

Recess from the Recession

How school meals can do more to help struggling families

Kumar Chandran
September 2008

Executive Summary

Every day in schools across the country, millions of low-income children rely on a federally-subsidized school lunch and breakfast for a significant portion of their daily nutritional needs. On any given school day in 2007, nationally, over 30 million students from families with an income below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Line ate a free or reduced price school lunch. In California, this figure is over 2.2 million. For struggling families in California, school meals provide a significant nutrition safety net for their children while also offering economic benefits by stretching the household food budget.

As students return to school this fall, the economic outlook for millions of struggling Americans is grim. Unfortunately, California is not immune from these economic woes; in fact, many economic indicators demonstrate that Californians are facing worse conditions than average Americans. In California, unemployment rates, fuel prices, and food costs in some regions are higher than the national average and certain areas of the state have been hit particularly hard by the housing downturn.

As the economy worsens, more families will face food insecurity and stretched household food budgets. In fact, the federal food assistance programs are already seeing rising demand with food stamps enrollments approaching record levels and WIC caseloads rising; food banks, food pantries, and the emergency food system are also seeing an increased demand for their services. In California, participation in the school meals programs has been steadily rising and school food service departments are expecting that trend to accelerate in the new school year.

Given the current economic situation and the growing demand for the school meals programs, the time is ripe for policymakers to strengthen and expand the nutrition safety net in schools. In 2009, Congress will reauthorize all the child nutrition programs, including the school meals programs. Child Nutrition Reauthorization presents a significant opportunity for Congress and USDA to make much needed changes. However, this report also highlights the unique and necessary role policymakers at the state and local levels can play in improving school meals.

Although there are many improvements that can be made to school meals, this report will focus on three major changes: (1) enrolling more low-income children into the school meals programs, (2) ensuring that the reimbursement rate is adequate for providing nutritious meals, and (3) growing the School Breakfast Program.

Increasing Enrollments of Low-Income Children

- School districts and school boards should ensure that their school districts are using the automated state matching system to automatically enroll kids from families that are receiving benefits from eligible programs.
- The Governor should sign AB 2300 to expand the state's automated system of direct certification and verification to include Medi-Cal.
- Congress should make it clear that states are authorized to test the use of Medicaid for direct certification and verification and, building upon these steps, should make this option permanent, should it prove successful.
- Congress and USDA should explore innovative methods of determining eligibility for free and reduced price school meals by either minimizing or eliminating the use of paper applications.
- Congress should study the effect of eliminating reduced price co-payments on participation, program quality, and nutritional and academic outcomes.
- Congress should also establish demonstration projects that examine the effects of various methods of eliminating the reduced price co-payments.
- Congress should explore the effects of raising eligibility to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line in order to bring more needy children into the program.
- As enrollments *increase*, state lawmakers should ensure that the amount of state meal reimbursement is not *decreased*.

Ensuring Adequate Reimbursement Rates for Nutritious School Meals

- Congress and USDA should increase reimbursement rates and tie these increases to specific nutrition improvements, such as additional servings of fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains.
- Congress should explore which metric is best to measure the annual rise in costs to produce a meal, including labor, fuel, and other costs, and use that metric to calculate the annual reimbursement rate adjustment.
- State legislators and the Governor should include funding for the successful California Fresh Start program to ensure that school breakfast be a permanent source of healthy produce for needy children across California.

Strengthening the School Breakfast Program

In addition to taking action on the above recommendations which will also improve the School Breakfast Program, policymakers can also act on several breakfast specific recommendations:

- **Congress should invest in strategies for increasing servings of fresh fruit and vegetables by giving school districts in the School Breakfast Program.**
- **Congress should establish funding for demonstration projects that allow schools to pilot new methods of increasing participation in school breakfast.**
- **The California Legislature and the Governor must ensure that all low-income children are able to eat a breakfast in school.**
- **Legislators and the Governor should re-fund the California Fresh Start Program and ensure that funding is adequate for the provision of an extra serving of fruits and vegetables.**
- **School district officials, principals, administrators, and school board members should ensure that a breakfast program exists in all their schools, starting with those with the greatest numbers of low-income students.**
- **Schools should apply for start-up and expansion grants for school breakfast available through the California Department of Education.**
- **Local education leaders should implement innovative breakfast service options, such as classroom breakfast or second chance breakfast.**

