

HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS — FOR ALL —



A TOOLKIT FOR ADVOCATES



CENTER FOR
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Public Interest

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND



ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

For more than 50 years, CSPI has been an influential force in the fight for a better food system. We are committed to partnering with communities, organizations, and individuals as they explore and enact innovative policies at the local, state, and federal level that advance a just and equitable food environment. CSPI leverages our unique expertise to support passing policies that increase access to nutritious food, support healthy food and beverage choices, and ensure a healthy diet for those that experience the greatest health disparities.

A crucial part of this work is helping to build the capacity of our partners and other community-based organizations around the country. To this end, we have developed policy toolkits for CSPI's priority issue areas, including the one you have here. These toolkits are living documents designed to support your advocacy, whether you're a seasoned pro looking for the latest research or are brand new to this issue and trying to figure out where to begin. We've structured this toolkit as a roadmap to guide your campaign, with academic research, case studies, model policies, messaging guidance, and other resources you may need. Included throughout are links to additional resources, developed by CSPI and by our partners, for your deeper learning. We also invite you to explore CSPI's [Resource Hub](#) and [Resource Library](#) for more tools that you may find useful.

This toolkit provides resources for advocates to improve school meals. The focus of this toolkit is advocacy at the state and local levels, but many of the resources provided can be used for federal advocacy as well. Topics covered include strengthening nutrition standards, increasing access to free meals, and funding for training, technical assistance, and kitchen equipment for operators.

HISTORY OF SCHOOL MEALS

Meals have been offered in school as early as the 19th century. Records indicate that penny lunches were served in Philadelphia as early as 1894, and the Women's Educational and Industrial Union served hot lunches to students in Boston.¹ Throughout the early 1900s, other major cities began serving meals, and Parent-Teacher Associations became involved in the movement through the 1920s. The federally funded National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was established in 1946 under the National School Lunch Act, signed by President Harry Truman. The NSLP is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS).



School lunch, South Carolina, 1939

The School Breakfast Program (SBP), like the NSLP, is administered by the USDA FNS. The SBP began as a two-year pilot program in 1966. Beginning in 1969, all chapters of the Black Panther Party were mandated by Panther co-founder Huey P. Newton to institute a Free Breakfast for Children Program, which was one of the party's "survival programs."² The Black Panther Party's program served as "both the model for, and impetus behind [the SBP]."³ Party members consulted with nutritionists on healthful breakfast.⁴ During the height of the program, thousands of children were fed per day in at least 45 different initiatives across the country.⁵ However, the program was not well-received by all and was systemically dismantled. Under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) targeted food programs across the country in an organized effort to destroy the Black Panther Party.⁶ While these efforts by the federal government were tragic and disastrous for the Black Panther Party, the visibility of the breakfast program provoked government officials to prioritize feeding children breakfast.⁷ Around the same time the Black Panthers' breakfast program was destroyed (1975), the USDA's piloted free breakfast program from 1966 became the permanent School Breakfast.⁸



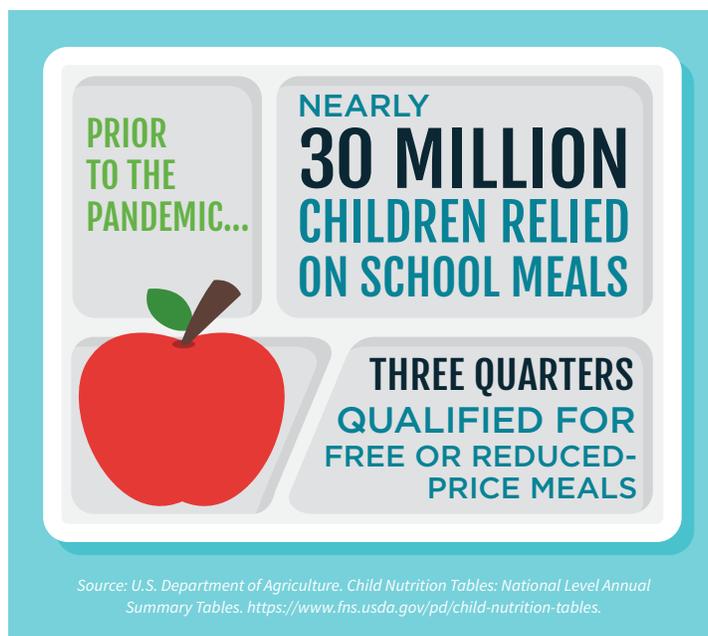
The Black Panther Free Breakfast Program, Oakland

