

LISTENING INTO ACTION

ACCESS TO FOOD FOR SCHOOL-AGED STUDENTS & THEIR FAMILIES: EVERY KID, EVERY DAY

REPORT OVERVIEW

Every year, Nourish California engages in a process of listening and co-developing with diverse communities to shape policies that ensure Californians have the food they need to thrive. Now more than ever, we believe it is critical that we listen to those most affected by recent federal bills and actions to ensure that our policy priorities are informed, responsive, and co-created with communities we serve.

*To learn more about the experiences of communities across California, we hosted **four in-person regional convenings**, in partnership with local organizations, and **one virtual statewide community convening** with community members and community partners. This **supplemental report** focuses on our **in-person regional convening in the Bay Area with immigrant parents and their school-aged children**, held in partnership with Innovate Public Schools.*

KEY FINDINGS AROUND SCHOOL MEALS

Key Finding: Of the eight students who participated, **seven reported regularly skipping breakfast and lunch at school** because they:



did not have enough
time to eat



felt meals were unhealthy
and lacked variety



preferred to eat at home



disliked the taste and
quality of school meals

Key Finding: Almost all the students felt school meal lines were too long and reported **feeling stressed, rushed, hungry, weak, and unable to fully focus and learn in class throughout the day** because they did not have enough time to eat.

Key Finding: Students felt they needed between **15-30 minutes each day for breakfast**, and between **30-40 minutes each day for lunch** to comfortably receive their meals and have enough time to eat.



"La mayoría del tiempo se va en la fila para agarrar comida.
Entonces me queda poco tiempo para comer."

We spend most of our time in line, and then there is not enough time to eat.

- Student, Access to Food for School-Aged Students and Their Families

Key Finding: Students described how **hunger and limited time to eat affected their ability to:**



Families emphasized that access to nourishing meals is not only a nutrition issue but also an educational issue that directly impacts students' health, well-being, and academic success.



"No come en la escuela, llega
de malas y con hambre."

*When my son doesn't eat at school,
he arrives home in a bad mood and
very hungry.*

*- Parent, Access to Food
for School-Aged Students
and Their Families*

Key Finding: Parents described experiencing stress knowing that their children were spending the school day hungry and unable to fully enjoy school and participate in learning. They felt worried when they saw their kids unwell after school.

Key Finding: Parents shared that the conversation helped them better understand why some students return home hungry, tired, low on energy, experiencing stomachaches, or struggling emotionally after not having enough food during the school day.

BOTTOM LINE: These conversations reinforced that improving meal participation requires not only access to free meals, but also ensuring students have enough time to eat meals that are appealing and nourishing.

KEY FINDINGS AROUND SUN BUCKS

Key Finding: Access to SUN Bucks for some families remains unsteady. **Over half of the families** reported not receiving information about the SUN Bucks program or their children's benefits.

Key Finding: Of those families who received SUN Bucks, most had received information regarding SUN Bucks at school. Families who received this information from their schools felt more confident and less fearful about using their benefits.



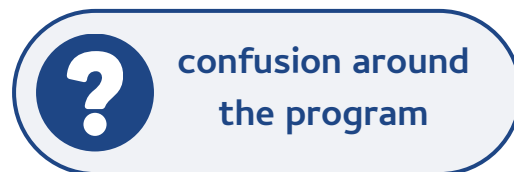
Key Finding: Of those who received SUN Bucks, 3 families received the cards automatically, while 1 family had to fill out an application.



Key Finding: Families consistently reported that **rising food prices and the increasing cost of living** have made it more difficult to afford food and meet their children's basic needs.

Families who received SUN Bucks benefits found it very helpful for buying food during the summer.

Key Finding: Barriers to getting or using SUN Bucks included:



Some families still had doubts about the program and chose not to participate.

Key Finding: Families emphasized that they feel more comfortable seeking benefits and support when **they know their information will remain confidential** and **when information comes from trusted messengers**, including schools, teachers, promotoras, parent leaders, outreach coordinators, and community-based organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure students have adequate Time to Eat during the school day.

- State and local school administrators should explore policies and strategies to ensure students have sufficient time to eat the meals they need to grow, learn, and be healthy.
- Schools should review their meal services, scheduling, and operations to identify practices that limit access. Schools that do not provide enough time to eat should look for solutions to **increase the time for breakfast and lunch to 20 and 30 minutes (or more)**, respectively.
- Schools should review and monitor operations to ensure wait lines are short, there is enough food for every child, and students have enough time to receive and eat their meals.
- Schools should regularly collect feedback from students and families to ensure that changes are improving access to meals and allowing students enough time to eat.

Improve the quality and student experience of school meals.

Students and families emphasized that food quality can influence participation. Low-quality, cold, moldy, repetitive meals lacking flavor discourage students from participating in school meals and leave children low on energy, which impacts their health and learning.

Students would like:

- More variety in fresh foods, as well as more scratch-cooked, culturally relevant meals.
- Access to a space that is clean, inviting, and free of stress and hurry to eat their meals.
- To be a part of the decision-making around what they eat, including tasting, planning, and deciding menus. They share that the issue is not always with food quality – it also includes school meal choices, which often feel disconnected from students' preferences.

Improve access to SUN Bucks through better outreach, an easier application process, and streamlined customer service.

Confusion, fear, and difficult processes stop families from applying for and using SUN Bucks. They would like state agencies to:

- Send clear information with trusted messengers in a timely manner, including, when families fill out an application, a response on whether they will receive the benefits.
- Simplify messages and include translations.
- Ensure applications are easily accessible and families can fill them out in their own language.
- Minimize the burden on families and address immigration fears. Make sure communication clearly describes eligibility, privacy protections, and participants' safety.
- Ensure the SUN Bucks helpline works as intended so families can talk to someone and receive help when needed.