



School Meals for All in California: Time to Eat Can Be a Barrier to Full Participation

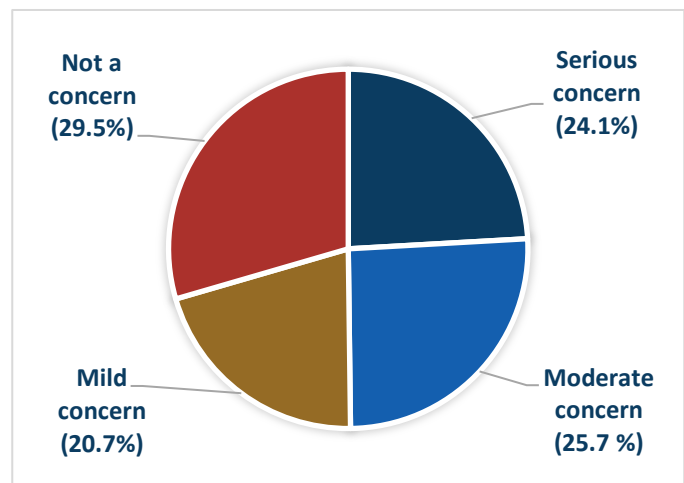
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BACKGROUND

California is the first state in the nation to implement a “universal school meals” program, offering breakfast and lunch to all K-12 students at public and charter schools every instructional day, at no charge, regardless of household income.¹ California’s program began in the 2022-23 school year, after temporary federal funding for free school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic ended.² This brief presents information gathered from food service directors/managers (hereafter, “directors”), parents/caregivers (hereafter, “parents”) and from students in spring of 2022 during the federal COVID meals program (before California’s policy began). We invited all 1,116 California food service directors to complete an online survey; 581 responded, representing over half of the school food authorities in the state. We surveyed 1,110 parents in a sample designed to reflect the characteristics of California’s students regarding race, ethnicity, and region of the state and including households across all tiers of USDA income eligibility for meals: free, reduced-price, near-eligible and non-eligible. We conducted 46 structured interviews with a subset of these parents (12 in Spanish). We conducted 17 small semi-structured focus groups with 67 middle and high school students from a range of income levels.

FOOD SERVICE DIRECTORS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT STUDENTS HAVING ENOUGH TIME TO EAT

Half of California food service directors felt insufficient time for students to eat is a moderate to serious concern. Director concerns over sufficient time to eat were most pronounced in school districts with 2,500 students or more (62% of directors were moderately to seriously concerned) and districts that were not providing free school meals to all students before SY 2021-223 (55%), compared with school districts with less than 2,500 students (39% were moderately to seriously concerned) and school districts that were already offering school meals to all students before SY 2021-22 (41%). In interviews with directors, common solutions proposed to increase students’ time to eat were adding more lunch periods to decrease number of students in a given period; utilizing all possible spaces to serve and eat, including outdoor eating areas; increasing cafeteria staffing; extending the lunch period to result in more student seated time to eat.



“Parents and students have always complained about long lines and not having enough time to eat it. This is the primary reason why students do not participate. Since there’s no mandate with minimal lunch time, there’s not much can be done about the bell schedule.”

-Food service director

MANY PARENTS THINK THEIR STUDENT DOES NOT HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO EAT

One-third of parents surveyed felt their child did not have enough time to eat lunch (32%) and breakfast (34%), although over half (56%) agreed that their child did have enough time to eat. Thirteen percent of parents were neutral. In interviews, parents cited reasons such as long lunch lines and short lunch periods (i.e., 15-20 minutes) as reasons why students did not have enough time to eat.

“He never goes [to breakfast], because he says he won’t have time ... he’ll barely have time to open it and then sit down, and then start consuming it and then that’s it, the bell rings.” -Parent of elementary school student

“She doesn’t think it’s enough time ... because [of] the amount of time they spend in line. So from actual standing in line to eating, it’s probably not even 10 minutes.” -Parent of high school student

STUDENTS REPORT THAT SHORT LUNCH PERIODS DO NOT GIVE THEM ENOUGH TIME TO EAT



Students in the focus groups described lunch periods ranging from 15 minutes to 1 hour. Most students who had shorter lunch periods felt that the amount of time to eat was insufficient. The most common incursions into seated time to eat were the length of lunch lines, the distance of the cafeteria from classrooms, or the desire to spend free time exercising, playing, or talking with friends. Student-suggested solutions included increasing the number or decreasing the length of lunch lines, or increasing the time allotted for lunch. Most students with longer lunch periods (30 minutes or more) felt they had sufficient time to eat.

*“It’s horrible. We get 30 minutes and it takes us 15 minutes to go through the lunch line. And then when we’re sitting down, we only have 10 minutes left for lunch. We eat our food five minutes and then that’s it.”
-Seventh grade student*

CALIFORNIA HAS MADE INVESTMENTS TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW UNIVERSAL MEALS

In addition to its unprecedented contributions to increase meal reimbursements, California has made historic investments in school nutrition programs, including funding for farm to school programs (\$90M over 2021-23), school food best practices (\$100M in 2022-23), and school kitchen infrastructure and staff training (\$750M over 2021-23).³ California is now moving forward with steps, such as determining sufficient time to eat, to achieve the full potential of universal meals to nourish children physically, mentally, and socially.

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References: [1] CDE. 2022. [California Universal Meals](#). [2] USDA. 2022. [Child Nutrition COVID-19 Waivers](#). [3] CDFA Farm to School Program Funding History; CDE [School Food Best Practices Funds](#), [2021 KIT funds](#), [2022 KIT funds](#). **Photo credit:** USDA 20111025-FNS-RBN-School Lunch CC BY 2.0