



Parent Voices: School Meals for All

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.

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

Provide healthy school meals at no charge to all children.

School meals for all is widely endorsed and is the School Nutrition Association's top [legislative priority for 2021](#).

Finding: Free school meals help families

"It helps because my kids enjoy it, and since I do not have to buy lunch, I am grateful because I can save money."

"[School meals] helped lessen the burden on me since I was at work all day."

"The school meals help to fill the gaps when there isn't much at home."

"It is good to know that there we have daily food for our children and that access is easy."

Research shows:

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 has made schools the single overall healthiest source of eating in the U.S.¹ The NSLP lunch is typically healthier than other lunch sources and provides the best nutrition of a child's day.²

When free meals are provided to all children, through mechanisms such as USDA's Community Eligibility Provision, schools see increased meal program participation,³ (which also may reduce stigma), and children benefit from improved diet quality, academic performance and attendance rates, while student Body Mass Index measures trend down.⁴

Further, meal costs can be reduced through economies of scale and lower administrative burden, without sacrificing nutritional quality of meals.⁵

References: ¹Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262. ²Gearan EC, Monzella K, Jennings L, Fox MK. *Nutrients* 2020; 12(12):3891. ³Tan ML, Laraia B, Madsen KA, Johnson RC, Ritchie L. Community Eligibility Provision and School Meal Participation among Student Subgroups. *J Sch Health* 2020; 90(10):802-811. ⁴Cohen JFW, Hecht AA, McLoughlin GM, Turner L, Schwartz MB. 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(3):911. ⁵Long MW, Marple K, Andreyeva T. Universal Free Meals Associated with Lower Meal Costs While Maintaining Nutritional Quality. *Nutrients*. 2021; 13(2):670.

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