



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Agriculture and Natural Resources

Nutrition Policy Institute

Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 3 on Education Finance

Assemblymember David Alvarez, Chair

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Issue 1: Universal School Meals Oversight & Proposals

Testimony of Christina Hecht, PhD, University of California Nutrition Policy Institute

My name is Christina Hecht. I am Senior Policy Advisor at the Nutrition Policy Institute, part of University of California's Agriculture and Natural Resources. Nutrition Policy Institute was selected by the State of California to evaluate the School Meals for All program. I am part of the evaluation team. Thank you for having me here today.

As you know, California's School Meals for All program offers two meals daily to all California public school students regardless of their families' financial circumstances.

Nutrition Policy Institute's findings to date indicate the program is off to a strong start. Kim Frinzell has given you the numbers for the expansion in participation. Nutrition Policy Institute's evaluation shows overwhelming appreciation and support for the program.

- For example, across all income categories, an impressive 80% of parents say they are in support of the program.¹

¹ Orta-Aleman D, Hecht C, Zuercher M, Hecht K, Cohen JFW, Ritchie L, Gosliner W. *School Meals for All in California: Strongly supported by parents of all income levels*. Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. March 2024.

The California program is only in its second year, but both Nutrition Policy Institute’s evaluation and findings from numerous studies around the country are consistent and clear: School Meals for All accomplishes its primary goal — increased participation in school meals so that every student is nourished and ready to learn, particularly students from lower-income families.²

Allowing all students to eat school meals at no charge effectively addresses two major barriers to school meal participation.

The first relates to the **federal income cut-offs for free and reduced-price meals**. The federal guidelines restricted free meals to students whose families were at or below 130% of the federal poverty level and allowed reduced-price meals to be provided to students in families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level. Students from families earning above 185% of the federal poverty level were required to pay full price for their meals.

California has eliminated this means testing by making school meals available for all. Now, students whose families are above the federal cut-off but still struggle to meet basic needs can take a school meal without charge. This is important because the federal poverty level, already considered very low by many experts, doesn’t take into account the high cost of living in our state. A higher cost of living is associated with increased food insecurity.³ The U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey finds that as of January 2024 just over 1 in 4 (26%) of California households with children are food insecure.⁴ For context, at its pandemic high this figure reached 30%.⁴ As a reminder, “food insecurity” means experiencing circumstances such as reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, through to disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. The California Budget and Policy Institute’s recent report estimated nearly half (44%) of California’s food-insecure families made too much to qualify for free or reduced-price meals.⁵

- Nutrition Policy Institute research finds that the greatest increase in participation when meals are at no charge to all students comes from those who are **near** eligible for reduced-price meals.⁶ This indicates that universal meals is an equitable way to address food insecurity among children.

² 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.

³ Basu S, Wimer C, Seligman H. Moderation of the Relation of County-Level Cost of Living to Nutrition by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. *Am J Public Health*. 2016 Nov;106(11):2064-2070

⁴ California Association of Food Banks. January 2024. *Food Insecurity in California*. At, <https://www.cafoodbanks.org/food-insecurity-data/>

⁵ California Budget & Policy Center. 2024. *Universal School Meals Help All California Children Thrive*. At, <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/universal-school-meals-help-all-california-children-thrive/>.

⁶ Tan ML, Laraia B, Madsen KA, Johnson RC, Ritchie L. Community Eligibility Provision and School Meal Participation among Student Subgroups. *J Sch Health*. 2020;90:802–811. doi: 10.1111/josh.12942.

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If we look beyond strict food insecurity to ability to meet a variety of basic needs, families with children are dramatically more likely to struggle to meet their basic needs, with striking disparities by race/ethnicity. By the Family Needs Calculator, while 27% of White California households with two children struggle to make ends meet, this figure is 66% for Latino households followed by 59% of Black households, 47% for Native American households and 31% for Asian American-Pacific Islander households.⁷

Nationally, the school lunch program lifted 1.2 million people — including 722,000 children — above the poverty line in 2017, based on Census Bureau data on poverty and income in the U.S.⁸

The second barrier is a sense of stigma that was associated with means-tested school meals — which prevented qualified students from participating.

