



# UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

State of School Meal Programs in  
San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties  
School Year 2022-2023



SECOND HARVEST  
of SILICON VALLEY



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
Agriculture and Natural Resources

UC Cooperative Extension

# Universal School Meals: State of School Meals in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties

## Introduction

School meals are integral to student health and learning. Universal school meals, where all students can eat for free, have been shown to improve student diet quality, academic performance, attendance and to reduce food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

The 2022-2023 school year was the first year of implementation of California's *Free School Meals for All* policy, where all students in California, regardless of income eligibility, are able to eat breakfast and lunch for free in perpetuity. Across San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, 235,000 students became newly eligible for free school meals and this policy change represents a substantial opportunity to improve food security for children and families. During School Year 2022-2023 school meal programs stopped operating under COVID-era USDA waivers and fully operationalized California's policy. This report details food service directors' experiences during the first year of implementation.

## Methods

School districts in San Mateo (n=23) and Santa Clara counties (n=31) were contacted and encouraged to schedule a 30-minute interview with Second Harvest of Silicon Valley and University of California Cooperative Extension. Districts were also given the option to complete a survey if they did not wish to schedule an interview. A total of 17 districts participated (9 from San Mateo County, 8 from Santa Clara County). Food service directors or Chief Business Officers, as relevant, were asked about challenges and successes of implementing universal school meals, with particular attention to staffing trends.

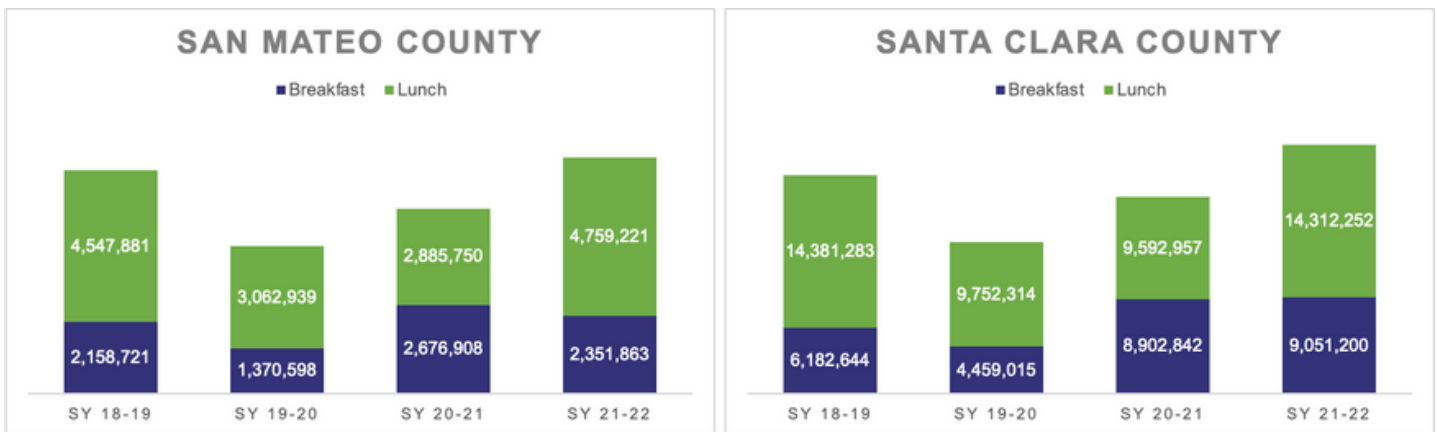
## Successes

### Participation

Just over half of food service directors indicated that they saw an increase in meal participation compared to the 2021-2022 school year. Some districts did not offer the School Breakfast Program during the 21-22 school year, and attributed the increase in meals served to the introduction of that program. One district noted a 26% increase in breakfast participation and another noted a 33% increase. Several districts noted increased lunch participation, which food service directors thought could potentially be driven by increased scratch cooking and by increased participation at schools with a high proportion of free and reduced price meal eligible students. This suggests that the universal meal policy is working as designed and is now reaching students who were previously nearly eligible for free meals. A few school districts reported small decreases in meal participation, which they guessed was driven by decreasing enrollment.

### Meal participation after COVID-19

In addition to asking food service directors about participation during SY22-23, we also analyzed participation data from previous years and found that school meal participation had fully rebounded from a pandemic era dip, which was driven by school closures and the temporary conversion of the meal program to a pick up model. In SY21-22, the most recent data available from the California Department of Education, Santa Clara County schools served more than 23 million meals, and San Mateo County schools served more than 7 million meals. Increased participation over SY18-19, the last “normal” year before the pandemic, indicates that more students are participating in school meals and accessing the benefits of universal school meals. A major driver of increased participation since SY18-19 has been breakfast, which suggests that local efforts to increase breakfast participation have been successful in conjunction with the requirement for schools to serve breakfast. We look forward to analyzing the SY22-23 data when it becomes available.