A Souring Economy and the Rising Need for a Child Nutrition Safety Net

The problem

As millions of children in California and across the country return to school this fall, they are returning to school cafeterias facing numerous problems, more acute than the perpetual woes of the American educational system. With food and fuel prices rising, recent news stories have reported how school districts may trim the school week to four days of instruction per week, cut bus routes, raise fees for riding the bus, and hike prices for school meals. The same pressures that are causing schools to economize, cut corners, and deal with tight budgets are also harshly affecting many households – low-income households in particular.

With a worsening economy, a weakening housing market, rising fuel costs, soaring food prices, and growing unemployment, it is nearly impossible to ignore the daily news about how many Americans are struggling to make ends meet. For California, these economic problems are worse than the national experience. Certain regions of California have been hit particularly hard by housing and foreclosure woes – Modesto and Stockton lead the nation in the percentage of homes in foreclosure proceedings, with Riverside County and the Antelope Valley not far behind. Gas prices in California are significantly higher than the national average, with the Bay Area and Los Angeles paying prices that are among the highest in the country.¹ In July 2008, unemployment in California reached 7.3 percent, compared with the national rate of 5.7 percent. Between June 2008 and July 2008, California experienced one of the largest decreases in unemployment in the country by almost 15,000 jobs.² In some regions of California, food prices have been rising faster than the national average as well.³

Recently released data from the Census Bureau indicate that low and moderate-income Californians' economic circumstances worsened from 2006 to 2007. California's median household income declined by \$1,154 to \$55,734. Although the poverty rate remained unchanged, the number of Californians in poverty grew during that time period to 4.6 million people, or 12.7 percent of the population. The child poverty rate in California was 17.9 percent in 2007 representing a decline from 18.1 percent in 2006, albeit a

¹ "US Retail Gasoline Prices". Energy Information Administration. US Department of Energy.

http://www.eia.doe.gov/oil_gas/petroleum/data_publications/wrgp/mogas_home_page.html, accessed on 9/2/08.

² "Regional and State Employment and Unemployment Summary". Bureau of Labor Statistics. US Department of Labor. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.nr0.htm>, accessed on 9/2/08.

³ Forthcoming CFPA analysis rising food costs on low-income Californians.

decline that was not statistically significant.⁴ National data differ in details, but generally paints the identical picture of economic challenges for most Americans. These data demonstrate that upper-income Americans reaped the vast majority of the benefits of the economic expansion from 2001 to 2007 leaving low- and moderate-income Americans behind.⁵

Across the state, data from a survey conducted in 2005 by UCLA established that over 2.4 million low-income adults in California live with food insecurity, or struggle to put food on the table.⁶ The survey conducted by UCLA only interviewed low-income adult household members. Using additional data gathered in this survey, a secondary analysis conducted by CFPA reveals that approximately 7.6 million other persons live in these food insecure households,⁷ many of whom are children.

With millions of children living in poverty across the country, millions of parents facing rising unemployment rates, food prices, and fuel costs, and the economy entering a recession, experts (and common sense) predict that the problems of food insecurity, hunger, and poverty will only increase in the coming years

What do these numbers mean for the nutrition safety net?

Individually, rising unemployment, soaring food and fuel costs, and an impending economic recession would be enough to push struggling low-income families over the edge towards food insecurity. When combined, these factors are producing the surge of rising need for nutrition assistance programs being seen across the country and across California. Trying economic conditions are creating a rising demand for food stamps and WIC, the emergency food system, and school meals. In California, applications for food stamps rose by 12.6 percent between May of 2007 and 2008. Nationally, enrollment in the Food Stamp Program is projected to rise to the highest level since the program was created in the 1960s. Between May 2007 and May 2008, WIC caseloads have risen 4.9 percent.⁸ According to a recent MAZON survey, four out of seven Bay Area food pantries and food banks surveyed reported an increase in the number of new

⁴ "News Release: 2007 Incomes Declined, Poverty Increased: New Data Mark a Reversal of Progress Made in 2006". California Budget Project. August 26, 2008. http://cbp.org/documents/080826_pressrelease_censusdata.pdf, accessed on 9/2/08.

