

California's Universal School Meals Program: a primer for families and community members

School meals support student health and learning for millions of children every year. Universal meals, where all students can eat for free, have been shown to improve student diet quality, academic performance, attendance, and to reduce food insecurity.¹

School Meals: Background

Established in 1946 “to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food” the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) served approximately 30 million children each school day prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.² The School Breakfast Program (SBP) was established shortly thereafter and was permanently authorized in 1975. Students are eligible for free, reduced-price, or full paid meals depending on their family’s income. The NSLP and SBP are operated locally in public and nonprofit private schools and administered nationally by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA instructed schools participating in school meal programs to provide all students, regardless of their eligibility, with free meals. In June of 2021 California became the first state in the nation to make school meals available to all students free of charge on a permanent basis. More than six million public and charter school students can enjoy free breakfast and lunch at school.³

Research shows that school meals are healthier than meals brought from home. Students who eat school meals consume more milk and fruits and vegetables, and fewer desserts and snack foods compared to those who ate lunch from home or another source.⁴

California's Universal Meals Program

California public school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools serving students in grades K-12 must offer breakfast and lunch to all students requesting a meal, regardless of their free or reduced-price meal eligibility.

To make this possible, California’s Universal Meals Program will supplement the reimbursements schools receive from the NSLP and SBP. State reimbursements will be provided for reduced-price and paid meals, ensuring schools receive the same reimbursement for those meals as they would for meals served at the free reimbursement rate. In order to access the state funding, schools will still be required to abide by all federal regulations and guidelines for the NSLP and SBP.

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School Meals: The Basics

Participating schools and school districts receive both cash support in the form of a reimbursement as well as USDA foods such as fresh, frozen, or canned fruit and vegetables; meat; eggs; and dairy products for the meal programs. For school meal programs to receive these federal supports, the meals must meet strict nutrition standards aligned with Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

For the 2023 - 2024 school year, the basic federal reimbursement rates⁵ are:

Lunch: \$4.25	Breakfast: \$2.28
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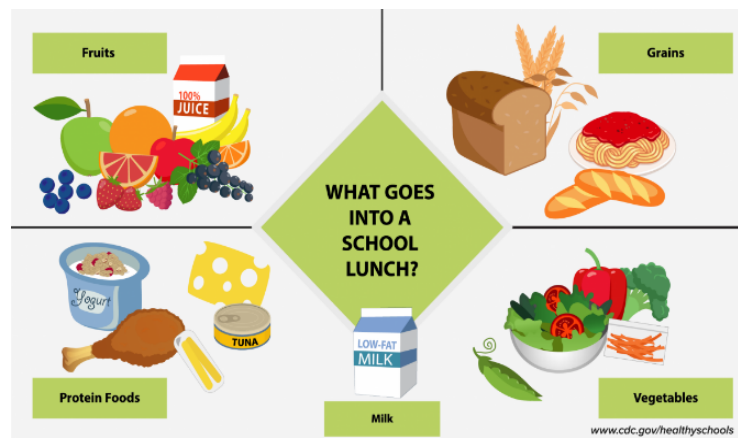
Most school districts expect that the entire meal cost - including food, labor, facilities and maintenance costs - are paid for with the meal reimbursements.

School Meal Nutrition Standards

In 2010, Congress passed the Healthy Hunger-Free Kid Act of 2010, which updated nutrition standards and significantly improved the quality of school meals.

Meals include:

- Fruit & vegetables: a variety of fruits and vegetables, including requirements to vary the fruits and vegetables offered each week so kids get all the nutrients they need.
- Schools often offer seasonal fruits and vegetables and may leave the exact fruit and vegetable served off published menus so that they have the flexibility to source whatever is freshest.
- Protein: meals include meat, fish, dairy, eggs, or beans & legumes to grow healthy and strong bodies.
- Whole grains: all grains served in the school meal program - bread, noodles, cereals, etc - are at least whole grain rich, which means that they contain B-vitamins, minerals, and fiber that help kids feel full and support their ability to concentrate.
- Dairy: Milk is an excellent source of calcium and helps to grow strong teeth and bones.
- The nutrition standards also set limits on the amount of saturated fat and sodium, as well as the total calories in each meal, so that meals support kids' health now and into the future!



Students get to choose what they eat via the **offer versus serve** rule.

- Schools must offer all five meal components at lunch (fruit, vegetable, grain, meat or meat alternative, and milk)
- Students choose to take at least three of the five components to make a reimbursable lunch; they can take all five if they choose!

This offer versus serve strategy allows students to decline some meal components and take only foods they intend to eat, which can help reduce food waste. As long as students take at least three components – one must be a fruit or vegetable – the lunch meal qualifies for reimbursement. At breakfast, four meal components are offered and students must take at least three.

The School Nutrition Environment

School meals are one part of the *school nutrition environment*. The school nutrition environment refers to all of the foods and beverages available to students at school, as well as the messaging and information they receive about food and beverages. Whether or not students find school meals desirable is affected by other parts of the nutrition environment. Food and beverages are often offered as part of celebrations and parties, available at student stores or school fundraisers, and given to students to reward academic achievement or positive classroom behavior, and those food and beverages can compete with school meals and provide mixed messages to students.

The school nutrition environment is also influenced by what's around the school, like nearby corner stores, vending carts, or fast food restaurants, and by students' ability to leave campus during the school day (e.g. open campuses). All of these parts of the nutrition environment affect whether or not students want to eat the school meals, and there is a lot schools and families can do to promote student health and make the school nutrition environment healthier.

School Nutrition: Challenging Conditions

School meal programs always operate on razor thin financial margins and in a highly regulated environment, but this year has been especially challenging for school food service directors as they have contended with:

- Staffing shortages: Staffing has been a long-term issue in the Bay Area, as many school food service roles are part time and require odd hours. This year has been especially challenging as nearly every district in Santa Clara County has reported that they are short-staffed.
- Supply chain shortages: COVID related supply chain issues have touched almost every aspect of society, and school meals are no exception. Food service directors have reported continuing difficulties sourcing food, supplies, and parts for their equipment.
- Reimbursement amount insufficient: School meal providers have long been expected to do a lot with a little, and the reimbursement they receive from the USDA is meant to cover every aspect of the meal program. This is tough in any year, but especially as food costs have increased.
- Administrative challenges: School meals require a lot of paperwork! Because schools are reimbursed for meals, they must keep very detailed records, which adds to the complexity of providing meals.
- Time to eat: Longer lines and short meal periods means that many students do not have enough time to eat.



Visit ucanr.edu/schoolmeals to learn more about actions families and caregivers can take to support healthy schools and contribute to a healthy school nutrition environment.

References

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