

January 2024

# Gaps in California's School Nutrition Services Staffing

Findings from the California School  
Nutrition Services Department  
Vacancy and Turnover Rates Survey

School Year 2022–2023



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# Executive Summary

## INTRODUCTION

California has invested heavily in the school food system in support of healthy and successful students, a resilient and climate-smart agricultural sector, and thriving economies. However, School Food Authorities are persistently underemployed, and recruiting and retaining labor continues to be a barrier to serving fresh, healthy meals for many school food programs. Staff shortages are consistently identified as a top challenge: according to the 2024 School Nutrition Trends Report survey, 90.5% of school meal professionals identified staff shortages as a challenge (School Nutrition Association, 2024). To understand this issue further, the Chef Ann Foundation and the California School Nutrition Association partnered with Food Insight Group to conduct a statewide survey of school nutrition services departments during the 2022–23 school year. Food service directors from 190 of California’s 1,018 School Food Authorities reported vacancy and turnover data along with their perspectives on staffing challenges and opportunities.

## KEY FINDINGS

12%

**Combined vacancy rate** of responding School Food Authorities, at the end of the 2022–23 school year. This rate is considerably higher than nationwide food accommodation and service industry, state and local education industry, and California statewide industry rates.

14%

**Vacancy rate of part-time non-managerial roles.** Part-time positions had higher overall vacancy than full-time positions.

13%

**Annual turnover rate**, with greater turnover rates for part-time roles. This rate was substantially higher than turnover rates from comparable industries during the same time period.

3 in 5

**Food service directors are concerned about** staff showing up to work (63%), which is caused by and reinforces systemic inequalities of low wage work. They were equally concerned with having enough staff to meet the student participation levels they expected (62%) and recruiting qualified candidates to fill vacant positions (62%).

## THE (MISSED) OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE SCHOOL MEALS

Persistent staffing issues prevent School Food Authorities from providing the quality of meals that they're striving for. Respondents spoke of the impact of these issues not only on the quality of meals they serve, but also on student meal participation and, therefore, their bottom line.



### 1 Impact on school meal service

Staff shortages lead to last-minute menu changes and greater use of pre-packaged items, longer lines (resulting in reduced time to eat or students skipping meals altogether), and less efficient operations.



### 2 Recruitment, compensation, and hiring challenges

School meal operators are concerned that they cannot recruit or retain employees with the level of skill required to achieve their program goals, particularly given competition from adjacent sectors and, in some cases, the burdensome district or School Food Authority hiring process.



### 3 Impact on scratch cooking and program quality

Food service directors note that achieving California's goals for school food requires investments in food, equipment, and training, but also longer-term solutions to staff shortages. They have appreciated being able to use current grant funds or supplemental funds for staff, but they request more sustainable solutions. Food service directors also describe how the cycle of staff shortages strain current staff, reduce their program quality, and thus affect employee morale and retention.



**Short-staffing greatly impacts the ability to feed students. Unlike other departments, the amount of work cannot be reduced if staff are missing. We can't just "put off" the work, students still need to eat and we cannot turn away students because we don't have enough staff. Having more staff also allows for meals to have better quality and the capability to create more scratch items and rely less on pre-packaged items.**

*California School Food Service Director*

# Overview



**The state of California has invested heavily in the school food system in support of healthy and successful students, a resilient and climate-smart agricultural sector, and thriving economies. However, anecdotal and nationwide data continue to illuminate that School Food Authorities<sup>1</sup> are persistently underemployed, and recruiting and retaining labor continues to be a barrier to serving fresh, healthy meals for many school food programs.**

Staff shortages are consistently identified as a top challenge: according to the *2024 School Nutrition Trends Report* survey, 90.5% of school meal professionals identified staff shortages as a challenge (School Nutrition Association, 2024). A recent Nutrition Policy Institute survey indicated that California school food service directors' and managers' greatest concern about implementing the state's universal meal program was staffing shortages (Hecht et al., 2022). Low pay, limited hours, and the aging school nutrition workforce all contribute to nonteacher staff shortages in the education sector (Cooper & Martinez Hickey, 2022). Yet data on the extent of staff shortages are not readily available. To understand this issue further, the Chef Ann Foundation and the California School Nutrition Association partnered with Food Insight Group to conduct a statewide survey of school nutrition services departments' vacancy and turnover rates during the 2022–23 school year.

