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FROM PIZZA TO POZOLE: NEWSOM LEGACY CELEBRATES FIVE YEARS OF TRANSFORMING SCHOOL MEALS

California's school nutrition investments are bringing fresher food to students while supporting farmers and local economies

RANCHO CORDOVA, Calif. — California leaders, farmers, chefs and school nutrition professionals gathered today at the **2026 California Farm to School Summit** to celebrate five years since California began a major expansion of school nutrition programs – including universal school meals and investments that bring more fresh, locally grown food into school cafeterias.

Hosted at Soil Born Farms, the Summit also brought together school nutrition professionals from across the state who received **California Food for California Kids® Leadership and Innovation Awards** for their work transforming what students eat at school.

In 2021, California became the first state to guarantee free breakfast and lunch to every public school student, regardless of family income. Since then, California schools have served approximately **3.5 billion free meals**. Universal meals have also erased the income divide in the lunch line: every student eats under the same system, whether or not their family could otherwise afford the meal.

“California’s kids deserve access to school meals that are locally-sourced, nutritious and delicious – food that helps them thrive,” said **First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom**. “Through our Farm to School Program, we’re making that vision a reality by connecting children with fresh food from California farmers and producers, including food grown using regenerative organic practices, while strengthening local economies and supporting the people who feed our communities. I’m incredibly grateful for the strong partnerships behind this program that help give every child the opportunity to reach their full potential.”

A cornerstone of this work is the California Department of Food and Agriculture's (CDFA) **Farm to School Incubator Grant Program**. Launched in 2021, the program has invested **\$86 million in 375 projects serving 4.2 million California public school students**. This year, California committed to making the program permanent, establishing an ongoing **annual investment of around \$25 million**. The Farm to School Program connects schools with California farmers to bring more fresh, locally grown food into school meals while supporting underserved communities, climate-smart agriculture and local farm economies.

"When school districts buy food from local regenerative farms, they contribute to the economic empowerment of our communities, revitalizing and supporting farms that are taking care of the land for future generations," said **Alice Waters, chef, author, and founder of the Alice Waters Institute**. "But just as important, they perpetuate the essential values of stewardship, nourishment, and interconnectedness directly through the cafeteria doors to our students."

The Farm to School grants reach beyond school campuses. California estimates that **every \$1 invested through this program generates more than \$2 in economic activity**. The program prioritizes smaller producers and underserved communities: **80% of Incubator grantees are Title I schools, and every farmer grantee is a small, mid-sized, and socially and economically disadvantaged producer**.

"It is hard to overstate the impact the Farm to School Program is having across California," said **CDFA Secretary Karen Ross**. "The investments from this program are a true local development tool. Schools are better equipped to provide healthy, nourishing meals to California's students. Students are also gaining a deeper understanding of where their food comes from, and farms are seeing benefits from these ongoing partnerships. This sustainable model is creating lasting, positive change for communities throughout our state."

Governor Newsom signed legislation in 2025 to make California the first state in the nation to phase out ultra-processed foods of concern from school meals. The law targets foods linked to rising rates of diet-related chronic disease in children and encourages schools to replace them with whole and minimally processed alternatives. California's Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) program also invests in schools, with grants to purchase new equipment and support workforce development to help deliver more freshly prepared meals to students.

"Together, School Meals for All, Farm to School, investments in school kitchens and the school nutrition workforce are changing both who gets to eat and what gets served", said **Siebel Newsom, First Partner of California**. "We're making better meals for every student while using California's purchasing power to support farmers, local economies and a stronger food system."

At today's Summit, the **Center for Ecoliteracy** honored the school nutrition professionals doing that day-to-day work with the **California Food for California Kids® Leadership and Innovation Awards**. [Check out all of the award recipients here.](#)

“These leaders are proving that fresh and local school food is possible at scale,” said **Alexa Norstad, Executive Director of the Center for Ecoliteracy**. “Whether it's remodeling a kitchen that once served prepackaged food, training staff to cook with fresh ingredients, or developing recipes that can feed hundreds of thousands of delicious meals kids want to eat – they’re working miracles every day for the children they serve.”

The Summit was held at **Soil Born Farms**, a 55-acre urban farm and education center in Rancho Cordova that helps schools and communities teach young people about the importance of growing, cooking, and eating fresh food.

“When children get a chance to engage in hands-on experiences in the school garden, at the farm, in the kitchen and at school lunch, everything changes,” said **Shawn Harrison, Founder and Co-Director of Soil Born Farms**. “Learning how food is grown, practicing simple, delicious cooking and accessing a plate of healthy locally grown food each day at school lunch are the combined ingredients for long-term wellness. Thanks to the Farm to School program model, our children are more connected to what they eat on a daily basis, the farmers that feed us, the earth and the larger community around them.”

FIVE YEARS OF SCHOOL FOOD TRANSFORMATION

Since California enacted universal school meals:

- **Approximately 3.5 billion free school meals** served.
- **Every California public school student** has access to free breakfast and lunch, regardless of family income.
- **\$86 million** invested through the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program.
- **375 Farm to School projects** funded, benefiting 4.2 million **California public school students**.
- **80% of Farm to School Incubator grantees are Title I schools**.
- **100% of farmer grantees** are small, mid-sized or socially and economically disadvantaged producers.
- Every **\$1 invested through Farm to School farmer grants generates an estimated \$2 in economic activity**.
- The state established **ongoing funding** to continue bringing California-grown food into schools.

The 2026 California Farm to School Summit is presented by **First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, Center for Ecoliteracy, Alice Waters Institute, National Farm to School Network** and **Soil Born Farms**.

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