Summer food service began in 1968 under the Special Food Service Program for Children, a three-year pilot that sought to feed children outside of school and included both summer meals and childcare meals. In 1975, the program was split into two: the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Child Care Food Program (CCFP).⁹

Summer meals are administered by the USDA FNS at the federal level. Meals can be offered by approved sponsors such as school districts, camps, private nonprofit organizations, and local government agencies.

SCHOOL MEALS TODAY

School breakfast and lunch are subsidized by the government, and schools receive reimbursement based on the number of full-price, reduced-price, or free meals served. Students can qualify for free or reduced-priced meals based on their household income, or if they attend a school offering free meals for all through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or another federally funded mechanism. Through CEP, high-poverty schools and school districts can serve free meals to all students, regardless of their family's household income. Prior to the pandemic, nearly thirty million children relied on school meals, and nearly three quarters of program participants qualified for free or reduced-price meals.¹⁰ For many kids, school meals may be the only healthy meals they receive that day.



Every five years, Congress reauthorizes child nutrition programs through a process called Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR). The last reauthorization was in 2010. Congress has tried to pass a CNR since but has been unsuccessful. Without reauthorization, the school meal programs can continue as is, because they are permanently authorized and have no expiration date.¹¹ However, reauthorization is important for updating and reinvigorating the programs.

Find out more about Child Nutrition Reauthorization at: <https://cspinet.org/2021-child-nutrition-reauthorization>.

The government also regulates foods and beverages sold outside of the reimbursable meal program, known as “competitive foods.” These foods include items sold a la carte in vending machines, in school stores, and through fundraisers. Eligibility for free or reduced-price meals does not apply to competitive foods, and all students must pay to receive these items.

THE HEALTHY, HUNGER-FREE KIDS ACT (HHFKA) OF 2010

In 2010, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) made significant improvements to school foods and other child nutrition programs, providing children with more nutritious food options. Called “one of the most important national obesity prevention policy achievements in recent decades” by the Harvard University T.H. Chan School of Public Health,¹² the HHFKA has been one of the most important laws for improving children’s health. The HHFKA updated national nutrition standards for meals, snacks, and beverages to align with the most up-to-date version of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (then, the 2010



edition); strengthened required policies at the local level (local wellness policies); increased access to free meals; and improved meal financing and technical assistance. The HHFKA also made CEP permanent.

Learn more about the HHFKA at: <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/fact-sheet-10-years-healthy-hunger-free-kids-act/>.

LAWSUIT OVER ROLLBACKS

Under the Trump administration, the USDA issued a rule in 2018 that weakened the sodium, whole grain, and flavored milk standards in school meals, even though schools were already meeting the updated standards and industry had innovated and reformulated many products to comply. CSPI sued the USDA over these “rollbacks” and a federal court threw out the rollback rule in 2020. As a result of that court victory, the HHFKA’s 2012 nutrition standards had been reinstated, but the USDA has since changed some of the standards.

Find out more about the lawsuit here: <https://www.cspinet.org/news/cspi-healthy-school-food-maryland-sue-usda-school-meals>.



COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous pressure on school nutrition programs while simultaneously bringing to public attention the critical role that school meals play in feeding children.

From the beginning of the pandemic, school nutrition staff, committed to ensuring that no student went hungry, set up meal distribution sites in parking lots and delivered individually wrapped meals to homes and bus stops. Staff served impossibly long lines of families waiting to pick up meals for their children. All of this was done without adequate personal protective equipment and without a guarantee that the costs would be covered. School nutrition programs are now facing millions of dollars in debt and a labor shortage crisis, not to mention unprecedented supply chain issues and increased food costs.

Early in the pandemic, the USDA issued several nationwide waivers to help school nutrition programs feed children and families while minimizing risk: providing free school meals to all and allowing schools to waive the nutrition standards if linked to COVID-related disruptions.

