

Back to Basics:

Food & Fairness for Students in Public Charter Schools



California charter schools are **public schools.**

They enroll more than **600,000 students.**

340,000+
of those students are low income.

NONE are guaranteed
access to free or low-
cost meals at school.



See endnotes for details & data sources.

Food & Fairness for Students in CA Charter Schools

This brief examines student access to meals in California charter schools. Included are the findings of a school-by-school data analysis assessing the availability of free and reduced-price meals as well as student enrollment and demographics. The findings are discussed with respect to the Local Control Funding Formula, student health and achievement, and public school choice. Also included are examples of California charter schools that do and do not make meals available to students in need.

Existing Law

In 1992, California authorized charter schools as a part of the state's public education system. California's Charter Schools Act establishes that charter schools are intended to "increase learning opportunities for all pupils" and "provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system."¹ Consequently, charter schools are considered public schools of choice open to all students who wish to enroll.

Since 1975, California state law has ensured that all low-income public school students have access to at least one free or reduced-price school meal each school day.² There is one notable exception: this law does not extend to low-income students attending public charter schools, making them the only low-income public schools students in California without guaranteed access to any free or reduced-price meals at school.

Charter School Enrollment

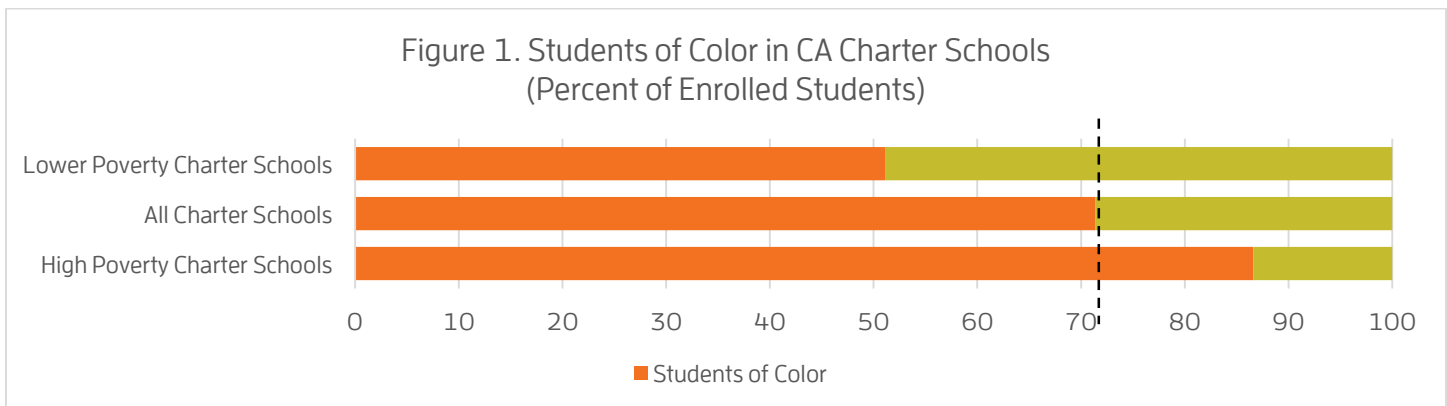
Nearly 1,250 charter schools operate within California, enrolling more than 600,000 students in grades K-12. That makes charter schools responsible for the education of approximately one in 10 public school students across the state.

Students in Poverty

California has one of the world’s largest economies³ – and the nation’s highest rate of child poverty.⁴ The families of nearly one in four California children do not have the means to meet their most basic needs including food, housing, clothing, and utilities.⁵

Well over half (57 percent) of the students enrolled in California charter schools are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals based on criteria^a established by federal law.⁶ State and federal funding streams (e.g., Title I, the Local Control Funding Formula) use school meal eligibility as an indicator of student need and low income,⁷⁻⁸ but eligibility alone does not confer access to school meals.

In three out of five California charter schools, at least half of all enrolled students are low income (i.e., eligible for free or reduced-price meals). These high poverty charter schools enroll students of color^b in disproportionately large numbers. Conversely, students of color are underrepresented in charter schools with lower rates of student poverty (i.e., schools where fewer than half of enrolled students are low income). See Figure 1.



