

# UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

**Early Experiences and  
Opportunities in San Mateo  
and Santa Clara County**



**SECOND HARVEST**  
of SILICON VALLEY



**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**  
Agriculture and Natural Resources

■ UC Cooperative Extension

# Universal School Meals: Early Experiences and Opportunities in San Mateo and Santa Clara County Schools

## Introduction

School meals support student learning and health. Universal 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> Starting with the 2022-2023 school year, all students in California, regardless of income eligibility, will be able to eat breakfast and lunch for free. Across San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, 235,000 students are newly eligible for free school meals and this policy change represents a substantial opportunity to improve food security for children and families.<sup>2</sup>

This policy change will also require huge changes for school districts across both counties. Some districts are practiced providers of school meals, serving a majority of their students through previous efforts to expand school meal access, like the community eligibility provision. Even for those districts, this policy represents a substantial increase in the number of students who can access free school meals. A number of districts didn't offer the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program in SY21-22, and their mindset about offering universal meals in the new year varied. Some were enthusiastic about the convenience it would offer their families, others had significant concerns about implementing a new and complex program.

We sought to understand the successes and challenges of food service programs as they transitioned to universal meal provision, aided by USDA COVID related waivers, in preparation for the roll out of California's Free School Meals for All program.



## Methods

School districts in Santa Clara (n=34) and San Mateo (n=23) counties were contacted and encouraged to sign up for a short interview with staff from Second Harvest of Silicon Valley and University of California Cooperative Extension. A total of 14 districts participated. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and a semi-structured interview guide was used to solicit information on early challenges and successes implementing universal meals, as well as opportunities for policy change and support from local partners.

## Successes

Nearly every food service director indicated that they had seen increased participation in school meals. Estimates ranged from a 20% increase at the low end, to a tripling or quadrupling increase at the high end. Several food service directors mentioned that there was more socioeconomic diversity in the students who were eating school meals. High school districts saw an increase in participation. Another district noted that they were seeing a marked increase in participation among kindergartners, who had never attended school while eligibility for free meals was limited. Finally, one food service director noted that they saw a marked increase at sites with high levels of free and reduced price meal (FRPM) eligibility, indicating that more students who needed meals were able to access them.



Another major area of success was decreased stigma, which food service directors were overjoyed to report. As one food service director said, “equity is the greatest success, there is no longer the assumption that kids getting free meals are poor. This is a great equalizer.” Another food service director said that it was valuable to no longer be concerned about meal debt and others shared that families have appreciated knowing that their children could eat free meals regardless of eligibility.

Finally, another bright spot was for the districts who have been able to scratch cook at least part of their menu. These districts reported that when scratch cooked items are served they saw a jump in participation.

## Challenges

Food service directors also reported a range of challenges, as would be expected with such a dramatic change to the school meal program. Infrastructure, staffing, supply chain woes, seat time, and funding concerns all complicated food service operations.

*During the 2021-2022 school year, food service directors reported challenges with:*

- **Sourcing:** nearly every food service director shared that they had been beset with supply chain woes. Orders had to be placed months in advance, and even that wouldn’t guarantee complete deliveries. Deliveries would frequently come incomplete, and/or at odd hours, which made it difficult to plan. Constant menu changes were the norm. One food service director reported making numerous runs to Costco to supplement orders. All of these challenges required additional staff time to manage, stretching an already limited resource.



- **Staffing:** Staffing for school meal programs is a long-term issue in the Bay Area, where the high cost of living and low pay / limited hours of school food service positions has been a tough combination. Food service directors reported that SY21-22 had been exceptionally difficult, with more than one food service director reporting that they had not been fully staffed at any point during the school year.

Another mentioned that staffing is a limiting factor in adopting scratch cooking. Others shared that they

often had just one staff person per site, which challenged their ability to meet regulatory requirements. Finally, food service directors applauded state funding for training but said it was difficult to take advantage of them - they simply don't have enough staff to spare to send to conferences or training.



