

California Watch

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More eligible for free school meals since recession

March 4, 2011 | [Joanna Lin \(/user/joanna-lin\)](#)



DC Central Kitchen/Flickr

More than 3.4 million students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals at California public schools last year – a 9 percent increase from two years earlier – indicating the number of families whose incomes have been hit hard by the recession.

Nearly [every county](#)

(<http://www.kidsdata.org/data/topic/map.aspx?ind=518>) in the state saw an increase in the number of eligible students from the 2007-08 to 2009-10

school years, according to an [analysis](#)

(<http://www.kidsdata.org/data/topic/dashboard.aspx?cat=39>), of new state education data released this week by the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health. Statewide, 281,696 more public school students became eligible.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs are federally funded and open to all K-12 students. To qualify for free or reduced-price meals, a student's family income must fall below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$40,793 for a family of four in 2009-10.

Nearly 60 percent of all public school students last year qualified, according to the foundation. Of those students, nearly 84 percent had family incomes at or below \$28,665 – 130 percent the federal poverty level for a family of four – making them eligible for free meals.

In 21 counties, more than 60 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Eligibility rates were especially high in Central Valley counties (74.8 percent in Tulare, 75.7 percent in Merced and 72.5 percent in Madera) and in Imperial County (72.6 percent).

Still, not all students eligible for free or reduced-price meals participate in the programs.

An [analysis](#) (<http://www.breakfastfirst.org/districtdata/index.shtml>) released last month by California Food Policy Advocates found that 70 percent of eligible students participated in the school lunch program during the 2009-10 school year. Participation in the school breakfast program was even lower: 30 percent.

(The group's analysis of state education data excluded charter schools, state special schools and sites operated by County Offices of Education, so it pegged the total number of eligible students at 3,279,182.)

Because most schools offer a breakfast program, the participation gap is "not necessarily an access issue," said Tia Shimada, a nutrition policy advocate at California Food Policy Advocates. "It's an issue of when and where breakfast is served."

Schools typically serve breakfast before classes begin. That can leave kids who rely on busses or their families to bring them to school without enough time to eat. And because the meal is usually offered in the cafeteria, kids who participate are more easily identified and can feel stigmatized, Shimada said.

Supporters of the School Breakfast Program are trying to increase participation by adjusting when and where students can eat.

Many schools now have [classroom breakfast](#) (<http://www.breakfastfirst.org/classroom/index.shtml>), in which all students are offered a meal at the start of the school day. Others offer breakfast once school begins, perhaps during recess or a passing period, or in a to-go bag for students to pick up as they come onto campus.

Research shows students who routinely eat breakfast perform better in school, and have lower rates of absenteeism and tardiness. But increasing participation is not just a health or education issue – it's also monetary.

If students eligible for free or reduced-price meals participated in school breakfast programs at the same rate they did school lunch programs, California could receive [more than \\$351 million in additional federal funds \[PDF\] \(http://www.breakfastfirst.org/pdfs/SchoolMeals_2009-10_DataHighlights_3-3-11.pdf\)](#), California Food Policy Advocates estimated.

"With the state of district budgets and our state's finances, you can't ignore the fiscal issues," Shimada said.

The number of students not served by the school breakfast program – and the federal dollars lost as a result – is available by district [here \[PDF\] \(http://www.breakfastfirst.org/pdfs/DistrictData_2-2-11_BFC.pdf\)](#). You can find the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals in your county or school district [here \(http://www.kidsdata.org/data/topic/table.aspx?ind=518\)](#).

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