At the time of the publishing this toolkit, school nutrition programs are operating under a number of federal waivers, which are referenced throughout. For a current list of waivers in effect, please visit: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/fns-disaster-assistance/fns-responds-covid-19/child-nutrition-covid-19-waivers>

CSPI's Vision for School Meals

All K-12 schools participating in the NSLP and SBP provide free healthy school meals for every student that meet science-based nutrition requirements, are well-received by students, are culturally relevant, are accessible to every student, support good health and nutrition, and contribute to achieving racial equity among students across the nation, with all schools having the financial resources and tools they need to be successful.

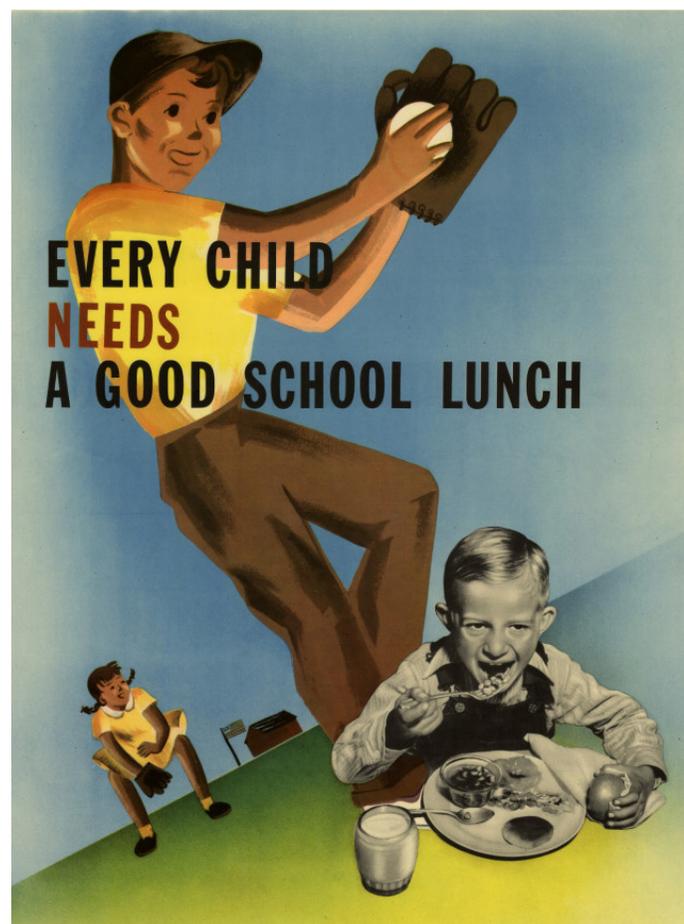
To actualize this vision, CSPI prioritizes support to federal, state, and local policies that:

- Protect and promote nutrition standards in alignment with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans
- Expand access to free healthy meals for all
- Increase reimbursement and technical assistance on nutrition standards
- Provide sufficient seat time/mealtime requirements
- Eliminate harmful artificial sweeteners and synthetic food dyes
- Provide kitchen equipment grants for upgrades, repairs, and maintenance, and
- Require all summer meals to meet standards consistent with those for breakfast and lunch served during the school year.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

The monumental progress made with the 2010 HHFKA was made possible by years of advocacy at the federal, state, and local levels. Today, the same level of enthusiasm and effort is needed to protect the integrity of the school meals program and ensure that the program reaches every child. The tools and resources in this toolkit are intended to support advocates who want to lead state and local campaigns to improve school foods, but many of these resources are also applicable for federal advocacy. The federal government sets nutrition standards for school meals and can expand access and improve resources using federal dollars, but states and localities can do all these things as well if their efforts do not conflict with federal rules. For example, a state law can require stronger nutrition standards than are required federally, but it cannot allow nutrition standards to be weaker than the federal standards.

Together, we can ensure that every child has stigma-free access to healthy delicious meals at school, and that school nutrition operators have the resources they need to provide those meals.



Poster from 1944

FACT SHEETS ON KEY PRIORITIES

In this section, we provide fact sheets that can be downloaded and printed or shared electronically with federal, state, or local policymakers, school administrators, parents, teachers, or any other stakeholder relevant to your school food campaign.

