



Parent Voices:

Local Foods for School Meals

Good for Kids – Good for Communities
Policy Brief • May 2021

2021 LEGISLATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

The [Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021 \(S. 1530, H.R. 3115\)](#) would allow all children in U.S. public schools to receive school meals at no charge, regardless of their family's income, ensuring that all students get at least two free, healthy meals every school day and giving children a foundation for success in school. [Free School Meals for All Act of 2021 \(SB 364\)](#), is a similar bill introduced in California.

The federal bill would provide an additional reimbursement of up to 30¢ per meal if at least 25% of food is from local sources. CA SB 364 would establish a grant program to support purchase of California-grown food.

OUR STUDY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers from Stanford University and University of California Nutrition Policy Institute partnered with two community-based organizations in California's San Joaquin Valley in order to improve access to school meals in this largely rural, low-income region. We investigated barriers and facilitators to healthy school meals in school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program.

We used mixed methods including parent focus groups and structured interviews with district personnel. We also engaged parents in a PhotoVoice project to document meals received over the course of one week. This brief highlights preliminary findings from this work.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Support local sourcing for school meals.

Finding: Parents prefer fresh vegetables and fruits for their kids

- *"I do not like the packaged food taste and neither do my kids, they know the difference between fresh and not. Therefore, if they [schools] changed that then more people would definitely participate."*
- *"The packaged fruit would be spoiled. I liked having the whole apples and oranges things like that."*
- *"If it [the meal] is made fresh and not frozen and no preservatives that tells us it is nutritious."*
- *"I really enjoyed the fresh fruit and vegetables and definitely not the canned food. I thought they [kids] were getting too much bready food and it was not healthy. I really liked the fresh options."*
- *"Help change their diet. Change [reduce] packaged or canned things [products in meals]."*

Research shows:

School lunches of higher nutritional quality were associated with higher rates of participation in school lunch programs. Schools with the healthiest meals averaged a 61% participation rate, compared with 50% for schools with the least healthy meals.¹ USDA's Farm to School Program and farm to school-related activities improve food and nutrition-related knowledge; most studies also indicate that farm to school-related activities increase healthy food selection during school meals, nutrition self-efficacy, and willingness to try fruits and vegetables.² The 2015 national Farm to School Census showed that school districts are increasingly a market for local foods; nearly \$790 M was spent by schools on local foods during the 2013-2014 school year, mostly local fruits and vegetables, as well as local dairy and baked goods.³ Further, economic impact studies find that every dollar spent on local food generates as much as an additional \$2.16 in local economic activity.⁴

References: ¹U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, Final Report Volume 4: Student Participation, Satisfaction, Plate Waste, and Dietary Intakes*. Fox MK, et al. Project Officer: John Endahl. Alexandria, VA: 2019. ²Pflugh M, et al. Farm to School Activities and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review, *Advances in Nutrition*, 2020; 11(2):357–374. ³ USDA. *Research Shows Farm to School Works*. 2017. ⁴Henderson T, et al. (2011) *Health Impact Assessment: Farm to School and School Garden Policy*, HB 2800, Upstream Public Health and the Health Impact Project.

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