

IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND:

School Food Authority and Parent Perspectives

Results from Surveys & Interviews with Cafeteria Staff and Parents

2023



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ABBREVIATIONS

CA= California

CEP = Community Eligibility Provision

HSM4A = Healthy School Meals for All

ME = Maine

NSLP = National School Lunch

SBP = School Breakfast Program

SFA = School Food Authority

SY= School Year

USDA = United States Department of Agriculture

USM= Universal School Meals

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools provided free school meals to all students in the United States, but national Universal School Meals (USM) policy (aka Healthy School Meals for All [HSM4A]) ended in school year (SY) 2022-23. However, a few states (California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont) adopted state-level USM policies to continue this statewide for SY 2022-23 and several more states have either passed or are currently considering similar legislation for upcoming school years. USM is also gaining national attention with the recent White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health calling for an expansion of USM at the federal level. Research examining the challenges and strategies for successful continuation of USM is essential, along with studying pandemic-related challenges that are likely to persist in schools. An evaluation in Maine and California was conducted to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on school meals and the concurrent implementation of the national USM policy. Foodservice directors and parents/guardians/ caregivers ('parents') across both states were surveyed and interviewed.

The key findings of the evaluation based on the surveys and interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent national USM policy are as follows:

- **The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many challenges for SFAs.** SFAs reported challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly regarding supply chain issues and food procurement, staffing shortages, and the costs.
- **Universal School Meals (USM) had multiple benefits.** SFAs reported multiple benefits of USM including increased school meal participation; reductions in the perceived stigma for students from lower-income households and their families; and no longer experiencing unpaid meal charges and debt. However, some challenges were noted such as the amount of time students spent waiting in lunch lines.
- **SFAs would benefit from specific resources.** SFAs reported that they need resources to help increase school meal participation,

communications and marketing to students and parents, alternative ways to collect families' economic status, and additional reimbursement for school meals and funding support for facilities and equipment.

- **Parents experienced multiple benefits of USM.** Parents reported reductions in stigma for both themselves and their children. Additionally, parents reported that USM policies reduced parent stress while improving household finances.
- **Parents would benefit from alternatives to traditional school meal application forms.** Parents reported multiple methods that can reduce the stigma of completing these forms including online options and less stigmatizing language on forms.
- **Many parents had positive views of school meals in general.** Overall, many parents were satisfied with the quality and quantity of school meals offered, with some differences by demographic characteristics.

Practice and policy recommendations based on these findings include:

- Consideration of expanding USM policies to all states, especially through state-level policies.
- Additional training opportunities and support for SFAs for professional development and training to further increase school meal participation.
- Innovating school meal application processes, including passing legislation to require that schools provide electronic meal application options and considering alternative ways to determine household economic status.
- Ensuring direct certification systems are as effective as possible to identify eligible students for free or reduced-priced meals.
- Continued grant funding for SFAs to purchase equipment and/or local products.
- Providing higher reimbursement rates for school meals.
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BACKGROUND

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an alarming rise in the prevalence of poverty and food insecurity among households with children. In response, Congress authorized the USDA to provide waivers for all schools nationally to operate Universal School Meals (USM) (aka Healthy School Meals for All [HSM4A]) from March 2020 through June 2022 (School Years [SY] 2019-2020 to 2021-2022).¹ Six states provided for USM for the 2022-23 school year through state-level policies, with several of the states passing this as a permanent policy (i.e., California, Colorado, and Maine). Additionally, several more states have either passed (e.g., Minnesota and New Mexico) or have introduced similar legislation for future school years. USM is also gaining national attention with the recent White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health² calling for an expansion of UFSM at the federal level, such as through expanded eligibility for schools to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).³

PASSAGE OF CALIFORNIA'S USM POLICY

As California's legislature began their new session in January 2021, a coalition of California partners, including No Kid Hungry CA, were advocating for an increase to the state's investment in CEP to make it easier for schools with lower identified student percentages (ISPs) to adopt CEP. However, a number of circumstances created an opportunity to go even further and enact healthy school meals for all legislation: schools had been providing no cost school meals for two years under a federal waiver provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, California was experiencing the best fiscal situation seen in a generation, and State Senator Skinner, Chair of the State Senate Budget Committee and a long-time anti-hunger champion, had hired an experienced anti-hunger advocate as chief of staff.

Given the advantageous situation on the ground, leadership from No Kid Hungry CA met with Senator Skinner's Chief of Staff to discuss the Senator's proposal to provide no cost school lunches to all students. While this alone would have been a huge step forward for California's kids, No Kid Hungry CA knew from experience that school breakfast participation in the state was quite low and that inclusion of no cost school breakfast in the legislation would make a huge difference in the state. With the Senator's support secured, No Kid Hungry CA and a broad coalition of anti-hunger advocates worked to educate legislators and the public about this unique opportunity to ensure that kids in the state had access to the nutrition they needed to learn and grow.

