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THE CENTER FOR ECOLITERACY'S APPROACH TO SCHOOL FOOD SYSTEMS CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

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The Center for Ecoliteracy, a California-based nonprofit organization, has been engaged in school food systems change for over twenty-five years. Informed by observing living systems in nature, a systems-change approach acknowledges that lasting change occurs when multiple parts of a system are considered: cause and effect, people, and policy, and how these elements interact.¹

With a focus on building and supporting equitable school meal programs that feature fresh California ingredients, the center recognizes that to create real progress and lasting change, the whole school food system must be considered. By creating deep collaborative partnerships, activating a statewide network of school districts, and identifying the most effective levers of change and key voices to amplify, the center serves as a catalyst for change within the school food system.

In *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*, Pier Luigi Luisi and Center for Ecoliteracy cofounder Fritjof Capra wrote that “truly sustainable development is based on the recognition that we are an inseparable part of the web of life, of human and nonhuman communities, and that enhancing the dignity and sustainability of any one of them will enhance all the others.”² The center manifests this idea by engaging students, families, educators, school nutrition directors, partner organizations, food distributors,

farmers, and policymakers in school food systems change. Engagement of stakeholders from schools, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and existing leaders in the field fosters community to build toward common goals. From this approach, shared priorities and opportunities across the system are identified to highlight opportunities that benefit multiple stakeholders.

The center began this work in 1995 with a pilot project to connect school food and garden efforts in Northern California. Three years later, the Center embarked on its first engagement with Berkeley Public Schools in Berkeley, California. Called the Food Systems Project, it was designated as one of four pilot projects of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) “Linking Farms to Schools” initiative. The project launched a district-wide effort to transform school nutrition service and related curriculum. Using the systems approach, the center led a network of seventeen Berkeley organizations to establish gardens on every public school campus in the city, develop a city food policy, and lead a successful bond campaign for kitchen and cafeteria infrastructure improvements.³ This led the city of Berkeley to adopt the nation’s first district-wide school food policy. This policy, in turn, informed the 2004 federal mandate for every school district participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Programs—that is, nearly every public school district in the US—to implement a wellness policy. Today, school districts nationwide develop and use wellness policies to model healthy habits for the school community and foster a healthy learning environment.⁴

To help catalyze success into the future, and to learn from other successful meal programs, the center convened leading school nutrition experts and practitioners to develop a portable framework that it published in 2004: *Rethinking School Lunch*. This guide provided action-oriented steps for school districts to work toward the goal of serving freshly prepared meals featuring local ingredients. Since there is no single blueprint for reforming school food—every school district is unique—*Rethinking School Lunch* outlines ten interconnected pathways that can help school districts identify which levers of change will help them begin their own transformations: food and health; policy; teaching and learning; the dining experience; procurement; facilities; finances; waste management; professional development; and marketing and communications.⁵

In 2009, the center began a partnership with the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation, founded by philanthropist and environmental advocate Kat Taylor, to foster a more sustainable food system by transforming school meals in California and prioritizing freshly prepared and locally grown food. The partnership helped to form the California Food for California Kids initiative, the creation of resources to promote fresh, California-grown food in schools, and opportunities for local and state policy change.

SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN CALIFORNIA

The center's work remains focused on California, which is home to the largest number of public school students in the US. California serves 6.2 million children in its public schools, 59 percent of whom were eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program in the 2020–2021 school year, a common measure of poverty in the US public education system. Almost one in five California children live in households with limited or uncertain access to adequate food, and California consistently reports a higher percentage of children living in food-insecure households than the country overall.⁶

California has a history of progressive school food policy change. In 1988, California voters committed to allocating at least 40 percent of the state budget on public schools and community colleges through the passage of Proposition 98, which also includes specific tests to ensure that the funding remains relatively stable year after year.⁷

At the national level, beginning in 2014–2015, the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows schools serving a high number of children living in poverty to provide all students with free meals. California advocates have worked to encourage schools to utilize this provision by formalizing the use of Medi-Cal data (Medi-Cal is California's Medicaid program, a federal program that covers the cost of medical services for children and adults with limited income and resources) to directly certify eligible students (making it easier for schools to qualify as "high poverty") and requiring the highest-poverty schools to implement CEP with Senate Bill 138.⁸ By 2021, 38 percent of California's public schools were participating in CEP.