- During the first year of the state program, 46% of district foodservice directors reported a decrease in stigma for students from low-income families.⁹
- From surveys with California parents in the second year of the program, Nutrition Policy Institute found that 65% of parents across all income levels believe the School Meals For All program reduces stigma for their child about eating a school meal.¹ In other words, although initially it seems counterintuitive, lower-income students are encouraged to participate in school meals once the higher income students can — and do — and it no longer can be seen as a poor person's program.
- Nutrition Policy Institute's evaluation finds that students also feel the program reduces stigma and embarrassment about taking a school meal.¹⁰

Robust participation in the School Meals for All program can benefit all students. Most important, when more students eat, more students are eating more nutritious meals. I'm sure you are aware of the epidemic of diet-related chronic disease and its toll on our state's

⁷ Insight Center. 2021. *The Cost of Being Californian*. At, https://insightcced.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/INSIGHT_CostofBeingCalifornian_6_web.pdf

⁸ Fox L. 2018. The Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2017. Current Population Reports, P60–265. U.S. Census Bureau.

⁹ Zuercher MD, Cohen JFW, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Ritchie LD, Gosliner W. Providing School Meals to All Students Free of Charge During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Challenges and Benefits Reported by School Foodservice Professionals in California. *Nutrients* 14(18), article 3855, 17 September 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14183855>

¹⁰ Orta-Aleman D, Zuercher M, Bacon K, Chelius C, Hecht C, Hecht K, Ritchie LD, Cohen JFW, & Gosliner W. Students' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of Universal School Meals related to food accessibility, stigma, and participation. In review.

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healthcare costs,^{11,12,13} and even on fitness to serve in the military.^{14,15} Poor diet is now the leading cause of illness in our country. **The School Meals for All program provides good nutrition for all students.** This is because the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s stringent nutrition standards, stemming from implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2012, have now made schools the single overall healthiest source of food in the U.S.^{16,17,18,19} New standards, due to be released next month, will make this more so.²⁰ A program that grows participation by lower-income students can help reduce a variety of disparities including in nutrition, health, and attendance.^{21,22} Offering no-charge meals to all students regardless of

¹¹ American Diabetes Association. *The Burden of Diabetes in California*. At, <http://main.diabetes.org/dorg/PDFs/Advocacy/burden-of-diabetes/california.pdf>.

¹² Conroy SM, Darsie B, Ilango S, Bates JH. 2016. *Burden of Cardiovascular Disease in California*. Sacramento, California: Chronic Disease Control Branch, California Department of Public Health. At, https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDCPHP/DCDIC/CDCB/CDPH%20Document%20Library/CVDBurdenReport2016_ADA.pdf.

¹³ Let’s Get Healthy California. *Reducing body mass index (BMI) by 5 percent could save California billions*. At, <https://letsgethealthy.ca.gov/goals/living-well/reducing-adult-obesity/#:~:text=California%20has%20the%20highest%20obesity,estimated%20at%20%2415.2%20billion%20annually>.

¹⁴ Council For A Strong America. 2018. *Unhealthy and Unprepared*. At, <https://strongnation.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/484/389765e0-2500-49a2-9a67-5c4a090a215b.pdf?1539616379&inline;%20filename=%22Unhealthy%20and%20Unprepared%20report.pdf%22>.

¹⁵ Council For A Strong America. 2022. *77 Percent of American Youth Can’t Qualify for Military Service*. At, <https://strongnation.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/1541/aab5fcd2-74e4-4b76-b260-010a5d9afcc9.pdf?1674578754&inline;%20filename=%2277%20Percent%20of%20American%20Youth%20Can’t%20Qualify%20for%20Military%20Service.pdf%22>.

¹⁶ Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262

¹⁷ Smith TA, Mojdzuska EM, Chen S. Did the new school meal standards improve the overall quality of children's diets? *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*. 2021 Dec;43(4):1366-84

¹⁸ Vernarelli JA, O’Brien B. A Vote for School Lunches: School Lunches Provide Superior Nutrient Quality than Lunches Obtained from Other Sources in a Nationally Representative Sample of US Children. *Nutrients*. 2017;9:924. doi: 10.3390/nu9090924.

¹⁹ Au LE, Rosen NJ, Fenton K, et al. Eating school lunch is associated with higher diet quality among elementary school students. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2016;116(11):1817–1824

²⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. 2023. Proposed Updates to the School Nutrition Standards. At, [https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/proposed-updates-school-nutrition-standards#:~:text=USDA%20is%20seeking%20feedback%20on%20two%20options%3A%201\)%20requiring%2080,limit%20over%20several%20school%20years](https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/proposed-updates-school-nutrition-standards#:~:text=USDA%20is%20seeking%20feedback%20on%20two%20options%3A%201)%20requiring%2080,limit%20over%20several%20school%20years).

