Who's At the Table?

CALIFORNIA

A Case Study of AB 130

Transforming School Food through School Meals for All

August 2023
The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency to move toward a more resilient local food supply that builds racial and social equity. The pandemic also radically shifted how child nutrition programs operate, with school nutrition professionals working tirelessly to feed kids under emergency conditions with limited resources. Even before this public health crisis, school food was inaccessible to many students in need. While certain income-eligible students can receive free or reduced-price meals, many more families who do not qualify for this subsidy have difficulty affording full-price meals.

We need a system of school meals that serves all kids and values the people who get it to the table. That’s why National Farm to School Network advocates for universal meals focused on equity for the most impacted stakeholders across the food system. We created the Who’s At The Table? School Meals campaign to provide tools to communicate how our shared community values have the potential to radically transform our food system for the better. This deep dive into California’s AB 130 is part of our effort to provide resources that support values-aligned universal meals advocacy. Learn more about this campaign and find additional resources here.

About National Farm to School Network

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy, and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing, school gardens, and food and agriculture education into schools and early care education settings. We provide vision, leadership, and support at the local, state, and national levels to connect and expand the farm to school movement, which has grown to reach approximately 67,300 schools in all 50 states as of 2019. Our network includes thousands of farm to school supporters, a national staff, an advisory board, and partner organizations in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. Territories. Our work is deeply rooted in equity, guided by our Call to Action that 100% of communities will hold power in a racially just food system.
In 2021, California made history by becoming the first state in the nation to permanently provide free school meals to all K–12 public school students. California's omnibus budget trailer education bill (AB 130) established the School Meals for All program in California by modifying the state's meal mandate. Under this bill, public school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools serving K-12 students are required to provide two meals (breakfast and lunch) free of charge to all students each school day. The bill also introduced new requirements for schools to maximize federal funding by participating in programs like the Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2. Additionally, AB 130 allocated $150 million in one-time funding during the 2021–22 school year to assist districts in upgrading kitchen infrastructure and providing nutrition-related staff training to support the implementation of School Meals for All.

What is an education omnibus trailer bill?
In California’s legislative process, an omnibus budget trailer bill is typically companion legislation to the state's main budget bill, which includes various provisions related to education funding, policies, and implementation details. It aims to supplement and support the primary budget bill by addressing specific education-related matters that may not have been fully covered in the main budget legislation.
California’s School Meals for All program was passed as part of the state’s budget bill, which also included additional provisions to enhance the implementation of the policy:

**Kitchen Infrastructure Upgrades - $120 million**

To support fresh, minimally processed, and locally sourced meals.

**Food Service Staff Training - $30 million**

**Increased Per-Meal Reimbursement Rate:**

AB 130 raised the rate from $0.245 to $0.89 per meal, resulting in a $611 million investment in school food programs.

**Farm to School Incubator Grant:**

Funded in 2020, this grant supports multiple stakeholder groups to encourage a systems approach to advancing farm to school throughout the state. More information about this grant can be found on page 8.

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**Continued Investments in School Meals for All**

In the following year, the California Legislature further built on these investments. A press release by the California School Meals for All coalition summarizes the state’s 2022-23 budget:

- **$596 million** - Implement School Meals for All program
- **$600 million** - School Kitchen Equipment and Upgrades
- **$100 million** - School Food Best Practices program (includes California-grown, freshly-prepared, and sustainable school meals)
- **$611.8 million** - Increase school meal reimbursements
- **$60 million** - Farm to School Incubator Grant
- **$45 million** - California Healthy School Meals Pathway program for school food service workers
- **$2.4 million** - Evaluation of School Meals for All program
California has a strong history of advocating for increased access to school meals. Before implementing School Meals for All, the state expanded meal access through a USDA pilot program, which allows students to be directly certified for free or reduced-price meals using Medicaid information.