At the same time, anti-hunger advocates recognized that the cost of school meals was not the only barrier to participation. Based on feedback from students and school nutrition professionals, advocates recognized the

importance of addressing the stigma surrounding school meals and ensuring that schools were equipped to serve meals that appeal to students. In 2017, the state responded to these critiques by passing Senate Bill 250, the “Child Hunger Prevention and Fair Treatment Act,” later superseded by Senate Bill 265, which strengthened the provisions in the original bill.⁹ SB 250 went into effect January 1, 2018, guaranteeing all students a school meal of their choice, regardless of whether they could pay. It also prohibited schools from “lunch shaming,” the practice of refusing a child a lunch or providing them with an alternate packaged lunch, different from what other children could choose from, if they cannot pay. While this provided a more equitable school meal experience for students, it had the unintended consequence of requiring school districts, as two nutrition directors told researchers, “to pay the debt from their general fund, strapping already struggling schools.”¹⁰ According to Senate floor analysis on SB 265, both small and large school districts saw an increase in unpaid meal debt.¹¹ Barstow Unified School District, which serves approximately 6,300 students, 72 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, reported unpaid meal debt of \$16,000 for the 2016–2017 school year and projected \$55,714 for the 2018–2019 school year. Los Angeles Unified School District, which serves approximately 608,000 students, 77 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, reported unpaid meal debt of \$393,200 for the 2016–2017 school year and projected \$2,249,242 for the 2018–2019 school year.¹²

School meal programs, and school kitchen facilities are historically underfunded in the US, and different districts—and schools within those districts—approach this challenge in different ways. Schools with full cooking kitchens can prepare meals on-site but often lack the funding to hire and train labor to prepare and serve freshly made meals. Others, though they were built with full cooking kitchens, don’t have the money to repair broken or outdated equipment, and many schools were built without kitchens altogether. This lack of adequate facilities to prepare food, coupled with a lack of professional development and culinary skills training offered to school nutrition professionals, means many schools simply heat or chill packaged products and set them out for students,¹³ who often find the food unappetizing.¹⁴ Some school districts utilize a central kitchen to prepare fresh meals in-house and distribute them to school sites. This model allows for the

preparation of school meals with more local and seasonal ingredients, and provides freshly made food to students, though it, too, is often packaged, delivered to schools, and reheated on-site.

A variety of these models are used to feed students in California. A 2020 survey report “Are California Public Schools Scratch-Cooking Ready? A survey of food service directors on the state of school kitchens” showed that 31 percent of districts reported high levels of scratch cooking, 53 percent reported some scratch or speed scratch cooking (using a combination of processed and fresh foods), and 16 percent reported little to no scratch cooking.¹⁵ The report states, “While scratch cooking appears to be occurring in districts across the state, rural school districts are more likely to report high levels of scratch cooking than their urban, suburban, or town peers,” and “Majority non-white school districts report less scratch cooking. Forty percent of school districts that are majority white enrollment report high levels of scratch cooking, compared to only 27 percent of majority non-white school districts.”

Though California grows nearly half of the country's fruits and vegetables, public school students are rarely fed local products. According to the USDA's 2019 Farm to School Census, only 21 percent of the purchasing dollars for school meals in California are spent locally (as defined by each school district), and this percentage drops to 11 percent when excluding fluid milk.¹⁶

Nationwide, the USDA has found that school meals often cost more to produce than the reimbursements—a phenomenon exacerbated in California because of the higher costs of food and labor.¹⁷ Yet approximately \$4.50 was allocated for each school lunch for the 2021–2022 school year,¹⁸ which is supposed to cover equipment, labor, ingredients, and all other costs associated with preparing and serving a school meal. With such minimal funding, school nutrition directors are pressured to get creative with procurement and labor practices while crafting meals that are both appetizing to students and meet USDA nutrition guidelines.

Even with all of these barriers to providing fresh, local meals in schools, improving the school food system presents an incredible opportunity. In California, more than one billion school meals are served each year. This scale creates an opportunity to source food from California farmers and producers, support the school nutrition workforce, and provide students

with freshly prepared meals that can support their health and education. The center's history of school food systems change provides effective strategies and lessons learned in the journey to transform school food.