### Breakfast

Alternative breakfast models are broadly used across both counties and seem to be working as a tool to support school breakfast participation. Districts reported serving breakfast during morning break or recess, in the classroom, and offering grab ‘n’ go breakfast in the morning before school. Those who supervise students during breakfast time include campus security, yard duty, paraeducators, and teachers. SY22-23 was also the first school year that several school districts offered breakfast, as required by California’s universal meals policy.

## Challenges

During the 2022-23 school year, food service directors expressed three main challenges with implementing universal school meals as they continue to serve more students. As one food service director shared, “We are serving more students than ever before but we haven’t changed any of the underlying structures.”

### Time to eat and line management

Several food service directors voiced that the time given for lunch was a major challenge for their meal program. One food service director explained that there was not enough time during lunch to get all

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the students through the lunch line with enough time to eat, especially now that they are serving double the number of students compared to last year. School districts reported meal time periods only lasting between 15-21 minutes, inclusive of time to transition to the cafeteria, wait in line, and eat. Other food service directors expressed that lunch times are not being staggered to account for the increase in students coming for lunch. As a result, too many students are coming through the line at the same time, creating long lines of students that are hard to manage and making it difficult to ensure they are properly documenting who is taking a meal and that they are taking the required meal components. One food service director said that they thought that for students and other school staff “*universal meals means a free for all*” and expressed frustration managing lines, students who only wanted one meal component (e.g. milk), and short meal periods. Some directors expressed hope that as they moved to implement Provision 2 during School Year 23-24, they might see some of the line challenges alleviated. Directors were unanimous in their desire to address time to eat, and hoped to see longer lunch periods, recess before lunch, and other solutions in the coming year.

### Supply chain and food costs

Supply chain and vendor issues continued to challenge food service directors during SY 22-23. Oftentimes, it was difficult for food service directors to source certain vegetables and districts needed to find substitutes, make last minute menu changes, and be prepared with several back up plans. One food service director mentioned that it can sometimes take months for some menu items to come, if they come at all. They noted that this negatively impacts their meal program as the items served may not match what was printed on the menu, leading to disappointment from students and parents. As one food service manager shared, “*I don’t count on the food until it’s in the building.*” A developing challenge is rising food costs, which combined with changes to the reimbursement rate, have further stretched budgets.

### Staffing

Another major challenge expressed by food service directors was issues related to staffing. Given that school districts had expressed concern about this issue previously, we asked an expanded set of questions about staffing.

All but two school districts were short staffed for the 22-23 school year, with several districts noting that they had not been fully staffed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Without enough staff, it is a challenge for districts to keep up with increased meal participation as well as pursue efforts to improve school meal quality, like scratch cooking. The driving forces behind high staff turnover were found to be low pay, not enough work hours, retirement, and difficult job duties. Retirements in particular seemed to be a major cause of turnover, and food service directors shared that losing experienced employees was particularly challenging. One food service director shared that parents used to be a reliable source of employees but that given how expensive it is to live in this area, both parents generally need to work full time and that a job for a few hours in the middle of the day is just not feasible for most families.



Districts noted that the majority of their positions are part time, offering fewer than 6 hours a day. Some shifts are as short as 1-2 hours a day. About half of districts provide benefits for their part time employees, although most employees need to work at least 4-5 hours a day to qualify. One food service director mentioned that if staff do not work enough hours to qualify for benefits, they often scramble to meet their hours by finding other positions within the school or district to supplement their hours, like working as playground assistants or instructional aides. Food service directors shared frustration that food service workers were often the lowest paid employees within the district, and one shared that other departments will recruit workers from her staff, further exacerbating staffing problems. Another food service director pointed to low hourly pay as the root cause, pointing out that fast food and other food service jobs pay more, offer more hours, and offer benefits.

Nearly all food service directors were working on some sort of strategy to address staff retention. These efforts included giving referral and retention bonuses, staff appreciation, trying their best to be accommodating and offering flexibility where possible, working on increasing work hours as well as increasing salaries. Many had seen success from these efforts and even used their own money to show appreciation to food service workers with donuts, small gifts, etc. As one food director summed it up, *“without them there’s no us.”*

## Opportunities

### Student engagement

Nearly all school districts use student helpers or have used student helpers in the past to operate their meal program. Students assist with serving food, managing lines, washing produce and reusable dishes, and ensuring students are taking required meal components. Some districts offer students incentives for helping, such as giving snack bar funds or paying for students’ yearbooks. Student helpers are mostly being implemented at middle schools, but there is opportunity to utilize student helpers at elementary and high schools, especially at districts that are very short staffed. One large high school district reported hiring 100 students districtwide to assist with the meal time period. Students are paid the County minimum wage for their work. Engaging students could help alleviate staffing issues and increase their voice in the school meal program, while strengthening relationships between food service staff and the students they serve.

