



School Meals for All in California: Government investments are associated with better meal operations, labor practices, and local food sourcing

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BACKGROUND

In the 2022-23 school year (SY), California implemented a School Meals for All (SMFA) program after the termination of federal waivers that allowed all schools in the nation to offer school meals free of charge to all students during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The California SMFA policy requires local education agencies to make available a nutritious school breakfast and lunch to every student regardless of their household income.¹ In efforts to help schools serve healthier school meals and to support school meal programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the State of California allocated multiple funds to enable schools to purchase new kitchen equipment (e.g., USDA NSLP Equipment Assistance Grant and the California Kitchen Infrastructure and Training [KIT] Funds), train foodservice staff (e.g., KIT Funds), and increase procurement of local produce (e.g., USDA Farm to School [F2S] Grant Program, Local Food for Schools, and California F2S Incubator Grant Program).^{2,3*}

This brief presents preliminary findings related to the receipt of those funds. Data come from a March 2023 survey of 430 food service directors, representing a third of the SFAs in the state, conducted during SY 2022-23. The survey asked about federal and state or local grants awarded during SYs 2021-23 for new kitchen equipment, foodservice workforce training, and increasing procurement of local produce. SFAs were also asked about kitchen equipment purchases during SY 2022-23, as well as demographics and questions about other factors related to school meal program operations. A subset of the SFAs surveyed also participated in semi-structured interviews to provide more context to the survey responses. Topical quotes from the interviews are included in this brief.

FINDINGS

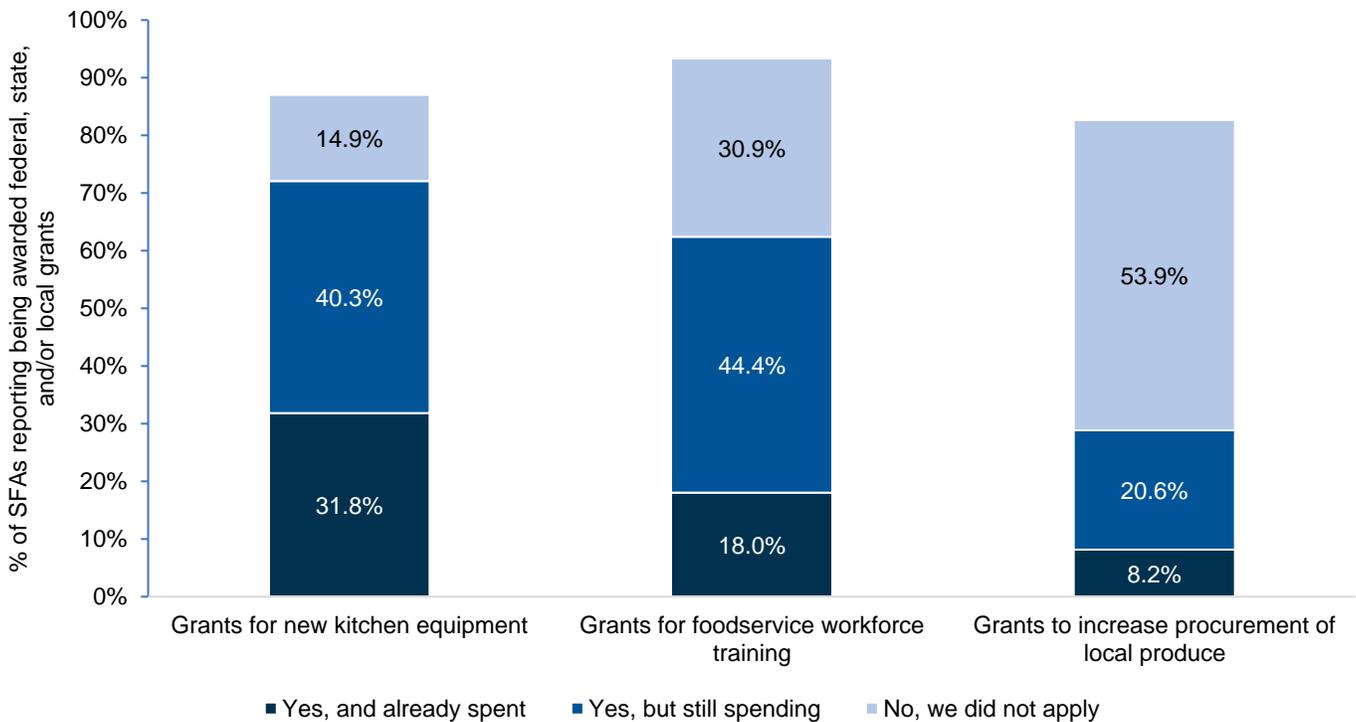
Most FSAs reported being awarded federal, state, and/or local grants, mostly for equipment and training

