



School Meals for All in California: Parents Value School Meals for All and Offer Suggestions to Strengthen Meal Programs

Research Brief • May 2023

BACKGROUND

School meals improve student diet quality and academic achievement. They also offer additional benefits to students and families, such as saving families money and time.¹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress authorized USDA “waivers” that allowed schools to provide meals to all students free of charge regardless of family income.² California is the first state in the nation to implement a permanent policy for School Meals for All, offering school breakfast and lunch daily, without charge, to all K-12 students.³ The state has invested significant funds to supplement the federal reimbursement as well as for procurement of fresh, local produce, training, equipment, and other resources to strengthen meal quality and service.

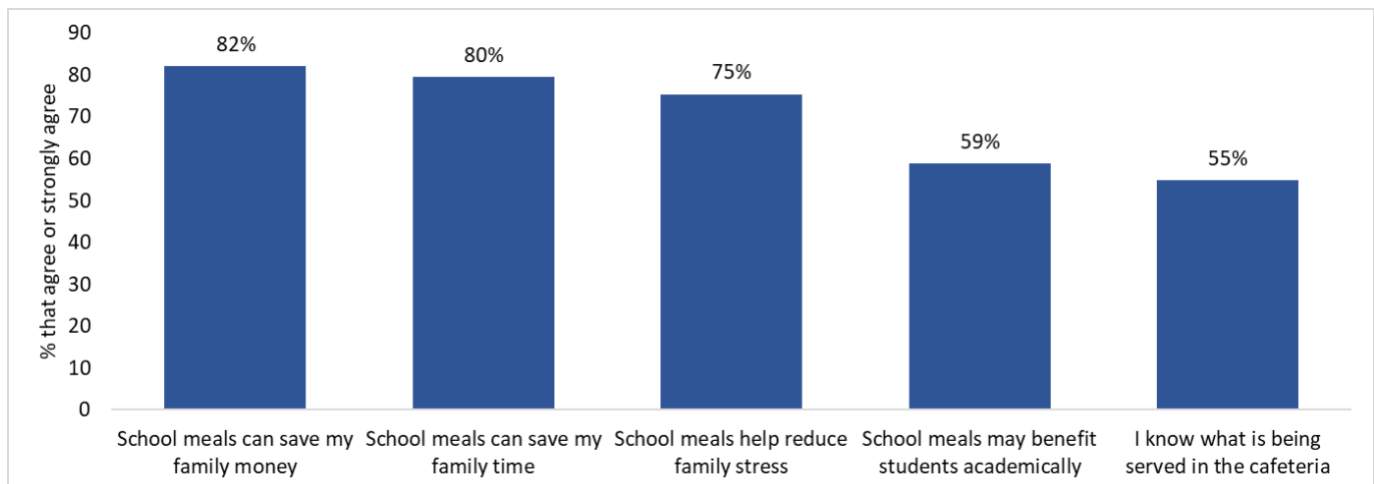


This brief reports on parent perceptions about the school meals available in school year 2021-22, as part of the federal pandemic response, to inform implementation of California’s new program. The brief presents quantitative findings from a representative sample of 1,110 California parents, guardians and other caregivers (“parents”) of public or charter students in grades 1-12 surveyed in May-June 2022 when the federal waivers were in place. The sample was designed to reflect the characteristics of California students regarding race, ethnicity, and region of the state and it included households across all tiers of pre-pandemic income eligibility for meals: free, reduced-price, near-eligible, and non-eligible. The survey was available in English and Spanish.

PARENTS APPRECIATE THE MANY BENEFITS OF SCHOOL MEALS

Parents reported that SMFA had the following benefits, in order of importance to them: it saved their family money (82%) and time (80%), and reduced family stress (75%). The majority felt meals may benefit students academically (59%) and appreciated knowing what their children are eating at school (55%).

Parents Perceptions of the Benefits of School Meals for All



This graph shows results from a survey of 1,110 California parents, guardians and other caregivers (“parents”) of public or charter students in grades 1-12 conducted in May-June 2022.

PARENTS REPORT MEAL PARTICIPATION IS RELATED TO MENUS, FRIENDS, TIME

Breakfast. Most parents (62%) believed that eating with friends was the most compelling reason their child likes school breakfast. About half considered the school breakfast to be healthy (48%), thought their child has enough time to eat breakfast (49%), or said their child finds the breakfast menu repetitious (58%). Half (49%) would prefer a “breakfast after the bell” option, while half (50%) said their child prefers to eat breakfast at home, on the way to school, or not to eat breakfast at all.

Lunch. Most parents (74%) said they believed their child’s decision to eat school lunch depends on the day’s menu, while 67% said their child likes to eat school lunch to be with friends. Slightly over half (56%) felt their child has enough time to eat lunch at school. About half (48%) felt their child usually likes the lunches served at school; half (50%) said their child prefers food from home or bought off campus. As with breakfast, many parents (59%) said their child finds the school lunch menu repetitious.

PARENTS SAY WRITTEN INFORMATION IS THE BEST WAY TO HEAR ABOUT SCHOOL MEALS

Most parents want to receive information about school meals directly from the school in a written format, including email (73%), a letter sent home (51%), or text messages (35%). A minority (16%) would prefer a telephone call; only 7% prefer social media platforms.

MEAL APPLICATION CHALLENGES REMAIN BUT FINDINGS SUGGEST WAYS TO OVERCOME THEM

While most parents (74%) had completed a school meal application or household income form, a sizable minority (35%) reported that it is somewhat or very difficult to do so. Parents reported that they would be more likely to complete a meal application form if the information enabled schools and families to receive other benefits (70%), if the application could be completed online (54%), if their information would be kept confidential (37%) and if providing a Social Security number were not required (29%) (it is a federal requirement but only the last 4 digits must be provided). Other facilitators to application completion included: feeling that their child eats meals enough to justify filling it out (32%), making it easier to fill out the application (24%), and translation of the form to the language spoken at home (besides English or Spanish) (18%).

SUMMARY

California parents recognized and appreciated the many benefits of school meals for their family, such as saving money, time, stress, and improving students’ academic performance. However, they also reported barriers to their child’s participation, including the repetition of the menu and their child not liking what was being served. As California continues to offer School Meals for All, it will be important to provide clear messaging to parents about the need to continue to complete a school meal application or household income form. Parents indicate that simplifying the application process, clarifying how the information is used and why it is needed would help motivate them to complete the applications. The findings point to many successes of school meals in California as well as areas for improvement; the state has recently invested in many of these areas to help schools make these improvements.

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References: [1] [Cohen et al.](#) *Nutrients* 2021;13:911; [Marcus & Yewell.](#) *J Health Econ* 2022;84:102646. [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] CDE. 2022. *California Universal Meals*.

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