With the ongoing health emergency due to COVID-19, advocates met with legislators and staff in short virtual meetings, shared positive stories of the impact no cost meals had during the pandemic, and provided written statements of support at each committee hearing and during floor action. In addition to working with the legislature, advocates also worked closely with First Partner Jennifer Newsom, a strong champion for school nutrition programs.

Due to the efforts of strong anti-hunger advocates, informed and passionate legislative leaders and an engaged state executive, California became the first state in the country to enact permanent school meals for all kids. The final FY22 state budget included \$1.6 billion allocated for the state's portion for meal reimbursement and over \$600 million for Kitchen, Infrastructure and Training (KIT) grants to incentivize scratch cooking. The policy requires LEAs to maximize their federal reimbursement by adopting the Community Eligibility Provision, if eligible, and the state pays LEAs the difference between the federal reimbursement received for each meal (free, reduced and paid) and the full no cost reimbursement rate for each meal served.

¹United States Department of Agriculture. FNS Responds to COVID-19. Available online: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/coronavirus>

²Biden-Harris Administration National Strategy On Hunger, Nutrition, And Health. Available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/White-House-National-Strategy-on-Hunger-Nutrition-and-Health-FINAL.pdf>

³USDA Announces New Investments in School Meals to Support Health Kids: Available online: <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2023/03/22/usda-announces-new-investments-school-meals-support-healthy-kids#:~:text=The%20expansion%20of%20CEP%20advances,K%2D12%20school%20food%20marketplace>

Because this program was enacted through the budget process, the policy language was minimal. Much of the guidance and implementation process was provided by the California Department of Education. Advocates and Senator Skinner are committed to ensure long-term commitment to fully funding the program and supporting legislation to address and improve on issues as they arise.

PASSAGE OF MAINE'S USM POLICY

In 2021 Share Our Strength partnered with Full Plates Full Potential to secure the passage of landmark legislation guaranteeing healthy school meals for all students in Maine. Full Plates, with the support of Share Our Strength, drafted the language for School Meals for All legislation modeled after other recently enacted legislation which eliminated the reduced-price copay for school meals and included a section instructing Maine Department of Education and Maine schools to maximize federal funding available through special provisions such as community eligibility.

In addition to drafting language, the team worked closely with Maine Senate President Troy Jackson and Maine House Speaker Ryan Fecteau. Although Maine had a Democratic majority in both chambers of the legislature as well as a Democratic governor, the state historically had been a purple state. In early meetings, Governor Janet Mills recognized the importance of bipartisan support for successful implementation and longevity of School Meals for All. The coalition, led by Full Plates, worked with legislative leadership from both parties to build the strongest case for the policy, emphasizing that feeding kids is not a partisan issue. In addition to directly briefing lawmakers, the coalition also provided school nutrition directors in key legislative districts with the resources to elevate stories of childhood food insecurity and how School Meals for All would help families in their communities.

These extensive outreach efforts paid off when Assistant Senate Minority Leader Matt Pouliot, who had personal experience with food insecurity as a child, became connected to the campaign. He was able to garner support amongst fellow Republicans

through his own testimony and an op-ed he wrote. As a fiscal conservative, this Republican senator was able to communicate to his caucus that childhood food insecurity comes at a great cost to society, and that investment in School Meals for All was a prudent financial decision, especially within the context of broader spending on education. Ultimately, School Meals for All passed unanimously in the state Senate.

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food insecurity comes at a great cost to society, and that investment in School Meals for All was a prudent financial decision, especially within the context of broader spending on education. Ultimately, School Meals for All passed unanimously in the state Senate and by an overwhelmingly bipartisan 151 to 26 vote in the state House. This included unanimous support from the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, which would ultimately be tasked with funding the bill as the governor had not included funding for School Meals for All in that year's budget. The committee was able to secure \$10 million to start a seed fund, and then advocates successfully worked to secure the rest of the funding in the worked to secure the rest of the funding in the subsequent year's budget.

OBJECTIVE

Research examining USM policies in the United State is essential to inform state and national efforts, as this is the first time this policy has been implemented state-wide. Additionally, pandemic-related challenges that schools continue to face are likely to persist and are important to document to inform resources and policies to support schools. Therefore, we conducted a study in Maine and California (two states that have passed legislation to continue USM indefinitely) to understand SFA and parent/guardian/caregiver ('parent') perspectives regarding USM policies, the continued impact of COVID-19 on school meal programs, and the impact of USM policies on both schools and households, including school meal participation and stigma.

METHODOLOGY

STUDY DESIGN

A cross-sectional, mixed methods design was employed to gather SFA and parent perspectives on USM, the continued impact of COVID-19 on school meal programs, and the impact of USM on both schools and households. Two methods were utilized: (1) online surveys and (2) interviews conducted remotely (on Zoom).

Surveys and interviews were conducted among SFAs and parents throughout the states of Maine and California.

