



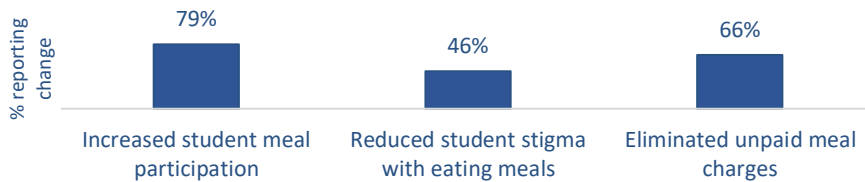
# School Meals for All in California: Benefits and Challenges During COVID and Beyond as Reported by School Food Services

Research Brief • August 2022

## BACKGROUND

California is among the first in the nation to adopt 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.<sup>1</sup> California’s program begins in the 2022-23 school year, as federal funding of temporary universal school meals through the Seamless Summer Option and USDA waivers allowing flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic end.<sup>2</sup> This brief presents quantitative findings with illustrative quotes from a 2022 survey of 581 food service directors/ managers, representing over half of school food authorities in the state. The survey asked about successes and challenges of school meal provision during COVID, and perspectives on future implementation of California’s universal school meals.

## FEDERALLY FUNDED FREE SCHOOL MEALS DURING THE PANDEMIC EXPANDED PARTICIPATION AND REDUCED STIGMA AND UNPAID MEAL CHARGES



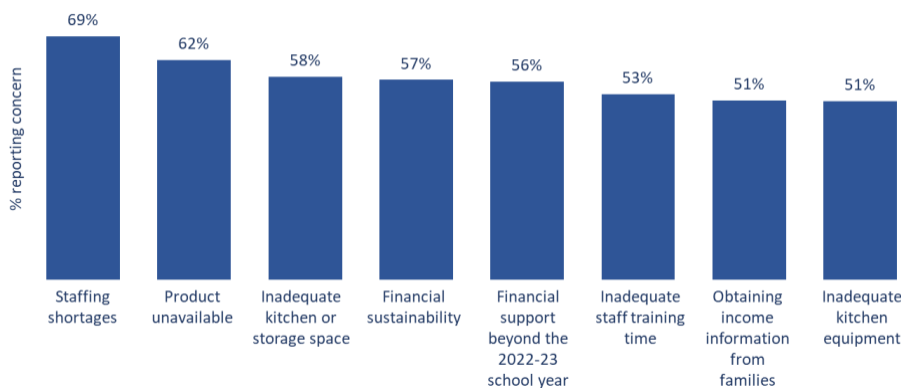
*“Eliminating the stigma of school meals for...kids has been a huge factor at our district.”*

## DESPITE USDA WAIVER FLEXIBILITIES, SCHOOLS FACED PANDEMIC-RELATED CHALLENGES

- Difficulty obtaining foods of the needed types (reported by 89% of sample) or amounts (86%)
- Difficulty obtaining non-food supplies/equipment (83%)
- Financial sustainability of school meal programs (82%)
- Adequacy of food service staffing (73%)
- Meal service modifications or disruptions (63%)
- Meeting federal meal pattern requirements (56%)
- Inadequate kitchen equipment (52%)

*“We are able to get all components out each meal, but due to vendor issues, staffing shortages and/or lack of substitute training, we cannot always meet component requirements.”*

## GREATEST CONCERNS ABOUT IMPLEMENTING THE STATE UNIVERSAL MEALS PROGRAM IN 2022-23



*“Our district is still struggling with vendor issues including shorts, outs, substitutes and produce quality. Labor has been stable overall, but we have had situations where 50% of staff has been out at the same time & have regular shortages at sites weekly. It’s difficult to plan ahead.”*

**Time Concerns for Some:** About half of the respondents were concerned about increases in student time spent in line to get food and inadequate time for students to eat.

*“The amount of time given to students to enjoy meals is extremely insufficient and further intensifies the amount of food waste and unhealthy eating practices.”*

## FEDERAL MEAL REIMBURSEMENT RATES ARE INSUFFICIENT

Only 30% of food service directors said that the current meal reimbursements were sufficient to cover the full cost of producing school meals (approximately one-quarter reported they did not know). Of the nearly 45% reporting reimbursements were insufficient, over a third said the rate covered 50% or less of the full cost of producing meals.

*“With the continued increase in the cost of food and goods as well as the increases in the minimum wage as well as the decrease of labor in the employee pool, it is getting more difficult to balance offering fresh, quality foods with the costs of running the operation.”*

Respondents reported that the minimum per meal reimbursement rate necessary in SY 2021-22 to provide meals that met all federal nutrition standards and appealed to students was, on average, \$3.39 for breakfast and \$5.08 for lunch. The SY 2021-22 waiver-enhanced federal reimbursement was \$2.46 for breakfast and \$4.32 for lunch, with an additional 24.9¢/meal California state reimbursement.<sup>4</sup> For SY 2022-23, California’s 89.5¢ per eligible free meal reimbursement rate, combined with the federal reimbursement, will increase to an amount consistent with what food service directors, on average, reported they need.<sup>5,6</sup>

*“Anyone can serve food, but only with money can we serve a ‘meal’.”*

## OTHER RESOURCES REQUESTED TO ENSURE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL MEALS

- Additional facilities and/or equipment (84%)
- Communications and marketing to students and parents (76%)
- Fiscal management (62%)
- Menu planning, meal counting and claiming guidance (52%)
- Help addressing cultural diversity in meal planning (50%)

*“Our students want food that tastes good and looks good. If the universal food program can provide that, our students will enjoy the offerings.”*

California made historic investments in school nutrition in 2022-23 to address these needs, including funding for farm to school programs, healthy food procurement, school kitchen infrastructure and training.<sup>7</sup>

*“Universal meals is wonderful and finally here! I hope that this will allow us to be a greater partner in education by honoring the time needed to (make) fresh, locally sourced, and prepared meals for students.”*

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**References:** [1] CDE. 2022. [California Universal Meals](#). [2] USDA. 2022. [Child Nutrition COVID-19 Waivers](#). The Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022 extends some waiver flexibilities, notably the supply chain disruption waiver for meal pattern violations for SY 22-23, and provides increased meal reimbursement through SY 22-23. [3] Income information is required to determine federal reimbursement rates for meals as well as educational funding allocation. [4] CDE. 2022. [2021-22 CNP Reimbursement Rates](#). [5] USDA. 2022. [School Meal Reimbursement Rates](#). [6] CA Proposition 98 provides 26.5¢ per meal and Governor’s 2022-23 budget provides 63¢ per meal. [7] [Office of Governor Gavin Newsom](#). Feb 24, 2022.