



Nourish California

# Invest in School Meals for All

## 2021 State Legislative Agenda

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### Opportunity

Throughout the pandemic, children across our state have accessed meals free of charge from schools in their communities. Looking ahead, strategic investments can make this essential resource available during the aftermath of COVID-19 and beyond.

### Legislative Action

Enable more schools to offer breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students. Make targeted State investments in schools where there is a substantial need among students but federal rules make universally free meal programs unattainable or unsustainable.

### Why this Matters

**Food insecurity.** Before COVID-19, at least two million California kids lived in households that struggled with food insecurity. Pandemic-era data show more than 1 in 5 California families with children have insufficient access to food.

**Educational equity.** We must meet students' most basic needs, including nutrition, in order to bridge opportunity gaps that harm low-income students and students of color, particularly Black and Latinx children.

**Schools as a safe harbor.** Schools should be a safe harbor where all children are nourished and able to thrive. Unlike so many federally funded resources, school meal programs can serve children regardless of immigration status.

**The eligibility gap.** Federal rules for school meal programs don't reflect California realities. Families of four making more than \$34,060 per year (\$655 per week) don't qualify for free school meals but many need them all the same.

**Now is the time.** Increased Medi-Cal and CalFresh participation can increase federal reimbursement for universally free school meals. With COVID currently elevating enrollment in these programs, an investment in school meals for all will give more children the nutritious food they need to learn, grow, and achieve – while optimizing the drawdown of federal funds.