### Mitigating food waste

With free school meals for all, food service directors found that some students only want one meal component and put the rest of the meal on a share table or in the trash. These are often students who have brought lunch from home and this practice may mean that students who need full meals are not able to access them, as meals may run out. Research shows that school meals are healthier than meals brought from home.<sup>2</sup> Increased student and parent education about school meals could help mitigate food waste and improve student diet quality and health by getting students who take meals to eat them.

## Professional development

Several districts spoke positively about KIT (Kitchen, Infrastructure, and Training) grants from the state and said they had been helpful in providing their staff with training opportunities which supported both increased scratch cooking and the opportunity for workers to advance. One district shared that they see an opportunity for food service workers to serve camps and year-round childcare programs in the summer, which would increase revenue for the meal program and hours for staff. Given that both San Mateo and Santa Clara counties have many smaller school districts, it is possible districts could achieve economies of scale by working together to seek out and offer professional development opportunities.

## Policy and Practice Recommendations

School meal stakeholders - including school food professionals, school administrators and teachers, parents, families, students, and advocates - should all continue to work together to increase funding and support for school meal programs, at the local, state and federal levels.

## School Districts

- **Increasing time to eat:** with the passage of SB348 in California, the California Department of Education will establish recommendations around adequate time for students to eat their meals. This will inform how public and charter TK-12 school districts design their daily schedules. Districts should take into consideration transition time between the classroom and cafeterias, time for students to move through a POS system if needed, and ensure students are not feeling pressured to finish their meals quickly before heading out to recess.
- **Recess before lunch:** School districts should consider adopting a recess before lunch approach to support children's consumption of healthy foods. Research has shown that this simple scheduling shift increases the amount of fruits and vegetables that children eat, reduces food waste, and improves classroom behaviors.<sup>3</sup>
- **Summer EBT:** The Federal Omnibus spending bill passed at the end of December 2022 established permanent, nationwide Summer EBT. This new nutritional program will provide low-income students with a debit card that can be used to purchase groceries when schools are closed. California is the first state to fully commit to its implementation in Summer 2024, with dollars set aside in the FY24 state budget. School districts and their partners can help families understand and use this new benefit.

## Local Government and Food Stakeholders

- **Peer Sharing:** During our interviews, several food service directors shared their desire to have a formal networking opportunity to share best practices, challenges and opportunities. The Office of Education or other appropriate entity could organize this in each county. Food service directors and other meals stakeholders could also consider joining existing collaborative spaces,

including Second Harvest of Silicon Valley's [Child Nutrition Coalition](#), the [San Mateo County Farm to School Committee](#), or contacting University of California Cooperative Extension for [technical assistance and resources](#).

- **Continue KIT funding:** In Fiscal Year 2021 & 2022, the State of California set aside \$750M to support the implementation of Universal School Meals through [Kitchen, Infrastructure and Training Funds](#). These dollars were vital to schools' ability to quickly upgrade their facilities to serve an increased number of student meals, shift to a scratch cooking model, and in some cases begin meal services entirely. Though this has been a welcome investment, school districts continue to report that their facilities are inadequate to serve their full student population and also meet the state's desire to see 40% of meals prepared from scratch. During our interviews, food service directors felt that they could perhaps do 20% with their current infrastructure and staffing. Additional, ongoing funding is needed to continue to upgrade school facilities.

## Federal

- **Child Nutrition Reauthorization:** At the federal level, there is an opportunity to significantly update school meal standards, operations, and reimbursement rates. Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) has not been renewed since 2010 with the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, and is now 8 years overdue for an update. Many of the operational challenges faced by the food service directors we spoke with could be addressed with a new CNR bill, including:
  - Increased meal reimbursement rates to match food cost inflation.
  - Updated nutritional standards to meet the updated Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
  - Meal pattern adjustments to accommodate minimum days and school breaks, as well as allowing fruit and vegetables to be offered vs served to reduce food waste.
    - Though, the passage of SB348 also includes a request to the USDA to allow for non-congregate meal service on minimum days, as well as sets state-level standards around added sugar and sodium in-line with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
  - Lowered Free and Reduced Price Meal eligibility requirements for programs like the Summer Seamless Option and the Child and Adult Care Food Program so that schools can serve additional children meals when schools are closed. Current income eligibility for the Free and Reduced Price Meal program does not take into consideration our area's high cost of living and does not reflect the reality of poverty that many families experience.
  - Statewide eligibility for Community Eligibility Provision would reduce bottlenecks at the point of sale system, as well as streamline administrative work to operate the meal programs at schools. Additionally, at the national level it would bring us very near to full Universal School Meals.

## References

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2. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Lunches Consumed From School Are the Most Nutritious. June 2021. FNS-841 Findings are from the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, which was conducted by Mathematica.
3. Cohen JFW, Hecht AA, Hager ER, Turner L, Burkholder K, Schwartz MB. Strategies to Improve School Meal Consumption: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*. 2021;13(10).

## Suggested Citation & Acknowledgements

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