

Survey Report: COVID-19 Budget for School Food

Update on Emergency Meal Service and
Districts' Priorities for the Revised State Budget

May 5, 2020



Survey on COVID-19 Budget for School Food

As of May 5, 2020

Introduction

The Center for Ecoliteracy is conducting a survey with public school districts to learn about emergency meal service during the COVID-19 pandemic and priorities for the revised state budget. Respondents — primarily school food service directors — from 25 public school districts completed the survey as of May 5, 2020. They collectively represent **405,000 students** and **691 schools**. In a typical year, **these school districts would have served over 55 million meals**, and their average percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced priced meals ranged from 22% to 96%.

This report presents a summary of these public school districts' responses to the pandemic and the supports their programs' need in order to stay open and continue providing essential meals to students.

Emergency meal service participation at 60% of normal meal service

School nutrition programs have stepped up to address this crisis. During summer school closures, participation in summer food programs averages 17% of participation in school food programs during the school year. Now, school districts are **servicing more than three times as many students** during pandemic-related closures, which demonstrates an increased need for free meals for the growing number of students and families who are facing economic hardship during this time.

Below are district averages for emergency meals served the week of April 13-17, 2020, out of what they typically serve during the academic year:

| | |
|-----|-----------|
| 60% | Overall |
| 84% | Breakfast |
| 56% | Lunch |
| 25% | Supper |
| 8% | Snack |

This translates to approximately **half a million meals** per week based on the 25 respondents' reported meal counts to the California Department of Education for school year 2017–18.

Budget deficits caused by providing emergency school meals

Eighty percent of the responding public school districts reported increases in the overall costs of serving meals during the pandemic, with just 20% reporting that their costs “remained the same” and 0% reporting that their costs had decreased. Fewer than 5% of respondents mentioned any savings. It is important to note that funding for school nutrition service departments is separate from a school's general fund and largely based on per-meal reimbursements. Emergency meal service is creating a large funding gap as participation drops due to school closures while labor costs remain fixed through the end of year for all staff, even increasing in some cases for staff receiving hazard pay. The overall costs of emergency meal service

operations are also generally much higher. School districts mentioned many reasons that their costs have increased, with the top reasons and the percentage of school districts who mentioned each as follows:

- 57% Increased packaging
- 29% Decreased revenues
- 24% Switching from freshly prepared food to pre-packaged items
- 24% Hazard pay for staff

The following quotes illustrate some of the ways in which costs have increased and placed a strain on already precarious school food budgets:

*“**Food cost has almost tripled** due to the necessity of using more packaged individual items and meal kits.”*

*“We have spent **extra money on packaging foods**. Sandwich plastic bags, foil, soup containers.”*

*“I can only purchase individually wrapped items which limits the products we can purchase and serve. We are a full production kitchen and **we aren't able to utilize our fiscal and [operational] capabilities** at this time by making our own meals.”*

*“We are still paying employees' salaries. Our salary costs have gone up due to the employees coming in – they are **getting paid time and a half**.”*

Budget priorities: Flexible funding

When asked what their top priorities were for the 2020–21 state budget, the participating school districts ranked their choices as follows, with **88% selecting flexible funding as their first choice**:

- 1st Flexible funding to respond to COVID-19, improve meal quality, and/or increase participation, allocated on a per meal basis
- 2nd Staff supports (including staff training on COVID-19 safety, non-medical masks, and meal service equipment)
- 3rd Disaster preparedness planning for future pandemics
- 4th Marketing to get the word out about free meals

Support for food service staff

There is a clear need to properly equip and prepare school food service staff who are providing this essential service to California's students. The food service directors we surveyed identified the following priorities for their staff to continue serving meals over the summer and to be able to serve meals when schools reopen:

- 1st Personal protective equipment
- 2nd Meal service equipment
- 3rd Staff training
- 3rd Funding for labor costs

The following quotes demonstrate what is needed for school districts to continue serving meals, mitigate risk of closure, and best protect their staff and the public:

*“PPE masks that can be **changed daily instead of weekly.**”*

*“We're struggling with a **lack of refrigeration.** Providing 5 days of meals at once requires more on site at one time than usual. Carts for moving food are needed.”*

*“**Training on how to keep staff and public safe** - how to properly use masks, etc.”*

*“We need additional funding, as everyone is looking to the child nutrition fund, and we are running out of cash. Since we do not know if we will be fully reimbursed, the questions districts are asking is how to continue feeding when the **costs are increasing faster than revenue.**”*

*“When **the nutrition service department becomes a first responder** and [staff] are on the front lines exposing themselves, the staff need to be compensated for that.”*

*“I'm greatly concerned that schools will be forced to do **massive lay-offs in response** [to budget deficits]. Typically, Classified staff are the first to go. It's the Classified staff that are keeping things going and are proving to be the most essential. I'm worried that the nutrition staff are working so hard for their communities and will then come back to having their hours and jobs cut.”*

The opportunity for local food

When school districts are able to purchase California-grown food, they support regional economies during this economic crisis. Of the responding school districts, 12% are already able to incorporate fresh, local food into their emergency food operations. The remaining districts identified these top solutions for incorporating more fresh and local food:

- 1st Pre-washed and packaged local foods
- 2nd Availability of local products
- 3rd More funding for local food

The following quotes elaborate on what might help school districts serve more local and fresh foods:

*“Having the items available and **packaging.** It's hard to serve fresh vegetables on a to go basis without them being packaged.”*

*“**Availability!** And ‘easy’ produce that can be packed quickly.”*

*“Having a website or somewhere we can look to see **what items are available locally.**”*

*“**More funding** to purchase fresh produce.”*