⁵ "Statement by Robert Greenstein, Executive Director, on the New Census Bureau Data on Poverty, Income, and Health Insurance". Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. August 26, 2008. <http://www.cbpp.org/8-26-08pov-stmt.htm>, accessed on 9/2/08.

⁶ Harrison GG, Sharp M, Manalo-LeClair G, Ramirez A, and McGarvey N. *Food Security Among California's Low-Income Adults Improves, But Most Severely Affected Do Not Share in Improvement*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, 2007. http://www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu/pubs/files/Food_Security_PB_082207.pdf, accessed on 9/2/08.

⁷ Chandran, Kumar. *Shared Tables, Shared Struggles: The Impact of Adult Food Insecurity on Families in California*. California Food Policy Advocates, November 2007. <http://cfpa.net/press/shared%202007/shared%20tables%20shared%20struggles%202007.pdf>, accessed on 9/2/08.

⁸ "WIC Program: Total Participation". Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/27wilatest.htm>, accessed on 9/2/08.

clients they have served this year compared to last year.⁹ Anecdotal reports and recent media coverage suggests that this increasing reliance on the emergency food system is widespread and increasing.

Given the rise in child poverty described above, the school meals programs are a vital cornerstone of the nutrition safety net. The recent economic slowdown affects the school meal programs in two ways – by increasing demand for the programs as well as increasing the costs of running the programs.

First, as unemployment rates rise and food and fuel prices escalate, low-income families are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. More families are becoming eligible for free or reduced price (FRP) school meals and more families that were likely eligible for subsidized child nutrition programs *before* the economic slowdown are enrolling in the programs as household budgets shrink.

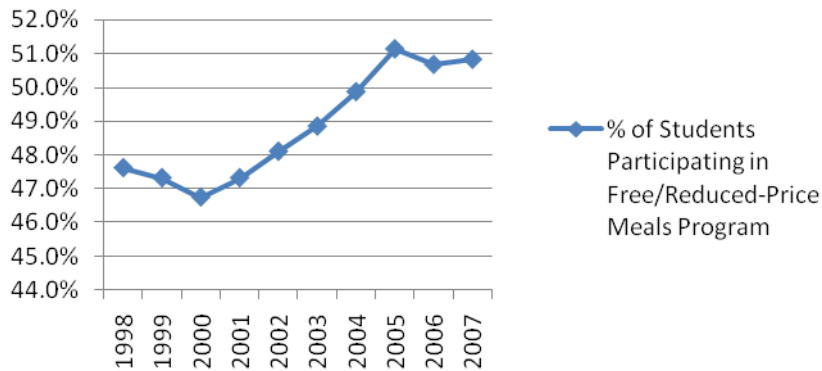
Students from families who earn less than 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) qualify for free school breakfasts and lunches while students from families who earn less than 185 percent of the FPL are charged no more than 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch. Students from families who earn above 185 percent of the FPL must pay the full price of the meal, which, on average in California during the 2006-7 school year, was \$1.99 for lunch.

Families with two children enrolled in public school who eat a free lunch at school every school day throughout the year save approximately \$716 during the school year; these benefits are even greater if the children also eat breakfast at school. These programs offer benefits that enable households to divert limited resources to supplementing meals provided in the home or other necessary household expenditures, such as health care or utilities. According to a recent *USA Today* article, schools saw an increase in the number of children enrolled in the FRP meal programs last school year and school food service departments are expecting that trend to continue in the fall.¹⁰ Indeed, a recent analysis of data provided by the California Department of Education show that in recent years, both the percent and overall number of students participating in the FRP meal programs has been rising. Because this data only runs through 2007, it does not capture recent changes from much of the rise in food prices nor the recent economic slowdown.

