

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

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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.
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- 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

Methods Spring 2022

District foodservice directors:

All 1116 in California were invited to complete an online survey (n= 581; 52% response rate).

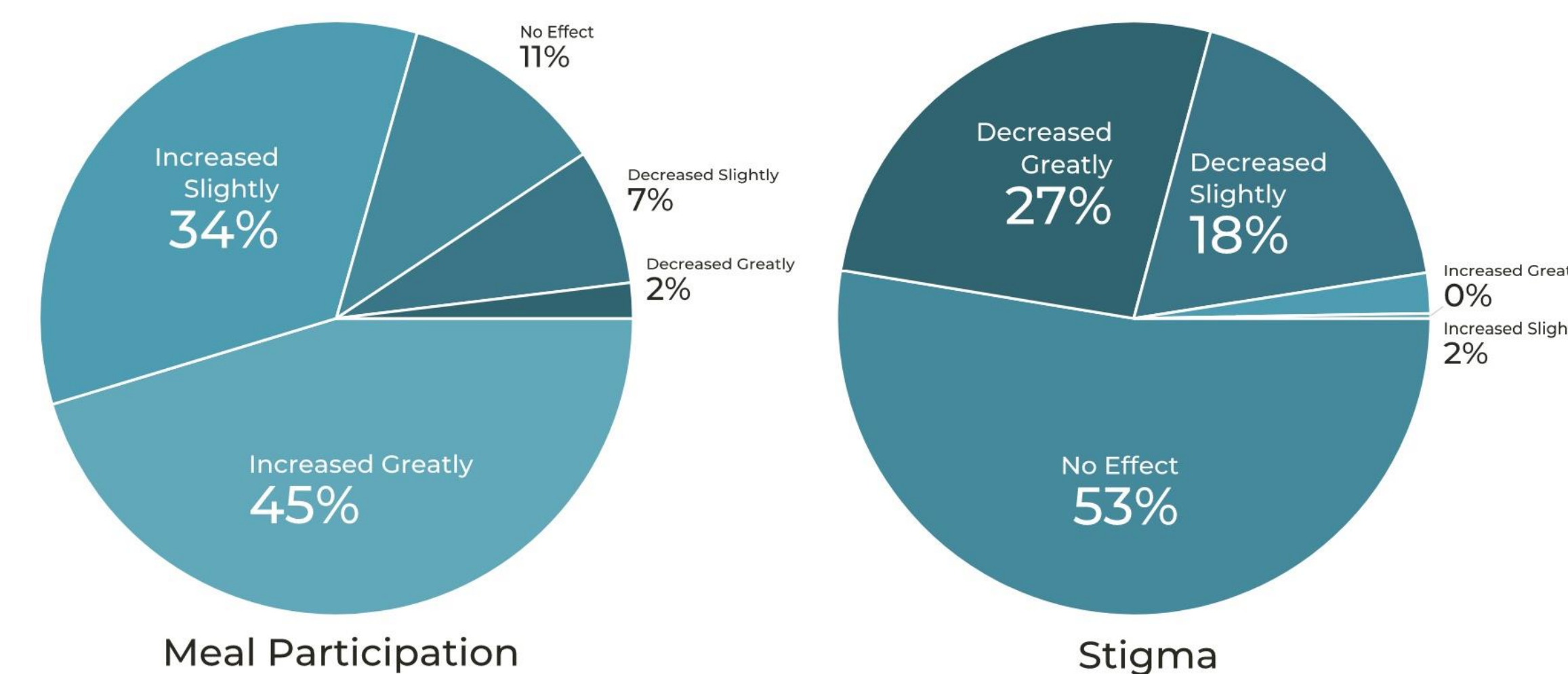
Parents/guardians:

A representative sample (n=1110) completed a survey:

- 60% Hispanic, 21% White, 9% Asian, 8% Black
- 55% food insecure
- Student eats school lunch 3.4 days/week and eats school breakfast 2.7 days/week

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.



Conclusions

Universal school meals increase student participation and help families feed their children, but room for improvement remains in providing healthy meals that appeal to students. Reimbursements may need to be increased and school meals promoted to families to achieve the goal of universal school meal participation.