Local Control Funding Formula

California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), established in the 2013-14 state budget, determines the level and distribution of state funding for all public schools.⁹ One intent of LCFF is to close the persistent achievement gap affecting low-income students. The formula provides all schools with a per-pupil base grant as well as additional funds (i.e., supplemental and/or concentration grants) allocated according to the enrollment of “disadvantaged students,” including students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.^c This means charter schools currently receive state funding that is explicitly tied to students’ eligibility for free or reduced-price meals without having any obligation to offer those meals.

^a Income guidelines for individual student eligibility for free and reduced-price school meals:

- Free meals: household income at or below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG)
- Reduced-price meals: household income between 130% and 185% of FPG

Foster, migrant, runaway, and homeless children and children from households participating in CalFresh, CalWORKs, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and MediCal, are considered eligible to receive free school meals.

^b “Students of color” includes students identifying as “American Indian or Alaskan Native”, “Asian”, “Pacific Islander”, “Filipino”, “Hispanic or Latino”, “African American”, or “two or more races” and excludes “White, not Hispanic” students. These categories are designated by the California Department of Education (CDE): <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/fsenr.asp>.

^c Per the CDE, “disadvantaged students” include students who are English Learners (ELs), foster youth, and/or meet the federal eligible criteria to receive free or reduced-price meals: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcffoverview.asp>.

School Meals

Free and low-cost school meals help protect students from the harmful effects of poverty and food insecurity. These meals nourish children while alleviating food costs for families, helping to stretch precariously limited household budgets. Perhaps unsurprisingly, school meal programs are also tied to better health, higher academic achievement, and improved food security, among other positive outcomes for students, particularly for those students who do not otherwise have access to enough food.¹⁰

School Meals & School Choice: One Family's Experience

Angeles enrolled her children in a San Diego charter school. The family chose the school because of the arts-focused curriculum. The children love to sing and play the piano. The family also liked the school's innovative schedule that requires on-campus attendance four days per week and one day of independent study.

After the school year began, Angeles learned that no free or low-cost lunch options were available to students. When she asked school administrators for help, letting them know that her children qualified for free school meals at their previous public school, she was told that nothing could be done. Being excluded from the school lunch program made her children feel like they didn't belong.

Angeles' youngest child is starting kindergarten next year. He will not be enrolled in the charter school because the family cannot afford to forego access to free school meals. Angeles knows other families are facing the same struggle. Speaking about the lack of free and low-cost meals in charter schools, Angeles says, **"It limits our choice of schools. It limits our ability to feed the kids. It affects the kids emotionally. This needs to change."**

Student Access to Meals in Charter Schools

One in four California charter schools, enrolling more than 170,000 students in grades K-12, do not offer free and reduced-price meals, or in many cases, any meals at all.^d These schools vary in size, geographic location, educational models, and student demographics.

More than 80,000^d of the low-income students enrolled in California charter schools go without access to free and reduced-price school meals. Also attending schools that do not offer such meals are

- ➔ 23 percent (nearly 11,000) of the African American students enrolled in charter schools;
- ➔ 20 percent (more than 62,800) of the Latino or Hispanic students enrolled in charter schools; and
- ➔ 20 percent (more than 8,100) of the Asian and Pacific Islander^e students enrolled in charter schools.

^d These calculations include schools deemed "exclusively virtual" by the CDE. Exclusively virtual schools represent 12 percent of the California charter schools that do not make free and reduced-price meals available to low-income students and enroll 11 percent of students attending such schools.

^e This statistic includes students who identify as "Filipino." The CDE reports statistics for "Asian," "Pacific islander," and "Filipino" students separately. These categories are aggregated for the purposes of this brief.

A number of charter schools, exercising the flexibility and independence afforded to them under state law, host their students on campus fewer than five full days per week. Students in these and all other schools are still beholden to the basic physiological and cognitive need for nutritious meals every day. Below are examples of California charter schools that do not make meals available to students in need. Schools with programs meeting fewer than five days per week are noted.

Because student access to meals in charter schools is a systemic issue rooted in statewide policy, this brief will not cite the name of any particular charter school. The unnamed charter schools described here help to demonstrate the scope and scale of need with respect to school meals.