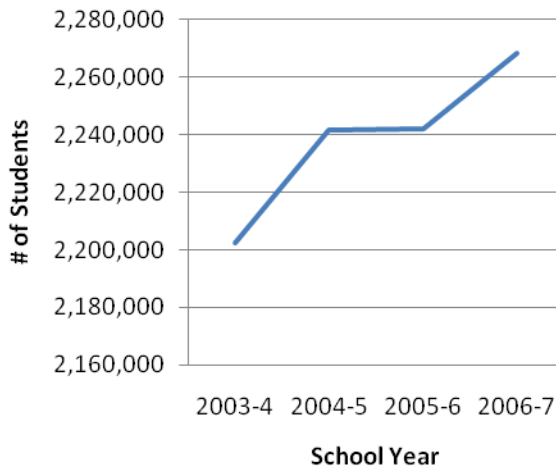
⁹ Forthcoming CFPA analysis rising food costs on low-income Californians.

¹⁰ Toppo, Greg. "More families requesting free or reduced lunch". *USA Today*, 8/19/2008. http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-08-19-free-reduced-lunch_N.htm, accessed on 9/2/08.

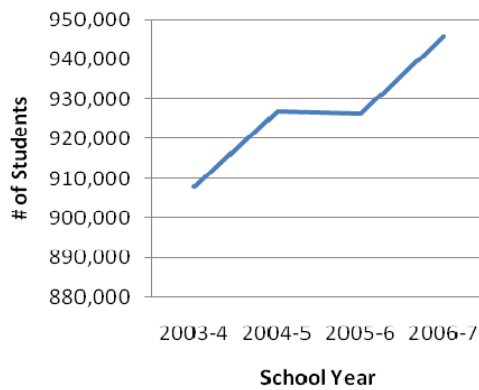
% of Students Participating in Free/Reduced-Price Meals Program



Average Daily Participation in FRP Lunch



Average Daily Participation in FRP Breakfast



Source: CFPA Analysis of California Department of Education Data

Along with a rising demand for the school meals programs, the other effect on the school meals programs of recent economic conditions is a serious cost pressure from rising food and fuel costs. Even as demand for these programs rise, due to these cost pressures, school food service departments cite difficulties in their ability to provide nutritious meals with the highest quality ingredients. The particularly significant spikes to dairy, eggs, and grain products have considerable impact on schools as these are major components of the school meal tray.

Many schools no longer actually prepare meals from scratch in school kitchens, but instead rely on central kitchens or processors to deliver fully-prepared or partially-prepared foods to cafeterias that are often only equipped with limited facilities that only heat and serve pre-prepared meals. The fleet of trucks needed to operate school food services consumes significant amounts of fuel, so rising fuel costs directly impact school food services' operational budgets.

USDA recently released the 2008-9 reimbursement rates for the federal child nutrition programs, adjusting payments to schools upwards by 4.27 percent – significantly below the increased cost of business.

What can be done to strengthen school meals?

In response to these challenges, there are a number of changes policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels should take to improve and strengthen the school meals programs. For academic, health, and economic reasons, students and families should be able to rely on a strong nutrition safety net in schools. Hungry children cannot learn. Academic research increasingly bears this out – breakfast is important for not only academic performance, but also can help decrease absenteeism and tardiness.¹¹ Additionally, recent evidence also suggests that nutritious lunches can help kids concentrate in school.¹² Although much can still be done to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, evidence also suggests that many school meals may be more nutritious than what children bring from home or would purchase on their own from a la carte lines, vending machines, or the fast food outlets and convenience stores abundant in neighborhoods surrounding schools. Thus, school meals can be an important ally in the fight against obesity, and should play a stronger role in this fight.

¹¹ Chandran, Kumar. *Running on Empty: A Report on the School Breakfast Program in California*. California Food Policy Advocates, September 2007. <http://cfpa.net/press/2007%20breakfast%20report.pdf>, accessed on 9/2/08.

¹² "Healthy Lunches Help Kids' Concentration in School". *US News and World Report*, August 24, 2008. <http://health.usnews.com/articles/health/healthday/2008/08/24/healthy-lunches-help-kids-concentration-in-school.html>, accessed on 9/2/08.

Finally, from an economic perspective, struggling parents ought to be able to rely on school meals to help feed their children and relieve the growing pressures on their household economies. As the economy worsens, these pressures will only increase. Children should not suffer as a result.

