



# School Meals for All: Farm Fresh Food

Research Brief • June 2023

## BACKGROUND

In the 2022-23 school year, after the federal pandemic universal school meals program ended, California became the first state in the nation to implement a “universal school meals” program offering breakfast and lunch to all K-12 students at public and charter schools every instructional day, at no charge, regardless of household income.<sup>1</sup> In addition to generously supplementing federal funding for school breakfast and lunches, California spent \$30M for the 2022 Farm to School Incubator Grants designed to bring fresh, local produce to school meals. Farm to School funding can improve the nutrition quality of school meals and meet students’ and school Food Service Directors’ needs for fresh and appealing school meals.

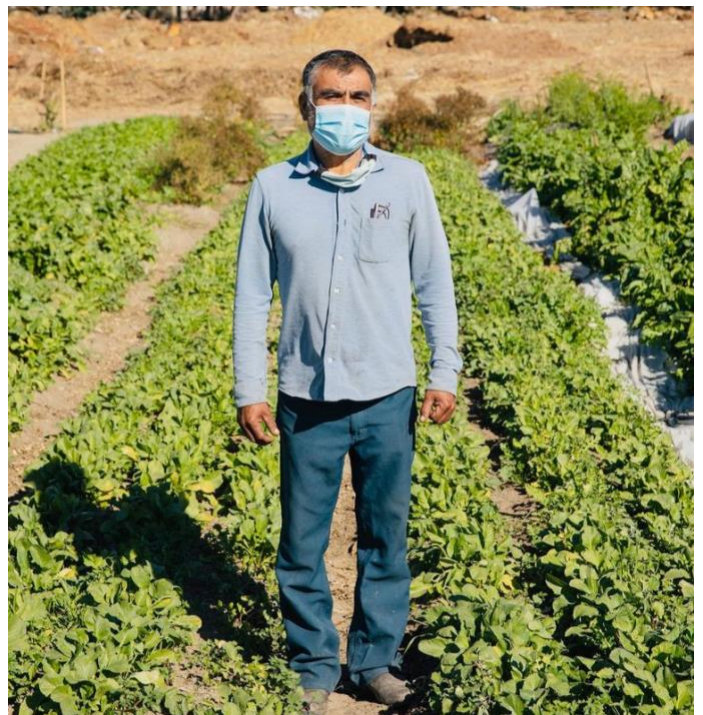
We conducted in-depth interviews with 29 school Food Service Directors, selected to reflect the characteristics of California’s school districts in terms of size, urbanicity and student free and reduced-price meal eligibility. We also conducted 17 small semi-structured focus groups with 67 middle and high school students from a range of income levels and from across the state. What follows is a sampling of our preliminary findings.

## FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION OF UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM in SY 2021-22

### Students value healthy school meals and want more fresh and healthy foods.

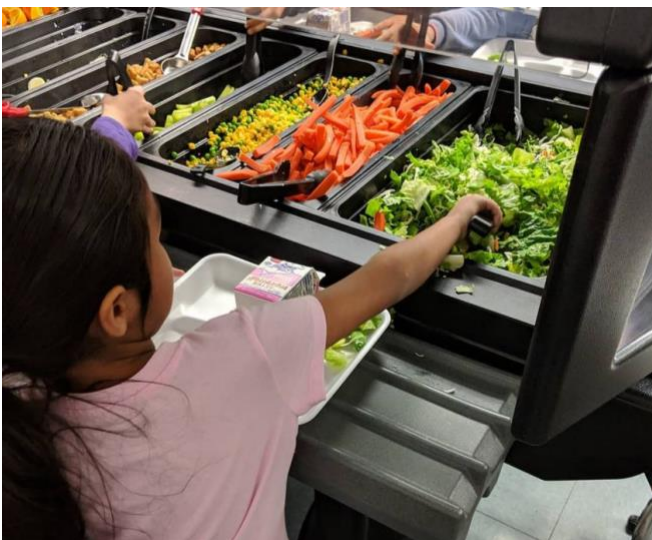
*“[I would like to see] more vegetables that are straight from a farm or straight from the garden. Not just fresh out of the fridge or fresh out of the grocery store. I want to see farm fresh food.”* -High school student

*“I’d say more produce, more vegetables, fruits.”* - High school student



*“I’d like to see more fresh stuff.”* -High school student

*“I think if you show that less stuff feels shipped and packaged, it would look and feel more fresh. And yeah, more open garden recipes. More salads, fruits and vegetables, more of those.”* -High school student



## Some students value healthy school foods specifically to support productivity and sports participation .

*“It’s very important for me that the school lunch be healthy and also, I think it should be more important to the school because the students need energy and good nutrition to pay attention in class.”*

-High school student, Spanish speaker

*“For me, well, I like staying healthy, but because I’m in sports year-round, it’s nice to know that if I’m putting good stuff with my body if I’m doing athletic things... It makes me eat better food at home, too, if I know I’m eating healthy stuff at school.”* -High school student

## School Food Service Directors report a variety of benefits from farm-to-school programs, such as enhanced nutrition education and reduced supply chain problems.

*“I think one of the most important ways to get the kids interested is to have that nutrition education outreach. At my previous district, we developed the Farm to School program, which is huge and the garden education there and letting kids see where their food comes from, involving them in that process is wonderful.”* -Food Service Director

*“Well, we are looking into the farm to school style options ... in dealing with supply chain issues, it's easier when I can work with a local grower... It's a local procurement ... It's coming from down the street, and our kids are getting a better product.”* -Food Service Director



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### References:

<sup>1</sup> CDE. 2022. [California Universal Meals](#).

<sup>2</sup> CDFA Farm to School Program Funding History

<sup>3</sup> [CA SB 101](#), Budget Act of 2023

<sup>4</sup> Bobronnikov E, Prenovitz S, Yadav LMB. 2021. 2019 Farm to School Census Report. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-Farm-to-School-Census-Summary.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> USDA. [Research Shows Farm to School Works](#). 2017. <http://www.farmtoschool.org/Resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Henderson T, et al. (2011) [Health Impact Assessment: Farm to School and School Garden Policy, HB 2800](#), Upstream Public Health and the Health Impact Project

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