In 2020, food service directors in the Center for Ecoliteracy's California Food for California Kids® Network identified School Meals for All as their top legislative priority. The Network consists of over 100 public school districts across the state. Combined, it serves one-third of the nearly one billion school meals served each year.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government allowed schools to provide meals at no charge to all children as a temporary emergency measure. This event highlighted the benefits of School Meals for All and created a sense of urgency to establish a state policy before the federal support ended. The School Meals for All Campaign emerged from this momentum and need to avoid this policy "cliff."

State Senator Nancy Skinner, who is also a board member of the Center for Ecoliteracy, introduced the Free School Meals for All Act (SB 364) in February 2021. The bill had several co-sponsors, including the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation, Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, the California Association of Food Banks, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond. In California, the term 'sponsor' pertains to the person or group responsible for working with the bill's author to lead the advocacy efforts.

SB 364 garnered significant support both within and outside the legislature. Senator Skinner was successful in securing over 30 legislative co-authors, which is substantial considering California has 120 state senators and assembly members. **This means that over a quarter of the state's legislature expressed support for the policy.** Following the bill's introduction, more than 200 organizations joined the School Meals for All coalition to advocate for School Meals for All and other supportive policies.

Senator Skinner decided to shift the language from Free School Meals for All Act into SB 129 (the budget bill) and AB 130 (the education trailer bill), which established the School Meals for All Program with permanent funding.
The co-sponsors of the Free School Meals for All Act of 2021 served as leaders of the Coalition. Each co-sponsor had specific responsibilities and engaged with their own constituencies to expand the network of support.

“The freshly prepared school meals made from California-grown ingredients is a critical step towards greater equity. School nutrition workers and local producers - especially those who practice organic and regenerative methods - deserve recognition as the heroes of food security while children deserve to grow up healthy, no matter their zip code.”

— Kat Taylor, TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation [quote from press release]

Senator Nancy Skinner and co-sponsors of the original 2021 Free School Meals for All Act, including the Center for Ecoliteracy, the California Association of Food Banks, NextGen California, TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, formed the School Meals for All coalition. This coalition brought together organizations from various sectors, such as health, education, labor, agriculture, and food banks. Starting with the ambitious goal of gaining support from 100 organizations, the coalition grew to include over 200 organizations. Their logos are shown in the image above.
California’s commitment to farm to school was evident even before the implementation of the School Meals for All policy. The state made groundbreaking investments in this area, allocating nearly $100 million through the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Office of Farm to Fork for the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program between 2020 and 2023.

The Farm to School Incubator Grant Program is a competitive grant initiative with the aim of promoting equity, supporting students’ well-being, enhancing climate resilience, and fostering scalable and sustainable change. It covers multiple tracks for different stakeholders, fostering a statewide approach to advancing farm to school efforts.

Farm to School Incubator Grant History

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>Projects Awarded</th>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>$8.5 million</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>2022</td>
<td>$25.5 million</td>
<td>120</td>
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<td>2023</td>
<td>$60 million</td>
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The program budget was further expanded to $60 million. An additional $4.5 million was provided for grant administration & evaluation in the 2022 cycle.
Transforming School Food Through Multi-Faceted State Investment

School Meals for All policies not only promote equitable access to school meals, but also serve as a catalyst for transforming school food. In California, advocates aimed to take this transformation further by prioritizing freshly-prepared and locally-grown school meals that fostered connections between underrepresented farmers and schools. Promoting workers' rights and elevating the school nutrition profession were also key aspects of the campaign. Achieving this vision required a suite of additional investments to drive meaningful change. This mindset allowed advocates to broaden the coalition and include diverse stakeholder perspectives.

*Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap for Success*, unveiled by California First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom and CDFA Secretary Karen Ross, provides a comprehensive roadmap to transform school food. Released in February 2022, the roadmap builds upon the passage of School Meals for All in the state.