Among the long list of potential improvements to school nutrition programs, this report will focus on three very timely changes: (1) enrolling more low-income children into school meals, (2) increasing reimbursement rates to ensure nutritious meals, and (3) growing the School Breakfast Program. Policy recommendations in this report are targeted to local, state, and federal administrators and/or elected officials. Because Congress will reauthorize all the child nutrition programs in 2009, the time is ripe for federal leaders to revise and strengthen the child nutrition safety net.

Expanding Access and Increasing Participation in School Meals Programs

As schools open their doors for the new academic year, many predict that more children will need the school meals programs. However, a handful of stubborn barriers deter many needy families. This report will highlight three barriers. First, the application process itself is a barrier for some families. Second, the reduced price co-payment for breakfast and lunch can be an economic barrier for some families. Finally, many families who are ineligible for subsidized meals are still struggling.

Reducing Paper Applications

Paper applications are an anachronistic method of determining income eligibility for subsidized meals, particularly when the government already collects, tracks, and verifies many of these families' income information through other means-tested federal programs, such as CalWORKs, Medi-Cal, and food stamps. Forcing schools to repeat these onerous steps is simply a waste of valuable resources.

California passed legislation in 2005 to create an automated state matching system to directly certify and verify¹³ children from families who receive food stamps, CalWORKs, and a number of other means-tested programs as eligible for free or reduced price school meals. At the time of this report's publication, California is poised to pass a complementary piece of legislation, AB 2300 (Laird), to include Medi-Cal information for direct certification and verification.

Actions

- **School district officials and school board members should ensure that their school districts are using the automated state matching system to automatically enroll kids from families that are receiving benefits from eligible programs.**
- **The Legislature should pass, and the Governor should sign, AB 2300 to expand the state's automated system of direct certification and verification to include Medicaid.**
- **At the federal level, Congress should make it clear that states are indeed authorized to test the use of Medicaid for this purpose and, building upon these steps, should make this option permanent, should it prove successful.**

¹³ "Direct certification" is a provision of the National School Lunch Act that allows school districts to automatically qualify children receiving benefits under Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF – or, in California, California Work Opportunity and Responsibility for Kids (CalWORKs)), Food Stamp Program (FSP), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservation (FDPIR) for free and reduced price meals without requiring individual applications. "Direct verification" allows school districts to verify family income without requiring additional paperwork by families; instead, they use other income declarations made on applications for certain other means-tested programs.

- **Congress and USDA should explore innovative methods of determining eligibility for free and reduced price school meals by either minimizing or eliminating the use of paper applications.** The applications are burdensome for both families and for school administrators. Some strategies include using socioeconomic data sources, such as Census data, for determining area eligibility.
- **As enrollments *increase*, state lawmakers should ensure that the amount of state meal reimbursement is not *decreased*.** In addition to the federal reimbursement, the California Department of Education reimburses schools at a specific rate for meals served to a low-income child (\$0.2195 during the 2007-8 academic year.) However, if enrollments increase above expected levels (as they have recently and are expected to in the coming year), the amount of funding allocated for state meal reimbursement becomes inadequate toward the end of the academic year forcing the department to reimburse schools at a lower rate or provide no reimbursement for the remaining months of the budget year. In fact, this scenario has played out during the past two academic years. Schools rely upon the state meal reimbursement for the entire academic year to provide students with complete, nutritious meals. As economic hardship triggers a rising need for the school meals programs, California should ensure that schools are able to provide complete meals to their needy children. Schools should be rewarded for serving needy children not punished with lower reimbursement.

Eliminating the Reduced Price Co-Payment

The reduced price co-payment of up to 40 cents for lunch and 30 cents for breakfast can pose a real barrier to many low-income families. A family with two children qualifying for reduced price meals would pay almost \$150 per year just for the lunch co-payment. A number of school districts across the state and country have eliminated the reduced price co-payment, including the State of Washington, where lawmakers eliminated the reduced price co-payment for breakfast.