Online Surveys and Interviews

SFA surveys and interviews: During the spring of 2022, all K-12 public and charter school food authorities (SFA) in Maine and California were recruited to participate in a cross-sectional, online survey through state partners (i.e., California Department of Education and a non-profit organization, Full Plates Full Potential, in Maine). The survey was developed based on existing school nutrition surveys as well as new questions created by the research team in collaboration with partner organizations (i.e., California Department of Education, School Nutrition Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, and the Urban School Food Alliance) and anti-hunger organizations (i.e., Full Plates Full Potential, and Share our Strength).

The final survey included questions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and USM, including challenges, benefits, perceived barriers for school meal participation, and resources needed for continued implementation of USM when the state-level USM policy was to go into effect in SY 2022-2023. A qualitative interview guide was developed to discuss these topics in greater depth. A total of $n = 43$ SFAs in Maine (36% response rate) and $n = 581$ SFAs in California (52% response rate) completed surveys (see Table 1 for SFA characteristics). Reflective of the states of Maine and California, over half of the participating SFAs were in rural areas and 15% were in urban areas in Maine, while 66% of SFAs were urban in California. Interviews were conducted among a subsample of SFAs in California ($n=29$) and Maine ($n=20$) via Zoom with variation by enrollment size, urbanicity, and percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Survey data were analyzed using analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine the differences in survey responses regarding the impact of COVID-19 and USM by school demographics, including urbanicity and prior CEP/Provision 2/3 status ('CEP'). Interview data were analyzed qualitatively relying on an immersion/crystallization approach.

Table 1. Characteristics of participating School Food Authorities (SFAs) in California (n=581) and Maine (n=43)

Respondent Characteristics	California (n=581)	Maine (n=43)
Role		
School Nutrition Director/Foodservice Director	391 (67%)	31 (72%)
School Nutrition Supervisor/Manager	99 (17%)	6 (14%)
Other	91 (16%)	6 (14%)
Years in the Role		
<1 year	81 (14%)	1 (2%)
1-4 years	190 (33%)	11 (26%)
5-9 years	174 (30%)	15 (35%)
≥10-14 years	134 (23%)	16 (37%)
SFA Characteristics	n (%)	
Urban¹	385 (66%)	7 (16%)
Availability of Free School Meals in all schools prior to COVID-19²	211 (37%)	7 (17%)

¹Based on Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) Codes (the remaining SFAs were suburban and rural)

²Based on participation in the Community Eligibility Provision, Provision 2, or Provision 3

Parent surveys and interviews: A survey was developed using similar methods to the SFA survey with feedback from key stakeholders. The final survey included questions about perceptions of and experiences with school meals overall as well as specifically related to USM. A qualitative interview guide was developed to expand on the survey topics in greater depth. Parents were recruited by Galloway Research Service to be reflective of the demographics of the states of California and Maine (based on race, ethnicity, and household income [i.e., based on national eligibility criteria for free or reduced-price meals]). A total of n=100 parents in Maine and n=1101 parents in California completed surveys. Interviews were also conducted among a subsample of parents who completed the interviews (n= 46 parents in California and n=20 parents in Maine), representing parents of children in elementary through high school, and with variability by eligibility for free or reduced-price meals and race/ethnicity (similar to the distributions in California and Maine). Interviews were available in both English and Spanish in California. Survey data were analyzed using linear and logistic regression models, accounting for frequency of lunch participation and demographic

characteristics of the household (e.g., urbanicity, total number of children under 18 living in the household) and child (e.g., child’s grade level and eligibility for free or reduced-priced meals). Interview data were analyzed qualitatively relying on an immersion/crystallization approach.

The online surveys and interview guides for SFAs and parents are available at: <https://www.childnourishlab.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all>

RESULTS

SFA CHALLENGES RELATED TO COVID-19 DURING THE SY2021-22

Supply Chain Issues

When examining challenges related to COVID-19 and/or supply chain issues, over 75% of responding SFAs reported moderate or significant challenges related to procurement (the quantities and types of food, as well as non-food supplies/equipment) and the costs/financial sustainability of school meals. In both states, over half of respondents reported significant challenges related to procuring or receiving the quantities of foods or beverages ordered, the types of foods/beverages ordered, and non-food supplies or equipment.

“...with us having the supply chain disruptions and the demand and ordering stuff, and not getting it. Or when we do find that it’s available, we try to order more so that we have it on hand. We just don’t have the place to put it.”

- Parent

Staffing

There were challenges with sufficient staffing in school cafeterias reported in both Maine and California, although a greater percentage of SFAs in California reported this as an issue.

Overall, medium and large sized SFAs had more foodservice staffing challenges than small SFAs. This may be in part due to the increases in school meal participation, which may have required staff to prepare more meals and oversee more serving lines. Additionally, many SFAs experienced challenges hiring a sufficient number of staff due to low wages and concerns about illness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

School Meal Finances

While SFAs received additional support from the USDA, including higher reimbursement rates for meals, SFAs still reported pandemic-related challenges regarding school meal finances; roughly two-thirds of SFAs in both Maine and California reported that the current reimbursement rate was not sufficient to cover the cost of breakfast or lunch. The most frequently cited causes of school meal deficits were the cost of food, school nutrition services labor costs, and supply costs. The average amount reported for meal reimbursement to be sufficient to cover the full cost of producing meals to meet all federal nutrition standards and also appeal to students was \$2.80 in Maine and \$3.41 in California for breakfast (compared with the USDA SY2021-22 reimbursement rate of \$2.42 for breakfast) and \$4.80 in Maine and \$5.10 in California for lunch (compared with the USDA reimbursement rate of \$4.25 for lunch) [Figure 1]. However, many SFAs noted that the increases in the reimbursement rate, as well as additional funding and grants, were helpful to keep financially afloat, to break even, or to cover purchase costs of equipment.

