

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

School Food Authority and Parent Perspectives in California and Maine



BACKGROUND

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools provided free meals to all students in the United States, but this national Universal School Meals (USM) policy (also known as Healthy School Meals for All or, “HSM4A”) ended in school year (SY) 2022-23. A few states (California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont) adopted state-level USM policies for SY 2022-23 and several more states have either passed or are currently considering similar legislation for upcoming school years. In September 2022, [The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health](#) also called for expansion of USM at the federal-level.

Universal school meals policies can have potentially positive impacts on child health outcomes. Yet, research is needed to understand challenges and successful strategies for continuing USM, along with examining pandemic-related challenges that are likely to persist in schools beyond the public health crisis. We conducted an evaluation in Maine and California—states that passed legislation to continue USM indefinitely—on the impact of this policy and examined differences in implementation by school characteristics, using a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design.

METHODS

We surveyed 581 school food authorities (SFAs) in California and 43 SFAs in Maine (response rate of 52% and 36%, respectively). Surveys were also conducted among 1,110 parents in California and 80 parents in Maine. Analysis of variance was applied to SFA survey data to examine differences in responses about the impact of COVID-19 and USM by school demographics, including urbanicity and prior [Community Eligibility Provision](#) (‘CEP’)/Provision 2/3 status. Parent survey data were analyzed using linear and logistic regression models, accounting for frequency of lunch participation and demographic characteristics of the household and child.

A subset of SFAs (29 SFAs in California and 20 SFAs in Maine) and parents (46 parents in California and 14 parents in Maine) were interviewed. Interviews were qualitatively analyzed using an immersion/crystallization approach.¹

RESULTS

Key findings based on surveys and interviews with SFAs and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent national USM policy include:

- **The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many challenges for SFAs, particularly regarding supply chain issues and food procurement, staffing shortages, and costs.**
 - [Foodservice staffing challenges](#) (e.g., the additional effort necessary to prepare more meals with higher student participation rates) was reported among 69% of SFAs in Maine and 77% of SFAs in California.
 - Results on the perceived impact on [crowding in cafeteria dining areas](#) and the [amount of time spent on lunch lines](#) were mixed.
- **Many parents had positive views of school meals in general.** Parents were satisfied with the quality and quantity of school meals offered, with some differences across demographic characteristics.
 - [Cost savings for households](#) was reported among 84% of parents in Maine and 82% of parents in California.
 - [Substantial time savings for parents](#) was reported among 82% of parents in Maine and 79% of parents in California.
 - [Reductions in parental stress](#) was reported among 79% of parents in Maine and 75% of parents in California.

¹The online surveys and interview guides for SFAs and parents are available at:

<https://www.childnourishlab.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all>

- **SFAs and parents reported multiple benefits of USM.** SFAs identified benefits such as 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. Parents reported reductions in stigma for both themselves and their children. As a result of USM policies, parents reported reductions in stress while household finance improvements.

- o Increased school meal participation was reported by the majority of SFAs (75% in Maine and 79% in California).
- o Eliminating unpaid meal charges and debt was reported by 57% of SFAs in Maine and 81% of SFAs in California

“It’s a parent’s worst nightmare to feel like I have to sign this piece of paper that says I can’t feed my kids.” - Parent

- o Reductions in perceived stigma for students and households was reported by 51% of SFAs in Maine and 40% of SFAs in California.
 - o Reduction in stigma for parents (e.g., completing school meal application forms) was a common theme discussed in interviews.
- **SFAs and parents would benefit from specific resources.** SFAs reported that they need: (1) resources to help increase school meal participation, (2) communications and marketing to students and parents, (3) alternative ways to collect families’ economic status, (4) additional reimbursement for school meals, and (5) funding support for facilities and equipment. Parents would benefit from alternatives to traditional school meal application forms such as online options as well as form language that is less stigmatizing.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed challenges faced by SFAs in Maine and California due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially obstacles to supply chain and food procurement, staffing shortages, and costs. Despite these challenges, 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. Parents similarly noted reductions in stigma for themselves and their children, as well as reductions in stress, and better household finances. Study findings suggest multiple 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, as well as providing applications online and crafting less stigmatizing language on application forms. 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. Many parents were satisfied by the quality, quantity, and overall healthfulness of school meals, with some differences observed by race and ethnicity.

POLICY & PRACTICE **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To expand school meal participation and make the process of applying for and providing school meals to more students, we recommend the following based on study findings:

- 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.

