

Student Supports: Getting the Most out of Your LCFF Investment

WHY SCHOOL NUTRITION MATTERS

Research tells us that children need healthy meals in order to reach their full academic potential. With tight household budgets and other pressing constraints, many families are faced with difficult trade-offs in order to meet their children's daily nutritional needs. At least 1.7 million households with children across California cannot consistently afford enough food.¹ Increasing access to healthy meals at school is critical to ensuring students can learn, grow, and achieve.

Schools are in a unique position to contribute to child nutrition through programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). Indeed, while the federal government guarantees these resources to all eligible applicants attending schools that participate in these programs, the only way that children can access these benefits is through school. If school districts maximized access to these programs and reached all eligible low-income students, food security for California children could be greatly improved. Making sure that all students receive the meals for which they are eligible underpins the overarching LCFF goal to support low-income and otherwise vulnerable youth.

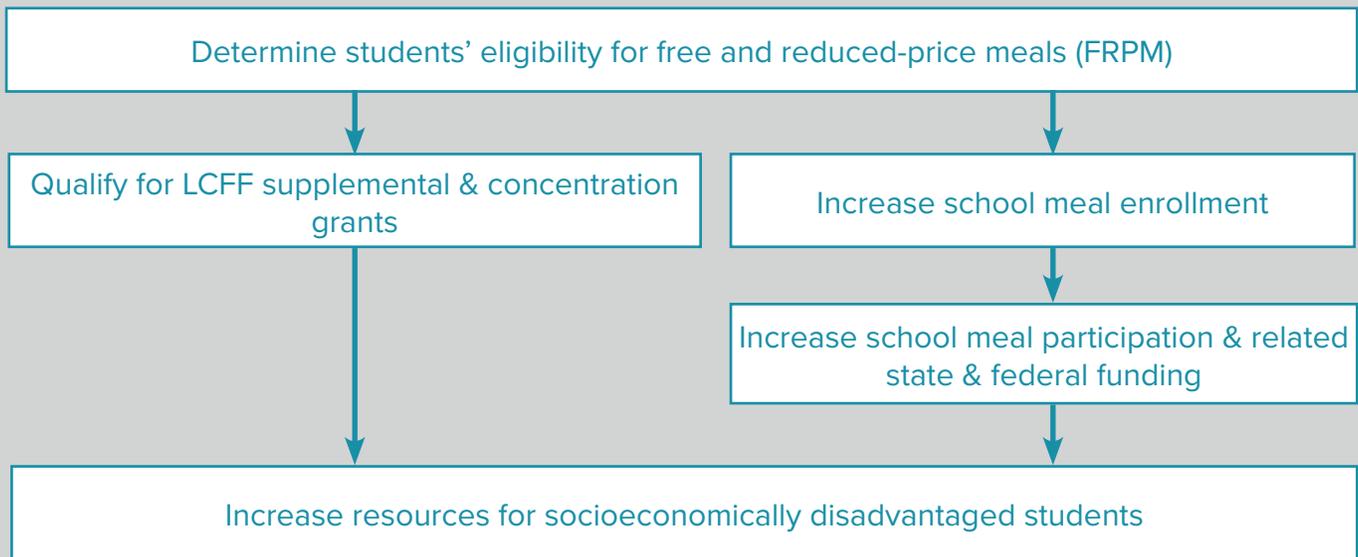
In addition to addressing hunger, school meals play a fundamental role in providing the basics of a nurturing school environment. Students' experiences with school meals can make or break attempts to build a positive school climate in which students feel cared for and considered.

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LCFF and School Meals Go Hand in Hand



Through concentration and supplemental grants, LCFF targets funding to support vulnerable (socioeconomically disadvantaged) students, including students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. By maximizing FRPM enrollment, schools can increase students' access to much-needed healthy meals, while also optimizing funding through LCFF.

