



# Arizona Food Service Director Survey Findings: Experiences transitioning from meals free of charge for all students

Research Brief • August 2024

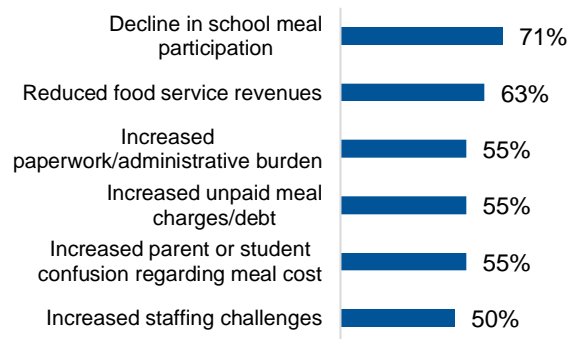
## BACKGROUND

In March 2023, an online survey gathered insights from Arizona food service directors (FSDs) about their experiences implementing school meal programs during the 2022-23 school year (SY) after the federal waivers allowing school meals to be served free of charge to all students ended and Arizona’s policy to eliminate co-pays for reduced-price meals started in January 2023. Forty-one FSDs and other foodservice personnel responded to the survey, representing 29% of Arizona school districts.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics.

Characteristic	% of Sample
Food Service Directors	88%
Other School Nutrition Personnel	12%
Urban or Suburban	64%
Small Enrollment Size (<2,500 students)	59%
No CEP or Provisions 1 or 2 before 2020	54%
40% or More students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals (FRPM)	83%

Figure 1. Most common changes reported by Arizona FSDs implementing school meal programs during SY 2022-23, compared to SY 2021-22.



## KEY FINDINGS

**The end of the federal waivers allowing meals to be served free of charge to all students was associated with negative impacts to meal participation, finances, and operations.**

Most FSDs reported reduced meal participation (71%) and food service revenues (63%). Around half (55%) reported a rise in unpaid meal charges and administrative burden. Staffing challenges were also reported, with 50% facing increased difficulties (Figure 1).

**Income verification posed challenges, with fewer families returning meal applications.**

Direct certification was the primary method for determining eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, used by 97% of FSDs. Among the FSDs that reported using traditional meal applications (72%), the mean return rates were only 51%. Those using alternative income forms (15%) reported even lower return rates at 32%. Most districts (77%) reported offering online application options to streamline the process and 58% reported lower return rates compared to pre-pandemic levels.

## Arizona FSDs employed multiple communication methods to inform parents about the new state policy.

Schools used various methods to inform parents about the new policy implemented by the Arizona Department of Education to eliminate co-pays for reduced-price meals and provide free meals to students in this category starting in January 2023. Updating websites (56%), emails to parents (47%), and use of social media (42%) were some of the strategies used. These efforts aimed to reduce confusion and ensure parents were aware of the new policy.

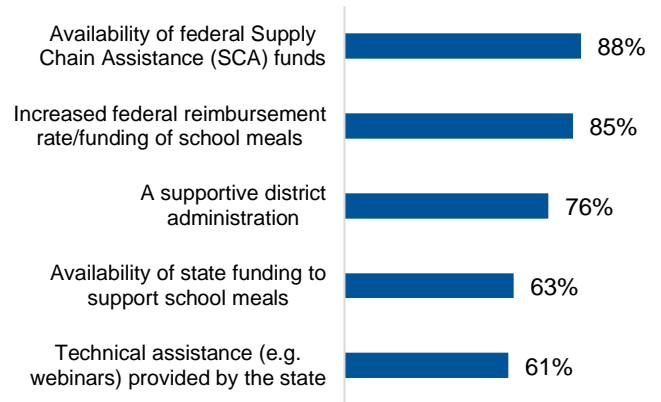
## FSDs reported that ending the state policy could have adverse effects.

If the policy to eliminate co-pays for reduced-price meals were to end, FSDs reported that it could lead to increased meal debt (50%) and confusion regarding meal costs (47%), and decreased meal participation (44%) and food service revenues (44%).

## Multiple factors helped support Arizona FSDs during the SY 2022-23.

The top factors that helped support SFAs include federal Supply Chain Assistance Funds (88%), increased federal reimbursement rates (85%), and support from district administration (76%) (Figure 2).