²¹ Ralston K, Treen K, Coleman-Jensen A, Guthrie J. 2017. Children’s Food Security and USDA Child Nutrition Programs, EIB-174, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. At, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84003/eib-174.pdf>.

²² Bartfeld JS, Berger L, Men F. 2020. Universal Access to Free School Meals through the Community Eligibility Provision Is Associated with Better Attendance for Low-Income Elementary School Students in Wisconsin. *J Acad Nutr Diet* 120(2): 210–218.

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family income level is also good for all students regardless of family income level. Research shows improvement for all students in behavior, overall well-being and school climate; attendance and academic performance; diet quality and Body Mass Index.

23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,33,34,35,36

- The Nutrition Policy Institute evaluation finds that over three-quarters of California parents agree that offering meals at no charge to all students can improve student academics and behavior of all,¹ while students say the program supports food security,

²³ Ochs E, Shohet M. The cultural structuring of mealtime socialization. *New Dir Child Adolesc Dev*. 2006;(111):35-49.

²⁴ Action for Healthy Kids. *Time to Eat*. At, <https://www.actionforhealthykids.org/activity/time-to-eat/>.

²⁵ Gutierrez, Emily. 2021. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. At, <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-430.pdf>

²⁶ Ruffini K. Universal access to free school meals and student achievement: evidence from the community eligibility provision. *J Hum Resou*. 2022;57(3):776-820.

²⁷ Schwartz AE, Rothbart MW. Let them eat lunch: the impact of universal free meals on student performance. *J Policy Anal Manage*. 2019;39(2):376-410.

²⁸ Radsky V, Domina T, Clark LR, Bhaskar. 2022. There is Such Thing as a Free Lunch: School Meals, Stigma, and Student Discipline, *Working Papers 22-23*, Center for Economic Studies, U.S. Census Bureau. At, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/cen/wpaper/22-23.html>.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Kinderknecht K, Harris C, Jones-Smith J. Association of the healthy, hunger-free kids act with dietary quality among children in the US national school lunch program. *JAMA*. 2020;324(4):359–368

³¹ Gearan EC, Monzella K, Jennings L, Fox MK. Differences in diet quality between school lunch participants and nonparticipants in the United States by Income and Race. *Nutrients*. 2020;12(12):3891.

³² Johnson DB, Podrabsky M, Rocha A, Otten JJ. Effect of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on the nutritional quality of meals selected by students and school lunch participation rates. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2016;170(1):e153918

³³ Dietz WH. Better diet quality in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and WIC package reduced childhood obesity. *Pediatrics*. 2021;147(4):e2020032375

³⁴ Localio AM, Knox MA, Basu A, Lindman T, Walkinshaw LP, Jones-Smith JC; Universal Free School Meals Policy and Childhood Obesity. *Pediatrics* 2024; 10.1542/peds.2023-063749

³⁵ Hecht AA, Dunn CG, Kinsey EW, Read MA, Levi R, Richardson AS, Hager ER, Seligman HK. 2022. Estimates of the Nutritional Impact of Non-Participation in the National School Lunch Program during COVID-19 School Closures. *Nutrients* 14(7):1387).

Note: this study took an interesting approach. The study estimates the changes in lunchtime calories and nutrients consumed by National School Lunch Program participants from March to November 2020, compared to the same months in 2019. National School Lunch Program participants receiving no school meals would increase their caloric consumption by 640 calories per week and reduce their consumption of nutrients such as calcium and vitamin D. Because 27 to 78 million fewer lunches were served per week in March - November 2020 compared to the previous year, nationally, students may have consumed 3 to 10 billion additional calories per week.

³⁶ Holford A, Rabe B. 2022. Going universal. The impact of free school lunches on child body weight outcomes. *Journal of Public Economics Plus* 3:100016.

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increases meal participation, makes school meals feel more inclusive, and reduces hassle.¹⁰

I am happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.

NPI School Meals for All Publications

NPI's School Meals for All webpage, at [https://npi.ucanr.edu/School Meals for All/](https://npi.ucanr.edu/School_Meals_for_All/), is regularly updated with new publications from our team.