School Nutrition: Key Facts

- ◆ **3 in 5 (or 3.4 million)** California public school students are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals.²
- ◆ On an average school day, **1.1 million** of these students do not get school lunch, and **2.2 million** do not get school breakfast.³
- ◆ Offering meals free of charge to all students can reduce stigma and increase participation.⁴

Hunger in Schools

- ◆ In comparison to their well-nourished peers, hungry children are more likely to experience the following:
 - Behavioral and emotional issues, especially anxiety and aggression⁵
 - Poor attendance, punctuality, and grades⁶

Health and Academic Benefits of School Meals

- ◆ School lunch participation can have a sizable impact on overall academic achievement.⁷
- ◆ School breakfast programs can improve students' behavior and academic performance.⁸
- ◆ The availability of free and reduced-price school meals can improve attendance.⁹



EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR SCHOOL NUTRITION

Children and youth spend a great deal of their time, and eat many of their meals, at school. Consequently, schools have a unique opportunity to provide millions of students across California with access to vital nutrition resources. School districts can seize this important opportunity by embracing these best practices:

- ✓ **Recognize that nutrition programs are central to students' success.**

A district's nutrition services department can play an important role in student success. When this department is included in the planning and provision of comprehensive student support services, meal programs become an integral part of the school day.
- ✓ **Use school meals to build a positive and nurturing school climate.**

The ways that school meals are served can make a big difference in whether students feel considered, cared for, and connected to their school. For example, when Breakfast in the Classroom is introduced, elementary classrooms see improvements in attendance and students arriving to school on time. Eating together provides the opportunity for students to start their learning day with a community-building activity or a centering quiet time.
- ✓ **Redouble efforts to enroll every eligible student.**

Making all possible efforts to identify and enroll every student who is eligible for FRPM is an important part of ensuring access. Federal law requires that students in households receiving CalFreshⁱ be automatically enrolled in free school meals through a data matching process known as **direct certification**. Students whose families participate in other social support programs can also be signed up automatically through this matching process. Optimizing the extent and frequency of direct certification can increase school meal enrollment while decreasing the administrative burden of collecting and processing school meal applications.

When school meal applications are used, they should be available in all relevant languages, streamlined to request only required information, accessible online and in hard copy, and promoted widely and frequently.
- ✓ **Make sure timing and location of meals are practical and put student well-being first.**

Recent science-based improvements to federal nutrition standards mean that school meals are healthier than they've ever been. But this only matters if students have time to consume those meals. Offer meals when and where students are able to eat. For example, in elementary schools, scheduling recess before lunch can help students eat without rushing. In high schools, serving lunch from multiple locations can get food to students faster, helping to ensure that students have adequate time to eat.
- ✓ **Improve access to the breakfast being served.**

Ninety-five percent of low-income students in California attend a school that offers breakfast, but only 35 percent of these eligible students actually receive breakfast at school.¹⁰ Integrating breakfast into the school day (serving breakfast sometime after the first bell rings) has been shown to dramatically increase student participation. Examples of successful "after the bell" breakfast models include serving breakfast in the classroom, serving breakfast from mobile carts around campus, and serving breakfast during a mid-morning break.

ⁱ SNAP (known as "CalFresh" in California, and formerly known as food stamps) provides benefits to supplement household food budgets when families cannot afford enough to eat.



 **Implement “universal meals” to decrease stigma.**

Offering meals free of charge to all students has been shown to decrease the harmful stigma that is often connected to eating school meals. Students may avoid participating if they associate school meal programs with poverty. Free meals for all can help normalize school meals and increase participation. This approach (often termed “universal meals”) is fiscally viable in schools with high percentages of low-income students.ⁱⁱ

ii See funding section for more information on how to make universal meals a reality at your schools.

SCHOOL NUTRITION SUPPORTS PROGRESS ON THE LCFF PRIORITIES

Meeting children’s nutritional needs is a smart investment. Children and youth are better prepared to succeed when their basic needs are met. Efforts to improve student achievement are more impactful if those students are first free from hunger. Providing students with ready access to nutritious meals supports several of the eight priorities that must be addressed in LCAPs.



