

# School Meal Programs: The Basics



Charters schools can  
**receive funding**  
for school meal programs.



Schools can – and do – offer meals  
**without a kitchen  
or cafeteria**  
on campus.



Schools have many options for  
offering meals from  
**self-prep to food  
service management  
companies.**

## Funding

All public schools, including charter schools, can participate in the federal school meal programs.<sup>1</sup>

Participating schools receive **federal funding** for each meal served. Generally, schools receive the highest reimbursement for meals served to the lowest-income students.

California schools can also receive **state funding** for meals served to low-income students.<sup>2</sup>

School meal programs receive categorical, entitlement funding that exists independent of school general funds. State and federal funding can be used for **food, staffing, equipment, and other expenses** necessary for the operation and administration of a school meal program.

Public grants and loans are also available to support the startup, expansion, and improvement of school meal programs.

## Facilities

While all students deserve access to first-rate school facilities, **many public schools face infrastructure challenges and are still able to offer meals without a kitchen or cafeteria.** In fact, a statewide survey found 70 percent of California school districts deal with infrastructure limitations when serving nutritious school lunches.<sup>3</sup>

## Operation & Administration

All schools have options in how they administer and operate school meal programs.<sup>4</sup> For instance, charter schools can

- Prepare meals at an onsite or central kitchen;
- Contract with a school meal vendor such as a local school district; or
- Contract with a food service management company to handle any aspect of their school meal program; and
- Serve meals with or without using the federal nutrition programs.



**California Food Policy Advocates** is a statewide public policy and advocacy organization dedicated to improving the health and well being of low-income Californians by increasing their access to nutritious, affordable food.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more about the National School Lunch Program, visit:  
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/nslp.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> For more about California's State Meal Program, which can operate in conjunction with (or separately from) the National School Lunch program, visit:  
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/stm.asp>.

<sup>3</sup> The Pew Charitable Trust, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The California Endowment, *Serving Healthy School Meals in California*, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about options such as school meal vendors and food service managements companies, visit:  
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/mbsnpsnp012009.asp> and  
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/mbsnpsnp072016.asp>.