Protect and Promote Nutrition Standards in Alignment with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans

- **School Nutrition Standards: Evidence-Based Standards Protect and Improve Children's Health**

Under the HHFKA, school nutrition standards were updated to align with the 2010 DGA. The Trump administration's USDA halted progress and introduced uncertainty by rolling the standards back in 2018. In 2020, the new DGA was released, including updated recommendations for sodium and added sugar intake (the 2015 version also included added sugars). It's time to strengthen the standards and protect them from future rollbacks. This document provides a summary of the current nutrition standards for meals and competitive foods as well as policy recommendations for lawmakers, including strengthening the sodium reduction targets, maintaining the whole grain-rich standard, and implementing an added sugars limit for meals and competitive foods.

Expand Access to Free Healthy Meals for All

- **Healthy School Meals for All**

Under COVID-19 relief waivers, all schools can provide free meals for all students. This document describes the benefits of healthy school meals for all, such as advancing equity and supporting school nutrition programs, and describes policy recommendations for ensuring all students have access to free healthy meals.



GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

2021-2022 grantee Healthy School Food Maryland developed a [fact sheet](#) on Healthy School Meals for All for their county council members:

Provide Sufficient Seat Time/Mealtime Requirements

- **No Time to Eat: The Need to Provide Children with Sufficient Time to Eat**

While lunch periods look different in the COVID-19 era, students often don't have enough time to eat their meals, and meals can be scheduled at inopportune times of the day. This document defines expert recommendations for sufficient seat time and mealtime requirements, and recommendations for policymakers, administrators, foodservice leadership, parents, and the community.

Eliminate Artificial Sweeteners and Synthetic Food Dyes

- **Synthetic Food Dyes and Behavioral Effects in Children: Implications for Regulators, Schools, and Daycare Centers**

Synthetic food dyes are pervasive in foods marketed to kids, but they can cause adverse neurobehavioral effects in some children. This document provides a summary of the evidence of the link between synthetic food dyes and neurobehavioral problems in children and steps that regulators, schools, and day cares can take to reduce the impact of synthetic dyes on children, including warning labels on products containing dyes and product bans.

Provide Kitchen Equipment Grants for Upgrades, Repairs, and Maintenance

- **Ill-Equipped: Why the U.S. Needs to Invest in School Kitchen Equipment and Infrastructure**

Schools need sufficient kitchen equipment and infrastructure to provide nutritious, appealing foods. This document outlines a brief history of school kitchen equipment funding, explains why there is a dire need for greater investment, and provides policy recommendations for federal, state, and local lawmakers.

Require All Summer Meals to Meet Standards Consistent with Those for Breakfast and Lunch Served During The School Year

- **Kids Deserve Healthy Meals Year Round**

It may be surprising to learn that meals provided in the summer do not have to meet the same nutrition standards as those provided during the school year. This infographic provides a side-by-side comparison of the Summer Food Service Program and National School Lunch Program requirements, demonstrating the need for alignment and strengthening of both programs' standards.



STATE AND LOCAL MODEL LEGISLATION & POLICY

WHY PASS A STATE POLICY?

Passing state laws not only helps improve nutrition for children in the state where you live, but it can also serve the bigger picture of advancing school foods priorities at the national level. Prior to the HHFKA, more than 20 states across the country had adopted policies setting nutrition standards for foods and the passage of state policies paved the way not just for state legislators who championed healthy school meals, but also for federal champions. For example, school food improvements in Arkansas helped to cultivate support for Democratic Senator Blanche Lincoln, who became a champion for healthier school foods. Senator Lincoln (who left the Senate in 2011) chaired the Senate Agriculture committee which was responsible for the HHFKA.

In several states where passing legislation might have been challenging, officials took steps to improve the quality of school foods and beverages through regulation and administrative action. For example, former Texas State Commissioner of Agriculture Susan Combs moved the school meal programs from the Texas Education Agency to the State Department of Agriculture and made key improvements to school meals, snacks, and beverages, such as removing deep-fat fryers and reducing portion sizes and calories for snacks and beverages.

Having numerous state laws, all with varying provisions, also helped bring the food industry along to support removing soda and most junk food from schools at the national level. The industry preferred national regulations rather a patchwork of state standards to navigate.



