake, the staff of the East Side Union High School District spent months recruiting low-income students to sign up for the federal school meals program with the zeal of an Army recruiter.

The campaign paid off. Enrollment in the meals program increased. And because program enrollment is what districts use to identify low-income students, East Side Union will receive more money based on a new funding formula that targets those students.

The new Local Control Funding Formula adds 20 percent to the yearly base for every English learner, foster youth and low-income student in a district. At East Side Union, increasing its free and reduced-price lunch eligibility from 42 percent of the 22,700 students in the district to 51 percent will translate to about \$800,000 more in funding next year. This will increase to an estimated \$2.7 million when the transition to full funding under the formula is reached, potentially in six years, said Marcus Battle, associate superintendent for business services. Including English learners nudged the district's proportion of targeted students to 55 percent, at which point districts get additional dollars.

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East Side Union is one of a half-dozen districts that EdSource is tracking as part of the project "Following the School Funding Formula." Go [here](#) to read about other districts' progress in implementing the Local Control Funding Formula and their new 3-year accountability plans.

While perseverance worked, what clinched the deal was not an appeal to help the district. It was the pitch to families' self-interest. Low-income students enrolled in the meals program qualify for reduced fees for Advanced Placement exams – the price drops from \$85 to \$5 – and waived fees for the college SAT and ACT exams and for applying to state universities, said Julie Kasberger, East Side Union's director of general services, which includes the lunch program.

Low-income families also qualify for an Internet discount through Comcast's [Internet Essentials](#), a program that is available wherever Comcast provides [service in California](#) and other states. Subscribers get monthly high-speed Internet service for \$9.95 per month and a low-cost computer.

“The computer was the biggest factor,” Kasberger said. “They’d ask, ‘Are you kidding, \$149 for a computer?’ That was huge.”

At William C. Overfelt High one day last week, five students hurriedly eating cereal and bagels during a morning break said they didn’t know about the cheap Internet offer but all were aware of the big break in AP and SAT fees. The \$170 savings from two AP tests more than offset the cost of prom, observed senior Ernesto Monarres.

With 87 percent of students signed up for reduced price meals, participation at Overfelt has been high for years. Principal Vito Chiala starts notifying incoming ninth graders during the summer before school, and makes signing up for the meals program part of enrollment.

But generally in high school districts, participation in the meals program historically takes a big dip from the level in elementary districts. High school kids have other options, like buying snacks on campus, and some students don’t want to reveal they’re from low-income families. About two-thirds of the students in East Side Union’s seven K-8 feeder districts enroll each year in the meals program; last year, only 42 percent of East Side Union’s students did. That translates to nearly four out of 10 students who were eligible when they were younger but declined to sign up in high school.

Compounding the challenge for East Side Union was that some students in the feeder elementary districts didn’t have to enroll annually to be eligible. They attended schools in which nearly every student was low-income. For those schools, called Provision 2 schools, the federal government qualified all students without

requiring their families to submit the annual paperwork. Some low-income families might never have filled out the forms before.

“All of a sudden they are being asked to fill out an application annually,” Kasberger said. She knew pushing up enrollment requires a lot of work. “We really put a lot of time into it,” she said.

She and her staff were strategic, identifying the feeder schools with the highest participation rates and the high schools they attended. Then she set a reasonable goal for each high school. For example, at Independence High, the largest in the district, the goal was 58 percent participation, up from 43 percent last year, a difference of 450 students.

Starting with a press release last August, the district made daily announcements on School Loop, the software linking parents to school activities. They also visited school site councils, made up of teachers and parents who are active in school issues. A three-member team went daily to every high school and made appointments to meet with students in groups of five to discuss how to fill out the applications. She targeted the 1,200 students who had failed to re-enroll within the first month of school, as the law requires.

The staff offered to help parents complete the form, available in three languages. The form “can be daunting,” Kasberger said, and requires a signature from the parent or guardian attesting to the truth of the information. It required the disclosure of every person living in a household and their sources of income, including food stamps. Some were confused by the breakdown of weekly, monthly or yearly incomes. Any mistake is a disqualifier. Kasberger said

undocumented parents, fearful of being deported, had to be coaxed to sign up, since the form asked for a Social Security number they didn't have. They had to put an X in the box instead.

“We said, ‘We’re not the INS,’” Kasberger said.

Responding to complaints from districts about the intense time and effort involved with registration, some legislators are calling for eliminating annual income verification, at least for the purpose of determining the funding formula. Otherwise, Kasberger will be back at it again in the fall.

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