

A School Nutrition Workforce for the Future

Challenges Facing the School Nutrition Workforce

With the introduction of its **Universal Meals Program** in the 2022-23 school year, California became the first state in the nation to provide two free school meals to every student, regardless of income. The program has other benefits beyond fighting hunger and eliminating stigma: California has also invested in increasing the number of school meals that are healthy, locally sourced, and freshly prepared because research shows the benefits of such efforts include increased educational outcomes, improved food system resilience, and economic growth.¹ Yet staffing challenges facing school nutrition departments are inhibiting the state's potential for scaling and sustaining this initiative. In fact, a recent survey² found that California school nutrition departments have an average staff vacancy rate of 12%, which is three times higher than unfilled positions for U.S. public school teachers.³

Healthy School Food Pathway Program: Building the School Food Workforce We Need

To address persistent labor and skills gaps facing California's school nutrition departments, the Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) worked with Governor Gavin Newsom's administration and the California legislature to establish the Healthy School Food Pathway (HSFP) program in 2022. HSFP is the first Registered Apprenticeship program for school food operators in the nation. CAF established program competencies for HSFP based on its decades of expertise running scratch cooking operations in schools. Open to anyone from current school food professionals with years of experience to community members who are interested in entering the field, the program helps all participants develop the skills needed to run successful K-12 meal programs. HSFP includes three programs tailored to different career stages:



- **Pre-Apprenticeship (7 weeks):** For aspiring and beginner school food professionals.
- **Apprenticeship (9 months):** For individuals who have completed the Pre-Apprenticeship and want to advance their skills.
- **Fellowship (13 months):** For mid-career professionals aiming to lead change in school food programs.

1. **Evaluation Key Findings:** In partnership with Food Insight Group (FIG), CAF is evaluating how the program is meeting its goals and benefiting participants. Here are some early results:

- **Knowledge and Skills Gains:** Pre-Apprentices showed significant gains in school food knowledge during the program, with 58% of Pre-Apprentices increasing or sustaining a high pre/post assessment score. These gains can contribute to the overall effectiveness of school food programs by improving meal quality, ensuring regulatory compliance, facilitating communication, and promoting career advancement.
- **Career Interest and Commitment to School Food:** Most Pre-Apprentices (80%) and Apprentices (60%) state that they're likely to start or continue working in school food over the next five years. For Apprentices and Fellows the program has had a positive impact on their job performance, with Fellows in particular noting improvements in their leadership skills.
- **Program Satisfaction:** Overall satisfaction is high, with 93% of Pre-Apprentices, 100% of Apprentices, and 100% of Fellows satisfied with their experiences.
- **Motivations for Participation:** Participants are driven by a desire to enhance their skills, advance their careers, and improve school food systems. Those with no previous school food service experience are focused on nourishing children and contributing to their communities, while existing workers are seeking career and salary growth.

2. **HSFP participants are primarily women, Latine and middle aged.** The program primarily benefits women, people who identify as Hispanic, and individuals between 35 and 54. 56% of HSFP participants identify as Hispanic. By comparison, people who identify as Hispanic account for 24% of the overall number of participants in Registered Apprenticeship programs nationally.⁴ Compared with other food service workers in California, school food professionals, including HSFP participants, are generally older.⁵

1. Upstream Public Health, Health Impact Assessment: HB 2800 Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Policy. May 11, 2021.

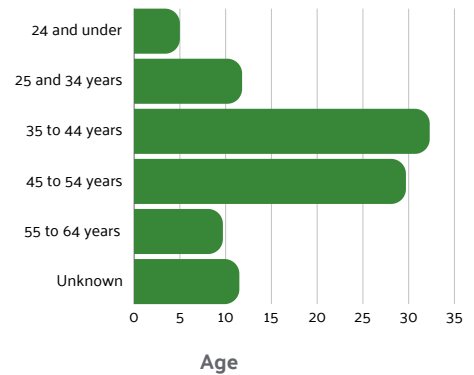
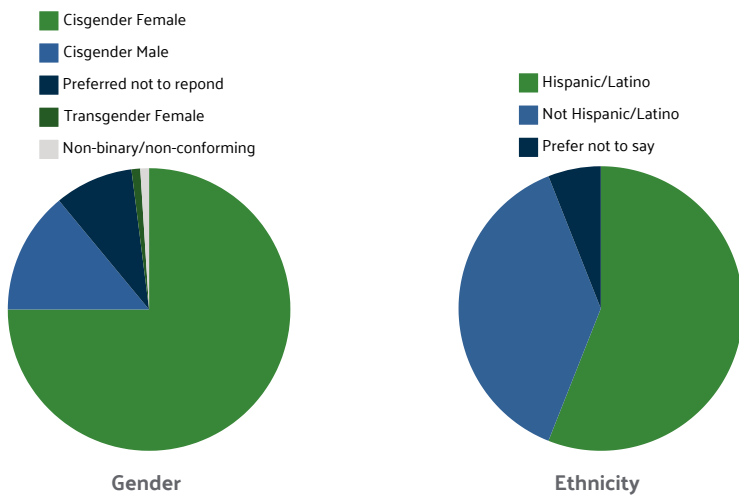
<https://search.issuelab.org/resource/health-impact-assessment-hb-2800-oregon-farm-to-school-and-school-garden-policy.html>