Actions

- **Congress should study the effect of eliminating the reduced price co-payment on participation, program quality, and nutritional and academic outcomes for students.**
- **Congress should also establish demonstration projects that examine the effects of various methods of eliminating the reduced price co-payments.**

Expanding Household Income Eligibility Guidelines

Particularly in many high cost areas of California, families earning between 185 and 200 percent of the federal poverty line still struggle to put food on the table. As the economy worsens, more families will become needy and eligible for free or reduced price meals. However, as the costs of housing, fuel, and food rise, families earning more than 185 percent of the federal poverty line will increasingly face economic hardship. In fact, recent analyses by the California Budget Project and Insight Center for Community Economic Development demonstrate that in many parts of California 185 percent of the federal poverty line is well below what it takes for families to make ends meet. A single parent family of three earning 185 percent of the federal poverty line would bring in \$32,560 per year in 2008. According to the CBP analysis¹⁴, such a family in Los Angeles would have to earn \$62,393 to make ends meet and according to InsightCEED's analysis¹⁵, this family would have to earn \$51,371. A family earning 186 percent of the federal poverty limit would not qualify for subsidized school meals but would also be well under both of these alternative income thresholds.

Actions

- **Congress should explore raising eligibility to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line in order to bring more needy children into the program.** To offset the costs of expanding eligibility, school meal programs should take advantage of enrollment strategies listed above by automatically enrolling students from families participating in other federal programs with similar income eligibility guidelines.

¹⁴ "Making Ends Meet: How Much Does it Cost to Raise a Family in California?". California Budget Project, October 2007. http://cbp.org/pdfs/2007/0710_mem_003.pdf, accessed on 9/2/08.

¹⁵ "California Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard by County". Insight Center for Community Economic Development. <http://www.insightcced.org/insight-communities/cfess/ca-sss.html>, accessed on 9/2/08.

Improving Meal Quality by Ensuring Adequate Reimbursement Rates

The recent rise in food prices underscores an ongoing problem in many school districts –inadequate reimbursement rate for school meals and inferior meal quality. During the 2007-8 academic year, schools received \$2.47 for every free lunch served and \$1.35 for each free breakfast served from the federal government. The state of California also provides school districts with \$0.21 for each meal served to low income students.

The federal reimbursement rates will increase by a little over 4 percent for the 2008-9 school year. However, as the chart below demonstrates, the percentage increase in prices for staple foods was in the double digits. Thus, it is likely that the annual reimbursement rate increase for school meals is insufficient, particularly given the fact that the USDA expects food prices to continue to rise.

CPI percent increase food categories from July 2007 to July 2008	
Poultry	+ 3.5%
Eggs	+ 16.5%
Milk	+ 4.7%
Rice, pasta, cornmeal	+ 22.6 %
Fruits and Vegetables	+ 14.3%
Bread	+ 17.2%

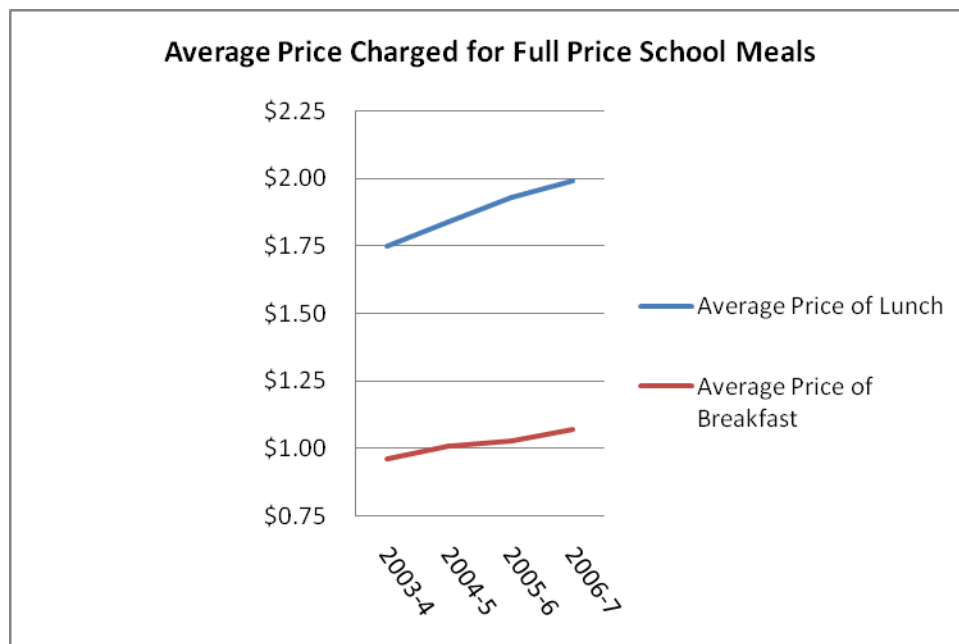
Source: CFPA Analyses of Bureau of Labor Statistics Data