Research Briefs

- [**Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All**](#)
Nourish Lab, Center for Health Inclusion, Research and Practice, Merrimack College. March 2024.
- [**The Many Benefits of School Meals for All**](#)
Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. Arizona State University, College of Health Solutions. University of Connecticut, Rudd Center. Merrimack College. Boise State University, College of Education. 29 August 2023.
- [**School Meals for All: Farm Fresh Food**](#)
Orta-Aleman D, Chelius C, Bacon K, Hecht C, Hecht K, Zuercher M, Ritchie L, Gosliner W. Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. 20 June 2023.
- [**School Meals for All in California: Parents Value School Meals for All and Offer Suggestions to Strengthen Meal Programs**](#)
Hecht C, Hecht K, Zuercher M, Ritchie L, Gosliner W. Research Brief: Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. 9 May 2023.
- [**School Meals for All in California: Time to Eat Can Be a Barrier to Full Participation**](#)
Hecht C, Bacon K, Chapman L, Chelius C, Olarte D, Orta-Aleman D, Zuercher M, Hecht K, Ritchie L, Cohen JFW and Gosliner W. University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Nutrition Policy Institute. 19 April 2023.
- [**School Meals for All in California: Benefits and Challenges During COVID and Beyond as Reported by School Food Services**](#)
Hecht C, Zuercher M, Hecht K, Gosliner W, Ritchie L. University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Nutrition Policy Institute. 23 August 2022.

Publications

- Zuercher MD, Cohen JFW, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Ritchie LD, Gosliner W. [**Providing School Meals to All Students Free of Charge During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Challenges and Benefits Reported by School Foodservice Professionals in California**](#) *Nutrients*, volume 14, issue 18, article 3855, 17 September 2022.
- Cohen JF, Polacsek M, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Read M, Olarte DA, Patel AI, Schwartz MB, Turner L, Zuercher M, Gosliner W, Ritchie LD. [**Implementation of Universal School Meals during COVID-**](#)

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19 and beyond: Challenges and Benefits for School Meals Programs in Maine

Nutrients, volume 14, issue 19, article 4031, 28 September 2022.

- Zuercher MD, Cohen JFW, Ohri-Vachaspati P, Hecht CA, Hecht K, Polacsek M, Olarte DA, Read M, Patel AI, Schwartz MB, Chapman LE, Orta-Aleman D, Ritchie LD, Gosliner W. **Parent perceptions of school meals and how perceptions differ by race and ethnicity**. *Health Affairs Scholar*, Volume 2, Issue 1, 10 January 2024
- Zuercher MD, Cohen JFW, Ohri-Vachaspati P, Hecht CA, Hecht K, Patel AI, Olarte DA, Chapman LE, Reach M, Schwartz MB, Ritchie LD, Gosliner W (joint last authors). Parent perceptions of school meals influence student participation in school meal programs. *J Nutr Ed Behav* 2024 (in press).
- Chapman LE, Olarte DA, Gosliner W, Ritchie LD, Schwartz MB, Polacsek M, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Turner L, Patel AI, Zuercher MD, Read M, Daly TP, Cohen JFW. Universal School Meals During the Pandemic: A Qualitative Analysis of Parent Opinions from California and Maine. *J Acad Nutr Diet* 2024 (in review).
- Zuercher MD, Cohen JFW, Hecht CA, Hecht K, Orta-Aleman D, Ritchie LD, Gosliner W. Household food insecurity is associated with parent and other caregiver perceptions and with student participation in school meals (in review).
- Chapman LE, Olarte DA, Zuercher MD, Gosliner W, Ritchie LD, Orta-Aleman D, Schwartz MB, Polacsek M, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Patel AI, Ohri-Vachaspati P, Read M, Cohen JFW. Impact of mealtime social experiences on student participation in and consumption of meals at school: a qualitative analysis of parent perspectives (in review).
- Cohen JFW, Zuercher MD, Orta-Aleman D, Chapman L, Hecht CA, Hecht K, Ohri-Vachaspati P, Olarte DA, Patel AI, Polacsek M, Schwartz MB, Ritchie LD, Gosliner W. Impact of De-implementing Universal Free School Meals on Schools: Foodservice Director Perspectives (in review).
- Orta-Aleman D, Zuercher M, Bacon K, Chelius C, Hecht C, Hecht K, Ritchie LD, Cohen JFW, Gosliner W. Students' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of Universal School Meals related to food accessibility, stigma, and participation (in review).
- Zuercher M and co-authors. California's Universal School Meals: Challenges and Facilitators Reported by School Foodservice Professionals (in preparation).

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