



# THE MEAL DEAL

**SUBSIDIZED SCHOOL MEALS SET THE TABLE FOR WIDE-RANGING BENEFITS BUT MORE THAN A MILLION STUDENTS MISS OUT.**

Along the rugged northern California coast, the Fort Bragg Unified School District educates roughly 1,900 students. Reflecting the town's cyclical economy — a mix of commercial fishing, lumber and tourism services — many of these students come from low-income households.

Further south, the Fresno Unified School District sprawls across the agricultural Central Valley, incorporating urban, suburban and semi-rural schools and educating some 73,000 students along the way.

**BY HUGH BIGGAR**

Despite the differences in their locations and student populations, both districts share a similar challenge common to many schools across California — making sure students have reliable access to healthy meals. Based on recent numbers from the California Department of Education, nearly 59 percent of public school students in California take part in subsidized school meals programs. These students are found across the state, from areas with entrenched poverty to urban coastal areas with high costs of living.

And with one in five California children living in poverty, California Food Policy Advocates, an Oakland-based nonprofit, has determined that about 970,000 of the state's eligible public school students miss out on free or reduced-price lunch and two million miss out on breakfast.

In response to these challenges, school districts and counties are cooking up innovative ways to reach more of these students and ensure they are fed as healthily as possible. In addition to the basic goal of ensuring students don't go hungry, there is also growing understanding that school meals are a low-cost way to improve academic performance, as well as a way to boost school finances and local economies.

## OVERVIEW

More than a century ago, a forward thinking high school principal in Milwaukee opened a school-basement lunch room serving prepared meals as a way to reduce attrition, an idea that quickly became popular. Today, that early initiative has evolved into the National School Lunch Program, the National School Breakfast Program, Summer Meal Programs, Breakfast After the Bell and other initiatives. Most of these programs are administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and implemented by state agencies. The programs have grown along with need, and the benefits are far-reaching.

Numerous studies have determined that inadequate access to nutrition can lead to impaired physical and cognitive development, reduced attendance rates, worse scores on standardized tests, lower graduation rates and adult health problems such as obesity and diabetes. Further, the problems begin early and perpetuate the achievement gap. In one recent study in the journal *Child Development*, for instance, researchers found that children who went hungry at a young age were socio-emotionally and academically underprepared for kindergarten. In another study by the Nutrition Policy Institute at UC

Berkeley, schools that contracted with vendors to provide healthier school lunch options had better test scores.

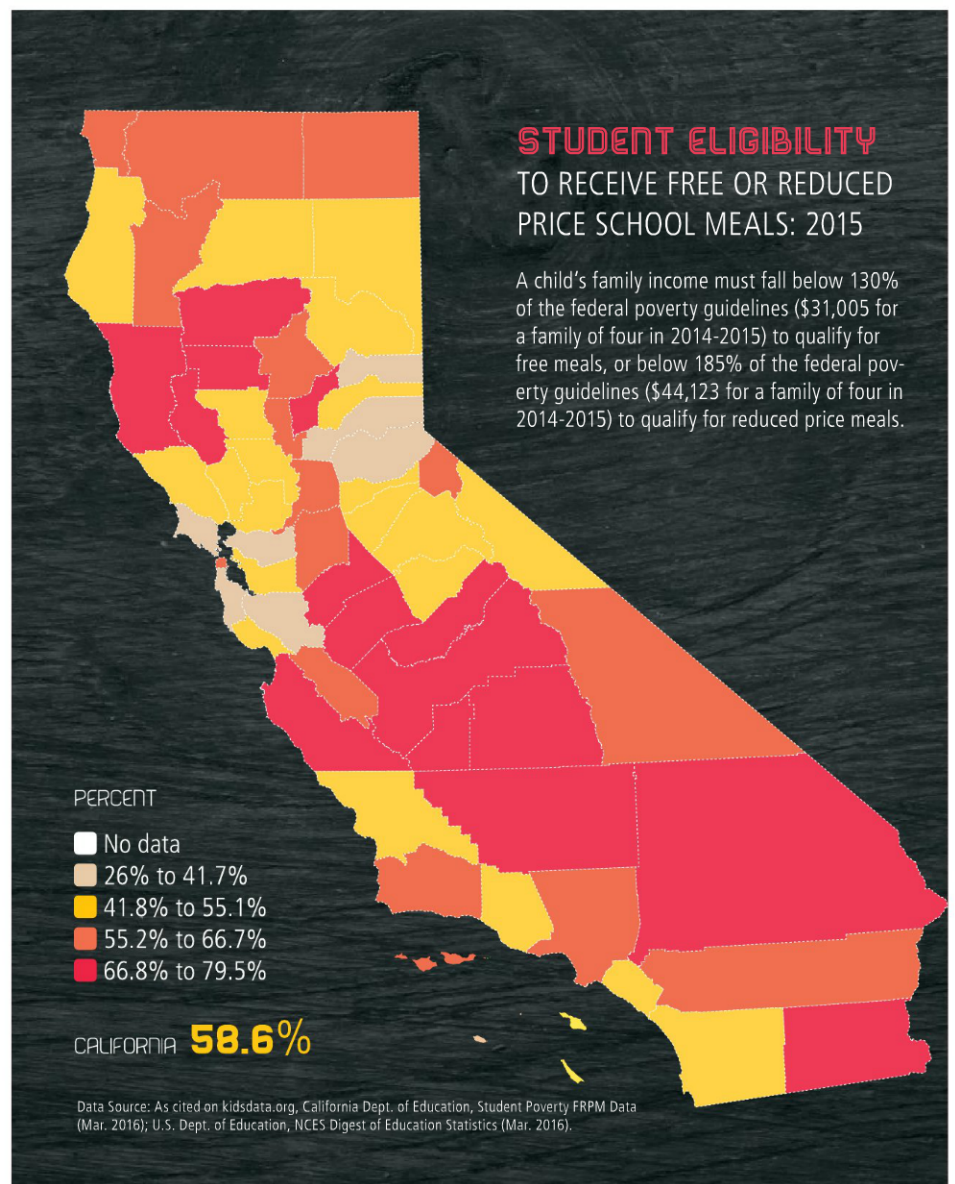
"Meals for disadvantaged kids are a key need, and along with safe drinking water and school supplies, they are elemental to basic school success," said Tracey Patterson, director of legislation for CFPA.