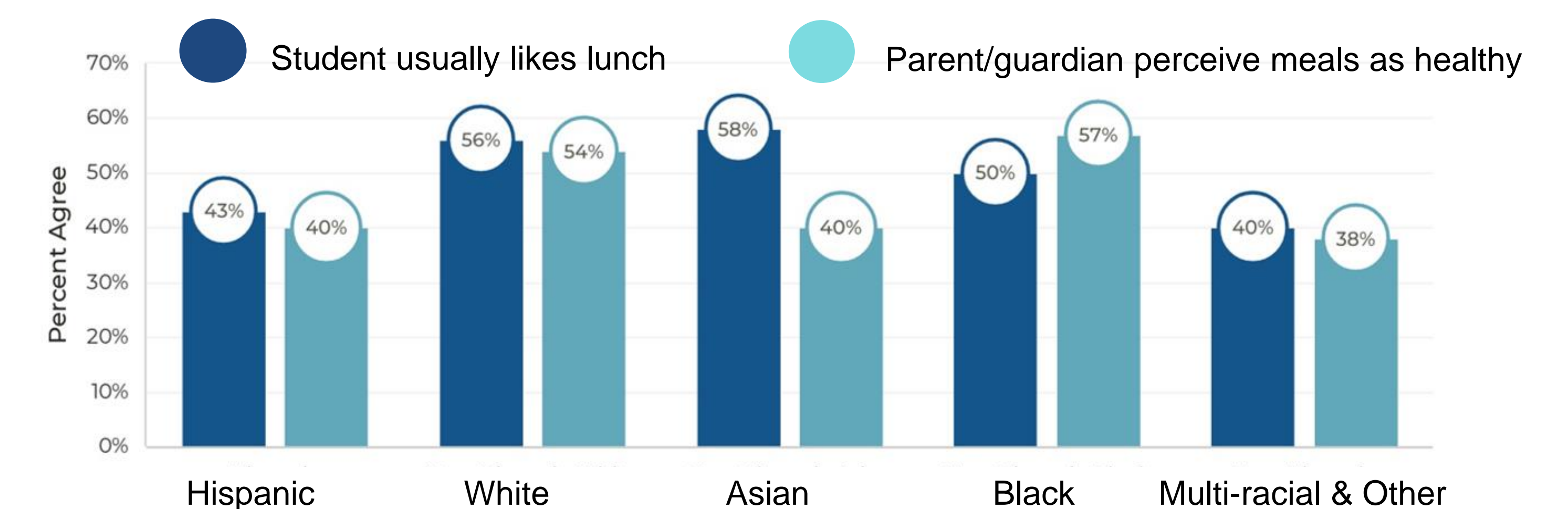


Results – Parents/Guardians

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

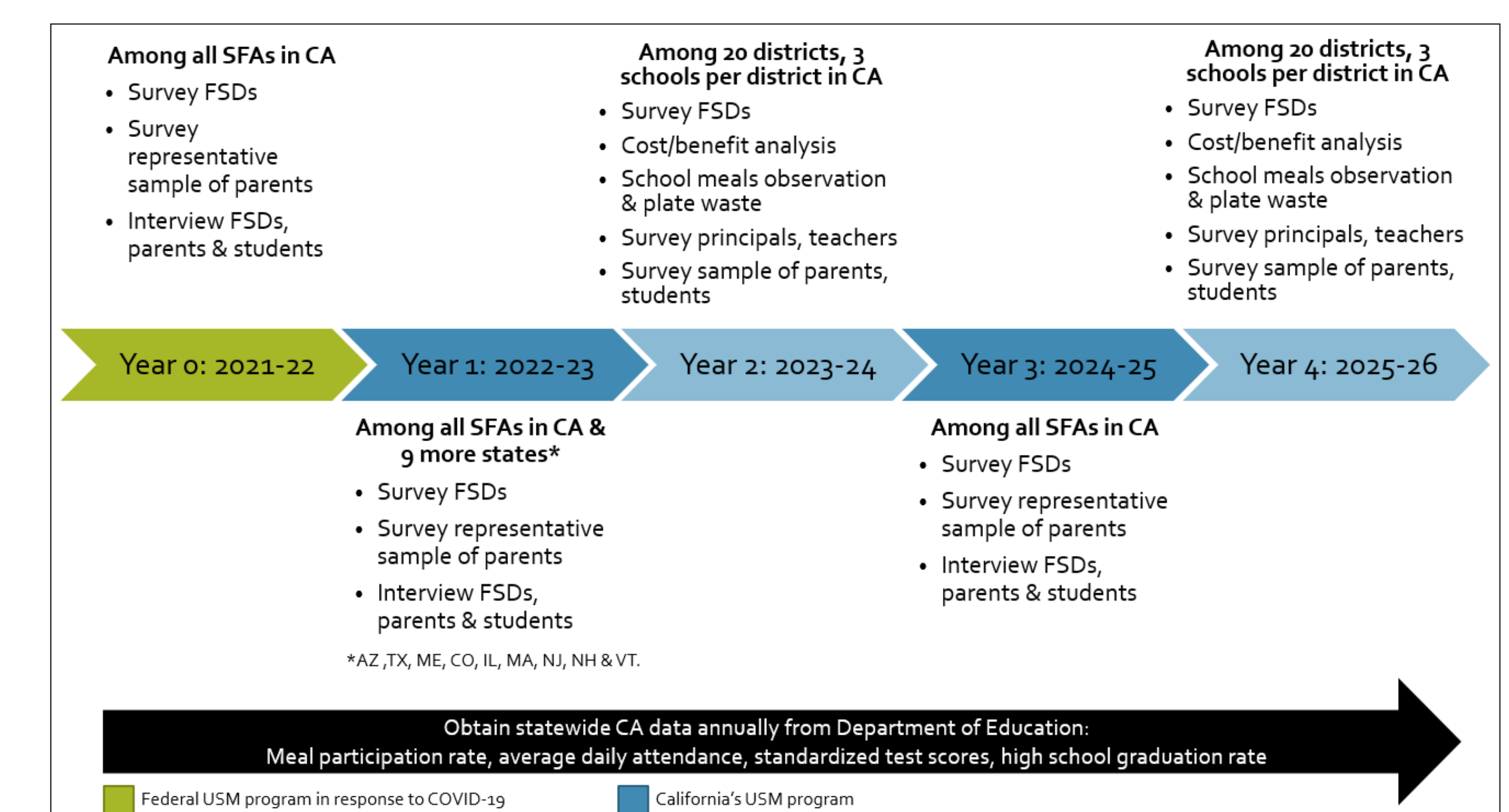


Challenges involve the appeal and health of foods served.



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.



References:

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