2. Food Insight Group. 2024. "Gaps in California's School Nutrition Services Staffing." <https://www.calsna.org/documents/PPL/GapsinCASNSStaffing2024Full.pdf>.

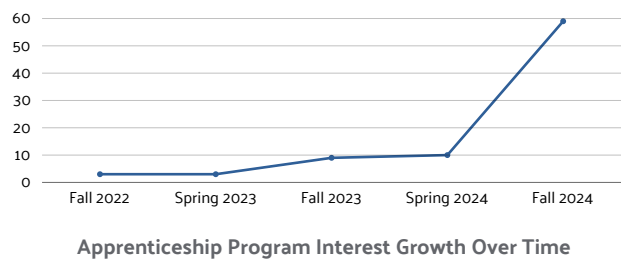
3. School Pulse Panel (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/results.asp>

4. U.S. Department of Labor, FY 2021 Data and Statistics. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/apprenticeship/about/statistics/2021>

5. Sara Hinkley, Hungry for Good Jobs: Food Service Workers in California Public Schools, Center for Labor Research and Education, University of California, Berkeley, September 11, 2024, <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/hungry-for-good-jobs/>.



3. Interest in HSFP is growing. Across all programs and cohorts, there has been a significant rise in applications, reflecting increasing interest in the program.



4. HSFP increases commitment to school food and may help with retention. According to HSFP alumni surveys, the primary benefits for both those working and not working in food service are an increase in knowledge and a stronger commitment to school food work. In the long run, the program may help school food programs attract and retain staff.

5. Participation in the Healthy School Food Pathway (HSFP) program led to several positive outcomes for school districts. In addition to their staff gaining more knowledge and skills, and a stronger commitment to school food work, which may help with retention and recruitment, districts that participated in HSFP are seeing other significant benefits including improved morale, culinary skills, and sense of community:

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The Healthy School Food Pathway program addresses key barriers that school nutrition programs face when they seek to increase the number of healthy, freshly prepared school meals they serve. This program also provides economic mobility to a long overlooked and underserved workforce of mostly female, Latine, middle-age school nutrition professionals while increasing the knowledge and skills essential to sourcing and serving freshly prepared meals. Investments in this training help to increase staff morale and build a stronger commitment to school food programs, which research has shown can help reduce turnover.⁶ An increase in the number of freshly prepared meals leads to increases in student participation in school meal programs, a reduction in hunger, improvements in attendance rates and test scores, and an increase in the size of the market for small and midsize California food producers.⁷

“I loved this program and would do it again. It gave me confidence and a network in school nutrition, and it opened doors to think beyond one kitchen. I found a community passionate about healthy food and proud of their work. It gave me purpose and changed my perspective, keeping me committed to my career in school kitchens.”

–HSFP Apprentice

“This program has helped us to build momentum with scratch cooking. It has also boosted employee morale and willingness to contribute and participate.”

–School Food Director

6. Carol Hacker, *The High Cost of Low Morale, and What to Do About It*, (CRC Press, October 2021), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781003072959/high-cost-low-morale-carol-hacker>.
 7. Jenny Jia et al., “Changes to Dietary and Health Outcomes Following Implementation of the 2012 Updated US Department of Agriculture School Nutrition Standards: Analysis Using National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2005–2016,” *Public Health Nutrition*, 23, no. 16 (2020). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10200493/>; California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation Team, “California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation Progress Report: 2022-2024,” <https://californiafarmtoschoolval.org/>.