



California Snapshot

School Enrollment & Access to School Meals

In school year 2022-23, California public schools will offer meals free of charge to all students. The State has committed \$650 million to this effort. Federal resources are also critical to sustaining this historic change.

In this fact sheet, we assess the number of California students currently eligible¹ for free school meals and anticipated effects of policies to expand the reach of school nutrition programs.

- **3.1 million (52%)** of California K-12 public school students are eligible for free school meals.
- An additional **500,000** students can access free meals because they attend schools that use a federal option, such as the Community Eligibility Provision, to offer meals free of charge to all students.
- Up to **2.3 million** students will gain access to free meals when California's new policies are implemented in school year 2022-23.

All children deserve to be well nourished and thrive.

6.0 million students attended California public schools during the 2020-21 academic year.

School meals are an essential resource that help students learn, grow, and achieve at their fullest potential.

By connecting children with the nutritious food they need, we can help close systemic opportunity gaps that inequitably harm students of color and students in chronically under-resourced communities.

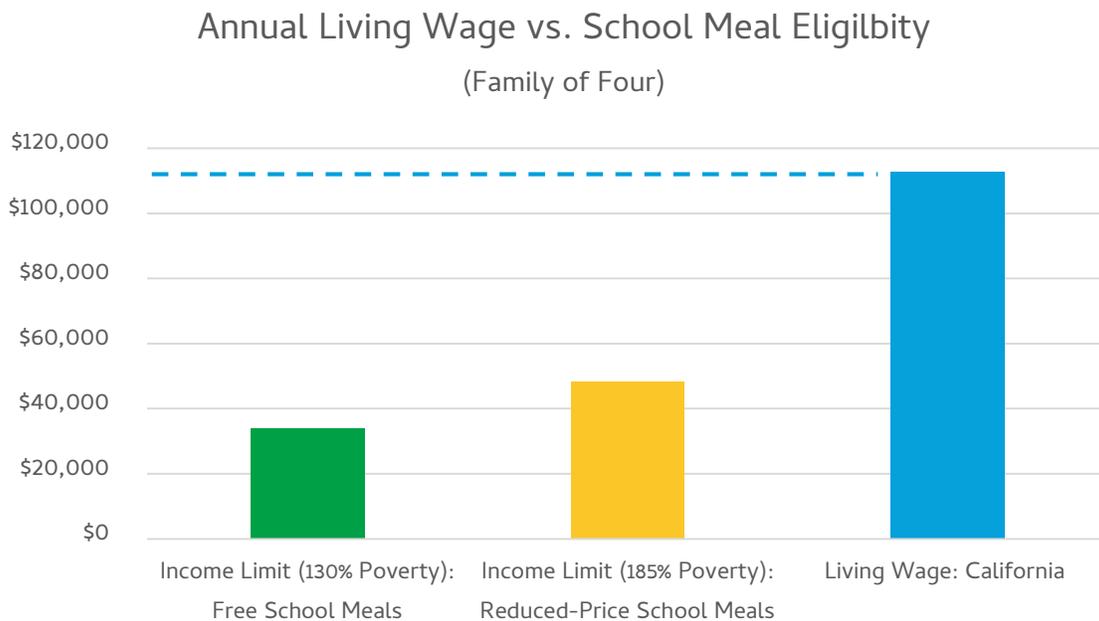
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Living Wage vs. School Meal Eligibility

Statewide, a family with two working adults and two children must earn more than \$112,000 per year to afford basic necessities such as food, housing, transportation, health care, and child care. That level of income would disqualify the family's children from receiving free – or even reduced-price – school meals given income criteria set by the federal government. In fact, the living wage for every California county (ranging from \$91,000 in Modoc and \$152,000 in San Francisco) outstrips federal eligibility criteria for school meals.



Cost Savings for Families

Considering the average price of school lunches (calculated from school districts across the country), a family spends more than \$500 per year to purchase school lunches for an elementary student, nearly \$550 for a middle school student, and \$560 for a high school student. Offering free school meals to all students allows a family with two children to save an estimated **\$13,800 in lunch expenses from grades K to 12**.

Optimizing Federal Resources

All children deserved to be well nourished and thrive. Federal resources for school meals can help achieve and sustain that vision. Federal eligibility criteria and federal reimbursements for school meals, including meals served through the Community Eligibility Provision, should be overhauled to account for true levels of need among all students.



County Data Table

County	Students Eligible for Free School Meals	Additional Students Who Can Access Free Meals at Schools Using Federal Provisions (e.g. CEP)	Students Who Will Gain Access When Meals are Offered Free to All
Statewide	3.1 million	500,000	2.3 million
Alameda	81,338	7,447	133,277
Alpine	41	16	16
Amador	1,522	747	1,637
Butte	15,234	5,664	8,159
Calaveras	2,299	282	2,442
Colusa	2,752	266	1,634
Contra Costa	59,151	3,995	109,352
Del Norte	2,555	1,439	253
El Dorado	7,942	150	21,994
Fresno	137,752	37,882	29,782
Glenn	3,704	1,180	1,188
Humboldt	9,550	1,452	6,634
Imperial	24,912	6,624	5,071
Inyo	2,451	69	1,538
Kern	127,788	27,693	39,801
Kings	19,235	2,229	8,219
Lake	6,467	1,642	1,427
Lassen	1,642	45	2,150
Los Angeles	867,549	54,589	464,471
Madera	22,862	3,792	4,840
Marin	8,563	176	23,042
Mariposa	994	64	739
Mendocino	8,318	1,104	3,450
Merced	39,564	11,361	7,739
Modoc	853	0	513
Mono	687	77	958
Monterey	50,520	13,023	12,113
Napa	8,454	1,297	9,767
Nevada	4,755	72	6,235
Orange	199,172	17,984	238,867
Placer	17,633	36	56,138



County	Students Eligible for Free School Meals	Additional Students Who Can Access Free Meals at Schools Using Federal Provisions (e.g. CEP)	Students Who Will Gain Access When Meals are Offered Free to All
Plumas	963	0	1,092
Riverside	240,743	25,449	154,400
Sacramento	123,998	30,119	91,262
San Benito	5,990	1,626	3,808
San Bernardino	251,032	67,041	80,763
San Diego	203,897	62,400	223,019
San Francisco	26,857	11,710	20,809
San Joaquin	84,047	12,648	54,306
San Luis Obispo	12,844	1,215	18,976
San Mateo	25,384	778	63,947
Santa Barbara	37,621	5,900	23,943
Santa Clara	71,893	6,340	174,930
Santa Cruz	18,834	3,529	17,321
Shasta	12,961	1,498	11,800
Sierra	168	0	227
Siskiyou	3,342	1,111	1,451
Solano	25,344	161	35,394
Sonoma	25,365	686	40,021
Stanislaus	63,265	13,945	30,797
Sutter	13,144	4,439	6,100
Tehama	6,808	1,658	2,347
Trinity	899	472	214
Tulare	70,985	24,271	8,336
Tuolumne	2,334	98	3,252
Ventura	58,136	16,671	56,575
Yolo	12,712	1,184	15,902
Yuba	8,331	2,995	3,379

Technical Notes

Data sources, references, and methodological notes are available in the Technical Appendix for this fact sheet:

<https://bit.ly/3kZG5AR>.

ⁱ This fact sheet does not account for time-limited federal waivers that allow (but do not require) schools to offer meals free of charge to all students during the 2021-22 school year in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.