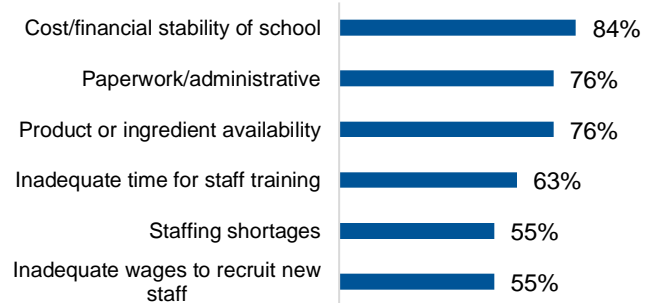
Figure 2. Most common factors that helped support Arizona FSDs during the SY 2022-23.



## FSDs faced many challenges in implementing school meal programs in the SY 2022-23.

Operational challenges remained, with 84% facing financial sustainability issues, 76% burdened by administrative tasks, and 76% struggling with product availability. Staffing shortages and inadequate wages further complicated operations, with 55% reporting these issues (Figure 3).

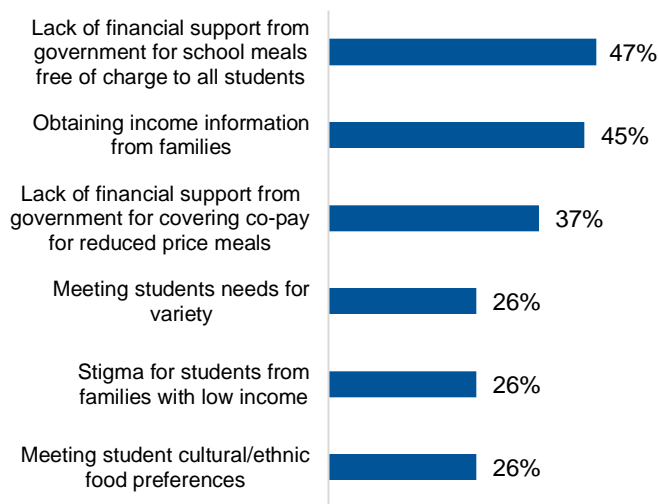
Figure 3. Most common food service operational challenges Arizona FSDs attribute to implementing school meals in SY 2022-23



## FSDs identified various stakeholder-related issues, including insufficient financial support and challenges in meeting diverse student needs.

SFAs identified common issues related to groups interested in school meals, including lack of financial support from government for providing free meals to all students (47%), obtaining income information from families (45%), lack of financial support for covering co-pays for reduced-price meals beyond SY 2023-24<sup>1</sup> (37%), meeting student needs for variety (26%), stigma for students from families with low-income (26%), and meeting cultural/ethnic food preferences (26%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Most common issues related to people or groups interested in school meals reported by Arizona FSDs.**



<sup>1</sup>Arizona state legislature has since provided funds to cover copays for reduced-price meals for SY 2024-25.

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## FSDs reported concerns about the financial sustainability of school meal programs.

Less than half of respondents (45%) reported that current breakfast reimbursements covered the full cost of meals, and only 40% said the same for lunch. Suggested reimbursement rates to meet federal standards were \$3.53 for breakfast and \$5.43 for lunch. To consistently include fresh, local produce the suggested rates were higher: \$3.87 for breakfast and \$5.82 for lunch.

## Arizona FSDs reported perceived barriers to student participation in school meals.

Top barriers include students preferring meals from home (56%), skipping meals (53%), and finding portions insufficient (48%). Other barriers include disliking the meal's taste (37%) and high costs for non-eligible students (35%).

## CONCLUSION

The 2022-23 FSD survey highlighted significant impacts and challenges faced by Arizona's food service authorities in the post-pandemic era. The transition away from federal waivers allowing school meals to be served free of charge to all students negatively affected meal participation, financial stability, and operational procedures. Effective communication and support from federal and state programs have been helpful in maintaining effective school meal programs. The findings emphasize the need for continued financial support, operational adjustments, and strategic communication to ensure the success of school meal programs in Arizona.