Values-based policymaking

The Farm to School Incubator grant centers equity and encourages school districts to purchase food with specific values in-mind, rather than buying the cheapest local food available. Grant applications were awarded more points if projects:

- Engaged students from underserved communities
- Served schools located among priority populations that are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change
- Included small to midsize, veteran and socially disadvantaged food producers as well as limited-resource farm households in California
- Included California food producers who utilize climate smart agriculture practices

“In districts like mine that are food deserts, it’s especially important to reconnect our students with the importance of farming and the associated health benefits of eating locally grown food. I was proud to have worked on our universal school meals program last year, and I am looking forward to working with my colleagues in the Legislature to ensure the meals we provide to our students are California-grown and healthy.”

- Assemblywoman Luz Rivas, D-San Fernando Valley

[From a Feb 2022 press release by the School Meals for All coalition]
### Additional Investments In School Food Can...

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<th>Provide opportunities for historically marginalized groups</th>
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<td>Approximately 80% of farms in the state are small farms, which means they operate on less than 180 acres or have less than $100,000 in annual sales. Additionally, nearly one in five farmers and ranchers identify as women or BIPOC. These producers play a crucial role in the food supply chain but often face marginalization. By connecting historically marginalized farmers with school districts through farm to school programs, School Meals for All can expand market opportunities and build capacity of these producers to grow their operations.</td>
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<th>Improve meal quality</th>
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<td>Farm to school and scratch cooking often go hand-in-hand. In a 2020 report, The Berkeley Center for Cities and Schools found that many California schools lack the infrastructure and equipment for scratch cooking, hindering their ability to provide high-quality meals. By funding kitchen infrastructure and staff training, schools can shift from the &quot;heat-and-serve&quot; approach and improve meal quality.</td>
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<th>Reduce disparities in school meal quality</th>
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<td>The same Berkeley Center for Cities and Schools study also demonstrated that disparities in school meal quality exist between districts of different socioeconomic status. Majority White student populations are more likely to have scratch cooking programs, while districts with majority non-White student populations rely on local funding for kitchen upgrades. Additional state funding can help bridge this gap and reduce disparities.</td>
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<th>Create good jobs through good school food</th>
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<tr>
<td>Districts that engage in scratch cooking employ more food service workers, leading to more full-time positions and higher-paying jobs. By investing in school kitchen infrastructure, state governments can generate employment opportunities.</td>
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We want a strong community, and by taking care of these students, we're able to do that. **We're bringing in our BIPOC farmers and really helping to get people who haven't been at the table.** For example, one of my school sites went from serving maybe four hundred meals a day to serving twelve hundred meals a day. As the volume of the meals go up, we are going to need to find resources in other places. And so what better way to find it in, than with people who haven't been able to get to the table?

As [School Meals for All programs] grow across the country, there are African-American farmers, women farmers, or other unrepresented groups of people, we need them. **We need to elevate them as part of the fabric of this country. If we can pull them into K-12, we're changing the world.**

As a director, I am going to continue to look at ways in which I can be supportive of underrepresented members of our community that provide product. Sure, I can't get enough ingredients [from small farmers] that can stretch across my district. But, I can work with them to provide for a couple of schools in my district. It's going to cause us all to have to be more flexible in how we purchase, because the need is going to grow when you start feeding everybody.

- Eric Span, *Sweetwater Union High School District*
TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES

In January 2022, the Center for Ecoliteracy authored an article entitled “Six Tips to Help Advocate for School Meals for All in Your State” for the website “State of Childhood Obesity.” The tips from this article are adapted below:

**Build partnerships.**

Partnerships enabled the Coalition to form a diverse and inclusive multi-stakeholder coalition. Senator Nancy Skinner and co-sponsors (mentioned above) tapped into their networks to bring diverse stakeholders to the table.

**Coordinate your approach.**

The Coalition unified advocates across sectors and cultivated bipartisan support by communicating the far-reaching benefits of School Meals for All. These include boosting the local economy, improving access to meals, supporting school food labor, and enhancing meal quality through local food sourcing.

