



The State of School Meals for All in California

Research Brief • February 2025

BACKGROUND

Historically, students whose household income was at or below 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL) were eligible for school meals at no charge and those between 130-185% FPL were offered a reduced-price meal. Students from families earning above 185% of the federal poverty level were required to pay full price for their meals. These income limits, that are set nationwide, do not take into account California's high cost of living, thus nearly half of California's food insecure families did not qualify for free- and reduced-price meals.¹

Recognizing the important role that school meals could play in reducing hunger, during the COVID-19 pandemic the federal government provided school meals at no charge to all public school students regardless of family income. Since 2022, California and eight other states have instituted permanent School Meals for All programs, offering free meals to every child; many more states are working to pass such legislation.² University of California Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI) has been engaged by the state to evaluate the roll-out of School Meals for All (SMFA, also known as universal school meals) in California. This brief presents NPI's key findings to date along with additional context from the research literature.

CALIFORNIA'S SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL PROGRAM: KEY FINDINGS TO DATE

The program is very popular. Across all income levels, eight in ten parents (80%) and almost nine in ten students (87%) support California's SMFA program. Parents also appreciate the way that SMFA saves them time and money and reduces their stress.³

Why does this matter? Studies show that when parents favor the program their children are more likely to participate.^{4,5,6}

More students are eating more school meals. Two-thirds of California Food Service Directors report increased participation.^{7,8} Meal participation has gone up nearly 8% since the program began,⁹ and the California Department of Education estimates that nearly 1 billion school meals will be served in 2025–26.

Why does this matter? When more students eat school meals, fewer go hungry. More students benefit from the improved nutrition standards of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, that must align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. In fact, school meals provide the overall healthiest source of food in the U.S. for children aged 5-19.¹⁰

Stigma and embarrassment about eating school meals has decreased. With SMFA, two-thirds of California students (66%) and parents (65%) report reduced feelings of stigma or embarrassment.^{11,12}

Why does this matter? Stigma previously discouraged some eligible low-income students and families from receiving school meals. Studies show that feelings of shame or being stigmatized for eating school meals are reduced when school meals are no longer seen as only for students whose families struggle financially. Also, shaming associated with students' unpaid meal debt is eliminated.^{7,13}

The program reduces hunger. Students in states with SMFA have significantly less hunger.¹⁴ This is particularly important for the 44% of California families who do not have enough to eat, but were left out of the federal meal program because they made just above a federal poverty level that does not take into account California's high cost of living.¹ Participation has grown the most among students whose families struggle to meet basic needs yet earn too much to qualify.¹⁵

Why does this matter? Studies show that even families with incomes above the eligibility limit for free or reduced-price school meals can be food insecure.¹⁶ Moreover, because a higher cost of living is significantly associated with poor nutrition,¹⁷ if eligibility is based solely on a single national benchmark for household income, it disadvantages families in high cost-of-living areas like California.

School meals are getting better and fresher. 44% of California's Food Service Directors reported improved meal quality during the first year of California's SMFA program. 82% of districts freshly prepare at least some meal offerings. Funding from complementary state programs (e.g., Kitchen Infrastructure and Training Funds and the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program) helps schools serve more locally grown and freshly prepared foods. When more meal items are fresh, more California students participate.^{8,18}

Why does this matter? Poor diet quality is the leading contributor to many chronic diseases and rising healthcare costs.¹⁹ Improving children's diets can help reduce their risk of developing heart problems and diabetes.²⁰

The learning environment is better. Teachers in NPI's study report that SFMA helps to improve academics, behavior, and attentiveness and that the program has a positive impact on feelings of inclusiveness and social-emotional well-being.²¹

Why does this matter? Making nutrition available to all students at no charge supports social and emotional learning and prepares all students to learn.^{22,23} SMFA can change the culture of the cafeteria, helping students feel more respected, decreasing bullying, and increasing socialization.²⁴ Studies indicate that students do better academically and have better attendance rates when meals are provided without charge to all children.²⁵⁻²⁸

School finances are better. California Food Service Directors report increased revenues, less meal debt, and, for some school districts, improvements in staff salaries and benefits.⁸

Why does this matter? When schools incur meal debt it must be paid by a school district's general funds, which can force cuts to core educational services. Additionally, research shows that reduced administrative burden often frees school districts to reinvest in the quality of the meal by directing their time to purchasing more fresh, local food.²⁹

There is still room for improvement. NPI's evaluation also identified some ongoing barriers to participation, such as students' desire for more freshly prepared school meals and more variety, and students not having adequate time to eat.^{8,30,31}

How are these issues being addressed? The Governor's 2025-2026 budget proposal includes \$150 million for a new, third round of the Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) program for training and equipment to serve more fresh and local meals, and an additional \$106.3 million for increased participation to serve nearly one billion school meals in 2025–26. California SB 348 (2023) asks the California Department of Education to investigate how to increase time to eat for students; a report is forthcoming in June, 2025.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Contributors include Hecht CA, Hecht K, Gosliner W, French CD, Zuercher MD, Orta-Aleman D, Ritchie LD. The Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, is funded to conduct evaluation through CA SB 170 (2021), CA SB 154 (2022) and CA SB 101 (2023). All methods were designed in collaboration with Nourish Lab evaluating a similar program in Maine. We thank all the parents, students and school professionals who took time to participate in this study. For more information on NPI's evaluation of California's Universal School Meals, please visit https://npi.ucanr.edu/School_Meals_for_All/

