

## **Increasing Access to Meals Out of School Time**

Developed by the Child Nutrition Advisory Council for consideration by the California Department of Education. November, 2023

Too many Californian children and teens go hungry when they are not in school. This paper provides recommendations for increasing families' access to fresh and minimally processed meals during the out-of-school-time period.

Increased access to summer and other out-of-school-time meals supports positive outcomes for children and families. However, millions of Californians experience food insecurity year-round, which is a health, education, and racial disparity issue. Most children and teens who are eligible for free summer meals are not accessing those meals. Families who need access to nutrition during the summer are often unaware of or unable to get to summer meal sites. Additionally, summer meal sites do not always deliver the resources that children and families want and need.

Our recommendations for addressing the barriers that prevent more families from accessing summer and other out-of-school-time meals include the following:

1. Enable more schools and other organizations to serve meals.
2. Increase program flexibility for meal providers and participants.
3. Increase families' awareness of summer meal options.
4. Increase access to fresh and minimally processed foods including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and plant-based meals at summer meal sites.
5. Strengthen summer meal sites through increased learning and enrichment opportunities and wraparound services for families.

These recommendations align with multiple facets of the Transforming Schools Initiative, including mental health support, universal meals, expanded learning programs, the Black student achievement task force, and the literacy task force. Providing greater access to healthy food also mitigates the impact of school food procurement on climate change.

## **Recommendations and Strategies**

### **1. Enable more schools and other organizations to serve meals.**

- a. Provide state funding to program sites that are currently ineligible to serve meals due to federal area-eligibility rules.
- b. Extend universal meals to summer.

### **2. Increase program flexibility for participants.**

- a. Provide support to sites to enable them to provide more non-congregate meal options and implement family-friendly policies at non-congregate sites, for example:
  1. Do not require families to have a child present when they pick up meals.
  2. Allow families to pick up multiple meals at once.
  3. Schedule meal collection periods to accommodate families' schedules and work commitments, e.g., 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- b. Support families in participating in congregate meal sites through partnerships, e.g., partnerships with transportation services that can help children and teens get to meal sites.

### **3. Increase families' awareness of summer meal options.**

- a. Make informational materials available in multiple languages and distribute materials widely for partners to share.
- b. Coordinate messaging with other agencies that communicate with California families, e.g., CalFresh and CalFresh Healthy Living.
- c. Develop a statewide coordinated multi language social media campaign, including a social media toolkit, for schools and others to easily use to promote meals.
- d. Encourage increased information dissemination at schools, e.g., through Parent Teacher Association and other meetings, materials sent home with students, information in newsletters, school announcements, bulletin boards, text messages from school to families, back to school night, social media, newsletters, etc.
- e. Launch partnerships between state agencies and groups trusted by families to raise awareness of out-of-school-time meals, e.g., California

Department of Public Health, California Department of Food and Agriculture, California State Library, and Boys and Girls Clubs.

- f. Issue direct messaging from the State Superintendent to families about out-of-school-time meal options and to staff working in local nutrition services departments to acknowledge the work being done and results accomplished.
- 4. Support meal providers in increasing access to fresh and minimally processed foods including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and plant-based meals.**
    - a. Coordinate with the California Department of Food and Agriculture on Farm to School efforts in alignment with the Ag Innovations report, [Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap for Success](#).
    - b. Coordinate with California Department of Public Health on nutrition education efforts.
    - c. Work with local education agencies to address and overcome barriers that prevent the procurement of local, fresh and minimally processed foods.
  - 5. Strengthen summer meal sites through increased wraparound services, including learning and enrichment opportunities for families.**
    - a. Support partnerships with other state agencies to deliver more wraparound community services for families at meal sites. These wraparound services may include coordination with library services or local health or community organizations to help raise awareness or offer free services, such as dental or vision services.
    - b. Continue providing financial support for meal sites to assist them in delivering increased learning and enrichment programs at summer meal sites including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), reading, sports and games, arts and culture, and nutrition programming.
    - c. Support summer meal sites in offering jobs and internships for teens that foster the development of workforce-readiness and social-emotional skills.

## Rationale

### Millions of Californians experience food insecurity year round which is a racial disparity issue as well as a health and wellness issue.

1. In 2021, approximately 4.1 million people, or 10.5 percent of Californian's experienced food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> The annual food budget shortfall is \$2,658,795,000.
2. Nationally, in 2021, 32.1 percent of households with incomes below the Federal poverty line were food insecure. Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher than the national average for single-parent households, and for Black and Hispanic households.<sup>2</sup>
3. The 2023 Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) report shows that only 1 in 6 California children and teens who received free or reduced-price meals at school also receive free meals during the summer.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

### Increased access to nutrition supports positive outcomes for children and families.

No Kid Hungry has identified the following benefits of increasing access to nutrition during the summer: reduced hospitalization costs, higher graduation rates, and reallocation by schools of re-teaching costs.<sup>6</sup>

No Kid Hungry also states that:

*“Summer nutrition programs provide foods that contain essential nutrients...providing access to food over the summer increases children’s food security and intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy products. Deficiencies in several essential nutrients found in such foods can otherwise lead to cognitive decline.”*

*“Consumption of nutritious food not only supports better cognitive functioning in the summer, it also positions children from low-income families to learn and perform well once they return to the classroom. One study found that while children from low-income and middle-class families had similar levels of cognitive growth during the school year, children from low-income families lagged far*

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<sup>1</sup> Food Insecurity Among the Overall Population in California, (Feeding America, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Alisha Coleman-Jensen, et al, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2021*, (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022), 17

<sup>3</sup> Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report, (Food, Research & Action Center, 2023), 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Child Nutrition Tables*, (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> *Food Programs*, (California Department of Education, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Katie Orovecz, et al *Summer Nutrition Program Social Impact Analysis*, (No Kid Hungry, 2015), 7.

