

# ISSUE BRIEF:

## Improving Afterschool Meal Quality



### Background

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The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal nutrition program that serves day care centers and afterschool programs. The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) led to wide-reaching improvements across the federal child nutrition programs, including afterschool nutrition. Among its achievements, HHFKA expanded the CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Supper Meals program (hereinafter referred to as afterschool meals) to all 50 states. Prior to 2010, only 13 states and the District of Columbia were authorized to serve reimbursable afterschool meals in low-income areas. CACFP afterschool meals allow youth who attending afterschool enrichment programming in low-income areas to benefit from nutritious meals. The nutrition provided by the CACFP meals is superior to afterschool snacks served through CACFP and other federal child nutrition programs, and the significantly higher reimbursement rate for the meals greatly increases the capacity of program sponsors. Offering a more substantial meal can help afterschool programs maintain attendance, improve behavior and support enrichment learning. School districts and other agencies can act as sponsors that administer the CACFP meal program for one or more afterschool program sites.

Since 2010, the California Department of Education, Nutrition Services Division (CDE-NSD) has collaborated with afterschool community partners to promote the new CACFP afterschool meal program. These efforts have resulted in over 2,200 approved California program sites as of May 2014. While most collaborative efforts have focused on enrolling more sponsors and sites in this new program, improving the quality and appeal of the meals is also paramount. Emphasizing meal quality capitalizes on the opportunity to ensure low-income youth are eating and enjoying healthy, appealing meals during afterschool programming.

### Issue Overview

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While efforts to expand the reach of afterschool meals in California have been very successful, the quality and appeal of afterschool meals should be a parallel priority to program expansion. A number of policy options are available at the federal, state, and sponsor levels that can improve afterschool meal quality and appeal.

In this report, survey data and case studies are assessed to identify major factors that influence afterschool meal quality and appeal, such as menu variety, food preparation methods, and participant preferences. Targeted policy can encourage best practices. Previous surveys and focus groups with California students identified the following program qualities that make school meals more appealing<sup>1,2</sup>:

- Offering variety and choice in entrées, fruits, and vegetables
- Serving food that looks and smells fresh
- Serving food that seems to have been made with attention and care, and doesn't look "institutional"
- Communicating menu options to students and clearly labeling food items
- Engaging students and incorporating their preferences into menu planning
- Establishing positive interactions and relationships between students, food servers and staff.

This report offers policy recommendations that can improve afterschool meal quality and appeal.

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*For more than 20 years, California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) has been the state's trusted food policy advocacy organization dedicated to increasing low-income Californians' access to healthy food at home, at school, and throughout entire communities. CFPA's advocacy agenda draws on the anti-hunger, nutrition, and health movements. Working as both a policy leader and supportive policy ally, CFPA continues to build on its long history of success.*

## Afterschool Meal Sponsor Survey

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In late 2013, CDE-NSD administered a survey to better understand how afterschool snacks and meals operate across the state. Forty-one respondents, representing 6 organizations and 35 school district sponsors, participated in the survey. While the survey collected information about many aspects of afterschool meal and snack programs, this summary analysis is limited to the questions related to meal quality.

### Survey Results

- Thirty-two percent of respondents offered a combination of hot and cold meals. Almost half of all respondents (49%) served only cold meals.
- Approximately half of respondents had the ability to self-prepare meals at most sites, while the remainder prepared meals in a central kitchen or purchased meals from outside vendors.
- A greater proportion of sponsors who prepare meals on-site served a combination of hot and cold meals and utilized longer menu cycles when compared to those who used outside vendors.
- Only 17% of respondents offer salad bars, which give students the ability to choose foods they prefer.
- Student preferences were not frequently sought out- only 27% of respondents surveyed participating students on afterschool meal preferences more than twice.
- Commendably, more than 75% of respondents report serving fresh fruits or vegetables daily.

Menu variety is a key element of quality and appeal to students. Variety can be achieved through less-frequent menu cycling ( $\geq 2$  weeks), offering an array of entrées and sides, and allowing student self-selection (such as at a salad bar or offering multiple daily choices). Hot or cold meals can both be appealing to students; however, offering a combination of both may allow for greater menu variety.

This CDE survey provides useful information, though it is limited due to the small sample size and the lack of direct focus on quality and appeal. Future surveys should assess comprehensive information about meal service practices and youths' perceptions and preferences.

## Afterschool Meal Program Case Studies

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Despite limited data on afterschool meal quality, best practices and themes emerge from successful sponsors' stories. California After School Network (CAN) and California Food Policy Advocates independently compiled case studies of five 'early-adopter' afterschool meal sponsors: Redwood Empire Food Bank (Sonoma County); Pittsburg Unified School District (Contra Costa County); Oakland Unified School District (Alameda County); South Bay Union School District (Humboldt County); and the YMCA of Silicon Valley (Santa Clara County). Best practices that emerged from the case studies include:



### Program Adoption by Experienced Child Nutrition Providers

All five profiled programs began serving CACFP afterschool meals very soon after the program became available, in response to clear community need for enhanced afterschool nutrition. Most of the profiled sponsors had already been serving afterschool snacks, and all had prior experience operating federal child nutrition programs. They piloted afterschool meal service at a small number of sites before expanding to serve additional areas. Some reached out to trusted colleagues to better understand how they were planning on operating afterschool meals in their area.