Table 2. Average Reimbursement Needed

		California	Maine
Mean meal reimbursement rate suggested to meet federal nutrition standards & appeal to students	Breakfast	\$3.41	\$2.80
	Lunch	\$5.10	\$4.80
Mean meal reimbursement rate to meet federal nutrition standards, to appeal to students, and to also include fresh, locally grown produce regularly	Breakfast	\$3.78	\$3.10
	Lunch	\$5.51	\$5.10

Among SFAs that reported having a financial deficit in SY2021-22, the main factors driving that deficit included food costs, school nutrition services labor, supply costs, indirect costs, and equipment costs. An overall summary of the perceived challenges related to COVID-19 among SFAs in Maine is presented in Figure 2. Additionally, the perceived challenges experienced by SFAs varied by urbanicity and prior participation in CEP (see Table 2). For example, in Maine, greater challenges were reported among rural SFAs related to the cost/financial sustainability of the school meal program. Conversely, respondents in urban SFAs reported greater challenges associated with meeting students' cultural preferences.

Respondents from SFAs that did not previously participate in CEP reported that procuring and receiving a sufficient amount of non-food supplies was more challenging compared to those previously participating in CEP. Conversely, schools previously participating in CEP reported greater complaints about school meals from students and parents. Overall CEP may have helped schools transition more easily to address the challenges experienced by SFAs, as they were already equipped to manage high participation rates, but may have still experienced pandemic-related challenges resulting in more negative feedback from parents and students.

Figure 1. Perceived Challenges Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic among School Food Authorities in Maine (n = 43).

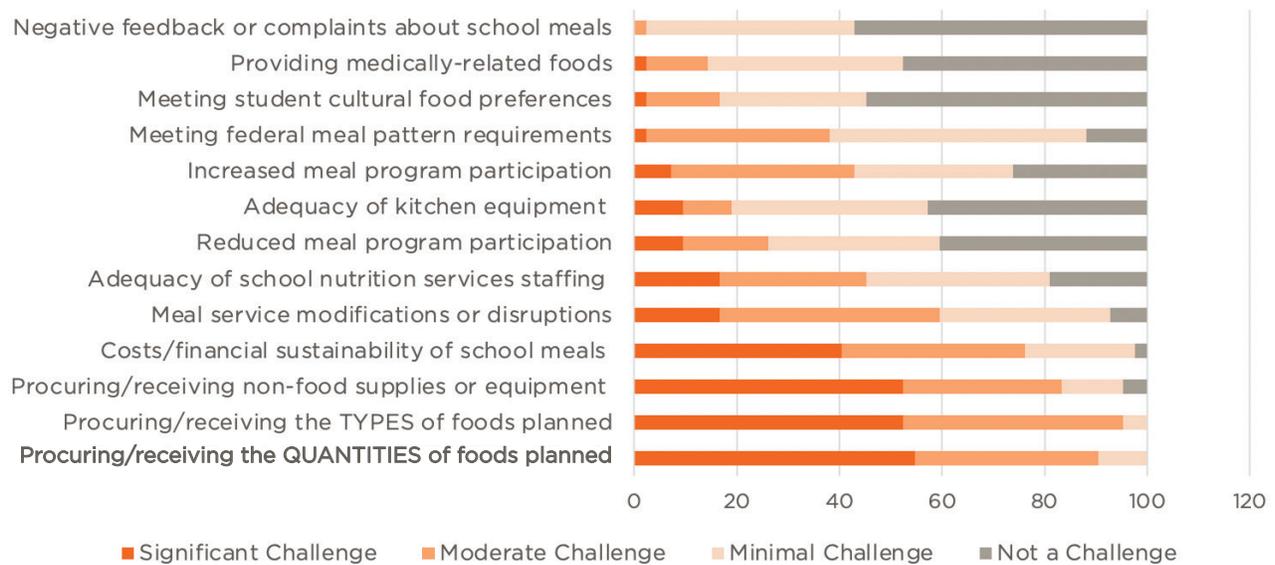


Table 3. Differences in Perceived Challenges due to COVID-19 in Maine by Urbanicity and Prior CEP status¹