- **Seat time:** Seat time, or meal period length, was a universally shared pain point. Short and large meal periods put a ton of pressure on food service to get students through the line quickly. At one district, food service was attempting to feed 3,000 students in 30 minutes, which they quickly realized was just not feasible. They worked with school administrators to create two lunch periods. This strategy was employed by several food service directors, but the multiple lunch periods also sometimes led to very early or late lunch periods for students, and they sometimes bumped up against the end of breakfast service. One food service director noted that she timed a school site and determined that students had just 10 minutes to sit down and eat. Several food service directors shared that they feared that this issue would only get worse in SY22-23, when they had to start recording individual students again.

*Food service directors also shared their concerns about SY 22-23, including:*

- **Funding:** Food service directors shared two major concerns about funding, that California's Free School Meals for All program would run out of money, and that the end of the USDA waivers would make their programs insolvent. School districts with lower proportions of FRPM students expressed doubt that the state had sufficient funding to reimburse them for meals they served to ineligible students and feared their districts would incur the cost. One district that had not previously operated the NSLP, opting to self-fund meals for eligible students, also speculated that this mandate would end up costing the district more money. The effect of transitioning away from COVID waivers (and a higher reimbursement rate through the Seamless Summer Option) back to NSLP/SBP will be buffered thanks to a recent announcement from the USDA that reimbursement amounts for both lunch and breakfast will be increased by \$.68 and \$.32 respectively.

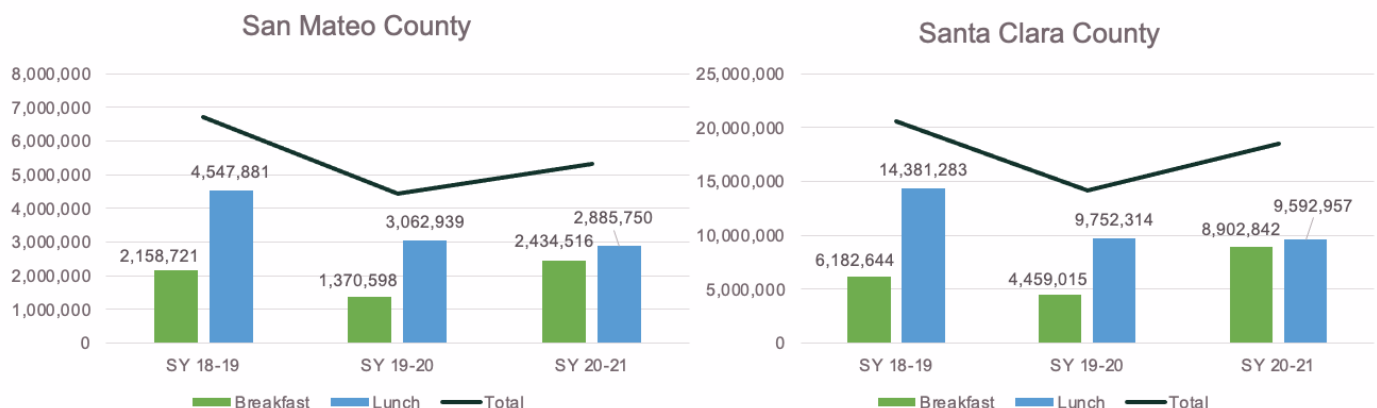
- **Infrastructure:** Most food service directors cited infrastructure as a limiting factor in their ability to implement universal meals. Several districts have central kitchens but are concerned they have the capacity to meet increased demand. Support for breakfast service is also an issue, including a lack of milk coolers.
- **Capacity:** As noted above, the few districts that have not previously operated a school meal program are particularly concerned, with some districts lacking any food prep or kitchen space, any point-of-sale system, and any internal expertise on how to operate a meal program. As one chief business officer shared, “we are a little taken aback by the size of the ask. It’s a lot to take on”.

