



School Meals for All in California: Strongly supported by parents of all income levels

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BACKGROUND

California's School Meals for All (SMFA) program started in the 2022-23 school year following federal pandemic relief efforts which provided universal school meals across the US from 2020-22. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a household's income level determined the charge for a school meal. Unless their district qualified for and enrolled in Community Eligibility or another specific provision, children from families above 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL) (annual income of \$55,500 for a family of four¹) paid in full for school meals. Children from families earning 130% FPL (\$39,000 for a family of four¹) or less received meals at no cost, while those from families earning 130-185% FPL qualified for reduced-price meals.

In 2023, Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI) surveyed a sample of 842 parents selected to represent the geographical, race/ethnicity and income diversity of California public school parents. The sample was evenly distributed among parents of elementary, middle and high school students. We purposively sampled by eligibility for free and reduced-price meals (FRPM). Approximately one-third of students were eligible for free meals and one-third were not eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and the remaining sample was evenly split into students eligible for reduced-price meals and those near-eligible but above the 185% FPL cut-off for reduced-price meals. Nearly half (45%) was Hispanic; 19% non-Hispanic (NH) white, 17% NH Black, 11% NH Asian and 8% other NH racial groups. This research brief presents preliminary findings that explore the early impacts of California's SMFA policy on families. This analysis sought to understand whether, and if so, how, family income level relates to perceptions about offering meals at no charge to all students.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

This study showed no statistically significant variation across the four income categories – a majority of parents in all income levels were supportive of SMFA and thought it to be beneficial for their children:

- 80% of all parents **support** the provision of SMFA at no charge.
- 77% believe that access to free school meals for all students enhances **academic performance** and **student behavior**.
- 65% of all parents reported that, with meals offered to all students, their children **did not feel stigmatized** by participating in the school meal program.

More than three-quarters of parents also recognized benefits to their family:

- 80% appreciated the **time-saving** aspect of the program, as it alleviates the need for meal preparation.
- 78% acknowledged that school meals can **save their family money**.
- 77% stated that school meals help **reduce family stress**.



Asked how they would feel should School Meals for All be terminated, parents expressed multiple concerns:

- 60% of parents eligible for reduced-price meals fear their children would be **less inclined to eat school meals** if the program stopped – thus even FRPM student participation would drop.
- 61% of parents near-eligible for FRPM but above the 185% FPL cut-off anticipated that their **household finances would be hurt** should the program end.
- 52% of all parents feared that discontinuing the program would **reduce their ability to provide enough food for their households**, highlighting the program's role in ensuring food security.
- 39% of all parents worried about the **re-introduction of stigma**, fearing their children would feel embarrassed to receive school meals if they were no longer free for all students.

CONCLUSION

Across all income brackets, parents overwhelmingly support the new program. If the program were to be discontinued, parents, particularly those near the eligibility threshold for reduced-price meals, could face increased financial strain and food insecurity, heightened stress, and the re-emergence of stigma. The high cost of living in California means that many families may struggle to meet their basic needs, including food security, although they do not meet federal FRPM eligibility. The California Budget and Policy Center estimated that 44% of households that were ineligible for FRPM in 2022 (income above 185% FPL, currently a total income of at most \$55,500 for a family of four) faced food insecurity.² Findings from parent surveys highlight the essential role the School Meals for All program plays in supporting all California families.

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References: [1] US Health and Human Services. 2023 Poverty Guidelines: 48 Contiguous States. At, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1c92a9207f3ed5915ca020d58fe77696/detailed-guidelines-2023.pdf>. [2] California Budget & Policy Center. 2024. Universal School Meals Help All California Children Thrive. At, <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/universal-school-meals-help-all-california-children-thrive/> Photo credit: USDA FNS, available at <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/resources/nutrition-education-materials/photography-gallery/group-children-having-lunch-cafeteria>