<sup>1</sup> School Food Authorities are entities that are responsible for administering child nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. In most cases, these are school districts. They can also be other entities, such as a county office of education or an individual charter school.

# Survey Background

This survey was developed in spring 2023, based on the federal Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS), which assesses vacancy and turnover information nationwide (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Some definitions were adapted for relevance to the school nutrition field based on input from current and former school food operators and academics who study school nutrition and school food labor. The turnover rate (referred to by JOLTS as “separations rate”) is calculated as an annual turnover rate. The turnover rate is the number of separations during the year as a percent of the average employment throughout the year (averaged between the beginning-of-year and end-of-year employment). The vacancy rate (referred to by JOLTS as “job openings rate” in JOLTS) was calculated as a point-in-time rate at the end of the school year. The vacancy rate is the number of job openings as a percent of job openings plus the number of people employed at that point in time. This survey used end-of-year turnover rates for practical reasons of data access and availability, based on input from food service directors. Future research could explore the variation and contributors to beginning versus end of school year employment. (For example: what effect does early departures for summer employment have on overall rates?) In this survey, the total number of people employed from the beginning to the end of the year decreased by 0.57%, indicating that the size of the employed workforce remained relatively stable.

The survey response rate was 19%, representing 190 of 1,019 School Food Authorities (SFAs) in California. Email invitations were sent to a list of 1,156 California K–12 food service directors obtained from the California Department of Education. Respondents included public school districts, public charter schools, and county offices of education that operate school meal programs. Meal programs from residential child care institutions were not included in this survey. In addition to individualized survey invitations, the survey was also promoted through state agency and CSNA communications, as well as outreach by partner organizations. Survey responses were collected in July and August 2023, with additional outreach and data collection in the fall of 2023. Data were cleaned to remove duplicate responses and were reviewed for reporting and calculation errors. The survey completion rate was 79%. The number of responses to each question is indicated in the descriptive tables and figures.



