

## **Banning Unified 411! - Free, healthy school meals boost academic performance**

By Karen Sanchez-Wright, Director of Nutrition Services

This year, every student in our district has been eligible for free, healthy school meals.

The Banning Unified School District's universal nutrition program includes breakfast, snacks, lunch, and even supper—if students stay after school for extracurricular activities or tutoring. We also offer a meal program during the summer.

Banning Unified's comprehensive, federal nutrition program, *Community Eligibility Provision*, is financed by a grant from the US Department of Agriculture to help lower-income school districts provide free school meals.

### **Getting healthier**

School meal programs have been around for nearly 75 years, but the emphasis on healthy eating is new. In 1946, President Harry Truman signed into law the National School Lunch Act. For decades, school cafeterias served up starchy or processed food high in sugar, fat, sodium, and calories. But with childhood obesity on the rise, things began changing about a decade ago. In 2010, the

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act began a new era of healthy eating and stricter nutritional standards. Many school menus across the country began to include more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and limited amounts of sodium, fat, sugar, and fewer calories.

### **Good nutrition and academic performance**

Banning Unified, which serves 1.2 million meals to students every year, strongly supports decades of research indicating that children do better in school if they're well nourished. The National Education Association cited several school meal studies in an article titled, "Facts about child nutrition."

An array of research has found that hungry children suffer academically. They score lower in math and are more likely to repeat a grade, arrive late, or skip school. By comparison, students who eat breakfast do better in school, especially in math, and have fewer behavioral and psychological problems and greater attentiveness, studies found.

## **A changing, healthier menu**

For its part, Banning Unified serves youngsters an ample supply of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-dairy fat and lean meats to encourage healthy eating. School lunches have an average of 650 to 850 calories, depending on a student's age. The healthy menu may be changing eating preferences! Cucumbers have grown so popular with students that the district has had to limit them to just two cucumbers each for lunch.

The district offers different menus tailored to the nutritional needs and food likes of students ranging from pre-kindergarten to high school:

- "Meatless Mondays" offer protein pasta and vegetables with an Asian flavor.
- "California Thursday" features produce from local farmers.
- Pizza lovers can dine on Domino's, but the crust must be made with whole wheat and topped with low-fat cheese.

To learn more about the food we serve our students, log on to our

website, [www.banning.k12.ca.us](http://www.banning.k12.ca.us) when the new school year starts on Aug. 7 and see what's on the menu. We're sure you'll find many delicious, healthy items that your child will enjoy!