In April 2008, the USDA released a study examining the cost of producing school lunches and breakfasts using data from the 2005-6 school year. The study found that for most school food authorities, the full cost to prepare and serve reimbursable lunches generally exceeded the free lunch subsidy, while the reported costs were less than the free lunch subsidy. However, for breakfast, both the reported and full costs of the meal were greater than the free breakfast subsidy. In general, smaller school food authorities faced higher per-meal costs than larger ones.¹⁶

Overall, the conclusion one can draw from this study is that, in general, schools were barely able to cover their costs for lunch and were losing money for breakfast. Since the study used data from the 2005-6 academic year, there are fewer districts likely breaking even given the recent rise in food prices. In fact, an analysis of the average price

¹⁶ "School Lunch and Breakfast Cost Study – II: Summary of Findings". Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture, April 2008. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/menu/Published/CNP/FILES/MealCostStudySummary.pdf>, accessed on 9/2/08.

charged for a full price school meal in California reveals that the prices of school meal have been steadily rising over the past four academic years.



Source: CFPA Analysis of CDE Data

In addition to the fact that the reimbursement rate is often inadequate for simply covering the cost of providing meals, many nutrition advocates continue to call for improvements to the nutritional quality of the meals. A recent study from the USDA found that only 6 to 7 percent of school lunches complied with all the nutrition requirements of the School Meals Initiative (SMI), based on the 1995 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.¹⁷ While some no-cost changes and cost-neutral substitutions can, and should, be made to school meals to improve the nutritional quality, other improvements will require additional funds. As consumers know, some healthier foods simply cost more than less nourishing foods – particularly true for perishable, nutrient dense foods. The same axiom is true for school meals.

Recent media reports across the country have noted school districts switching to less healthy substitutes in cafeterias in order to meet new budgetary realities. Examples include switching from whole grains to refined grains or from fresh vegetables to canned. Other changes include reducing the variety of foods offered or limiting menu options.

¹⁷ "School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment Study – III: Summary of Findings". Food and Nutrition Service, US Department of Agriculture, November 2007. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/menu/Published/CNP/FILES/SNDIII-SummaryofFindings.pdf>, accessed on 9/2/08.

Actions

- **Congress and USDA should increase reimbursement rates and tie these increases to specific nutrition improvements, such as additional servings of fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains.**
- **Congress should explore which metric is best to measure the annual rise in costs to produce a meal, including labor, fuel, and other costs, and use that metric to calculate the annual reimbursement rate adjustment.** As discussed above, this year's annual reimbursement rate increase does not adequately reflect the rise in food prices faced by school districts. USDA uses the Consumer Price Index for Food Away from Home to adjust the reimbursement rate for school meals. It is possible that the basket of foods measured by this index is not consistent with that used for producing school meals.

In 2005, California enacted SB 281 (Maldonado) creating the California Fresh Start Program in which the state reimbursed schools an extra 10 cents per breakfast for an additional serving of fruits and vegetables. A recent evaluation conducted by the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley for the California Department of Education determined that California Fresh Start succeeded at increasing the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables (often fresh) both offered to and taken by students. For budgetary reasons and a lack of political will, funding for this program was eliminated in 2007.

- **State legislators and the Governor should include funding for this successful program and ensure that school breakfast be a permanent source of healthy produce for needy children across California.**

Strengthening the School Breakfast Program

Academic research and experience confirm the old adage that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. For children, the importance of consuming a healthy breakfast daily is even greater. Research demonstrates that eating breakfast is associated with academic achievement, decreasing tardiness and absenteeism, and improving concentration. Additionally, research also concludes that breakfast is important in improving nutrition and helping maintain a healthy weight.¹⁸

However, too many low-income children show up to school hungry and not ready to learn. Many low-income families may simply be unable to afford to feed their children breakfast or to afford an adequate, healthy breakfast. In addition to cost considerations, many working families find it difficult during a busy morning to prepare and serve breakfast while also trying to get their children to school on time. Unfortunately, too many of these children who miss breakfast at home do not even have the opportunity to eat a breakfast at school because their schools do not offer the federally-funded School Breakfast Program.