STATE/LOCAL POLICY OPTIONS

When it comes to influencing policy at the state level, laws passed through the state legislature are the most durable and can be considered a gold standard. The timing, history of past initiatives, level of industry influence, and political makeup of the state legislature should all inform your campaign strategy. Every state is different and has unique considerations. If a bill is unlikely to make

it through the legislature but your state governor is supportive, you may consider pushing for an executive order.

If both the state legislative and executive order options are infeasible or impractical, you may consider going to the state board of education or the agency that oversees the school meals programs (often, the state child nutrition department). They may pass resolutions or issue guidance that will not have the force of law, but that will still have statewide reach and set a clear intention that may make policy passage more likely in the future. Alternatively, you may consider starting at the ground level at a single school district or even a single school (See Local Wellness Policy, below). Whichever option you choose, know that your efforts have the power to make lasting improvements to school meals and build support for larger, longer-term policy changes.

MODEL STATE LEGISLATION*

- **Model State Nutrition Standards Bill**

This modifiable state bill seeks to align school meal and competitive food standards with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

- **Model Bill Fact Sheet**

This modifiable fact sheet can be used to communicate to stakeholders the key components of the state bill.

LOCAL WELLNESS POLICY

A local school wellness policy (“wellness policy” or LWP) is a written document that guides a local educational agency (LEA) or school district’s efforts to establish a school environment that promotes students’ health, well-being, and ability to learn. LWPs are an important and low-cost approach for school districts to ensure robust implementation of the updated nutrition standards for school meals, snacks, and beverages and address other school foods and physical activity.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

2021-2022 grantee University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences developed a policy and communications toolkit for creating healthy policies in schools.

**Creating Healthy Policies in Schools:
District Outreach Toolkit**

**Creating Healthy Policies in Schools:
Healthy Foods Toolkit**

* For support crafting a board of education resolution, governor’s executive order, or child nutrition department policy, please contact Meghan Maroney at mmaroney@cspinet.org.

LWPs were established by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 and were further strengthened by the HHFKA. Each school district participating in the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program must develop and implement a LWP.

Schools can protect and strengthen school foods through their local wellness policy beyond state-level standards. In the years leading up to HHFKA, more and more school districts were in a place to remove soda and junk food from schools because many already had addressed this trend in their local wellness policies.

MODEL LOCAL WELLNESS POLICY

- **Model Local Wellness Policy**

This modifiable local wellness policy seeks to align school meal and competitive food standards with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

- **Optional Provisions for LWP**

This document contains additional findings and provisions (e.g., expanding meal access, increasing reimbursement and technical assistance, etc.) to add on to the model LWP.

For more LWP resources, visit: <https://www.cspinet.org/advocacy/nutrition/school-food/local-school-wellness-policies>.



MESSAGING GUIDANCE

Effective messaging is paramount to a campaign's success.

CSPI has developed several resources to help ensure that your campaign messaging is impactful and science-based.

- **[Messaging Guidance for an Effective School Food Campaign](#)**

Use this resource to understand key messages to use when communicating with stakeholders about healthy school meals or expanding access to school meals. Results from message testing are provided to advise which messages resonate—and which don't—with voters.

- **[Strengthen Science-Based Nutrition Standards for School Meals & Support Healthy School Meals for All: Key Points](#)**

This document provides a bulleted list of research-based key talking points around expanding access to meals and nutrition standards, with an emphasis on added sugars, whole grains, and sodium. More comprehensive than the Messaging Guidance for an Effective School Food Campaign (above), use this list as a quick reference if and when questions arise from stakeholders, or refer to it when crafting original content, like an op-ed or social media post.

- **[Settling the Facts: Countering Myths about Nutrition Standards in School Meals](#)**

Since the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act passed in 2010, opponents of strong nutrition standards in school meals have circulated damaging myths, so much so that we hear them in public discourse. Use this document to counter common myths and settle the facts.

COMMUNICATION MATERIALS



Use these communications material templates to share the word about your campaign and solicit support.

- **[Sample Social Media to Support Your Campaign](#)**

Use this resource to kickstart your campaign's social media presence. Sample customizable posts and tips for success for your online media presence are provided. Topics include nutrition standards (specifically, sodium, whole grains, and added sugars), healthy school meals for all, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school meals programs.