The story of the center, the campaign, and the platform it was built on are described in the following sections. The center, its cosponsors, and over two hundred supporting organizations launched a "School Meals for All" campaign that led, in the summer of 2021, to legislation making California the first state in the nation to adopt universal school meals. Beginning in the 2022–2023 school year, the state will permanently provide free breakfast and lunch to all K–12 public school students. The strategies used in this successful campaign present a model for advocates and policymakers to lobby for and enact universal school meals.

CALIFORNIA FOOD FOR CALIFORNIA KIDS

Today, the center has expanded its reach from one school in Berkeley to a network of over one hundred school districts in California through California Food for California Kids, an initiative that recognizes the leadership and innovation of school nutrition professionals, builds the capacity of school districts to provide students with fresh, locally grown food, and reinforces connections between the classroom, cafeteria, and garden. Membership is free of charge, and the center builds strategic relationships with food service directors and school district leadership to advance food systems change in their school districts. The California Food for California Kids Network serves more than 330 million school meals annually, which together serve one-third of the school meals in the state.

When the center first sought to recruit school districts to build this network, it identified the largest school districts in California with the highest percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals. The focus was on scale, serving students with the highest need and recruiting districts with a high level of readiness for change. The center also looked to recruit districts that were served by a school nutrition director with the leadership potential to champion the school nutrition program and that had local procurement or scratch cooking programs in place already.

To join, members commit to increasing local procurement and freshly prepared meals; providing garden, culinary, and food system education;

and contributing to the network's data and storytelling development. Each district in the network completes an annual assessment survey to identify its challenges, accomplishments, and goals. In 2020, members rated universal school meals as their top policy priority.

Members of the California Food for California Kids Network gain access to professional development and engagement opportunities, marketing and advocacy materials, and the opportunity to shape a shared political platform. They receive recognition for their leadership and can receive awards for their commitment and innovation. Stakeholders report that the resource they value most, however, is the ability to build relationships with, and learn from, their peers.

In 2022, participating school districts came from thirty-three different counties and represent the diversity of California, including rural districts surrounded by farms in the Central Valley and urban and suburban districts up and down the coast. Some of them are very small, such as one with a single 177-student school site, and some are quite large, including the state's largest, Los Angeles Unified School District, which enrolls more than six hundred thousand students across 1,011 sites. The network represents over two million students, a majority of whom are students of color and qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

This network was born out of the center's "California Thursdays" program, which encouraged school districts to serve freshly prepared meals featuring California-grown ingredients starting one day per week. Through this strategy, districts gradually revamped their practices so that fresh, healthy school meals became the norm. The center provided the *Rethinking School Lunch* framework, technical support, professional development, and marketing resources to support districts in serving and promoting California Thursdays meals.

School districts also participated in "Collective Action Days" to serve California Thursdays meals together on the same day, creating a statewide media campaign to celebrate the program's collective impact. The center continues to foster the community that grew out of this effort through the California Food for California Kids initiative, a growing movement of school food leaders nourishing students with fresh, California-grown meals and ecological education.

STATE ADVOCACY FOR SCHOOL FOOD SYSTEMS CHANGE

The Center for Ecoliteracy's first joint policy endeavor began with a project to apply its *Rethinking School Lunch* framework within the Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, California. The center worked to provide a blueprint, budget, and timeline for transforming the district's school food program to improve student health, well-being, and academic outcomes through a feasibility study that was then adopted in the district's Facilities Master Plan.¹⁹ This master plan provided a basis for bond Measure J, which passed in 2012 with 84 percent public approval, securing \$475 million to improve district infrastructure.²⁰ Measure J provided the funding for Oakland Unified School District to build a central kitchen, instructional farm, and education center.

The center began to work on state-level policy in 2016, collaborating with then-assembly member Susan Eggman and Center for Ecoliteracy board member and California state senator Nancy Skinner on a legislative bill to incentivize California-grown school food procurement. In 2017–2018, this work manifested with a new “California-Grown Fresh School Meals Grant Program” in the state budget with \$1.5 million of one-time funding. This was extended in 2018–2019 with an additional \$1 million in the state budget.

The center came back to the idea of using public dollars to incentivize California-grown school food procurement in 2019 when three bills focusing on changes to school food were introduced in the legislature focusing on (1) organic procurement, (2) plant-based proteins, and (3) universal breakfast. The center successfully worked with sponsors of the universal breakfast bill to include an incentive for California-grown food and collaborated with the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation to further encourage the bill authors and sponsors to come together around a single bill. While common ground was fostered, the effort to combine these three competing bills was unsuccessful, and policymakers seemed to lack an understanding of their differences. None were funded during the 2019 legislative cycle.

