

meal reimbursements by \$54 million in the 2021–22 fiscal year and \$650 million ongoing Proposition 98 funding beginning in 2022–23, to cover the costs of offering breakfast and lunch for all students.”

“California once again leads the way by becoming the first state in the country to fund universal school meals for all K-12 students,” said Assemblywoman Luz Rivas (D-San Fernando Valley). “In my district, it’s not unusual to see school districts with upwards of 85% of its students on free or reduced-price lunch. That’s why I have fought for several years to help make this funding a reality, because no child should ever go hungry. I want to thank the School Meals For All coalition, along with Budget Chairs Phil Ting and Nancy Skinner, for their relentless efforts to preserve the full funding for this budget allocation — our efforts to feed all of California’s students has finally come to fruition.”

Fully implementing universal free meals is especially important for families who fall through the cracks in the current system: eligible families concerned that submitting required paperwork could affect their immigration status, families of four that make more than \$48,470 per year and still go hungry, and eligible students who don’t participate because of the stigma that can be associated with free school meals.

“If you’re a kid in the classroom and you’re hungry, you can’t learn,” said Assemblymember Kevin McCarty, Chair of the Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance whose leadership in crafting the Assembly Budget has enabled transformational investments in our education system. “It’s a key to their success, so making sure they have a well-balanced meal is critically important.”

“California has made history,” said Kat Taylor, co-founder of the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation and co-sponsor of School Meals for All. “As the first state in the nation to adopt universal school meals, California is giving kids a better shot at growing up healthy and ready to succeed, thanks to the leadership shown by Governor Gavin Newsom, the State Legislature, especially Senator Nancy Skinner and Assemblymembers Kevin McCarty and Luz Rivas. Now it’s time to roll up our sleeves and make sure our school administrators, food service workers, and farmers have what they need to provide free, healthy, locally-grown school meals to all students.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture waivers that have enabled schools to provide free meals to all students during the pandemic are set to expire at the end of the 2021–22 school year, at which point California’s public schools will be reimbursed for providing universal school meals. Nearly 60% of all students in the state — more than 3.6 million California students — qualified for free or reduced-price meals in the 2019–20 school year. Now, every California public school student will be eligible for free school meals.

“This landmark investment to provide universal free school meals demonstrates California’s leadership in elevating the role school meals play in the health and educational outcomes of children,” said Adam Kesselman, Executive Director of the Center for Ecoliteracy. “School Meals

for All ensures all students will be nourished and ready to learn. Paired with California's investment in Farm to School innovation, a future with fresh, locally-grown school meals is in sight. We are committed to supporting schools to transform this bold vision into a reality for all students.”

The need for free meals is apparent in the number of families that pick up food at schools and food banks. From March to December 2020, California public schools served more than 450 million free school meals, providing families with an essential resource during the pandemic-related school closures. In April 2020 alone, California food banks distributed food to more than 1.5 million households — about 4.5 million people — feeding 62% of the total number of individuals served in all of 2019. Right now, nearly 20% of all California households — and 27.3% of Latinx households with children and 35.5% of Black households with children — report food insecurity. This is double pre-pandemic rates, impacting about 8 million Californians.

"This is a transformational moment in California's march toward a hunger-free future for our children. We are grateful for the exceptional leadership by Governor Newsom and Senator Skinner, and are proud to stand alongside them and a broad multi-sector coalition as California leads the nation. Hungry children cannot learn, and must be provided the nutrition they need to fuel their learning, grow into healthy adults, and fulfill their potential,” said Andrew Cheyne, Director of Government Affairs for the California Association of Food Banks. "Now, we call on our federal legislators, President Biden, and Vice President Harris to enact healthy school meals for all children across the county — to truly invest in the future of our kids and our nation."

School meals are the healthiest source of meals for American children, according to a [study from Tufts University](#), and a body of evidence shows students who participate in school breakfast programs have improved attendance, behavior, and academic achievement as well as decreased tardiness.