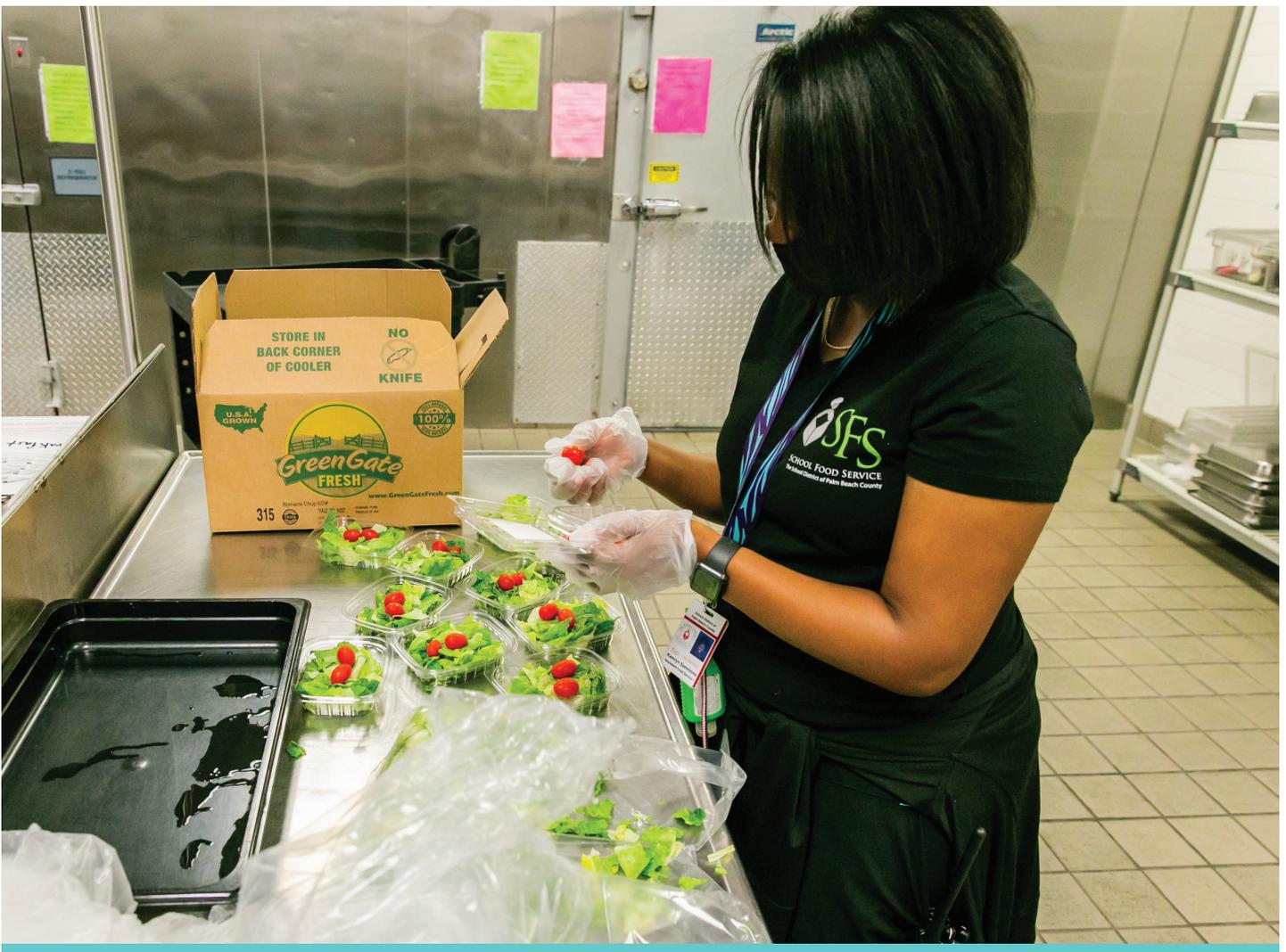
COVID-19 Related Challenges	Urbanicity ²	Prior CEP Status ³
	β (SE)	β (SE)
a. Costs/financial sustainability of school meal programs	0.26 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.32)
b. Procuring or receiving non-food supplies or equipment needed for school meals	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.70 (0.34)
c. Meeting student cultural food preferences	-0.21 (0.10)	0.56 (0.31)
d. Negative feedback or complaints about school meals from parents or students	-0.02 (0.07)	0.48 (0.21)

Bold denotes statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

¹ Perceived challenge was rated by school food personnel on a scale of 1-4 (1= Not a Challenge; 2= Minimal Challenge; 3= Moderate Challenge; 4= Significant Challenge)

² Based on Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) Codes from the US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (Ordinal variable categorized as 1=Urban; 2= suburban, 3= large rural; 4= small towns/rural areas)

³ Reference Group is not previously participating in CEP



IMPACT OF USM DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR (SY) 2021-22 ON SFAS

There were several reported benefits and challenges of implementing USM among SFAs that had not previously implemented USM through CEP.

School Meal Participation and Stigma

The greatest perceived benefit was an increase in school meal participation, with the majority reporting an increase (Figure 2). Another reported benefit was a reduction in the perceived stigma for students from lower-income households and their families, with SFAs in both Maine (51%) and California (40%) reporting that they perceived stigma decreased with the USM policy. This is important as stigma associated with receiving a free or reduced price meal (or unpaid meal debt) is a key barrier to participating in school meals and is one of the primary ways in which USM policies potentially improve school meal participation and reduce diet related disparities. However, it is important to note that this assessment of stigma was based on SFA perceptions and not self-reported by students. Among schools that did not previously participate in CEP, the reduction in stigma was a primary theme among the interviews, and therefore likely a primary driver of increases in school meal participation.