Through this experience, the center learned how unfamiliar many policymakers were with school meal programs. A broader, multi-stakeholder coalition would be needed to more effectively advocate for state policies to

improve school food. So, the center collaborated with the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation and NextGen California to design a new policy framework that advanced freshly prepared California-grown school meals, including incentives for California-grown procurement, grass-fed beef, organic and plant-based foods, funding for school nutrition staff training and kitchen equipment, and an advisory council. The policy framework was loosely modeled after the 10 cents a meal incentive for local procurement in Michigan and similar programs in Oregon and New York.²¹

The center worked closely with the California School Employees Association (CSEA), the largest union representing school food service workers in the state, to ensure that their priority of providing workers with training and equipment to freshly prepare meals was reflected in this framework. The three organizations then convened a group of forty-three stakeholders representing nonprofits, farmers, food banks, labor unions, and government agencies in October 2019 following the close of the legislative session. The purpose of the meeting was to garner feedback and build support for a policy framework representative of a broad coalition's priorities. Ultimately, efforts to build a unified coalition were unsuccessful, and organizations decided to pursue single-issue bills rather than build a coalition around joint priorities.

Nevertheless, the three organizations committed to advocating for this policy framework focused on educating legislators, the governor's office staff, and budget staff on issues critical to catalyzing school food systems change. The advocacy and lobbying efforts paid off in the governor's proposed state budget in January 2020, which featured \$60 million to improve the quality and access to healthy school meals, \$10 million for staff professional development, \$8.5 million for a Farm to School Incubator Grant Program, and permanent ongoing funding for the California Office of Farm to Fork, the state agency that administers the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program.

Weeks after the budget proposal was released, the coronavirus pandemic hit California, shuttering schools and quickly reprioritizing the state budget. Advocacy efforts pivoted in kind to focus on supporting school districts in serving emergency school meals and providing debt relief for school nutrition department budgets, whose participation had dropped overnight yet whose operating costs were fixed.²² The center's advocacy

was successful in securing \$192 million to support emergency school meals and maintaining funding for the state's farm-to-school program.

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic highlighted the importance of school food access for low-income families. As school buildings closed and school nutrition departments pivoted to grab-and-go school meals, media coverage of long lines outside schools and the incredible efforts of school nutrition professionals put a national spotlight on school meals as an essential need for families, many of whom were facing job loss as a result of the pandemic. Building on the accomplishments of the 2020 budget, the attention on school meals, and the top policy priority of the California Food for California Kids Network, the center's focus turned to the audacious goal of achieving universal meals in California.

THE FREE SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL ACT

In February 2021, California state senator Nancy Skinner introduced Senate Bill 364: The Free School Meals for All Act. Senator Skinner, chair of the Senate's Budget and Fiscal Review Committee, has a long history of social justice and environmental advocacy. As a member of the center's board of directors since 2014, Senator Skinner was aware of the work to be done to improve school meals in California. In 2020, Senator Skinner hired Jessica Bartholow, a longtime anti-hunger advocate, as her chief of staff.

Senator Skinner's 2021 proposal aimed to transform school food permanently so that providing locally sourced, nutritious meals would no longer be a line item subject to politically charged budget negotiations. The proposal was to provide free breakfast and lunch to every K–12 student in California public schools, increase locally sourced meals through a California-grown incentive program, and increase freshly prepared meals through a grant program to provide equipment and training for school nutrition staff.

The bill also aimed to leverage the federal Pandemic EBT program (see chapter 7, "Local and National Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States") by creating a permanent food benefit for California students known as "BOOST," the Better Out-Of-School Time program. The BOOST program was developed to ensure that children from low-income

families have access to food when schools are closed during breaks and prolonged emergencies.

The Free School Meals for All Act represented the most significant state-wide opportunity in the movement for universal school meals in the US: if passed, California could showcase the impact of universal school meals for its 6.2 million public school students and provide a model for future state and federal policy. The center became a cosponsor of the legislation alongside the California Association of Food Banks, NextGen California, the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation, and state superintendent of public instruction Tony Thurmond.