## Opportunities:

**Increased meal service:** One of the greatest opportunities and justifications for providing universal free school meals is the projected increase in meal participation. Not only does this benefit the student body by ensuring students have adequate nutrition, but it can bring in millions of additional federal and state funding for school districts.<sup>3</sup>

In school year 2018-2019, school districts in San Mateo and Santa Clara County provided 6.7M meals to their students. In school year 2019-2020, meals served dropped to 4.4M meals due to the COVID-19 pandemic ending in-person instruction in March 2020. While grab-and-go meals became an option, the logistics of students traveling just to pick up meals was a significant access barrier. Additionally, it took time to build community knowledge that meals were available. In school year 2020-2021, schools in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties were primarily operating remote learning. At this point, schools were well-practiced with distributing multiple days’ worth of meals at once, and families knew that this food assistance was available. Breakfast service was especially elevated over previous years, likely because schools were providing both breakfast and lunch in a single pickup. In SY20-21, schools provided 5.3M meals to students.<sup>4</sup>

**Meals Served, By County by Year SY2019-SY2021**



Data for school year 2021-2022 is not yet available from the California Department of Education, but anecdotal data from food service directors indicates significant increases in meal participation as mentioned earlier in this report. Beginning with California's universal school meals program rollout in school year 2022-2023 some school districts will be adding breakfast service for the first time. It is anticipated that meal participation will continue to grow.

**Breakfast After the Bell:** In order for schools to maximize access to breakfast, it is strongly recommended that they implement a meal service model that allows for the most students to participate.<sup>5</sup> For districts who are implementing a breakfast service for the first time, beginning with best practices will greatly help with their meal participation and reimbursement.

Three commonly used models are:

- **Breakfast in The Classroom:** Students eat breakfast at their desks at the beginning of first period. In some schools, teachers deliver the breakfast, where in others, students, cafeteria staff, or parent volunteers are responsible for breakfast delivery. This classroom model results in the highest increases in breakfast participation.
- **Second Chance Breakfast:** Breakfast is offered mid-morning, between class periods as a dedicated meal time. In elementary schools, teachers may bring students to the lunchroom and walk them through the line.
- **Grab and Go:** Students pick up breakfast from portable carts placed in high traffic areas such as school entrances, recess fields, hallways, and even bus stops. They pick up bagged breakfasts from these carts on the way to class and can eat in the lunchroom, hallway, or at their desks. Grab and Go can happen before or after the bell.



**Parent & Family Engagement:** Expanded eligibility for free school meals has brought additional stakeholders to the table, and renewed community interest in improving school meals. Several school food service directors shared that they saw potential in deeper engagement with parents and families, to educate them about the school meal program and to include their voice in menu and recipe development and work together to improve the meal service experience.

## Policy Recommendations

Food service directors shared policy opportunities to improve school meals, including:

- **Increased meal reimbursement rates at the state level:** On an annual basis, the state of California should ensure that its meal reimbursement for state-funded school meals is adequate to cover the real costs of providing those meals.
- **Funding for Kitchen, Infrastructure, and Training:** In the FY22 and 23 budgets, the State of California included one-time KIT funding in the combined amount of \$750M to provide infrastructure support to schools as they implement new meal services and upgrade their kitchens' capacity to feed a larger number of students. These funds are intended to run through FY25. This funding should be reviewed and renewed as school districts scale to meet demand.<sup>6,7</sup>
- **Workforce development:** School nutrition staff should be paid a livable wage for the area where they live, and be provided with enough working hours to become eligible for full benefits. From our interviews with food service directors, we learned there are significant pay differentials on a district-by-district basis, which makes it very difficult for school districts to recruit and retain staff.
- **Changes to bell schedules:** The minimum amount of time students have to eat their meals is determined at the school district level through the Local School Wellness Policy. Districts should develop research-based plans which take into consideration student enrollment and seats available, while ensuring that enough time has passed between meal services.
- **Federal opportunities:** At the federal level, Child Nutrition Reauthorization makes permanent changes to child nutrition programs, including school, summer, and childcare meals. In July 2022, H.R. 8450 was introduced with several beneficial provisions to support California's Universal School Meals Program. At the time of this report, the bill includes an option for statewide Community Eligibility Provision, which would lead to more than 90% of meals served in California receiving full federal reimbursement.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, this bill would provide increased meal reimbursement rates, funding for school kitchens to support Farm to School programs and scratch cooking, updated nutritional standards, a formal review of meal pattern best practices, and more.<sup>9</sup>



## Suggested Citation & Acknowledgements

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