“California continued its legacy of creating progressive change with this historic budget investment in healthy school meals,” said Tiffany Germain, Research and Policy Advisor at NextGen California. “NextGen California is thrilled that our state is one giant step closer to ensuring that no student goes hungry — especially with the dramatic increase in food insecurity due to the ongoing global pandemic. Providing healthy, freshly prepared, free school meals for every student will ensure equity and help end ‘lunch shaming’ practices that can lead to bullying and students skipping lunch altogether.”

The budget deal was [directly influenced by SB 364 \(Skinner\): The Free School Meals for All Act of 2021](#), which is now a two-year bill and will support school nutrition departments with the resources they need to implement provisions in the state’s budget. Co-sponsors of SB 364 are Kat Taylor, TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation, Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, California Association of Food Banks, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond.

What People Are Saying

“The American Heart Association commends the Governor and legislature for leading the nation with their commitment to provide funding for universal school meals. We have seen the negative impact that poor nutrition during childhood and adolescence can have on the body. Nutritious school meals establish a foundation for a lifetime of healthy behaviors, reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and support cognitive development and academic success. Funding universal school meals sends a clear message that California puts the health and wellbeing of its children first.”
— Jamie Morgan, Government Relations Regional Lead, American Heart Association

“Investment in school nutrition is an investment in the future of agriculture. California produces the healthiest, freshest and highest quality products in the world. Our school-aged children should be the beneficiaries of that California-grown bounty.”
— Taylor Roschen, Policy Advocate, California Farm Bureau Federation

"California moving forward School Meals For All is a massive win for nutrition security and health equity. This critical step will set the stage for a national shift towards expanding real food access."
— Nora LaTorre, CEO, Eat REAL

“The decision to provide free school meals for all K-12 students in California is a clear indicator of the state's dedication to ending child hunger. Common Sense is proud to be aligned with this effort to support the wellbeing and development of young people.”
— Marvin J. Deon II, Vice President - CA Policy, Common Sense

“We are thrilled to see California lead the way in recognizing the essential role of school meals as we emerge from the pandemic. Free, healthy school meals for all kids support families, farmers, and school nutrition professionals who work every day to make sure kids get the food they need to thrive.”
— Curt Ellis, Co-Founder and CEO, FoodCorps

“I have students who show up Monday morning for school breakfast and tell me that they didn't eat over the weekend because it wasn't their turn. It's heartbreaking. I applaud California's decision to fund School Meals for All, which will reduce child hunger, eliminate stigma, and ensure that every student is prepared to learn.”
— Stephanie Bruce, Nutrition Services Director, Palm Springs Unified School District

“School Meals for All is about more than free breakfast and lunch. California is telling students we see you, we prioritize you, and you deserve all the tools you need to thrive at school.”
— Mark Chavez, Director of Nutrition Services, Long Beach Unified School District

“I have seen how stigma can keep students from eating school meals, even when the alternative is going hungry. School Meals for All will not only eliminate school meal debt, it will provide much-needed relief to struggling families experiencing daily stress and stigma around

feeding their kids. California's leadership to feed every hungry child should be a model for the rest of our nation."

— Trieste Huey, Food Service Director, Fontana Unified School District

"Oakland Unified's success serving free school meals provides proof of the benefits that will now be available to all California students: reliable nutrition, free of stigma, and the ability to focus on their education. This is a win for our schools, families, and students."

— Kyla Johnson-Trammell, Superintendent, Oakland Unified School District

"During a typical school year, families earning minimum wage in San Francisco don't qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. The federal guidelines don't account for California's high cost of living. As a school nutrition director of 20 years, I am thrilled to see California lead the way on universal meals, and look forward to the positive impact free school meals for all will have on our students."

— Jennifer LeBarre, Executive Director, Student Nutrition Services, San Francisco Unified School District

"School Meals For All represents a major victory for California families. Now, every child will have access to food at school—an essential learning tool. This funding will alleviate burdens on families, especially the single parents and spouses of enlisted service members San Diego Unified serves."

— Gary Petill, Nutrition Services Director, San Diego Unified School District