**Seize the moment.**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of school meals in addressing child hunger became increasingly evident. Families across the country relied on free meals from schools and food banks due to increased hunger and economic insecurity. The availability of federal USDA waivers showed that School Meals for All could be achieved. The Coalition seized on the country’s renewed attention to the need for school meals to achieve support for this groundbreaking policy.
The Coalition used research and data to advocate for School Meals for All by sharing personalized messages with policymakers. While an initial state budget allocated funding to expand access to free school meals, the proposal left out students who stand to benefit from the program. The Coalition demonstrated that the initial proposal would exclude up to 50% of California’s public schools, impacting 2.9 million students. Personalized reports for key legislators shared which schools in their districts would be affected, stressing the need for additional state funding to fully implement the program.

The Center for Ecoliteracy spearheads the California Food for California Kids® Network, comprising over 100 school districts. School Meals for All was identified as a top policy priority of the Network. Once the campaign was established, the voices of the Network’s school food professionals were further amplified in hearings, press releases, and social media.

The Coalition customized their communication for different audiences. To enhance bipartisan support, they rebranded their campaign as ”School Meals for All“ instead of using the less popular term “universal meals,” following recommendations from a 2020 messaging study by the Center for Science in the Public Interest. They employed simple, easily understood facts for general audiences and presented deeper data and research to policymakers. The Coalition leadership ensured regular updates for the School Meals for All coalition, while also leveraging earned media and opinion editorials to raise awareness in crucial legislative districts.
TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES

In addition to the tips from the article above, advocates shared additional tips:

Support implementation with wraparound services.

The additional programs introduced through the California budget were crucial for successful School Meals for All implementation. The Farm to School Incubator Grant, kitchen infrastructure funding, staff training, and increased per-meal reimbursement enhance the capacity to provide healthier, farm-fresh meals to more students. Including these programs in advocacy also garnered strong stakeholder support.

Find champions in the state legislature.

The Coalition's long-term relationship with Senator Nancy Skinner and her team played a crucial role in the campaign's success. Senator Skinner has a background in sustainability and history advocating for farm to school policies. Jessica Bartholow, Senator Skinner's chief of staff, also has a strong history of anti-hunger advocacy. This intimate knowledge of and commitment to school food, along with Senator Skinner's positions as chair of the Senate's Budget and Fiscal Review Committee and the California Legislative Women's Caucus, garnered substantial support and contributed to the policy's passage.

“Our students deserve to eat healthy and tasty foods at school, our staff deserve to use real foods and adequate equipment to create exceptional meals at school, and our districts deserve school meal programs that can actually be self-sustaining programs that benefit the entire system and the whole child.”

- Erin Primer, Director of Food and Nutrition Services, San Luis Coastal Unified School District

[Quote from Center for Ecoliteracy website]
ADVOCACY CHALLENGES

Funding School Meals for All campaigns is challenging.
The Coalition received grant funding that partially supported staff time, which made a huge impact in the success of the School Meals for All campaign. Still, accessing funds for direct policy advocacy or unrestricted funding remains an issue for many coalitions. Grant administration can be cumbersome for small nonprofits, diverting staff time from on-the-ground organizing efforts.

Close the technology gap.
Nonprofits, particularly small ones, may lack awareness and access to beneficial software and data for their campaigns. While the School Meals for All coalition utilized Google Suite and MailChimp, members recognized that more streamlined technology could have improved campaign administration.
Implementation of the School Meals for All policy brings both challenges and successes. California advocates shared early obstacles faced, the achievements made, and the strategies employed to effectively implement the program.

### Early Successes:

- **Reduced student stigma with eating meals**
  
  "Just like textbooks, school meals will now be a universal part of every child's school day — reducing stigma, hunger, and barriers to nutrition."
  
  - Senator Nancy Skinner, *California Senate District 9*

- **Middle-income students benefit from School Meals for All, as they face financial challenges despite not qualifying for free or reduced-price meals**

  “There are now second graders who have never had to pay for a school meal. I think about the continued impact of this and how it's changing the culture of school meals, it is just really tremendous to see.”
  