Student Achievement

Investments in education are less effective if students are hungry. Well-nourished children are better able to focus and achieve.¹¹ Both school breakfast and school lunch programs have been shown to boost academic performance.^{12,13}



Student Engagement

Measures of student engagement include attendance rates. Studies have shown that both school lunch¹⁴ and school breakfast¹⁵ promote improved attendance.



School Climate

Students who attend class hungry are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems,¹⁶ which not only detracts from their own school experience, but the experiences of their classmates. Effective school nutrition programs can improve classroom environments for all students, allowing children and teachers to focus on lessons with fewer disruptions.

Additionally, meal programs that are thoughtfully designed as an integral part of the school day can improve efforts to build a positive school climate.



FUNDING SCHOOL NUTRITION

Given the availability of federal funds to support school nutrition, these programs can be – and often are – self-sustaining from a fiscal perspective. That said, in some cases, a strategic investment of LCFF funds to expand or improve school nutrition programs makes sense. For example, using LCFF funds for the one-time purchase of equipment to increase a districts’ fresh-produce storage or to move breakfast into the classroom can benefit students and the long-term bottom line by increasing program participation.

Districts participating in NSLP and SBP receive state and federal funds to support these programs. Those funds (in the form of per-meal reimbursements) can be used for food, labor, equipment, and other costs associated with operating the program. Maximizing enrollment and participation in school meals not only ensures that more students are well nourished and ready to learn, but also maximizes public funding and can enhance the impact of LCFF investments.

School Meal Reimbursements

School meal reimbursement rates reflect levels of student and school need. For NSLP and SBP, California schools receive a relatively small state-funded reimbursement for meals served to lower-income students. The federal reimbursement for these meals is several times larger than the state reimbursement, though both are vital to the school meal programs.ⁱⁱⁱ Generally speaking, schools receive the highest reimbursement for meals served to the lowest-income students. Schools with high-need student populations receive additional reimbursements for meals served.^{iv}

Improving Reach via Universal Meals

Optimizing enrollment in the school meal programs can help maximize state and federal funding, leveraging critical resources for students and schools.

With increased enrollment, offering **universal meals** (meals free of charge to all students) becomes viable. This practice can help reduce stigma, ease administrative burdens, and get nutritious meals to as many students as possible. If your school serves a high concentration of low-income students, two primary mechanisms exist to make universally free meals a reality.

P2: Provision 2

Provision 2 (P2) operates on a four-year cycle. In the first year, a school determines how many of its students are eligible for free, reduced-price, and full-price meals and tracks participation by each category. It uses these percentages to determine the level of reimbursement received during the remainder of the cycle for the whole student body.

ⁱⁱⁱ Students are income-eligible for reduced-price meals if their household income is below 185 percent of the federal poverty threshold and free meals if their income is below 130 percent. Students may also receive free meals if they are “categorically eligible,” which includes students in CalFresh, CalWORKs, and FDPIR households; foster, migrant, and homeless youth; and students enrolled in the Head Start Program.

^{iv} In the 2014-15 school year, this support came in the form of an additional 31 cents per breakfast served and an additional 2 cents per lunch. The determination to qualify for these reimbursements is based on data from the previous two years and must be reestablished annually. A school is eligible if more than 40 percent of the meals it served in the previous period were free or reduced-price.



For example, if 80 percent of students participating are eligible for free meals in the first year, the school receives the free (i.e., highest) rate of reimbursement for 80 percent of the meals that are served during each of the four years of that cycle. During the subsequent years of the cycle, schools do not need to make eligibility determinations. Schools utilizing P2 must offer meals free of charge to all students and can choose to use P2 to serve breakfast, lunch, or both.

CEP: Community Eligibility Provision

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is designed to eliminate the need for school meal applications and also operates on a four-year cycle. Schools can utilize CEP if at least 40 percent of the student body is determined to be eligible to receive free meals based on participation rates in other safety net programs.^v This includes, but is not limited to, students who are identified through direct certification. Schools utilizing CEP must offer both breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students and are reimbursed based on the following guidelines:

- % of identified students x 1.6^{vi} = % of meals reimbursed at the “free” (highest) rate
- All other meals are reimbursed at the “paid” (lowest) rate of reimbursement

For example, if 60 percent of students meet CEP’s criteria for free meals, 96 percent of meals will be reimbursed at the “free” (highest) rate of per-meal federal reimbursement (60% x 1.6 = 96%). The remaining 4% will be reimbursed at the “paid” (lowest) rate.

