**California School Lunch**

In School Year (SY) 2022–23, California became the first state to implement a statewide Universal Meals Program for school children. California’s Universal Meals Program (UMP) builds on the foundations of the federal National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). There are three key pillars to ensure the program's success:

Pillar One: California’s state meal mandate requires local educational agencies (LEA) to make available both a nutritiously adequate breakfast and lunch for, not just needy children, but all children each school day.

Pillar Two: High poverty schools are required to participate in a federal provision.

Pillar Three: The California State Legislature allocates funds to provide state meal reimbursement to cover the cost of the UMP.

Background Provisions Guidelines Resources FAQ Contacts

Background

In 2022, California Education Code (EC) sections 49501.5 and 49564.3 were enacted, establishing the UMP, which updated the state meal mandate and required high poverty schools to apply for a federal provision, such as the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or Provision 2.

Update of State Meal Mandate

California EC Section 49501.5 requires public school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools serving students in grades transitional kindergarten through grade 12 (TK–12) to provide two meals free of charge (breakfast and lunch) during each school day to students requesting a meal, regardless of their free or reduced-price meal eligibility.

Federal Provision Participation Requirement

California EC Section 49564.3 requires LEAs with high poverty schools to adopt a federal universal meal service provision, such as CEP or Provision 2. A school is considered high poverty if their identified student percentage (ISP) is over 25 percent, meaning 25 percent of enrolled students are determined eligible for free school meals through direct certification, or identification as homeless, migrant, foster, or runaway.

Supplemental State Meal Reimbursement

The CDE will provide additional per meal reimbursement to LEAs for all nutritonally adequate meals served to students, as long as the LEA is approved to participate in the federal School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs and serves U.S Department of Agriculture reimbursable meals. LEAs will still be required to abide by federal regulations and guidelines as the UMP is meant to supplement, not replace, the federal school nutrition programs.

Under California EC Section 49501.5, the meal reimbursement amount will not exceed the difference between the federal and state free reimbursement rates. Addtional state reimbursements will be provided for reduced-price and paid meals to ensure LEAs receive the same reimbursement for those meal categories as they would for meals served at the free reimbursement rate.

Questions: School Nutrition Programs Unit | UniversalMealsSY22@cde.ca.gov | 1-800-952-5609

Last Reviewed: Wednesday, December 27, 2023