



California Makes Vital Investments In Free School Meals

Final 2022-23 state budget includes more than \$2 billion for school food infrastructure, staff training, and more freshly prepared, CA-grown school meals

June 30, 2022 — (Sacramento, CA) — Building on its School Meals For All commitment, California will make significant investments in freshly prepared school food at a time when families, schools, and farmers face inflation and supply chain disruptions. Governor Gavin Newsom today signed the state budget with more than \$2 billion in funding to address the emerging needs of school districts through higher meal reimbursements, kitchen equipment for more freshly prepared meals, and training for nutrition staff as well as creating more opportunities for California producers to nourish California kids.

“Last year, California became the first state to offer two free school meals daily to all public school students,” said Senate Budget Committee Chair Nancy Skinner, who introduced the Free School Meals for All Act of 2021. “This year, we are building on that historic achievement by investing \$600 million for school kitchens and \$100 million so schools can buy healthy, California-grown food. Plus, we’re supporting food service staff with training and more to ensure all students have access to free, nourishing meals made with care.”

California’s final 2022-23 budget includes:

- \$596 million to implement School Meals for All,
- \$600 million for school kitchen equipment and upgrades to school kitchen infrastructure for more fresh, minimally processed, and locally sourced meals,
- \$100 million for the California Department of Education, in consultation with the California Department of Food and Agriculture, to implement school food best practices and develop eligibility criteria for California-grown, whole and minimally processed, sustainably grown foods, and plant-based or restricted diet food options that can be purchased by local educational agencies for school meals,
- \$611.8 million provided on an ongoing basis for enhanced school meal reimbursements through the state meal program,
- \$60 million in funding to expand the California Farm to School Grant program,
- \$45 million to support implementation of the California Healthy School Meals Pathway program for school food service workers, and
- \$2.4 million for evaluation of the California School Meals for All program.

“School Meals for All is a game changer for California families. Fully funding it in the California State Budget will provide help to the students who need it the most,” said Assemblymember Kevin McCarty, Chair of the Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance whose leadership in crafting the Assembly Budget has enabled transformational investments in our education system. “Providing these meals will ensure every student is well-fed and focused on learning – setting them up for a successful educational journey.”

California’s School Meals For All Coalition, which represents more than 70 organizations that advocate on behalf of public health, education, labor, agriculture, and food banks, commends California’s leadership for understanding the need for, and making transformational investments to increase equitable access to quality school meals. The Coalition thanks Governor Newsom, Senator Skinner, Senate President pro Tempore Toni Atkins, Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon, Assemblymembers Ting, McCarty, Luz Rivas, and Robert Rivas as well as State Superintendent of Public

Instruction Tony Thurmond, California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Secretary Karen Ross, and First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom for their steadfast commitment to our children, schools, and farmers.

Serving more fresh, locally grown school meals increases student participation, which supports lower program costs and is especially important given only two percent of adolescents nationwide meet the United States Department of Agriculture's vegetable intake recommendations.

"It is important that all California children have access to farm-fresh and nutritious meals sourced from California farmers and ranchers," said Sec. Ross, co-author of *Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap to Success*. "We are well-positioned to reach this goal because California produces over a third of our nation's vegetables and two-thirds of the country's fruits and nuts. Further critical investments to expand the CDFA Farm to School Incubator Grant Program will increase children's fruit and vegetable consumption and enhance their academic achievement through hands-on nutrition education. Research also has shown that these important projects boost our local economies and positively impact the environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions."

Twenty percent of Californians face food insecurity on a daily basis, according to January 2022 data from the California Association of Food Banks, with Black, Latinx, and multiracial Californians experiencing much greater levels of hunger.

"As our state continues to reel from the economic repercussions of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity among low-income families will increase," said Assemblymember Luz Rivas, whose San Fernando Valley district has upwards of 85% of its students on free or reduced-price lunches. "For many students, the meals they eat at school are the only source of nutrition for the entire day. However, school lunch fees are a barrier for low-income families which could cause students to forgo a nutritious school meal if they cannot pay for lunch instead of incurring a debt. It is important for all our students, regardless of income, to receive a school lunch free of charge."

School food serves as both a reliable, and the most healthy, source of meals for American children, according to a study from Tufts University, and a body of evidence shows students who participate in school meal programs have improved attendance, behavior, and academic achievement as well as decreased tardiness.

"Our education system can't deliver until all of our children are well-fed and ready to learn," said Assemblymember Robert Rivas. "Healthy, nutritious school meals will help

California students become the next astronaut, the next teacher, and the next Assemblymember. That is why, as a father, I am proud to support the work of School Meals for All.”

The budget deal was directly influenced by SB 364 (Skinner): The Free School Meals for All Act of 2021, which is a two-year bill in its second year, and if passed will support school nutrition departments with the resources they need to apply provisions that will help to implement the state’s free school meals program. Co-sponsors of SB 364 are Kat Taylor, co-founder of TomKat Ranch, Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, California Association of Food Banks, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond.