Economically, school districts benefit from federal reimbursement for meals and improved average daily attendance rates. Local economies, too, can receive a boost through the use of locally grown fruits and vegetables in farm-to-school programs and other initiatives. According to CFPA, California could receive roughly \$370 million in federal meal reimbursements if the number of participants in the breakfast program matched that of the lunch program.

The demand is already there, with schools frequently acting as a main provider of regular meals for many students — an issue exacerbated by California's high cost of living and in many areas, a lack of access to neighborhood grocery stores with healthy, affordable food, also known as "food deserts."

"For many low-income children, the meals they receive at school during the day account for a substantial portion of the nutrition they receive every day," said Vernon M. Billy, CEO & Executive Director of the California School Boards Association. Our work as educators needs to reflect this reality and the central relationship between nutrition, health and positive academic, social and emotional outcomes.

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Given this reality, recently developed policies and programs have been put in place to help local education agencies meet that demand.

## ON THE MENU

### Improving Nutrition Standards and Reducing the Stigma

“Schools are the largest restaurant in town, with highly discerning customers, and they must also comply with complex regulations,” said CFPA’s Tracey Patterson. Eligibility guidelines set by the USDA determine which students can receive a free or reduced-price school meal. That number is benchmarked to a percentage of family income. For a family of four, the cut-off for eligibility for free meals is \$31,590, and at the high-end, \$44,955 to receive reduced-price meals.

To take part in these programs, students and their families have traditionally filled out applications each school year in order to participate. But the paper-heavy process has created hurdles, such as increased administrative responsibilities for districts and a sense of stigma among students.

The Obama administration passed the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010 to improve nutrition standards for school meals (in the past school kitchens had been a dumping ground for surplus USDA food), and included the Community Eligibility Provision as a means to better align school meals with other support services. Known as CEP, the program provides free meals to *all* students in a district, or in some cases, select high-poverty schools within a district. To qualify, 40 percent of district students must be eligible for free meals and already participating in CalFresh (formerly known as food stamps), CalWORKS or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

As a bonus, the program reduces administrative costs by not requiring schools to collect applications or track meals for reimbursement. For students and families, the availability of free meals to all students regardless of income helps reduce stigma.

For districts not a part of CEP, there is still concern about the stigma involved in paper applications and debt accrued by students whose families are unable to pay for part of a meal. With this in mind, a new U.S. Department of Agriculture policy was launched in the summer of 2017. Under the new directive, school districts are required to have a written policy — to be sent to all households at the beginning



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of the academic year—for students who participate in the National School Lunch Program or National School Breakfast Program but have insufficient funds to pay for it.

In the past students have been singled out for unpaid meal debt, known as “lunch shaming,” denied meals, or been labeled by some schools with a stamp, wristband or sticker indicating money is owed. The written policy has to outline the actions a district or county will take to collect lunch money (such as working out a payment plan with a parent). If the debt is still unpaid at the end of the year, the money can be collected from the district or county’s nonfederal funds.

## WHAT’S COOKING

### Successful School Meal Policies in Action

Such efforts to reduce stigma and streamline the school meal process caught the attention of Fresno USD, where roughly 85 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The district signed on early for CEP, becoming one of the first large districts to do so.