“So removing the stigma is huge. I think that’s been really, really helpful. And I will say my numbers are up at every single school because of it.”
- SFA Participant

Figure 2. Universal School Meals: Changes in Meal Participation

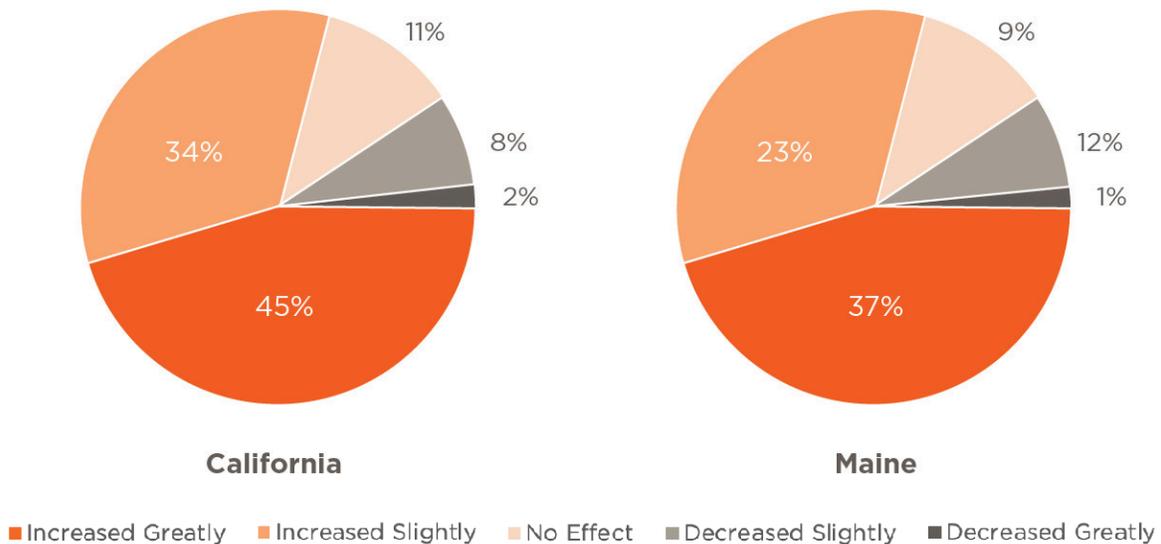
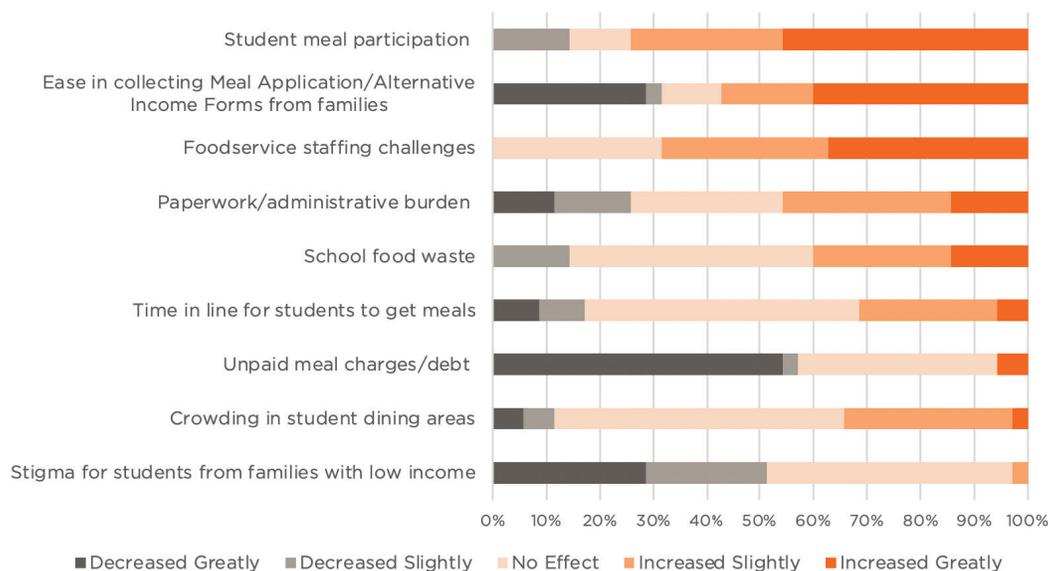


Figure 3. Perceptions of Changes Due to Implementing Universal School Meals in School Year 2021–2022 among School Food Authorities in Maine (n = 35)¹



¹Among SFAs not previously participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

Unpaid Meal Debt

Most SFAs also reported that USM was associated with a decrease in the problem of unpaid meal charges and debt, which can also be related to the reductions in stigma observed. However, while school meals are free under a USM policy, it is important to note that many schools still sell competitive foods at a charge (e.g., snacks and beverages sold in vending machines, a la carte, in school stores, and in fundraisers/booster sales during school hours).

