



California Celebrates Five Years of School Meals for All

In 2021, California became the first state in the nation to guarantee free school meals for all 6 million TK-12 students. Five years and nearly four billion meals later, that promise is being kept, and students, families, and schools across the state are seeing the results.

SACRAMENTO, CA – On June 28, 2021, California made history by becoming the first state to provide free breakfast and lunch to every TK-12 student, regardless of income. Five years later, the School Meals for All program, which is backed by a broad suite of state investments in school nutrition infrastructure, workforce, and local sourcing, is expected to serve nearly one billion meals in the 2026-27 school year alone, improving meal quality and access while reducing hunger for millions of families.

Today, educators, parents and students, school nutrition professionals, advocates, policymakers, and community leaders across California mark the 5th anniversary of this landmark program that has fundamentally transformed what it means to attend school in the Golden State.

"Five years ago, I was proud to sign universal school meals into law and make California the first state in the nation to guarantee every public school student a free breakfast and lunch," said **Governor Gavin Newsom**. "Today, with nearly one billion meals served each year, we're seeing exactly what we hoped for: healthier kids, more resilient families, and expanded opportunities for every child across the state."

"California's School Meals for All program continues to be a vital investment in our children and their future," said **First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom**. "When every child starts the school day nourished and ready to learn, we are investing in their health, their academic success, and their ability to thrive. This critical program has expanded access to basic needs and demonstrated that universal school meal programs can create real, lasting change for students and their families in the classroom and beyond."

School Meals for All Has Helped Families Weather the Affordability Crisis

Since its launch, the School Meals for All program has removed federal income limits and administrative barriers that historically prevented many students from accessing the school meals they need. Research shows that [44%](#) of food-insecure families in California do not qualify for federal school meal assistance — meaning that without this state program, many students in need would fall outside the federal safety net. In a 2023 survey, [nearly 80%](#) of parents agreed

that free school meals save their family money and more than half of parents said that their household finances would be hurt if the program ended.

“As a mom with a son in his first year of public school, I’ve been absolutely thrilled with California’s School Meals for All program,” said **Samantha, a working mom in Sacramento**. “His district sources 90% of its produce from local farms, which makes me proud to be a Californian — feeding our kids healthy meals, supporting local agriculture, and creating good jobs for school nutrition workers.”

School meal participation has increased by [nearly 9%](#) since the program's implementation, with schools serving an estimated 73 million additional meals annually compared to pre-program levels.

Well-Nourished Students Succeed in the Classroom

The benefits of the School Meals for All program extend far beyond the cafeteria. Research has shown that students who participate in school meal programs are more likely to consume nutritious foods, [less likely](#) to experience nutrient deficiencies, and show improved attendance, better academic performance, [fewer visits](#) to the nurse's office, and [reductions](#) in behavioral issues, anxiety, and depression.

"Programs like California School Meals for All are a critical component to building the safe, stable schools California students deserve," said **David Goldberg, President of the California Teachers Association**. "For many students, school is the only place where they have consistent access to meals. As an educator, I remember buying food for my classroom so my students could focus on learning instead of being hungry. Right now, educators report increasing rates of food insecurity among students, reflecting the rising cost of groceries and the Trump administration's attack on SNAP and CalFresh benefits, which impacts nearly 2 million children in California."

Historically, students who qualified for free or reduced-price meals often faced stigma that prevented them from participating. By making meals available to every student regardless of income, the program has created a more equitable and inclusive environment in schools statewide.

“School Meals for All doesn’t just feed students, it gives us stability, dignity, and the ability to show up to school ready to learn,” said **Patrick, a student at Inglewood Unified School District**. “When hunger is no longer a barrier, we can focus fully on our education, our goals, and our future. This program is proof that when basic needs are met, students don’t just survive school—they thrive in it.”

A Food System Built for Lasting and Impactful Change

California's investment in School Meals for All has been amplified by a suite of complementary programs that advance a comprehensive approach to school nutrition — one focused not only on access, but also on quality, sustainability, and equity.

“School Meals for All has changed the dynamic in our schools,” said **Micha James, Nutrition Services Director at Monterey Peninsula Unified School District**. “The ability to engage every student has shifted how our staff approach meal service and how our students perceive the school cafe. Our focus is on cooking great food and celebrating our students as they come to enjoy that food. As a result, we are feeding more students each day, providing the nourishment they need to excel in school and beyond.”