Most (79%) of the SFAs reported having been awarded federal or state and/or local grants between fall 2021 and March 2023 (the time of the survey). Of these, 72% were awarded grants to purchase new kitchen equipment and 62% were awarded grants to train foodservice staff. Less than a third were awarded grants to increase procurement of local produce (though less than half of SFAs applied for those grants). Due to multiple factors including survey timing and supply chain issues, most SFAs reported not yet having spent all of the allocated funds (Figure 1).

“I think one of the biggest things, too, was having to make sure we’re using all of our funding that we got from the state. They did extend it until next school year. But just trying to get the vendors, just trying to reach vendors was a challenge.”

*KIT Funds were provided to all California SFAs unless they opted-out.

Figure 1. Grants SFAs were awarded during the SY 2021-22 and SY 2022-23



Totals do not add up to 100% because other answer options included “pending and not yet received” and “no, applied but not awarded.”

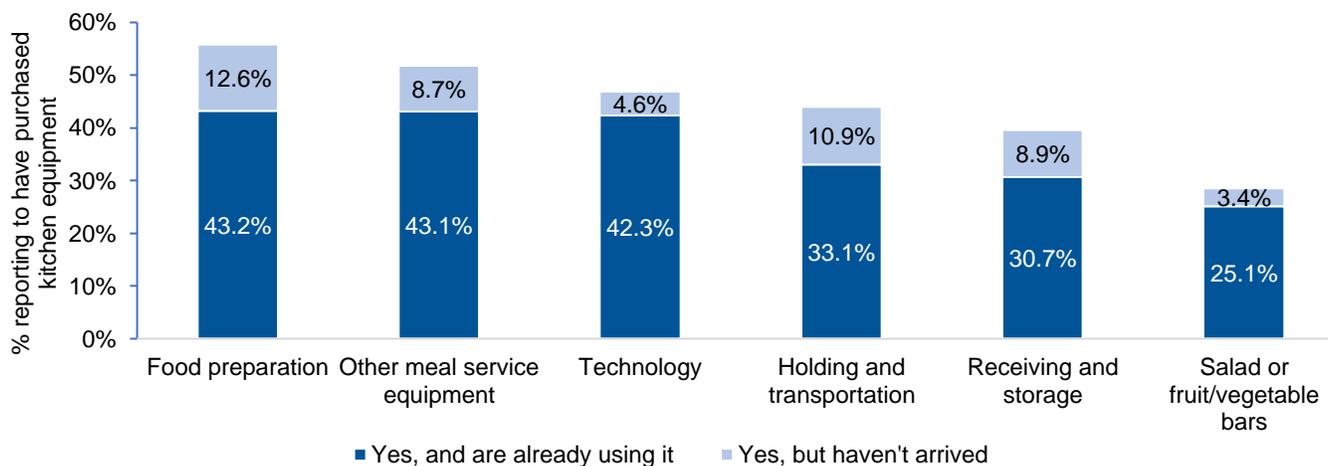
In comparison with small SFAs, medium and large SFAs were more likely to report being awarded federal, state, and/or local grants for foodservice workforce training (1.3 times and 1.4 times more likely, respectively). Similarly, medium and large SFAs were more likely to report being awarded federal, state, and/or local grants to increase procurement of local produce than small SFAs (1.5 times and 2.6 times more likely, respectively).