REFERENCES

- [1] California Budget & Policy Center. [Universal School Meals Help All California Children Thrive](#). 2024. [2] Food Research and Action Center. [Raise Your Hand for Healthy School Meals for All](#). 2025.
- [3] Orta-Aleman D, et al. [School Meals for All in California: Strongly supported by parents of all income levels](#). Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. 2024. [4] Lambert L, et al. Parental beliefs toward the National School Lunch Program related to elementary student participation. *J Child Nutr Manag*. 2002;26(2):1-1. [5] Ohri-Vachaspati P. Parental perception of the nutritional quality of school meals and its association with students' school lunch participation. *Appetite*. 2014;74:44-47. [6] Martinelli S, et al. Parental Perceptions of the Nutritional Quality of School Meals and Student Meal Participation: Before and After the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2020;52:1018-1025. [7] Zuercher MD, et al. Providing School Meals to All Students Free of Charge during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Challenges and Benefits Reported by School Foodservice Professionals in California. *Nutrients*. 2022;14:3855. [8] Zuercher MD, et al. The Benefits and Challenges of Providing School Meals during the First Year of California's Universal School Meal Policy as Reported by School Foodservice Professionals. *Nutrients*. 2024;16:1812. [9] Center for Ecoliteracy. [More California students Are Eating School Meals Than Ever Before](#). 2024. [10] Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4:e215262. [11] Orta-Aleman D, et al. Perceptions and experiences of Universal School Meals in California: Qualitative insights from school food service directors on participation, stigma, and operational benefits and challenges. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2024;S2212-2672(24)00941-9. [12] Orta Aleman D, et al. Students' Perspectives on the Benefits and

Challenges of Universal School Meals Related to Food Accessibility, Stigma, Participation, and Waste. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2024;56:599-610. [13] Cohen JF, et al. Implementation of Universal School Meals during COVID-19 and beyond: Challenges and Benefits for School Meals Programs in Maine. *Nutrients.* 2022;14:4031. [14] Orta-Aleman D, et al. Statewide Universal School Meals Policies and Food Insecurity in Households with Children. In preparation. [15] Tan ML, et al. Community Eligibility Provision and School Meal Participation among Student Subgroups. *J Sch Health.* 2020;90:802–811. [16] Nord M, Brent CP. Food Insecurity in Higher Income Households. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. 2002:E-FAN-02-016. [17] Basu S, et al. Moderation of the Relation of County-Level Cost of Living to Nutrition by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. *Am J Public Health.* 2016;106:2064-2070. [18] Zuercher MD, et al. Factors and Outcomes Associated With Using Scratch-Cooked, Organic, and Locally Grown Foods in School Meals in California. *J Sch Health* 2025:Jan 6. [19] Jardim TV, et al. Cardiometabolic disease costs associated with suboptimal diet in the United States: A cost analysis based on a microsimulation model. *PLOS Med.* 2019;16:e1002981. [20] Willett WC, et al. Prevention of Chronic Disease by Means of Diet and Lifestyle Changes. In: Jamison DT, et al, editors. *Disease Control Priorities in Developing Countries*. 2nd edition. Washington (DC): The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank; 2006. Chapter 44. Co-published by Oxford University Press, New York. [21] French CD, et al. Nutrition Policy Institute. Unpublished findings. [22] Ochs E, Shohet M. The cultural structuring of mealtime socialization. *New Dir Child Adolesc Dev.* 2006;(111):35-49. [23] Action for Healthy Kids. Time to Eat. [24] Gutierrez E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. EdWorkingPaper 2021:21-430. [25] Cohen JFW, et al. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients.* 2021;13:911. [26] Bartfeld JS, et al. Universal Access to Free School Meals through the Community Eligibility Provision Is Associated with Better Attendance for Low-Income Elementary School Students in Wisconsin. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2020;120:210-218. [27] Gordanier J, et al. Free Lunch for All! The Effect of the Community Eligibility Provision on Academic Outcomes. *Econ of Educ Rev.* 2020;77:101999. [28] Schwartz AE, Rothbart MW. Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance. *J Policy Anal and Manag.* 2020;39:376-410. [29] Long MW, et al. Universal Free Meals Associated with Lower Meal Costs While Maintaining Nutritional Quality. *Nutrients.* 2021;13:670. [30] Chelius C, et al. California Middle and High School Students Report Wanting Fresh and Healthy School Lunch in the Context of Universal School Meals. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2025:Feb 7. [31] Hecht C, et al. *School Meals for All in California: Time to Eat Can Be a Barrier to Full Participation*. Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. 2023.