  - Abby Halperin, *The Center for Ecoliteracy*

- **Increased meal participation**

- **Some schools have added entire breakfast programs to comply with the law, increasing opportunities for students to eat**

- **School Meals for All policies help families save money, time, and reduce stress, according to over 75% of parents in California in a report by the Nutrition Policy Institute**

  “Some districts in more affluent communities didn’t anticipate that this would be so positive thing for their communities. It turns out that they are the ones that are seeing those tremendous increases in participation. To me, this indicates hidden struggles among families. Now, those kids can just go through the line.”
  
  - Kathy Saile, *No Kid Hungry*
SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

I. Provide shared learning opportunities for school nutrition directors

II. Stay in coalition with partners

III. Secure additional funding for successful implementation

“The Center for Ecoliteracy has continued engaging school nutrition professionals through a School Meals for All Task Force and virtual gatherings focused on leadership, inspiration, and cultivating a successful school nutrition program. These opportunities allow leaders to exchange best practices and lessons learned to advance their school meal programs. The work doesn’t end when School Meals for All passes. In 2022, California invested $2 billion to support school nutrition programs. Convening stakeholders and providing ongoing support is key to successful implementation.”

- Abby Halperin, The Center for Ecoliteracy

Funding Research and Evaluation:

Through the Budget Act of 2021 (SB 170), the state allocated funds to the Nutrition Policy Institute at University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources for comprehensive evaluation. An additional $2.4 million was invested in evaluation services in the 2022-23 Budget. The Nutrition Policy Institute has already released research briefs on various topics such as meal time, parent perspectives on School Meals for All, and student perspectives on farm fresh meals. Stay updated on the Institute’s School Meals for All webpage for more research updates.
IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

- Long lunch lines from increased participation can reduce the time students have to eat, as shown by research from the Nutrition Policy Institute. This concern is shared by parents and food service directors.

- Higher meal participation and more scratch cooking often stretch staff capacity.

- There is a continuous need to educate families about completing income forms, which determine federal meal support and also impact family benefits and education funding outside the cafeteria.

“I would emphasize the importance of communication, communication, and more communication. It's important to have upfront communication with your administration and all the site leaders, such as principals and assistant principals. Additionally, ensuring that this message reaches families is crucial. We have found that people may assume that since their kids are receiving free meals, they don’t need to submit an application. It's necessary to explain that the application process serves another purpose, like supporting education needs.”

- Eric Span, Sweetwater Union High School District
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites:
- California School Meals For All coalition’s website
- California Department of Education’s web page on School Meals for All
- California Food for California Kids® School Meals for All web page
- The Center for Ecoliteracy's School Meals for All web page
  - Success with School Meals for All web page
  - The Impact of School Meals for All web page
- CDFA Office of Farm to Fork's web page on the California Farm to School Program

Press Releases and Articles:
- [Civil Eats] “Op-ed: Transforming School Food Requires More than Universal Access” by Angela McKee-Brown (June 10, 2021)
- “California To Provide Free School Meals For All” (June 29, 2021)
- [State of Childhood Obesity] “Six Tips to Help Advocate for School Meals for All in Your State” by Anne Moertel and Abby Halperin (January 12, 2022)
- “School Meals For All Can Strengthen Farm to School” (February 10, 2022)
- “California Makes Vital Investments In Free School Meals” (June 30, 2022)
- [CDFA Blog] “CDFA awards $25.5 million for Farm to School projects across California” (November 10, 2022)

Research and Reports:
- University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Nutrition Policy Institute web page for School Meals for All evaluation and research (ongoing)
- Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap for Success by First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom and CDFA Secretary Karen Ross (February 2022)
- [Master’s Thesis] ”What’s Lunch Got to do With It?: A Case Study of California Policy, Educational Equity, and the First Statewide Universal School Meals Program” by Rebecca Murillo (May 21, 2022)

Thank you to the following advocates:
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- **Eric Span**, Sweetwater Union High School District

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