Most equipment was purchased to improve food preparation, meal service, and technology

In SY 2022-23, more than half of SFAs purchased equipment for food preparation (e.g., slicers, food processors, utility carts, stainless steel worktables, combi ovens) and other meal service equipment (e.g., mobile milk coolers, steam table pans, serving portion utensils) (Figure 2). About 40% of SFAs purchased new technology (e.g., point-of-service software, phone app technology), holding and transportation equipment (e.g., refrigerated or non-refrigerated trucks, hot holding mobile carts, walk-in coolers), and receiving and storage equipment (e.g., platforms and hand trucks, scales, walk-in refrigerators/ freezers). Less than a third of SFAs purchased salad or fruit/vegetable bars.

“We used the Kitchen Infrastructure and Training funds to buy new ovens and we’ve had more additional refrigeration, so we’re able to keep more fresh produce on hand and prepare more fresh items.”

Figure 2. New kitchen equipment purchased during the SY 2022-2023



Totals do not add up to 100% because other answer options included “yes, but we haven't ordered it yet” and “no”.

Medium and large SFAs were around twice as likely to report purchasing all types of kitchen equipment compared to small SFAs.

Grant funds were associated with improved meal service operations and labor practices and may facilitate local food procurement

SFAs that were awarded and already spent grant funds for new kitchen equipment (as opposed to SFAs that were not awarded or had not yet spent their grants) more often reported:

- Purchasing holding and transportation equipment and other meal service equipment
- Upgrading or redesigning their serving and eating area
- Having more point-of-service stations
- Using scratch cooking and preparing school meals at school sites more (this was a non-statistically significant trend in increased use of scratch cooking (defined as the use of minimally processed foods with some degree of ingredient preparation and cooking when needed)).

“The Kitchen Infrastructure and Training grant allowed us to make changes to our kitchens and buy new equipment that would help change the infrastructure of the way that we serve and do meals. And so, we are really making a huge push right now to get away from packaged foods.”

We also observed that SFAs that had already spent awarded funds reported:

- Increasing salaries and benefits for foodservice staff
- Improving sourcing of local produce
 - 40% or more of the foods purchased in their district were locally grown or produced
 - Fewer challenges sourcing locally grown or produced items
 - Experiencing fewer logistical issues with school food vendors and distributors

However, these differences were not statistically significant. When asked about the factors that helped SFAs serve more locally grown or produced foods, 65% of SFAs reported federal grant funds and 60% reported state grant funds as a contributing factor.

“The farm to school funds from the California Department of Food and Ag has allowed us to really grow our ability to get local, organic, and more fresh products to our kids.”

“We are gaining leaps and bounds, local, fresh, everything. Because of the grants and the help, we’ve been able to really explore and expand and go from packaged, really something in a package versus something we just freshly cooked.”

School kitchen infrastructure challenges remain

Despite support from federal, state, and local grants, multiple SFAs reported that their school facilities do not have adequate space for kitchen food preparation, service, and storage equipment that would enable them to prepare meals on-site as they would like.

“There’s been lots of equipment grants and we’ve been able to upgrade a lot of our equipment, and we’ve had infrastructure grants as well. But to really make a huge impact, I think we need more capacity within the facility. And a lot of buildings in our district are very old, so space in the kitchen is a huge one.”

“There are grants that we have applied for and received for kitchen equipment and whatnot. It’s just a challenge of space because we only have two rooms in one building for both culinary and the kitchen.”

“Besides that, making sure that we had enough cold storage, which we have funds to get, but we don’t necessarily have the space to hold all of the cold storage.”

CONCLUSION

Federal, state, and local grants have improved the capabilities of SFAs to purchase, prepare, and store more fresh foods and improve their meal programs. The majority of SFAs received grants, predominantly for the improvement of kitchen equipment and staff training. The grants facilitated the acquisition of food preparation, meal service, and technology equipment. The data suggest a promising trend: SFAs that have spent their funds report operational improvements, including better meal service operations, increased scratch cooking, and improved labor conditions for foodservice staff. Moreover, these SFAs report increased procurement of local food, indicating that grant funds are not only improving meal service quality but also supporting the local food system. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that more investments are needed to improve and update the infrastructure of older school kitchens

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References: [1] California Department of Education. California Universal Meals. Accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/cauniversalm meals.asp> [2] U.S. Department of Agriculture. Grant Opportunities. Accessed March 14, 2024, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fm/grant-opportunities> [3] California Department of Education. Grants, Recognition, and Appropriations. Accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/grarecapp.asp>