- The Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) program has helped schools modernize facilities and build the capacity to prepare fresh meals at scale.
- Farm to School initiatives have deepened connections between California's schools and farmers, bringing fresh, locally grown produce to cafeteria trays while supporting California agriculture and the broader food economy.
- The Healthy School Food Pathway program is expanding the pipeline of trained nutrition professionals and strengthening the workforce that makes high-quality school meals possible every day.

“For five years, School Meals for All has meant that no student in California learns on an empty stomach, and CSEA's food service members are the ones who make that real every day,” said **Adam Weinberger, Association President of the California School Employees Association**. “Continued investment in modernized kitchens, essential equipment, and workforce development gives these employees the tools and support to prepare fresh, locally sourced meals for students. When we invest in the people who feed our students, we build healthier schools and stronger careers at the same time.”

Together, these investments embody a bold vision for school nutrition — one that supports student learning and health, strengthens local economies, and lightens the burden on families’ grocery budgets. Five years in, California’s transformational approach to school meals is delivering results, inside and beyond the classroom.

What Partners Are Saying

“Every child deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive, and having access to school meals is essential to making that possible. When students have dependable access to nutritious food during the school day, they are better able to focus in the classroom, attend school consistently, and build lifelong healthy habits,” said **Khuram Arif, M.D., President of the American Heart Association’s Sacramento Board and President and CEO at Western Health Advantage**. “California’s leadership over the past five years has consistently demonstrated what’s possible when we meet students’ basic needs where they spend the most time, treating school meals just as fundamental to student success as books and classrooms. By ensuring all students have access to meals at school, we reduce stigma, support families, and strengthen our education system.”

“As the first universal school meals program in the nation, California's School Meals for All program was a landmark victory in the fight against hunger — ensuring that no students in California go without food as they learn and grow and sparking a national movement to ensure

every child is fed at school,” said **Stacia Hill Levenfeld, Chief Executive Officer of the California Association of Food Banks**. “California Food Banks is proud to be a partner with School Meals for All and looks forward to our continued work fighting hunger and poverty in California.”

“California has proven that free school meals are not only possible—they can be fresh, healthy, and delicious,” said **Alexa Norstad, Executive Director of the nonprofit Center for Ecoliteracy**. “We celebrate the school nutrition professionals transforming school food. Thanks to their leadership, families are saving money, farmers have a reliable market, and no child goes hungry at school.”

“Five years ago, California embarked on an historic undertaking and became the first state in the nation to provide free School Meals for All (SMFA) students, regardless of their income,” said **Tiffany Germain, Policy Advisor at NextGen California**. “The SMFA program addresses a number of critically important issues: it helps to reduce food insecurity; it eliminates the stigma around accessing free school meals; and, equally as important, it recognizes that hunger should never stand in the way of learning. The SMFA program also helps support California families as the cost of groceries continues to rise and California farmers who need new outlets for their products. As we celebrate all that the SMFA program has achieved, the NextGen team remains committed to protecting, expanding, and strengthening the program and its provisions, knowing that there are millions of California’s children and families who rely on its benefits every day.”

“School Meals for All is as much an economic engine as it is a nutrition program — it’s a win on multiple fronts,” said **Kat Taylor, co-sponsor of School Meals for All and an investor in regional food hubs and innovative food aid programs**. “For when students are freely nourished, families keep more money for other essentials, local farmers excel, and schools become the vibrant centerpiece of healthier, more equitable communities. Guaranteed breakfast and lunch critically support affordability. Five years ago, California got the recipe right by reenvisioning quality school meals as the vital underpinning of every student’s ability to learn and grow. The journey is ongoing — it will require continued bold leadership from our policymakers to secure infrastructure investments, supported as always by our growing statewide coalition. We are proud to stand with that coalition in transforming school meals, and our food system along with it, across all of California. We accomplish far more together than we ever could apart.”

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About the School Meals for All coalition:

The School Meals for All coalition is led by the American Heart Association, California Association of Food Banks, Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, and Office of Kat Taylor. It includes more than 225 education, health, labor, agriculture, and anti-hunger organizations working together to advocate for sustained investments in school nutrition programs. These include School Meals for All, Kitchen Infrastructure and Training, Farm to School, and the

Healthy School Food Pathway program, which together expand access to more fresh, high-quality, and locally sourced meals for every student. Learn more at schoolmealsforall.org.