In collaboration with these partners, the center led an advocacy campaign in support of the Free School Meals for All Act. The team referenced the Messaging Guidance for an Effective School Food Campaign, which surveyed 1,200 US voters in September 2020.²³ The report states: Use “Healthy School Meals for All” in place of “Universal Meals.” While the majority of respondents overall supported a policy that ensured that all public school students received school meals, the name “Universal Meals” ranked thirteenth when respondents were asked to choose a name for the policy that they liked. The top-ranked choices were “Healthy Schools, Healthy Kids” (34 percent), followed by “Healthy School Meals for All” (28 percent) and “Nutrition for All” (27 percent). The partners selected “School Meals for All” as the official campaign name.²⁴

The “School Meals for All” campaign kicked off in February 2021 with fifteen organizations supporting the policy, including national organizations Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) and Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). As cosponsors of the legislation leveraged existing relationships and connections, they eventually grew the list to a coalition of more than two hundred supporting organizations. The Center for Ecoliteracy gained support from California school districts, nonprofits, and health organizations. The TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation brought on national organizations as well as farmers, ranchers, labor unions, and other members of California’s agricultural sector. NextGen California garnered support from climate policy advocates, and the California Association of Food Banks rallied food banks across California as well as faith-based institutions and anti-hunger advocacy groups. These complementary

relationships led the School Meals for All Coalition to grow and diversify to include organizations spanning health, education, labor, agriculture, and food banks.

Meanwhile, the nationwide movement for universal meals at the federal level was gaining momentum. Through USDA waivers beginning in March 2020, school meals were made available for free nationwide during the pandemic. This change showcased the unique potential of schools to curb hunger and serve millions of meals each day. Representative Ilhan Omar (Democrat, Michigan) and Senator Bernie Sanders (Independent, Vermont) introduced the Universal School Meals Program Act in October 2019 and put forward the proposal again in May 2021, along with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (Democrat, New York) and Representative Gwen Moore (Democrat, Wisconsin). However, in conversations with congressional staffers, California School Meals for All cosponsors learned that federal action on a full universal school meals policy was unlikely to happen before the waivers expired at the end of the 2021–2022 school year. That created a new sense of urgency to avoid the sudden loss of this benefit for California families, many of whom do not qualify for free or reduced-price meals under federal guidelines but still struggle to make ends meet due to the state’s high cost of living. Federal guidelines state that a family of four with an annual income over \$48,470 is ineligible for free or reduced-price school meals, but researchers estimate that a family of four with two working parents in California must make over \$112,000 to afford basic necessities.²⁵

As the 2020 poll had shown, advancing universal school meals was the top policy priority for members of the California Food for California Kids Network. The center interviewed school nutrition directors about what this policy would mean for their district, school food program, students, and families. For example, Gary Petill, director of nutrition services at San Diego Unified School District, said that “Single parents and spouses of enlisted service members are facing an onslaught of challenges right now. By providing free school meals, we will alleviate some of the burdens on families; many will now be able to afford to pay their rent and utilities, put gas in their car, or even avoid becoming homeless.”²⁶

The center shared what it learned from network members through fact sheets, articles, social media, and press outreach: (1) a universal meal program could better support students’ health and academic success than the

current system, in which families who had to apply for free or reduced-price meals ended up falling through the cracks, (2) eligible families were concerned about the stigma of needing support for meals, and (3) some families worried that submitting the application could affect their immigration status.

Members of the advocacy coalition were strategic in explaining how the benefits of the proposed Free School Meals for All Act would extend beyond the students and their families. Stephanie Bruce, nutrition services director at Palm Springs Unified School District, testified to the California Senate Education Committee in April 2021. She argued that the proposed bill would reduce administrative costs and free up staff time for non-administrative tasks. "When our district switched to feeding every student at no cost, we were able to shift the labor of three full-time employees from processing meal applications, sending out letters, and answering phone calls from concerned parents," she explained. "Instead, that staff time is now redirected to creating better tasting, fresher meals that have increased participation." She further explained how the incentives for freshly prepared and California-grown school meals in SB 364 would help schools form meaningful relationships with California farmers that benefit local economies, highlighting that her district, alone, had served one million pounds of fresh California-grown produce to their students since the start of the pandemic."²⁷

Labor unions, including the California School Employees Association (CSEA) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), provided critical support and further underscored the impact this would have on the state's school nutrition workforce. In a letter of support for SB 364, CSEA representatives argued that the bill "could provide more hours, jobs, and pay for food service workers, who are literally putting their lives on the line during the pandemic, to serve meals to our students."