- **Stories to Support Your Healthy School Meals for All Campaign**

This document contains quotes and links to audio stories from experts in the field sharing why they support healthy school meals for all. These stories can be posted on social media, used in print materials, or shared in emails.

- **Sample Testimony**

Providing testimony at public hearings can be a powerful advocacy strategy. This customizable testimony, written from a parent’s perspective, supports improved nutrition standards in school meals.

- **Sample Petition**

Petitioning the school board allows advocates to demonstrate how many parents support their policy priorities. Use this customizable template to collect signatures, names and addresses of fellow parents who support strengthening nutrition standards in school meals.

- **Sample Sign-on Letter (Child Nutrition Reauthorization)**

A sign-on letter allows multiple organizations to come together with a formal request to a government agency. This customizable sign-on letter urges Congress and the USDA to expand access to healthy school meals for all children and protect and strengthen evidence-based nutrition standards for school meals and other foods sold in school.

- **Sample Press Release**

Once you’ve achieved your goal of policy passage, acknowledgement and celebration are in order. This customizable press release celebrates the passage of a new policy that strengthens nutrition standards.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Check out [UAMS’s Blog Post](#) announcing their partnership with a local school district to strengthen their LWP.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

School Food in the COVID-19 Era

- **[On the Front Lines: The COVID-19 Experience of School Nutrition Programs](#)**

CSPI conducted a survey with an informal sampling of U.S. schools and school districts to understand these challenges and provide recommendations for federal, state, and local stakeholders.

- **[Implementation of COVID-19 Meal Pattern Waivers: Best Practices and Comparisons by State](#)**

Best practices and recommendations for advocates working with schools, school districts, state agencies, and the USDA.

- **[Maintaining Healthy School Meals During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)**

Success stories of three districts that successfully provided meals that met the meal pattern to as many students as possible using innovative strategies.

Feasibility of Strong Nutrition Standards

- **[School Meals Corporate Report Card 2021](#)**

CSPI assessed the nutritional quality of K–12 products offered by major companies in five key areas: whole grain-rich, sodium, added sugar, artificial sweeteners of concerns, and synthetic dyes. CSPI found that companies largely were able to comply with science-based nutrition standards. The report includes recommendations for the USDA and industry.

- **[Whole Grain-Rich Products for Schools](#)**

A sampling of products in the K–12 marketplace that are whole grain-rich compliant. This resource can be shared with stakeholders to demonstrate the variety of whole grain-rich products available.

- **[Products that Easily Meet Sodium-Reduction Targets for School Meals](#)**

The following table displays examples of K–12 products that contain no more than 430 mg sodium. This limit is the lowest sodium reduction target that had been set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for school meals. The target was removed by the USDA and thus will not go into effect, but the USDA is currently considering revisions to sodium standards to better align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA). This resource can be shared with stakeholders to demonstrate the variety of lower sodium products available.

- **[Reducing Added Sugar in School Foods](#)**

This infographic includes key statistics about added sugars in school meals and displays product swaps that school foodservice providers can make to reduce added sugars.



- **[Resources for Schools to Support Healthy Menu Development](#)**

This document includes links to external resources to help school foodservice providers develop healthy menus. CSPI's favorite recipes are highlighted.

Healthy School Meals for All

In 2021, California and Maine became the first two states to pass free meals for all students at the state level.

- **[California School Meals for All](#)**

Find a press release announcing the budget proposal that provided free meals for all students in California, a list of coalition partners, and quotes supporting the effort.

- **The first two state budgets to provide free meals for all students:**

- [130th Maine Legislature, First Special Session](#)
- [California Department of Education Budget Act for 2021-22](#)

About CSPI and Contact Information

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) envisions a healthy population with reduced impact and burden of preventable diseases and an equitable food system that makes healthy, sustainable food accessible to all. CSPI values independence, scientific rigor, and transparency.

If you have any general questions related to this toolkit or school foods, please contact:

- Meghan Maroney at mmaroney@cspinet.org
- Colin Schwartz at cschwartz@cspinet.org
- Samuel Hahn at shahn@cspinet.org

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