Challenges Associated with USM

Some challenges associated with USM were also reported, with SFAs noting that the USM policy was associated with increases in foodservice staffing challenges. Results were mixed when examining crowding in student dining areas, the time that students spent in line to get meals, and perceived school food waste, with roughly half of respondents reporting that a USM policy had no effect on these cafeteria-related issues. More research is needed to further understand the impact of these issues. An overall summary of the perceived changes related to USM among SFAs in Maine that did not previously participate in CEP is presented in Figure 3.

Resources Needed by SFAs

To help address some of these challenges, the majority of SFAs reported needing resources to help increase school meal participation, as well as additional support for facilities and equipment, and additional resources for communications and marketing to students and parents. Most SFAs also reported that they would benefit from resources for financial management. SFAs also noted that to financial concerns, many would likely need extra funding, an alternative way to obtain families’ economic status other than the traditional school meal applications, and, in the meantime, a campaign with effective messaging to parents regarding the importance and benefits of filling out the application. Current resources that are already available and can be utilized by SFAs include those created by Share Our Strength and California’s More than a Meal campaign. FSDs also stated they needed marketing materials to assist with effective messaging.

PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF USM

Benefits of Universal School Meals

Overall, the majority of parents were very supportive of USM policies and over 75% of parents reported it saved them money, time, and stress. First, parents reported that USM saved their households money, which was particularly helpful given the rising costs of food. Additionally, parents reported that this policy saved them time as they no longer had to prepare breakfast and/or lunch for their children, and that their children could get more sleep as they no longer needed to wake up early to eat breakfast before school. These time savings were reported as particularly important among single-parent households. Reductions in parent stress was another reported benefit of USM; parents reported a sense of relief knowing their children had consistent access to food, as well as no longer having to worry about small shifts in household income (which might make them no longer eligible for free or reduced-price meals).

**“No matter what happens,
I know my child has two meals
at school waiting for him.”**

- Parent

Lastly, parents reported that USM reduced their and their child’s perceived stigma. Many parents were worried that children experience embarrassment in the cafeteria when they receive a free or reduced-price meal, and this embarrassment increased with age. During interviews, many parents of younger students discussed how they were worried about their child experiencing stigma when they entered middle and high school. Additionally, many parents explained that USM would also reduce stigma for themselves, which has not previously been reported in research examining free school meal policies. Parents reported that with a USM policy, they would no longer feel embarrassed or judged by the school for asking for assistance with feeding their families.

“...growing up, it was more for low income families. Now it’s just for everyone. Doesn’t matter income or anything like that...so I do appreciate that.”

- Parent

Applications for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals

Despite USM policies, it is critical that schools continue to collect school meal application forms because in addition to determining eligibility for free or reduced-priced meals, this information is used to allocate state and federal financial support for education, such as Title I funding (i.e. funding provided to communities with higher poverty rates); thus school meal applications (or alternative income forms) play an important role even in the presence of USM. Additionally, this information is required for the state to get the maximum amount of federal reimbursement for school meals and to reduce the financial burden for the state. While the ease of collecting these applications eased for some SFAs, these remained a challenge for others, particularly given confusion around the need for parents to complete these applications in the presence of USM policies.

Parents reported that the application completion and submission processes varied greatly, with many reporting that online applications were both easier and helped somewhat to reduce stigma. For example, parents in Maine typically reported completing paper applications and their children returned the forms to their teachers or school administrators. In interviews, many parents discussed how they felt this was stigmatizing, in addition to concerns about their child returning the forms (of note, Maine has recently passed legislation to provide parents with online application options). Conversely, in California, many parents were able to complete the applications online, which made applications easier and somewhat less stigmatizing, although many perceived stigma associated with

completing forms in general. Some parents in California could enter their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) information into their meal application (instead of more sensitive information such as their household income) and their children were then automatically qualified for free school meals, making the process much easier for parents. Parents also suggested that changing or removing the title of “The School Meal Application” and removing stigmatizing language from the applications such as “low-income” could help reduce stigma.

Parents’ Opinion of School Meals

Overall, many parents were satisfied with the quality and quantity of the school meals offered. Nearly half of parents reported being satisfied with the healthfulness of school meals, although some differences were observed by race and ethnicity in California; on average parents of Hispanic and Asian/Asian American students had less favorable perceptions of school meal quality, taste, and healthfulness than students of non-Hispanic white students. In interviews, parents noted the balance that schools have to navigate to serve healthier foods that will also be appealing to students.

“The greatest benefit is like I said, I can rest assured that it’s a healthy meal. Well, it’s pretty healthy. And I know he’s going to get fed every day. It’s consistent and he’ll eat it. And so I know he’s getting the nutrition that he needs and that’s one less thing that I have to worry about as a mom.”