The bill passed with unanimous bipartisan support in the California Senate Education Committee in April 2021. California state senators Brian Dahle and Rosilicie Ochoa Bogh, both Republicans, spoke in support of the Free School Meals for All Act, describing the childhood hunger they had witnessed in their districts and the value of school meal programs. While bipartisan support was not strictly necessary for the bill's passage—Democrats had a supermajority in both the state assembly and state

senate—the coalition made an intentional effort to secure Republican support by arranging meetings ahead of the hearing with Republican representatives and their staff. At the California Senate Human Services Committee in April 2021, the bill passed yet again with unanimous bipartisan support, building the momentum for universal meals in California and showcasing the broad support school meals programs have across party lines. The coalition had seized the moment, culminating in the passage of transformational school food policy, but still faced the critical task of securing funding to enact the policy and ensure it would be resilient over time.

ADVOCATING FOR THE ADOPTION OF UNIVERSAL MEALS IN THE STATE BUDGET

In June 2021, policies from the Free School Meals for All Act were proposed in the state budget, but the other components of the proposal were put on hold. The California legislature proposed the following, which became known as the “School Meals for All” package: (1) establishing a universal meals program to serve free breakfast and lunch to every student in California public schools, permanently; (2) funding to train and equip school nutrition professionals to serve freshly prepared meals; and (3) funding farm-to-school initiatives.

Notably, the BOOST program and incentive to purchase California-grown food were not included in the budget proposal. In April 2021, the Biden administration extended Pandemic-EBT through August 2021, which provided additional support for families to access food outside of school and reduced the urgency to pass BOOST in the 2021 state budget.²⁸ The central focus became passing universal meals and providing schools with funding to support serving healthy, freshly prepared meals.

The California legislature is responsible for passing the state budget that the governor signs or vetoes. While the state had a budget surplus, there were competing proposals around how much to invest in school nutrition. Lobbying legislators to include full funding for School Meals for All in the final budget package was critical. The more than two hundred organizations making up the School Meals for All Coalition advocated by signing letters, raising awareness on social media, highlighting

stories via op-eds, and participating in direct lobbying to California governor Gavin Newsom. One school nutrition director organized a letter to Governor Newsom from the superintendents of Long Beach, Sacramento, and Oakland Unified School Districts supporting the School Meals for All package in the budget. Cosponsors held meetings with the administration, legislators, and other policymakers. The center created personalized legislative reports detailing how many students in specific legislative districts would benefit from the School Meals for All proposal—and compared this impact to the governor's initial funding proposal, which would have left out half of the schools in the state.

On July 9, 2021, California officially adopted School Meals for All. Governor Newsom signed AB 130, the education package of the 2020–2021 state budget, which provided \$650 million annually to establish a universal meals program to serve free breakfast and lunch to every student in California public schools, permanently. History was made—as the first state in the nation to provide free school meals to all public school students regardless of eligibility, California provided a model for the country to make healthy school meals a part of every child's educational day.

The budget also provided funding for serving more fresh and local school meals. It allocated \$150 million to equip schools and train staff to serve freshly prepared school meals. This funding recognized that school nutrition professionals need support in the form of proper equipment and training to serve more freshly prepared and locally grown food in schools. California's Farm to School Incubator Grant Program also received an unprecedented investment through the state budget in the form of \$30 million in 2021, with an additional \$30 million in 2022. This represents a significant increase from the \$8.5 million allocated to the grant program in 2020 and makes California's farm-to-school program the largest in the country, even surpassing the USDA's \$12 million farm-to-school program.²⁹ This funding will support sustainable food procurement as well as projects that provide students with nutrition education, experiential lessons on the food system, and exposure to California agriculture and seasonal foods.

Leading up to the 2022 legislative session, the center reconvened with the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation, NextGen California, and the California Association of Food Banks to outline a policy platform to

strengthen California's school food system and build on the previous year's investments. The Center for Ecoliteracy interviewed school nutrition directors in the California Food for California Kids Network, who shared that their priorities were to ensure funding for School Meals for All, continue to expand the farm-to-school program and support the school nutrition workforce to serve more freshly prepared meals. These priorities were advanced through a 2022 School Meals for All coalition, which consisted of seventy-two supporting organizations. The coalition advocated by lobbying policymakers, supporting testimonies from school district leaders, authoring an op-ed, and sharing the voices of students and school nutrition professionals on social media.

