Healthy School Meals for All in California During the Pandemic: Challenges and Benefits Reported By Foodservice Directors and Parents

**Nutrition Policy Institute:** Lorrence Ritchie, PhD, RD; Monica Zuercher, PhD; Christina Hecht, PhD; Ken Hecht, JD; Wendi Gosliner, DrPH, RD

**Other Collaborators:** California Department of Education, Share Our Strength, and researchers at Merrimack College, University of New England, Boise State, University of Connecticut, Arizona State, and Stanford

**Background**

- School meals improve student nutrition, food security, and academic performance.
- Pre-COVID, K-12 students received school meals for free, reduced price or full price, depending on family income.
- In 2020-2022 Congress authorized the provision of school meals at no charge for all students.
- California was the first state to enact policy continuing school meals for all starting the 2022-2023 school year.
- The Nutrition Policy Institute received state funding to evaluate universal school meals in CA.
- Evaluation is imperative to ensure CA school meals are implemented optimally and inform policy nationally.

**Research Question**

What are the main benefits and challenges of universal school meals reported by CA foodservice directors and parents/guardians during COVID?

**Photo description:** Student with school meal, Credit: Shutterstock

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**Results – Foodservice Directors**

**Benefits** include increased meal participation and reduced stigma as well as less unpaid meal debt borne by school districts.

**Challenges** are primarily related to COVID-19 and supply chain issues. Nearly half (46%) reported that reimbursement rates ($4.32 per lunch in school year 2021-22) do not cover meal costs.

**Results – Parents/Guardians**

**Benefits** include saving families’ money, time and reducing stress. 60% said school meals help students academically.

**Challenges** involve the appeal and health of foods served.

**Next Steps**

Over the next 4 years, we plan to collect data from schools, parents and students in CA and 9 other states who are either continuing or discontinuing universal school meals (USM) as well as do a deeper dive in 20 CA school districts to identify best practices for implementing USM.

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