- ➔ A K-8 charter school in Alameda County that enrolls 115 students does not offer any meals. Nearly all (95%) of the students at the school are low income.
- ➔ A K-12 charter school in Riverside County that enrolls more than 1,300 students does not offer any meals. Well over half of the school's students are low income.
- ➔ A charter school in Placer County that enrolls more than 450 students requires onsite attendance four days per week and does not offer any meals. Nearly one in 10 of the students at the school is low income.
- ➔ A K-8 charter school in San Diego County enrolling more than 1,600 students requires up to three days of onsite attendance per week and does not offer any meals. One in five students at the school is low income.
- ➔ A K-12 charter school in Humboldt County that enrolls more than 120 students only offers a paid (full-price) lunch program. More than 80% of the school's students are low income.
- ➔ A K-8 charter school in San Diego County enrolling more than 800 students only offers full-price meals and only on certain days of the week (as a fundraiser). One in three students at the school is low income.

Student Need & School Choice: A Parent's Perspective

Our family made the choice that 2014-15 would be our last year at [the charter school] due to a number of concerns, the lack of a free and reduced-price meal program being part of that decision. I do hope to see new legislation requiring California public charter schools to comply with the current public school nutrition requirements. I know there are literally hundreds of families at [the charter school] that would benefit from the implementation of a nutrition program.

-Anonymous parent of former charter school students in CA

A large majority of California charter schools do voluntarily make free and reduced-price meals available to low-income students. As illustrated by the examples below, the more than 900 charter schools that do

help meet the basic, nutritional needs of their students vary widely with respect to size, geographic location, educational models, and student demographics.

- ➔ A charter high school in Los Angeles County that enrolls more than 3,000 students contracts with a nearby school district to offer meals. Two in every three students at the school are low income.
- ➔ A K-8 charter school in Alameda County that enrolls 170 students contracts with a vendor to offer school lunch. More than one in four of the school's students are low income.
- ➔ An independent study charter school (grades 7-12) that enrolls more than 100 students in Stanislaus County offers meals two times per day. Almost 90% of the enrolled students are low income.
- ➔ A charter school offering a high school diploma program centered on late afternoon and evening classes in Kern County offers meals. Of the more than 420 students enrolled, nearly 70% are low income.
- ➔ A charter school in Sacramento County that enrolls 200 students serves lunch and breakfast free of charge to all students. One in 10 students at the school is low income.

Public School Choice

In order for California families to have a true, unencumbered choice in public education, their children need equitable access to basic resources at school. Those basic resources should include nutritious meals, especially for students living in poverty. To make public charter schools a viable option for all students, as is required and intended under the law, low-income students in charter schools should have ensured access to free and low-cost meals like low-income students in all other public schools.

Technical Notes

This analysis used a school-level match of County District School (CDS) codes to compare the publicly available 2016-17 *Student Poverty FRPM* data file from the California Department of Education (CDE), the 2016-17 National School Lunch Program and federal School Breakfast Program meal claiming data provided by the CDE to California Food Policy Advocates, and the publicly available 2016-17 *Enrollment by School* data file from the CDE which details school-level enrollment by racial/ethnic designation, gender, and grade.

For schools included in the *Student Poverty FRPM* data file that could not be matched via CDS code to the school meal claiming data file (i.e., schools that were not initially confirmed as serving meals through a federal school meal program), we verified school-level characteristics using a variety of data sources, including but not limited to direct contact with charter school personnel, student/parent handbooks, content of school websites, School Accountability Report Cards, and the online CDE School Directory.

School characteristics examined for the purposes of this analysis included the provision of free and reduced-price meals, the provision of any meals, K-12 student enrollment, K-12 student enrollment by race/ethnicity, K-12 student enrollment by income status, geographic location, open/closed status, and school type. With respect to school type, the analysis assessed characteristics including designation by the CDE as an exclusively virtual school and requirements for students to be physically present at a school site.



California Food Policy Advocates

is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health & well being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable food.

Contact:

Tia Shimada at
510.433.1122 ext 109 or
tia@cfpa.net

Stay current online:

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www.lchc.org



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www.wclp.org



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