## Leveraging Capacity of Other Child Nutrition Program Operations

Most of the profiled programs carefully assessed their afterschool food service capacity, and utilized those assessments to purchase additional kitchen equipment or add staffing as needed. Program administrators also experimented to determine the best afterschool meal time for different sites and ages. Some planned the afterschool meal time around school lunch schedules, while others served meals based on the time students leave in the evening. This flexibility ensures that afterschool meals are served when students are ready to eat.

## Thoughtful and Varied Menu Planning

Many profiled programs utilized self-prepared scratch cooking, while others worked with a commercial vendor. However, all prioritized the freshness of meals, with foods prepared from scratch in the district within 24 hours of service, or through daily deliveries from vendors to individual sites. Almost all profiled programs strongly emphasize menu variety, serving foods of different textures, temperatures and colors, and incorporating ethnic diversity. Thoughtful and varied menus help maintain student interest in the afterschool meal, which may have to compete with snacks sold in vending machines and school fundraisers after school.

## Complementary Nutrition Education Programming

Federal regulations require that CACFP afterschool meal program sites provide academic enrichment activities for participants; however, there is no requirement that these activities include nutrition education. Yet, most of the profiled sponsors report delivering some form of nutrition education through the afterschool programming. Cooking demonstrations, garden visits or cooking lessons are popular hands-on activities. Some programs allow children to take home donated or purchased fresh produce to extend nutrition literacy to their families. Engaging lessons about healthy eating can reinforce the value of eating a nutritious afterschool meal. Nutrition education was often coordinated in partnership with afterschool program staff at individual sites.

## Engagement with Students, Parents and Site Staff

All profiled programs regularly solicit feedback about meals from program participants. Incorporating student input into menu planning shows attention to student need and customer service. Afterschool site staff members were also asked to give feedback about student preferences. Site program staff can be a great source of feedback about the quality of the meals served, and can provide objective input as to the popularity of different meals offered to the whole student group. One profiled program surveyed parents, and many sent home monthly menus and invited feedback from parents. Parents can inform afterschool meal programs about how the meals fit into youth's home environments, and help determine whether afterschool meals are best served in the early evening as a light dinner or near the end of the school day as a "super snack."



## Innovative Community Partnerships

Most profiled programs collaborate with community partners to strengthen their afterschool meal programs. For example, afterschool programs and food service departments within school districts may divide tasks so that neither department is left doing all of the meal service and administrative paperwork. The profiled school districts and community-based organizations often leverage resources and capacity to provide the comprehensive support of afterschool enrichment along with a nutritious meal. Such collaboration can yield greater program participation by making afterschool enrichment and nutrition a community effort.

## Recommendations

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Targeted policies and practices can improve afterschool meal quality and optimize the benefits of participation in the CACFP afterschool meal program.

### Federal Policy Recommendations

- Update the CACFP afterschool meal pattern to reflect the Institute of Medicine recommendation that child nutrition standards are aligned with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Create better alignment between the CACFP afterschool meal pattern and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) meal pattern. Emphasize the benefits of coordinating lunch and afterschool menus.

### State Agency Recommendations

- Encourage school district sponsors to use the NSLP meal pattern for afterschool meals, which offers more nutritional benefits and variety than the current pattern for CACFP afterschool meals.
- Coordinate trainings and in-person regional meetings for current and prospective afterschool meals sponsors to discuss best practices, observe meal operations and sample meals.
- Utilize the Team California for Healthy After Schools mentor program as a key avenue to encourage afterschool programs to improve the quality and appeal of afterschool meals.
- Enhance communication about afterschool meal quality on the CDE website. Make information about healthy afterschool meal environments more prominent, and link to organizations that provide additional support, ie California AfterSchool Network, the California Healthy Behaviors Initiative and CANFIT.
- Convene a working group of stakeholders to identify additional ways to overcome barriers to serving high-quality and appealing afterschool meals.

### Sponsor and Site-Level Recommendations

- Prospective sponsors should seek out experienced sponsors to serve as mentors. Veteran sponsors should host new sponsors to visit afterschool meals sites and discuss operations.
- Access resources from organizations such as the California AfterSchool Network, the California Healthy Behaviors Initiative and CANFIT that support sponsors in improving the quality of afterschool meals.
- Establish creative strategies and partnerships with local non-profit organizations or farm-to-school efforts that enable serving high-quality meals.
- Work with program sites to create afterschool wellness policies that limit the sale of competitive foods during after school hours, and promote nutrition standards for any foods and beverages consumed on site by staff and students.
- Experiment with different menu and food service strategies, and modify program operation and the timing of meal service as necessary in order to best meet the needs of each afterschool program site.
- Survey children, program staff, and parents regularly and incorporate changes as needed.

## Contact

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Questions? Contact Tracey Patterson at [tracey@cfpa.net](mailto:tracey@cfpa.net) or 510.433.1122 ext. 101.

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<sup>1</sup> California Food Policy Advocates and the Healthy School Food Coalition. LAUSD Student Food Talks. November 2012.

<sup>2</sup> UC Berkeley Atkins Center for Weight and Health and The California Endowment. Evaluation of the Healthy School Meals Projects: Report of Findings from Ten California School Districts. October 2013.