



# The State of School Meals for All in California

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## BACKGROUND

Historically, students whose household income was at or below 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL) were eligible for school meals at no charge and those between 130-185% FPL were offered a reduced-price meal. Students from families earning above 185% of the federal poverty level were required to pay full price for their meals. These income limits, that are set nationwide, do not take into account California's high cost of living, thus nearly half of California's food insecure families did not qualify for free- and reduced-price meals.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing the important role that school meals could play in reducing hunger, during the COVID-19 pandemic the federal government provided school meals at no charge to all public school students regardless of family income. Since 2022, California and eight other states have instituted permanent School Meals for All programs, offering free meals to every child; many more states are working to pass such legislation.<sup>2</sup> University of California Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI) has been engaged by the state to evaluate the roll-out of School Meals for All (SMFA, also known as universal school meals) in California. This brief presents NPI's key findings to date along with additional context from the research literature.

## CALIFORNIA'S SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL PROGRAM: KEY FINDINGS TO DATE

**The program is very popular.** Across all income levels, eight in ten parents (80%) and almost nine in ten students (87%) support California's SMFA program. Parents also appreciate the way that SMFA saves them time and money and reduces their stress.<sup>3</sup>

**Why does this matter?** Studies show that when parents favor the program their children are more likely to participate.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

**More students are eating more school meals.** Two-thirds of California Food Service Directors report increased participation.<sup>7,8</sup> Meal participation has gone up nearly 8% since the program began,<sup>9</sup> and the California Department of Education estimates that nearly 1 billion school meals will be served in 2025–26.

**Why does this matter?** When more students eat school meals, fewer go hungry. More students benefit from the improved nutrition standards of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, that must align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. In fact, school meals provide the overall healthiest source of food in the U.S. for children aged 5-19.<sup>10</sup>

**Stigma and embarrassment about eating school meals has decreased.** With SMFA, two-thirds of California students (66%) and parents (65%) report reduced feelings of stigma or embarrassment.<sup>11,12</sup>

**Why does this matter?** Stigma previously discouraged some eligible low-income students and families from receiving school meals. Studies show that feelings of shame or being stigmatized for eating school meals are reduced when school meals are no longer seen as only for students whose families struggle financially. Also, shaming associated with students' unpaid meal debt is eliminated.<sup>7,13</sup>

**The program reduces hunger.** Students in states with SMFA have significantly less hunger.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly important for the 44% of California families who do not have enough to eat, but were left out of the federal meal program because they made just above a federal poverty level that does not take into account California's high cost of living.<sup>1</sup> Participation has grown the most among students whose families struggle to meet basic needs yet earn too much to qualify.<sup>15</sup>

**Why does this matter?** Studies show that even families with incomes above the eligibility limit for free or reduced-price school meals can be food insecure.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because a higher cost of living is significantly associated with poor nutrition,<sup>17</sup> if eligibility is based solely on a single national benchmark for household income, it disadvantages families in high cost-of-living areas like California.

**School meals are getting better and fresher.** 44% of California's Food Service Directors reported improved meal quality during the first year of California's SMFA program. 82% of districts freshly prepare at least some meal offerings. Funding from complementary state programs (e.g., Kitchen Infrastructure and Training Funds and the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program) helps schools serve more locally grown and freshly prepared foods. When more meal items are fresh, more California students participate.<sup>8,18</sup>

**Why does this matter?** Poor diet quality is the leading contributor to many chronic diseases and rising healthcare costs.<sup>19</sup> Improving children's diets can help reduce their risk of developing heart problems and diabetes.<sup>20</sup>

**The learning environment is better.** Teachers in NPI's study report that SFMA helps to improve academics, behavior, and attentiveness and that the program has a positive impact on feelings of inclusiveness and social-emotional well-being.<sup>21</sup>

**Why does this matter?** Making nutrition available to all students at no charge supports social and emotional learning and prepares all students to learn.<sup>22,23</sup> SMFA can change the culture of the cafeteria, helping students feel more respected, decreasing bullying, and increasing socialization.<sup>24</sup> Studies indicate that students do better academically and have better attendance rates when meals are provided without charge to all children.<sup>25-28</sup>

**School finances are better.** California Food Service Directors report increased revenues, less meal debt, and, for some school districts, improvements in staff salaries and benefits.<sup>8</sup>

**Why does this matter?** When schools incur meal debt it must be paid by a school district's general funds, which can force cuts to core educational services. Additionally, research shows that reduced administrative burden often frees school districts to reinvest in the quality of the meal by directing their time to purchasing more fresh, local food.<sup>29</sup>

**There is still room for improvement.** NPI's evaluation also identified some ongoing barriers to participation, such as students' desire for more freshly prepared school meals and more variety, and students not having adequate time to eat.<sup>8,30,31</sup>

**How are these issues being addressed?** The Governor's 2025-2026 budget proposal includes \$150 million for a new, third round of the Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) program for training and equipment to serve more fresh and local meals, and an additional \$106.3 million for increased participation to serve nearly one billion school meals in 2025–26. California [SB 348](#) (2023) asks the California Department of Education to investigate how to increase time to eat for students; a report is forthcoming in June, 2025.

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