According to a recent analysis in California, just over 1500 schools with over 700,000 students did not offer breakfast. Of these, over 500 were considered “severe need” due to significant populations of low-income children. The federal government recognizes the special responsibility these schools have to offer breakfast and provides them with an extra reimbursement to ensure a successful breakfast program. All schools, particularly “severe need” schools, should offer breakfast.

While many children lack the opportunity to even eat a school breakfast, many more children attend schools where the breakfast program is poorly utilized. In California, only 35 percent of students who eat lunch at school also eat a school breakfast. This rate is slightly higher for low-income students, at 41 percent. But, California underperforms the national rate of 44.6 percent. Many of the children that rely on school lunch should also be able to rely on a strong School Breakfast Program.

Poor participation in the School Breakfast Program does not usually reflect low demand for breakfast at school, but rather, inadequate implementation of the program. Traditionally, school breakfast is served in the cafeteria before the school day begins. For many families, it is difficult to get their children to school on time, let alone early

¹⁸ Chandran, Kumar. *Running on Empty: A Report on the School Breakfast Program in California*. California Food Policy Advocates, September 2007. <http://cfpa.net/press/2007%20breakfast%20report.pdf>, accessed on 9/2/08.

enough to eat a breakfast before the bell rings. For children who ride the bus, bus schedules are often incompatible with arriving at school early enough to participate in the breakfast program.

Schools throughout California and the nation have adopted innovative methods of serving breakfast that incorporates school breakfast into the school day. This includes classroom breakfast in which students eat in the classroom once the school day begins or a “second chance breakfast” during which breakfast is served during a brief “nutrition break” in the mid-morning. Schools that adopt these methods often find that once low participation rates soar; sites operating classroom breakfast reach nearly 100 percent of their students.

As the economy worsens, unemployment rises, and food prices increase, growing numbers of families will rely on the School Breakfast Program to give their children a healthy start to the day. Policymakers at all levels can take important steps to make sure that all children have the chance to participate in a successful breakfast program.

Congress should adopt the recommendations described in the section above to encourage greater enrollment in the school meals programs; increased enrollment will increase use of school breakfast. Many districts have experimented successfully with universally free breakfast programs. Innovative methods of determining eligibility and avoiding paper applications make universal breakfast programs easier to operate and administer. Congress should also adopt the recommendations described above related to reimbursement rates. Given the recent USDA study demonstrating the inadequacy of the reimbursement rate for breakfast, the need for Congressional action to address the reimbursement problem is paramount.

Actions

Congress can also take other steps to specifically improve the School Breakfast Program.

- **Congress should invest in strategies for increasing servings of fresh fruit and vegetables by giving school districts in the School Breakfast Program.**
- **Congress should establish funding for demonstration projects that allow schools to pilot new methods of increasing participation in school breakfast.**

In California, legislation has often been introduced over the past fifteen years to improve access to the School Breakfast Program by requiring certain schools, either low-performing or high-need schools, to serve breakfast. These bills have all failed at various points in the legislative process.

- **The California Legislature and the Governor must ensure that all low-income children are able to eat a breakfast in school.**
- **Legislators and the Governor should re-fund the California Fresh Start Program (described above) and ensure that funding is adequate for the provision of an extra serving of fruits and vegetables.**
- **School district officials, principals, administrators, and school board members should ensure that a breakfast program exists in all their schools, starting with those with the greatest numbers of low-income students.**
- **Schools should apply for start-up and expansion grants for school breakfast available through the California Department of Education.**
- **Local education leaders should implement innovative breakfast service options, such as classroom breakfast or second chance breakfast.**

In conclusion, great challenges require great leadership, creativity, and sensitivity to ensure that no child is left behind. Improving the nutrition environment in schools is one of many steps that can be taken to ensure that low-income children are able to live bright, successful lives.