



## **The Benefits of School Meals for All in California**

The 130+ organizations in the 2024 School Meals for All Coalition respectfully ask members of the Legislature to support the Governor's proposal to fully fund California's landmark Program.

### **Addresses Child Hunger for California's Low-Income, Food-Insecure Families**

School Meals for All bridges a critical hunger gap for families in California, ensuring all children get access to two nutritious meals every day at school regardless of family income. Prior to School Meals For All, the federal income requirements for meal programs were set far too low to account for California's cost of living, leaving out a large share of financially struggling families. Nearly half of California's food-insecure families are not eligible for federal free or reduced-price meals, including many families of color.<sup>1</sup> Two thirds of Latino households in California with two children are struggling financially, along with 59% of Black households, and 47% of Native American households.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, School Meals For All provides meals for students whose families did not participate previously due to concerns over their immigration status.

### **Reduces Stigma, Stress, and Financial Burdens for Families**

When access to meals is not publicly tied to poverty, students are less likely to skip a meal if they need one. School Meals for All has led to reduced stigma, more students eating school meals, and eliminated unpaid meal debt in our state.<sup>3</sup>

The program alleviates stress on California families. Researchers from the UC ANR Nutrition Policy Institute found that with School Meals for All:

- Eighty percent of parents support the program, which saves them money, time, and has reduced family stress.<sup>4</sup>
- The greatest increase in school meal participation is among the students whose families had just missed the cutoff for free or reduced price meals,
- A majority of families who were nearly eligible for free and reduced price meals anticipated that their household finances would be hurt without the program.

### **Increases Participation in School Meals**

As other states struggle with decreased participation, more California students are choosing to participate in free school breakfasts and lunches, meaning fewer are going hungry. Data from the USDA shows that California students'

---

<sup>1</sup> [California Budget & Policy Center, Universal School Meals Help All California Children Thrive, [3/2024](#)]

<sup>2</sup> [Insight Center, The Cost of Being Californian, [2021](#)]

<sup>3</sup> [UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Universal School Meals Increased Participation, Lessened Stigma, [3/14/23](#)]

<sup>4</sup> [UC Berkeley Nutrition Policy Institute, Research Brief, [5/2023](#)]

participation in school meals outperforms national trends. Between 2018 and 2023, nationwide participation in school lunch declined by more than 4%, but California's meal participation is increasing. Over 845 million school meals are projected to be served in California through this program in 2024-25.

- School meal participation reduces food insecurity by at least 3.8%, and students who participate are less likely to have nutrient deficiencies.
- Nutrition Policy Institute surveys showed that 60% of parents eligible for free or reduced-price school meals fear their children would be less inclined to eat school meals if the School Meals For All program stopped.

### **Ended Family Meal Debt**

School Meals For All ends the practice of family meal debt tracking at schools. This reduces administrative burdens for school nutrition program staff and administrators who are otherwise required to take on extra administrative tasks related to meal debt accounting and collection. As a result of School Meals For All, school nutrition program administration is far less burdensome and many overhead costs are eliminated.<sup>5</sup>

### **Improves Learning, Academic, and Behavioral Outcomes for Students**

It is hard for students to learn and fully benefit from their education when they do not have the focus or energy to concentrate because they are hungry. School Meals For All helps students learn and succeed in school through improved attendance, improved student behavior, better academic performance, and long-term educational attainment.<sup>6</sup>

### **Supports Long-Term Health and Lowers Risk of Chronic Diseases**

Poor diet is now the leading cause of illness in our country. School Meals For All promotes good nutrition and improves health, and reduces visits to the school nurse's office.<sup>7</sup> Studies show that free or reduced-price school lunches help lower rates of poor health and obesity.<sup>8,9</sup> Children who participate in school meal programs are more likely to consume fruits, vegetables, and milk at breakfast and lunch, reducing the risk of nutrient deficiencies which can be harmful to health.<sup>10</sup>

- A Massachusetts report showed that the annual investment of \$172 million in its School Meals For All program will save the state \$152 million in direct medical costs and productivity alone each year when these children become adults.<sup>11</sup>

### **Acknowledges Historic Underfunding and Increased Costs**

School nutrition programs have been historically underfunded, and current federal reimbursement rates have not kept pace with the rising costs of food and labor in California and many other parts of the U.S. Food prices have increased 25% since 2019. The federal minimum wage is \$7.25, compared to \$16 in California. With School Meals for All, costs can be reduced through economies of scale and lower administrative burden, without sacrificing nutritional quality of meals.

---

<sup>5</sup>[California Budget & Policy Center, Universal School Meals Help All California Children Thrive, [3/2024](#)]

<sup>6</sup>[Food Research and Action Center, School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning, [8/2019](#)]

<sup>7</sup>[Food Research and Action Center, The State of Healthy School Meals for All, [2/2024](#)]

<sup>8</sup>[Journal of Econometrics, The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health, [1/2012](#)]

<sup>9</sup>[National Bureau of Economic Research, Trends in the School Lunch Program: Changes in Selection, Nutrition & Health, [5/2023](#)]

<sup>10</sup>[California Budget & Policy Center, Universal School Meals Help All California Children Thrive, [3/2024](#)]

<sup>11</sup>[Project Bread, Cost Savings of a Universal School Meal Policy in Massachusetts, [7/7/23](#)]