“It has allowed us to feed everyone free, so much simpler and no stigma,” said Jose Alvarado, the district’s director of food services. Since joining CEP, Fresno USD has seen the highest rate of participation among large school districts for participation in both CalFresh and school meals.

Alvarado has also diversified the menu to ensure students eat nutritious meals. For example, 55 elementary schools receive fresh fruit and vegetables from nearby farms. After school, 75 campuses offer a popular, locally made whole grain pizza. During school, some campuses also include a grab-and-go option to provide students with a snack from a mobile cart on their way to class. There is also a free summer meals program at more than 40 locations across Fresno to provide meals featuring locally grown produce to K-12 students during summer months.

Since only some of these programs benefit from CEP funding, Alvarado uses grants and local partnerships (such as the whole grain pizza baked by an area restaurant) to help sustain the diverse options.

“We have a diverse population, so we like to mix up the menu,” Alvarado said. “We have a large number of Hmong students, and pho soup is quite popular with them, for example. If the kids like it, they are more likely to develop healthy eating habits and less likely to go to the store and buy junk food.”

School officials in Fort Bragg in Mendocino County have a different means to reach those

same goals. The district just missed qualifying for universal free school meals under CEP, but still has nearly 70 percent of its students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

To ensure they have adequate access to food, Fort Bragg USD provides free or reduced-price breakfast, lunch and snacks, and a free supper to all students (following after-school activities).

“We have done amazing things at Fort Bragg USD for being a small, rural, high-poverty district,” said school board member Jennifer Owen.

As an example, she points to an award-winning farm-to-school initiative to bring fresh fruit and vegetables to school cafeterias. There are also school gardens at each campus, and produce from the gardens is used in school kitchens.

“Another very cool nutrition-related program is our Harvest of the Month program, where a local independent grocery store called Harvest Market donates seasonal food to the schools,” added Owen.

Despite the successes, however, Owen believes more could be done, particularly in qualifying for CEP.

“We’re close, but not quite there,” Owen said. She shared that the district nutrition director believes that improved participation in CalFresh in Mendocino County could help the district reach more students.

Indeed, bridging the gap between those receiving CalFresh support and those eligible for free or reduced-price school meals is seen as an important way to improve food security for students.



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## GOOD INGREDIENTS

“Integration with CalFresh could be a promising goal for districts,” said Caroline Danielson, a senior fellow with the Public Policy Institute of California, stressing the importance of districts connecting with county and state agencies.

In her research, Danielson has found that CalFresh has lower enrollment than free school meals and other child nutrition programs.

“We estimate that if all CalFresh-eligible children were fully enrolled in both CalFresh and free school meals, these programs would reach 1.6 million more children and lower the child poverty rate in California,” she said.

As part of this push for districts to reach out to CalFresh, she notes that families concerned about federal immigration crackdowns should keep in mind that student data is not shared by the state with federal authorities.

California also has a new policy to help boost participation of eligible students.

Through the CalPads program, California schools are now able to match Medi-Cal records with school records to help ensure qualified students receive meals.

“School leaders can definitely be champions for school meals, especially by providing leadership to implement programs like the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows high needs schools to offer free breakfast and free lunch to all students,” added Jessie Hewins, senior child nutrition policy analyst for the Food Research & Action Center. “California still has many schools that are eligible to participate that haven’t yet signed up, so there is huge opportunity for growth.”

She points to the need for strong advocacy to protect access to the school nutrition pro-

grams as particularly important, given uncertainty about potential cuts to federal nutrition programs and Medicaid under the Trump administration. The administration also has proposed relaxing the stricter nutrition standards of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act.

“Maintaining the improvements to access to school meals and to the quality of meals provided are critical to ensuring children’s academic and health outcomes,” she said.

CSBA Senior Director of Policy and Programs Julie Maxwell-Jolly also recommends

that districts have a system in place for families to pre-pay for meals, to encourage eligible families to apply for free or reduced-price meals, to make applications available online and support families with the application process.

“Hungry kids struggle to learn,” she said. “All children, regardless of circumstances, deserve to thrive in body and mind, but this can’t happen without good nutrition.” **CS**

Hugh Biggar (hbiggar@csba.org) is a staff writer for *California Schools*.



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USDA mandates policy on delinquent meal payments | <http://bit.ly/2sttvMJ>  
Nutrition | <http://bit.ly/2s8pnCO>

### CALIFORNIA FOOD POLICY ADVOCATES

School Meals Analysis | <http://cfpa.net/school-meal-analysis-2014-15>

### FOOD RESEARCH & ACTION CENTER

Profile of hunger, poverty and federal nutrition programs in California  
<http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ca.pdf>

### KIDS DATA

Food Security | <http://bit.ly/2snHfOg>

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