“Universal meals is a historic investment to provide daily access to quality school breakfast and lunch regardless of income eligibility. It’s a central part of how we are transforming California schools, improving educational outcomes and enhancing the overall wellbeing of our nearly six million public school students,” Thurmond said. “I commend all of our schools and partner organizations who have worked to make this possible.”

What People Are Saying

“School Meals for All is a rebuild of the school food ecosystem for the betterment of all Californians. Not only will it provide free breakfast and lunch for nearly six million children, many of whom depend upon school meals for the bulk of their nutrition, it will also increase the economic and environmental resiliency of farmers and local growers in our state.”

-Kat Taylor, Co-founder, **TomKat Ranch**

"This is another critical step in California's pursuit of a hunger-free future for all our children. We are grateful for Governor Newsom's leadership and are proud to stand alongside a broad multi-sector coalition as California continues to lead the nation by investing in student nutrition and school faculty and infrastructure. Hungry children cannot learn and must be provided the nutrition they deserve to fuel their futures. Now, we look forward to working with the Governor and the Legislature to ensure that children have access to this vital nutrition all year long."

— Becky Silva, Director of Government Relations, **California Association of Food Banks**

“We are proud to see that California is continuing to make history. Thanks to the leadership shown by Governor Gavin Newsom, the State Legislature, and especially Senator Nancy

Skinner, our young people have a shot at growing up healthy and ready to succeed. Paired with California's investment in farm to school innovation, a future with more fresh and locally grown school meals and transformational education for students is in sight. We are committed to supporting school food professionals and educators as they put this investment to work for the benefit of their communities."

— Alexa Norstad, Executive Director, **Center for Ecoliteracy**

"California has made history once again with another significant investment in providing free school meals to all California kids. NextGen California is proud of what our state has accomplished to help address food insecurity and looks forward to continuing to work with Governor Newsom and the Legislature to build on this legacy. Paired with the investments in Farm to School, Kitchen Infrastructure Training funds and the Healthy School Food Pathways Program we are swiftly moving towards a future of healthy, freshly prepared free school meals for every child."

— Tiffany Germain, Research and Policy Advisor, **NextGen California**

"California has made historic investments in school food reform, in order to leverage these investments we need the labor required to create change. CA Healthy School Food Pathways (HSFP) partners with Community Colleges, K-12 Districts and the Department of Apprenticeship to invest in, and develop a school food labor force that has the capacity and tools to serve fresh, scratch cooked meals to all CA kids. Through School Food Institute courses, SCALE assessments, onsite training and leadership development the HSFP program will ensure we are building a labor force for the future. We are grateful to CA legislators, the Governor and First Partner for ensuring we have the critical funds needed to support school food labor and ensure the health of our children and the planet."

— Mara Fleishman, CEO, **Chef Ann Foundation**

"With the expanded reach of school lunches for all kids, farm-to-school education and purchasing will have a greater impact than ever in California. The wrap-around support for local and equitable purchasing, freshly prepared meals, and culinary professions is a smart investment in nourishing the next generation."

— Karen Spangler, Policy Director, **National Farm to School Network**

"Every time California's elected leaders choose to invest in school food and Farm to School, they invest in creating a future that supports every child to flourish, a stronger localized economy, and the regeneration of our planet."

— Nora LaTorre, CEO, **Eat Real**

"With food supply challenges impacting school meals throughout the nation, California's growers have also been struggling. TomKat Ranch is honored to be a part of the Schools Meals for All effort, which championed additional procurement funding for schools. Our own experience working with schools has taught us that additional resources are critical to help cultivate direct school-to-farm relationships. Schools being able to purchase directly from local producers supports the resiliency of farmers, ranchers, and rural economies across the state."

— Kathy Webster, Food Advocacy Manager, **TomKat Ranch**

"Providing free school meals helps children and families know where they can access food, feel cared for, and ensure that all students are nourished and ready to learn. With greater investments that allow school nutrition professionals to more easily source food from local farmers and update kitchen equipment, we have an opportunity to make cafeterias joyful, empowering places for both students and staff to gather every day. A nutritious school meal and positive environment help shape a kid's relationship with food that can last a lifetime."

— Cassie Spindler, California Program Manager and Alum, **FoodCorps**

"California is leading the way to connect students with free, nutritious meals and schools with local farms. As we have experienced in our hometown of Oakland, these programs and investments are critical for struggling school districts and vital for hungry kids."

— Chris Helfrich, CEO, **Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation**

"Our collective vision for both equity and regenerative agriculture in California must include school food as a central, catalyzing piece in the discussion. By investing in School Meals For All, California can seize the opportunity to positively address some of the most pressing food system issues of the day - market access and equity for BIPOC and California farmers, health and nutrition for all of our students, climate-smart agriculture, and shared prosperity for front line food service workers."

– Chef Brenda Ruiz, President, **Sacramento Food Policy Council**

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