- Parent

During interviews, several parents mentioned that their children particularly liked the fruit provided by school meals (especially when it was pre-cut) and their school’s salad bar, which increased the variety and amount of healthy foods offered by schools. Of note, despite the challenges of COVID-19 experienced by SFAs (e.g., labor shortages and supply chain disruptions), many parents felt that COVID-19 did not impact the quality or types of foods served in school meals. However, during interviews, parents discussed how COVID-19 disrupted the social aspect of school meals, such as spacing children six feet apart while eating or mandating silent lunches. While there was general satisfaction with school meals, parents did discuss several suggestions for improvement including a wider variety of meals, shorter lunch lines, and more time for the students to eat lunch, as well as more opportunities for parents to be involved with menu planning for school meals.



CONCLUSION

This study found that SFAs in Maine and California experienced many challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding supply chain issues and food procurement, staffing shortages, and the costs.

However, SFAs also experienced multiple important benefits from the USM policy implemented during the pandemic. In particular, SFAs reported markedly increased school meal participation; reductions in the perceived stigma for students from lower-income households and their families; and no longer experiencing unpaid meal charges and debt.

Specific resources were also noted that would be beneficial to SFAs related to increasing school meal participation, communications and marketing to students and parents, alternative ways to collect families' economic status, and additional funding support for facilities and equipment.

Parents similarly noted reductions in stigma, not only their children but for themselves as well. Additionally, parents reported reductions in stress and better household finances. Parents also reported that traditional school meal applications can be stigmatizing, but that online applications and less stigmatizing language on the forms can potentially help. Lastly, many parents were satisfied by the quality, quantity and overall healthfulness of school meals, with some differences observed by race and ethnicity.

In conclusion, study findings suggest there are multiple important benefits of USM to schools not previously eligible to provide free school meals to all students. Reported increases in meal participation and reductions in stigma may help to promote nutrition equity among students. Future research and policies should examine alternatives to school meal applications, more funding and resources for schools, and support for schools to further enhance the quality of school meals.

PRACTICE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings have important implications for both practice and policy, particularly as schools continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and as an increasing number of states consider USM policies. Understanding both the challenges and benefits of USM policies can help inform both state and federal policies. Based on the findings from the study, the following key practices and policies are recommended:

Practice

1. Continued grant funding for SFAs to purchase equipment and/or local products. SFAs noted that procurement costs for food and non-food items and supply chain issues made providing meals difficult; therefore additional funding to support schools to address these challenges are needed.
2. Additional training opportunities and support for SFAs. Based on feedback from SFAs, some of the greatest needs regarding professional development and training are to further increase school meal participation, including resources for communications and marketing to students and parents, and financial management.
3. Ensure direct certification systems are effectively identifying students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals. Direct certification will help to address challenges for both SFAs and parents regarding school meal applications.

Policy

1. Consider expanding USM policies to all states, especially through state-level policies. Current findings about the benefits of USM policies are promising. Federal USM policies may be particularly effective at addressing the issues reported by SFAs and parents regarding school meal applications as these would not be required if USM were implemented nationally.
2. Promote school meal application innovations and funding to support development and implementation. This includes legislation requiring that schools provide electronic meal application options and consideration of alternative ways to obtain household economic status to help address the challenges experienced by families, including stigma.
3. Higher reimbursement rates for school meals to provide healthy, appealing, and culturally appropriate school meals. As food and supply costs continue to remain high, and to meet the cultural and dietary needs of all students, additional funding for schools can help ensure they can provide school meals that align with school meal standards. The reimbursement rates reported by SFAs varied between California and Maine, suggesting that reimbursement rates may need to vary within the continental United States to account for areas with higher costs.

Table 4. Healthy School Meals for All (HSM4A) State Laws

State	Effective Date	Funding Provided/ Committed ¹	Require Free Meal Service ²	Require CEP ³	School Breakfast Program Required	National School Lunch Program Required
California	7/9/2021	FY22-23; FY23-24; ongoing	Yes (Public K-12, Charter)	Yes	Yes	Yes
	https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB130					
Colorado	6/6/2022	FY23-24; FY24-25	Yes (Public)	Yes	Yes	Yes
	http://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2022a_1414_signed.pdf					
Maine	7/1/2021	SY22-23	Yes (Public, some private)	Yes	Yes	Yes
	http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/display_ps.asp?id=221&PID=1456&snum=130					
Massachusetts	8/2/2022	SY22-23	No	No	Yes	Yes
	https://malegislature.gov/Bills/192/H5050					
Vermont	7/1/2022	SY22-23	Yes (Public, Approved Independent)	Yes	Yes	Yes
	https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2022/Docs/ACTS/ACT151/ACT151%20As%20Enacted.pdf					

¹Denotes SY(s) funding provided legislatively or through budget processes commitment. Legislation that authorizes free meal service requirements is typically separate from budgetary bills that appropriate funding for said requirements.

²Includes requirement that schools/districts make breakfast and lunch available to all students at no cost.

³Includes requirement that schools/districts adopt CEP, if eligible, and/or to maximize federal reimbursement/ participation in CEP.