






# Universal School Meals

## Early Experiences and Opportunities in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties

### Why School Meals Matter

School meals support student health and learning for millions of children every year. Universal meals, where all students can eat for free, have been shown to improve student diet quality, academic performance, attendance, and to reduce food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

Improved	Decreased
 Cognitive Function	 Risk for Obesity & Diabetes
 Academic Achievement	 Aggressive Behavior
 School Attendance	 Behavior Issues
 Diet and Physical Health	 Suspensions
 Emotional Health	 Tardiness

### How California's Policy Works

Beginning with the 2022-23 school year, California public school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools serving students in grades K-12 **must offer breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of their free or reduced-price meal eligibility.** Schools must track the eligibility of each student to maximize federal reimbursement.

Because meal eligibility was set at the federal level, this policy represents a substantial opportunity to improve food security for children and families.

**2.3 million students in California are newly eligible for free meals.<sup>2</sup>**



### Methods

- 14 school districts from San Mateo and Santa Clara county were interviewed.
- Interviewees included food service directors (FSDs) and chief business officers, in smaller districts.
- A semi-structured interview guide was used to solicit information on early challenges and successes implementing universal school meals. Also asked about policy opportunities and the need for technical assistance and support.

### Successes

- Increase in meal service participation was universal.** Every district was serving more meals and reported participation increases between 20% and 400%.
- More socioeconomic diversity in who is eating meals.** And even schools already serving a lot of students FRPM-eligible still saw an increase in participation.
- Decreased stigma, no meal debt.** Staff were relieved that they could, at last, serve meals to all students and they were especially happy to leave the issue of "lunch debt" behind.
- Scratch cooking** was very well-received by students and anecdotally translated into increased participation.

### Challenges

- COVID19 continues to impact the food system supply chain.** FSDs reported short orders, receiving different items than they ordered, and in some dire cases, even runs to Costco to get what they needed to prepare and serve meals.
- Staffing difficulties,** including challenges recruiting and retaining staff due to low wages and awkward working hours. Few districts were fully staffed at any point during the school year, despite rapidly increasing demand for meals.
- Time to eat,** children do not have enough "seat time" or time to eat. Increased meal participation combined with the need to track each student's eligibility makes it difficult to feed all of the kids in the same amount of time as before.

For more information, see the full report at [cesanmateo.ucanr.edu](https://cesanmateo.ucanr.edu)

#### References:

- Cohen JFW, Hecht AA, McLoughlin GM, Turner L, Schwartz MB. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*. 2021;13(3):911.
- Nourish California. [School Enrollment & Access to School Meals Factsheet](#). September 2021.

### Local Opportunities

- Youth and family engagement:** FSDs asked for help increasing youth and family voice and engagement with the meal program, increasing the cultural diversity of menu items, etc
- Economies of scale:** increased meal participation offers the opportunity to experiment with economies of scale and FSDs were interested in increasing scratch cooking and sourcing more local food, etc.
- Alternate breakfast models:** Some schools/districts had never served breakfast before and all were interested in increasing participation. Breakfast after the bell, breakfast in the classroom, offer the opportunity to reach more students.

### State Policy Recommendations

- Increase meal reimbursement rates** at the state level, to ensure that the meal reimbursement for state-funded school meals is adequate to cover the real costs of providing those meals.
- Funding for Kitchen, Infrastructure, and Training:** Continued infrastructure support to schools as schools implement new meal services and upgrade their kitchens' capacity to feed a larger number of students are needed.
- Workforce development:** School nutrition staff should be paid a livable wage for the area where they live, and be provided with enough working hours to become eligible for full benefits.
- Changes to bell schedules:** The minimum amount of time students have to eat their meals is determined at the school district level through the Local School Wellness Policy.