*behind during the summer. While most students lose about two months of grade level equivalency in mathematical computation skills over the summer, children in low-income families also fall behind more than two months in reading achievement compared with their peers from higher-income families.<sup>7</sup>*

### **Increased flexibility for meal providers and families results in greater access to nutrition during the summer.**

Data comparisons of summer lunches served when waivers were in place allowing for non-congregate meal distribution, versus once waivers were removed, show that "Every state saw a **decrease** in the average daily participation in summer lunch in July 2022 compared to July 2021."<sup>8</sup>

### **Families who need access to nutrition during the summer are often unaware of or unable to get to summer meal sites. Additionally, summer meal sites do not always deliver the resources that children and families want and need during the summer.**

The October 2021 [USDA Summer Meals Study](#) provided a "comprehensive assessment of the two summer meal programs operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and the Seamless Summer Option (SSO)."<sup>9</sup> Although this study did not include California as one of the 23 randomly selected states, it yielded several key findings focused on participation, food quality, and implementation of summer meal programs as assessed using summer 2018 data. We recommend that a California study be funded to collect additional data relevant to the specific needs of Californian students and families. Selected findings from the USDA Summer Meals Study are included below.

1. Although many children living in low-income households live near a summer meal program site, most do not participate.
2. Lack of awareness about the summer program located near their home is the most frequent reason both nonparticipant teens and nonparticipant caregivers give as to why they or their children do not participate in the summer meals program.
3. The most frequently cited program features that would encourage nonparticipants to attend the site are the provision of games and activities (38

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<sup>7</sup> Katie Orovecz, et al *Summer Nutrition Program Social Impact Analysis*, (No Kid Hungry, 2015), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report, (Food, Research & Action Center, 2023), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Tracy Vericker, Ph.D., et al, *USDA Summer Meals Study Summary*, (Westat, 2021), 6.

percent), free transportation (28 percent), a daily schedule with more hours (20 percent), and an affordable program cost (20 percent).

4. Access to meal sites is a considerable challenge to children's participation. Eighty-nine percent of sites report transportation is needed for children to get to and from the site, but just 30 percent of sites provide transportation.

**Providing greater access to fresh and minimally processed foods including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and plant-based meals is better for everyone.**

1. Meat and dairy account for 92% of all school menu offerings in 25 of the largest school districts in California despite [student demand](#)<sup>10</sup> for more plant-based meals. Even modest menu shifts to less carbon-intensive, plant-based foods can help mitigate the impact of school food procurement on climate change.
2. If all the school districts in California swapped out a beef burger for a black bean burger just once a month, it would be the equivalent to keeping 22,000 cars off the road for a year and save 220 million lbs. of CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>11</sup> ([Plant-Based Trends in California's School Lunches: A Progress Report on Climate-Friendly School Food, August 2023.](#))
3. The consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables is critical to the health of children, especially for the prevention of diabetes, cancer and heart disease. According to a [national study](#), only 7.1 percent of high school students meet the recommended intake for fruits and only 2 percent meet the recommended intake for vegetables. Additionally, BIPOC children are up to 5 times more likely to die from diabetes than their white peers due to poor nutrition.

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<sup>10</sup> M. Shahbandeh, Share of Generation Z that eats plant-based diet in the U.S. in 2017 and 2022, (Statista, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Stewart and Hamerschlag, *Plant-Based Trends in California's School Lunches*, (Friends of the Earth, 2023), 11.

## Resources

California Department of Education. 2024. Food Programs. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/sn/#annual>.<sup>5</sup>

Feeding America. 2023. 2021 Food Insecurity in California<sup>1</sup>. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/overall/california>.

FRAC. 2023. *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation – Summer Nutrition Status Report*. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/summer-report-2023.pdf>.<sup>3</sup>

FRAC. 2023. *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation – Summer Nutrition Status Report*. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/summer-report-2023.pdf>.<sup>8</sup>

Friends of the Earth. 2023. Current Plant-Based Trends and Key Findings. <https://foe.org/resources/plant-based-trends-ca-school-lunches/>.<sup>11</sup>

No Kid Hungry. 2015. Summer Nutrition Program Social Impact Analysis. <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/summer-nutrition-program-social-impact-analysis>.<sup>6</sup>

No Kid Hungry. 2015. Summer Nutrition Program Social Impact Analysis. <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/summer-nutrition-program-social-impact-analysis>.<sup>7</sup>

Statista. 2023. Share of Generation Z that eats plant-based diet in the U.S. in 2017 and 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1361089/share-of-gen-z-that-is-plant-based-in-the-us/><sup>10</sup>

USDA. Child Nutrition Tables. 2024. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>.<sup>4</sup>

USDA. Household Food Security in the United States in 2021. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=104655>.<sup>2</sup>

USDA. 2021. *Summer Meals Study Summary*. Westat. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SummerMealsStudy-2018-SummaryofFindings.pdf>.<sup>9</sup>