

Parent & Caregiver FAQ

Universal School Meals



Why are school meals important?

School meals support student health and learning for millions of children every year. Universal meals, where all students can eat for free, have been shown to improve student diet quality, academic performance, attendance, and to reduce food insecurity.¹



Do I have to pay for my student to eat school meals?

No! School meals are funded by the state and federal government. All children can eat school meals free of charge. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) sets strict nutrition standards to ensure that school meals are balanced and healthy, and schools must adhere to these standards to get government funding.

In June of 2021, California became the first state in the US to make school meals free for all students on a permanent basis. **More than six million public and charter school students can enjoy free breakfast and lunch at school!**²



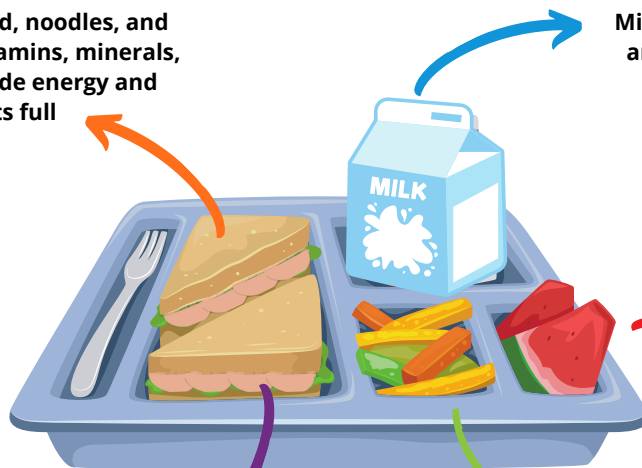
Are school meals healthy?

Yes! School meals must meet strict nutrition standards aligned with Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Research shows that school meals are healthier than meals brought from home. Students who eat school meals consume more milk and fruits and vegetables, and fewer desserts and snack foods compared to those who ate lunch from home or another source.³

Whole grains, like bread, noodles, and cereals, are rich in B-vitamins, minerals, and fiber, which provide energy and keep students full

Milk is an excellent source of calcium and helps to grow strong teeth and bones



The nutrition standards set limits on the amount of saturated fat, sodium, and total calories in each meal, so that meals support kids' health now and into the future!

Protein, such as meat, fish, dairy, eggs, beans & legumes help students grow healthy and strong bodies!

A variety of fruits and vegetables can provide student's bodies with all the nutrients they need to promote healthy skin and eyes, and a strong immune system



My student may not want everything that is offered in the school meal. Do they need to take everything that is offered?

No! Students get to choose what they eat via the **offer vs. serve** rule.

- Schools must offer all five meal components at lunch (fruit, vegetable, grain, meat or meat alternative, and milk)
- Students must select at least three of the five components to make a reimbursable lunch; they can take all five if they choose!



This offer versus serve rule allows students to decline some meal components so they take only foods they intend to eat, which can help reduce food waste. As long as students take at least three components - including a fruit or vegetable - the lunch meal qualifies for reimbursement. At breakfast, four meal components are offered and students must take at least three.



How can parents and caregivers support the school meal program?

- Offer to help with taste tests or other nutrition promotion activities in the cafeteria
- Help inform other parents about the benefits of school meals, including the important role they play in supporting food security and academic success for millions of children nationally
- Find out if your school offers culturally relevant meal options
- Review the school menu with your student, ask about any new fruits or vegetables they have seen or tried at school – the menu is usually on the school district website
- Advocate for longer lunch periods to give students sufficient time to eat
- Learn about Smart Snacks in Schools and encourage your child to take the full meal
- Give your school nutrition staff the positive feedback, too! Thank them for the healthy meals they are preparing for students





I've heard the term school nutrition environment. What does that refer to?

The school nutrition environment refers to all of the foods and beverages available to students at school as well the messaging and information they receive about food and beverages while at school. It also includes the foods and beverages they see other students bring to school.



How do parents and caregivers contribute to a healthy school nutrition environment?

- Discuss school celebrations with other parents and [encourage celebrations that support kids' health with physical activity or healthy foods and beverages](#)
- Encourage parent-teacher organizations to host fundraisers with non-food items
- Suggest or donate [student rewards](#) such as pencils, stickers, the opportunity to choose a class activity or book to read or, for older students, permission to listen to music while working at their desk instead of candy or other unhealthy foods
- Send your student to school with a reusable water bottle and work with the school to ensure that your student has [effective access to water at school](#)
- Volunteer to work in the school's edible garden
- Find out if your school offers [nutrition education](#). Standards-based nutrition education can help students learn to make healthy choices
- Join the school or district [wellness committee](#)



Where can I learn more about the school meal program?

Visit ucanr.edu/schoolmeals to learn more about the school nutrition environment, challenges facing school food service directors, and actions families can take to support healthy schools.

References:

1. Cohen JFW, Hecht AA, McLoughlin GM, Turner L, Schwartz MB. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*. 2021;13(3):911.
2. California Department of Education. [Fingertip Facts on Education in California](#). March 2023
3. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Lunches Consumed From School Are the Most Nutritious. June 2021. FNS-841 Findings are from the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, which was conducted by Mathematica.



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