Complying with LCFF Guidelines While Using P2 and CEP

Typically, schools must determine each student’s household income every year for LCFF. However, to preserve program efficiencies, Provision 2 (P2) and Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools can establish a four-year baseline of low-income students for the purposes of LCFF (with annual adjustments for incoming and outgoing students). However, one key benefit of CEP is not entirely compatible with LCFF — while CEP is designed to eliminate the need for school meal applications, household income forms do need to be collected every four years from students who are not directly certified in order to maximize LCFF funding.

Additional Funding Sources

Additional funds are available for schools seeking to improve their school nutrition programs. For example, the California Department of Education offers Start-up and Expansion Grants for schools looking to begin or strengthen a breakfast or Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Numerous private grant opportunities also exist.

^v “Eligible” students include children who are directly certified (through data matching) for free meals because they live in households that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (in California referred to as CalWORKs), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), as well as children who are certified for free school meals without submitting a school meal application because of their status as being in foster care, enrolled in Head Start, homeless, runaway, or migrant students.

^{vi} This is the current multiplier and is subject to change.



SCHOOL NUTRITION: GETTING STARTED

Prioritizing school nutrition for students is an important first step in addressing the needs of the whole child. While most districts are already seeing the benefits of providing school meals, it is important to consider how these programs can be improved to increase access, participation, and quality for all students. Below are some key questions and a brief roadmap to help you get started.

Critical Questions:

- ? Is the district maximizing enrollment of students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals, or are there students missing out?
 - ? How often is the district conducting direct certification matches? Are all categorically eligible students being captured in data searches?
 - ? What are the barriers that keep families from filling out school meal applications?
- ? Do we have schools and students in the district that would benefit from offering universally free meals through P2 or CEP?
- ? What barriers exist in our schools that keep students from accessing meals?
 - ? Are buses arriving with ample time for students to eat breakfast and still arrive to class on time?
 - ? Are students provided with enough time to navigate long lunch lines?
 - ? Keep in mind that many other barriers may be in place. Thorough and frequent monitoring is necessary to ensure that students can easily access meals.
- ? Could innovative approaches, such as Breakfast in the Classroom or mobile meal carts, help increase participation?
- ? Could other meal programs outside of school breakfast and school lunch be beneficial at our school sites, such as summer meals or the Afterschool Meal Program?

Roadmap of Tasks Ahead:

- ➔ Survey students and families to identify the barriers that keep them from participating in school meal programs.
- ➔ Talk to teachers and administrators at school sites to identify any additional barriers that students encounter in having time for or accessing school meals.
- ➔ Maximize school meal enrollment for students from low-income families by regularly utilizing all direct certification options and by encouraging and supporting parents and guardians in submitting school meal applications, as necessary.
- ➔ Determine if schools are good candidates for P2 or CEP.



CONCLUSION

Improving school meal programs can be easy to sideline. We think that the nutrition director has this covered. But this is work that is foundational to achieving overarching LCFF goals: recognizing that school meals play a central role in ensuring student success and making sure that all students get the meals to which they are entitled. The research is clear: students do better when they aren't hungry – they have better grades, attendance, and punctuality. Beyond this, students will be even more motivated and engaged if they feel cared for and considered when meals are served in a thoughtful way that puts student well-being first.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▶ Visit California Food Policy Advocates at <http://cfpa.net> for more information about the school nutrition programs, including policy recommendations, state and local data, research, and links to additional resources.

ENDNOTES

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The information in this chapter was primarily provided by California Food Policy Advocates.
www.cfpa.net



An initiative of the Partnership for Children and Youth, the California Community Schools Network is an informal group of community members, educators, and policymakers working together to share information and think comprehensively about supporting California's students.
www.partnerforchildren.org

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