

# Policy At A Glance:

## California's Universal Meals Program (AB 130)

*California is the first state in the United States to establish a universal meals program for all students. The establishment of this program through AB 130 ensures that all students receive two meals each school day, regardless of their income status. This brief will provide an overview of the universal meals program and its significance.*

## Introduction

California is at the forefront of tackling the devastating food insecurity issue impacting children by becoming the first state to implement a statewide universal meals program for all school-age students.

According to a food insecurity analysis conducted by Feeding America, 1 in 6 children were projected to face food insecurity in 2021, which equates to 13 million children across the United States.<sup>1</sup> The universal meals program was approved as a part of the state budget via Assembly Bill (AB) 130 and is making a significant commitment and investment in the lives of children across the state of California.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Director of Nutrition Services, Kim Frinzell, this initiative is “one of three key universal initiatives the Department of Education is undertaking, which is instrumental to student’s overall educational success that honors and promotes the whole child.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the establishment of the universal meals program breaks down food insecurity barriers and socioeconomic stigma associated with receiving free or reduced-priced meals based on income.<sup>3</sup>

This brief will provide an overview of California’s landmark universal meals program and its significance.

## Relevant Dates for AB 130<sup>2</sup>

- 1/08/2021** Introduced in the California State Assembly
- 2/25/2021** Passed by the State Assembly
- 7/8/2021** Passed by the State Senate with amendment that included the universal meals program provisions
- 7/8/2021** Amended version passed by the State Assembly
- 7/9/2021** Signed by Governor Newsom and became California law

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# Overview of California's Universal Meals Program



## Background

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided schools with waivers permitting them to offer free meals to all students.<sup>6</sup> As these waivers reach their expiry date at the end of the 2021-22 school year, California will invest \$650 million to permanently continue offering two free meals per day to all students.<sup>6</sup>

Under AB 130, California became the first state in the United States to implement a statewide universal meals program for all school-age children within the public education system. As a result, 6.2 million children will be given two free nutritious meals during each school day.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after the passage of AB 130, Maine became the second state to offer a universal school meals program.<sup>4</sup>

California's Universal Meals Program builds upon the federal School Breakfast Program (SBP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).<sup>5</sup> Also, the main goal of this initiative is to prevent malnutrition, hunger, and food insecurity among children.<sup>6</sup>

## Essential Elements of the Universal Meals Program

The following are three primary components established to ensure that the universal meals program is a success:<sup>5</sup>

1. Expanding the state meal mandate to include the offering of two meals during each school day for all children, beginning in the 2022-23 school year. Of note, schools must provide all students with a nutritiously adequate breakfast and lunch each school day, regardless of their eligibility status for the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. This provision enhances the previous state meal mandate because that mandate only required schools to provide students in need with one free meal per school day.
2. Requiring eligible schools to apply to participate in federal provisions such as Community Eligibility Provisions (CEP). This component ensures that California maximizes receipt of available federal funding.
3. Providing funds to supplement federal meal reimbursement for serving breakfast and lunch. Essentially, state funding will cover the balance remaining after applying federal reimbursements for free and reduced-price meals. Thus, state funding will supplement and maximize federal funding rather than replace federal funding.

## Kitchen Infrastructure and Training Funds

On September 23, 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 167 into law.<sup>7</sup> AB 167 allocates \$150 million to fund food service staff training and kitchen infrastructure upgrades. School kitchen upgrades aim to increase access to nutritious and fresh meals and improve the quality of these meals.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that local educational agencies (LEA) can use these funds when planning for the implementation of California's universal meals program.



# The Significance of California's Universal Meals Program

## The Reason for the Universal Meals Program

During the 2019-20 academic year, approximately 60% of children in California qualified for free or reduced-price school meals.<sup>8</sup> According to a food insecurity analysis conducted by Feeding America, 1 in 6 children were projected to face food insecurity in 2021, representing approximately 13 million children across the United States.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the California legislature makes a significant commitment and investment in the lives of children across the state of California by establishing the universal meals program.<sup>2</sup>

Providing all students with two free nutritious meals per school day will lead to proper nourishment. Some benefits of proper nourishment include the following: higher academic performance, lower rates of obesity, fewer emotional-behavioral problems, and less hunger.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the universal free meals program aids in the mitigation of any stigma associated with low-income students' receiving free or reduced-price school meals.<sup>9</sup>

State Senator Nancy Skinner (D-Berkely) led the effort to establish a universal school meals program in California by introducing a bill in March 2021. Upon receiving bipartisan support, the California legislature opted to include it in the state budget as part of AB 130 rather than as a separate bill. Senator Skinner believes that "many California children are food insecure, and if you're hungry you cannot learn well."<sup>10</sup> In addition, Skinner believes that "the whole point of school is learning, and everything we can do to create an environment that allows children to thrive and learn is what we need to do."<sup>10</sup> All in all, the universal meals program provides students with a level playing field to nourish their bodies and ultimately be set up for success.



## Benefits of Providing Free School Meals

According to the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), school meals play a pivotal role in the health and well-being of students because it provides them with adequate nutrients throughout the day to learn. According to research, receiving free or reduced-price school meals reduces obesity rates, poor health, and food insecurity.<sup>9,11</sup>

Participation in free or reduced-price school meals had the following benefits:<sup>9,11</sup>

1. Reduction in food insecurity
2. Improved dietary intake
3. Lowered body mass index levels
4. Reduction in emotional, behavioral, and mental health problems
5. Reduction in academic problems
6. Reduction in obesity rates

The above list is non-exhaustive, and it is believed to expand as all school-age children in California continue to receive free meals each school day. This initiative will support student learning, health, and overall success. Hopefully, this program will serve as a model for other states across the nation.

## Conclusion

California is making a significant commitment and investment in students across the state through its universal meals program as all students in grades K-12 will receive two free nutritious meals per school day starting with the 2022-23 school year. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the food insecurity issue impacting children across the United States, and this important provision of AB 130 makes strides to tackle food insecurity, child hunger, and malnutrition. When children are properly nourished, they can concentrate better, perform higher academically, reduce their chances of becoming obese, experience fewer emotional-behavioral problems, and experience less hunger.<sup>9</sup> Also, the universal free meals program aids in the mitigation of any stigma associated with low-income students' receiving free or reduced-price school meals. Notably, the universal meals program also helps families who make too much money to be eligible for free or reduced-price meals but not enough money to adequately provide their children with nutritious meals throughout the day. All in all, the universal meals program will help to level the playing field for California's public school students by providing the nutrients and calories they need to succeed academically and help promote health equity as well.

## References

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## Did you know?

March is National Nutrition Month. Notably, March is a time to recognize and celebrate the value of nutritious food and the role that food service staff play in supporting education, student health and school meals.<sup>12</sup>



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