Bolstered by momentum from the 2021 campaign and another state budget surplus, the coalition's advocacy culminated in a record \$2 billion to support school meal programs through the 2022–2023 state budget, including:

- \$596 million for School Meals for All
- \$600 million for kitchen equipment and staff training to support freshly prepared meals
- \$611.8 million for enhanced school meal reimbursements from the state
- \$100 million to support “school food best practices” (California-grown, freshly prepared, and plant-based meals)
- \$60 million for the California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program
- \$2.4 million to support the evaluation of the School Meals for All program

Additionally, \$45 million was provided to establish the Healthy School Meals Pathway Program, a training program for school nutrition staff to learn scratch-cooking techniques for use in school kitchens.

California school nutrition directors celebrated the historic funding package and the impact of systems-wide investments. Erin Primer, director of Food and Nutrition Services for San Luis Coastal Unified School District, said, “This is an absolute dream to have adequate funding to procure, plan, create, train, and serve amazing food at school. Our students deserve to eat healthy and tasty foods, our staff deserve to use real foods

and adequate equipment, and our districts deserve school meal programs that benefit the entire system and the whole child.”

With the start of the 2022–2023 school year, California’s School Meals for All program went into effect. Kristie To, a high school student in Orange County, California, published an opinion editorial in the *Voice of OC*. She testified to the impact of free school meals:

My peers and I rely on school breakfast and lunch every day. Many of my closest friends do not have the time and are not in the financial situation to provide themselves with meals to fuel their school day and concentrate in class . . . This new program has alleviated the stress of buying and preparing meals that previously strained students and families . . . Without the burden of being responsible for buying and creating nutritional meals for myself, I can better focus on my education and positions as a student leader. Therefore, I believe all states should follow in the footsteps of California.³⁰

LEVERAGING SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FROM CALIFORNIA’S SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL CAMPAIGN

California’s 2021 and 2022 state budgets have positioned the state as a model for the nation. The six strategies used in California’s School Meals for All campaign can be leveraged by advocates and policymakers to lobby for and enact universal school meals in other local and national governments. First, **seize the moment** to launch your campaign by understanding the political and social landscape you’re working within. The pandemic created widespread food and economic insecurity in the US. A national spotlight was cast on the country’s safety net programs, including school meals. In addition, the political landscape in California played a role. The state had a budget surplus, and the governor was facing a recall election.

Second, **build strategic partnerships** to form a broad coalition of stakeholders that support the policy change. Cosponsors of the Free School Meals for All Act and the broad multi-stakeholder coalition were critical to the reach and ultimate success of the campaign. Federal advocacy organizations and universal meal advocates in other states collaborated to raise awareness of the California campaign. Funders, in particular those that fund lobbying efforts, were essential to fuel the work.

Third, **use a systems-change approach** to craft policy that benefits multiple groups impacted by the issue. The center's systems change approach helped to craft resilient policy language, build a broad multi-stakeholder coalition, and garner bipartisan support.

Fourth, **leverage a powerful network** of school food champions, and raise their voices to policymakers and in the media. The California Food for California Kids Network provided a platform to gauge key priorities and the feasibility of the policy. The center was able to leverage existing relationships with school nutrition directors in certain legislative districts to connect them directly with policymakers and elevate their voices in the media.

Fifth, present **research and data** customized for your audience to showcase what's possible with their support. With a deep understanding of the school food system, including federal requirements and the status of California schools leveraging federal policies, the center was able to efficiently present data at key moments to policymakers and in the media.

Sixth, design your campaign **brand** and messaging to speak positively to a broad audience. Transformations in school meal programs can make a positive impact on children's health and ensure they have the tools they need to thrive at school. The School Meals for All campaign leveraged best practices to use "for all" rather than "universal" in campaign language, and, consistent with the Center's values of "smart, vital, and hopeful," communications remained steadfast and optimistic throughout the campaign.

NOTES

1. Acknowledgements: Thank you to Abby Halperin for her research contributions to this chapter.
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