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## Top agriculture expert praises school supper program



[Brett Kelman](#), The Desert Sun 6:29 p.m. PDT October 28, 2014



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(Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun )

One of the highest ranking agriculture officials in the nation on Tuesday praised the Palm Springs Unified effort to provide free after-school meals to about 8,000 needy students every day.

Kevin Concannon — the U.S. Department of Agriculture's under secretary for food, nutrition and consumer services — said such supper programs are the key to keeping students well fed, and that nourished students are better equipped to learn.

Programs like these are especially critical in low-income areas, where students may have nowhere else to turn for a nutritious meal.

More than 80 percent of Palm Springs Unified students are low-income, according to state data.

"You are talking about a population that has significant income challenges," Concannon said. "And, to the extent you get healthy meals starting right from the youngest students coming into the school system, then their palate will develop in ways they were like those healthier foods, and it will help them learn."



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Kevin Concannon, U.S. Department of Agriculture under secretary for food, nutrition, and consumer services, on Tuesday checked out packages of vegetables during a tour of the Palm Springs Unified School District Nutrition Services facility in Palm Springs. (Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun )

Concannon, who is in Southern California for a series of child nutrition events, made the comments during a tour of the west valley school district's central kitchen and the supper program at Desert Hot Springs High School.

And as he walked through the district kitchen on Tuesday morning, the facility whirled with activity.

Chili bowls and pizza plates rolled down an assembly line. Kitchen workers were washing apples and broccoli. In one corner of the kitchen, a cook was sprinkling oats on a batch of corn muffins, nearly ready to go in the oven.

Some of this food went to Desert Hot Springs, where Concannon witnessed the end result: Between 250 to 300 supper meals are served at this school each day.



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Lunch entrees of chili with pinto beans and cheese are prepared Tuesday. Palm Springs Unified School District Nutrition Services Director Stephanie Bruce provided a tour of the district's food preparation during a visit with Kevin Concannon, U.S. Department of Agriculture under secretary for food, nutrition, and consumer services. (Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun )

The supper program operates similar to the standard breakfast and lunch programs, but serves meals after school is over. Many students return to the campus for food because the free meal is their only option for dinner.

Concannon said supper programs spread to schools in all 50 states last year, but remain small in many areas.

Palm Springs Unified started its supper program three years ago, serving thousands of meals at 25 schools. The program has only grown since then, said Stephanie Bruce, district director of nutrition services.

The program is designed to serve as many meals as possible. Students receive meals for free, even if they normally have to pay for school lunches. Students from other schools also are welcome.



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Palm Springs Unified School District Nutrition Services Director Stephanie Bruce, center, and Nutrition Services Supervisor Tami Murdica, right, on Tuesday give a tour to Kevin Concannon, U.S. Department of Agriculture undersecretary for food, nutrition, and consumer services. Concannon later visited Desert Hot Springs High School. (Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun )

"It's not just for the students who are enrolled. It's for anyone who is on campus who is under the age of 18," Bruce said. "So, if mom shows up with her elementary school kids to pick up a high school student, they can all participate in the supper program."

Concannon also praised the Palm Springs Unified kitchen facility, which he said was one of the most impressive he had ever seen.

The school district opened the bond-funded building, which sits on Gene Autry Trail near the Palm Springs International Airport, in 2012.

Previously, meals were prepared in kitchens at three middle schools. The central facility allows staff to cook higher-quality food at a faster pace, Bruce said.

"It reduced our costs as well," Bruce said.

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