# Vacancy

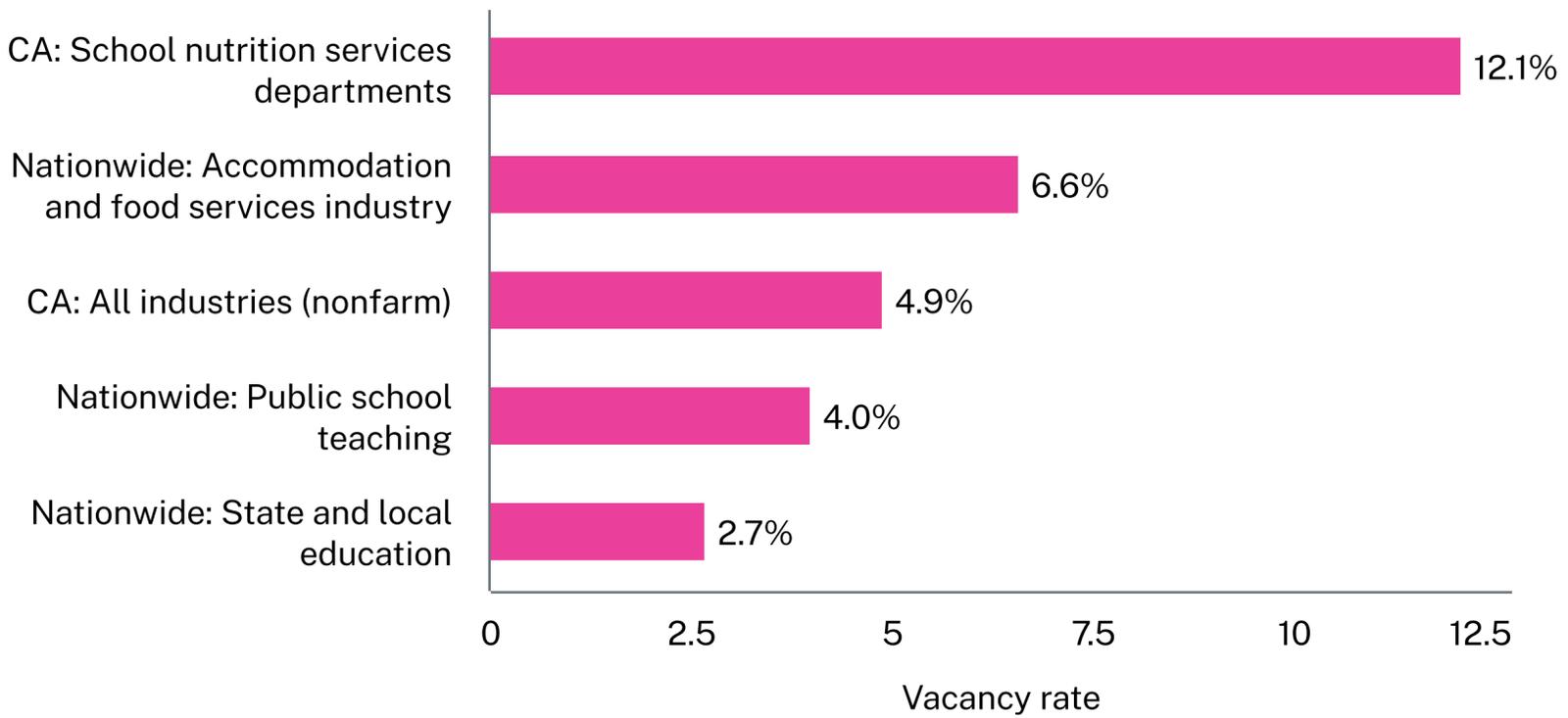
## 12.1% of school nutrition jobs were vacant in school year 2022–23

Food service directors<sup>2</sup> from 190 of 1,018 School Food Authorities reported a combined 12.1% vacancy rate at the close of the 2022–23 school year. This number represents 1,359 vacancies out of 11,252 positions if fully staffed; more than one in every nine budgeted positions. This rate exceeds similar rates of vacancy reported in the June 2023 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey* across the food services and accommodation industry nationwide, the nationwide state and local education sector, and all of California's nonfarm industries combined. Teacher and school support staff turnover is also a known issue within the local education sector. For comparison, the National Center for Education Statistics estimated a 4% vacancy rate within public school teaching positions nationwide during the fall of 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Figure 1 illustrates this rate compared to relevant state and nationwide industry totals.

<sup>2</sup> This report uses the term "food service director" to refer to the leader of a school nutrition department. There are a variety of other job titles applied to this role, such as "nutrition services director" or "director of child nutrition." When referring to survey respondents, this term references those individuals or their delegates for completing the survey.

## ▼ Food Insight Group

**Figure 1. Reported vacancy rates for California school nutrition departments exceed vacancy rates of relevant state and national industries**



Source: California School Nutrition Vacancy Rate Survey; Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, June 2023 rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023); School Pulse Panel (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

## Part-time roles had considerably higher vacancy rates

Vacancy rates varied by position type, with part-time roles at nearly twice the vacancy rates of their full-time counterparts (Table 1). Non-managerial, part-time roles reported the highest vacancy rate at 14% (Figure 2). These roles include positions like cashier, dishwasher, and nutrition assistant.

**Table 1. Vacancy rates by position type**

Position type	Vacancy rate	Vacancies	Total positions if fully staffed	n
Managerial, full-time	5.1%	39	762	188
Managerial, part-time	9.4%	8	85	188
Non-managerial, full-time	7.5%	183	2,452	188
Non-managerial, part-time	14.0%	1,100	7,878	188
Total	12.1%	1,359	11,252	190

*n* = 188 SFAs responding to the position type subcategories, 190 SFAs responding to the overall vacancy questions

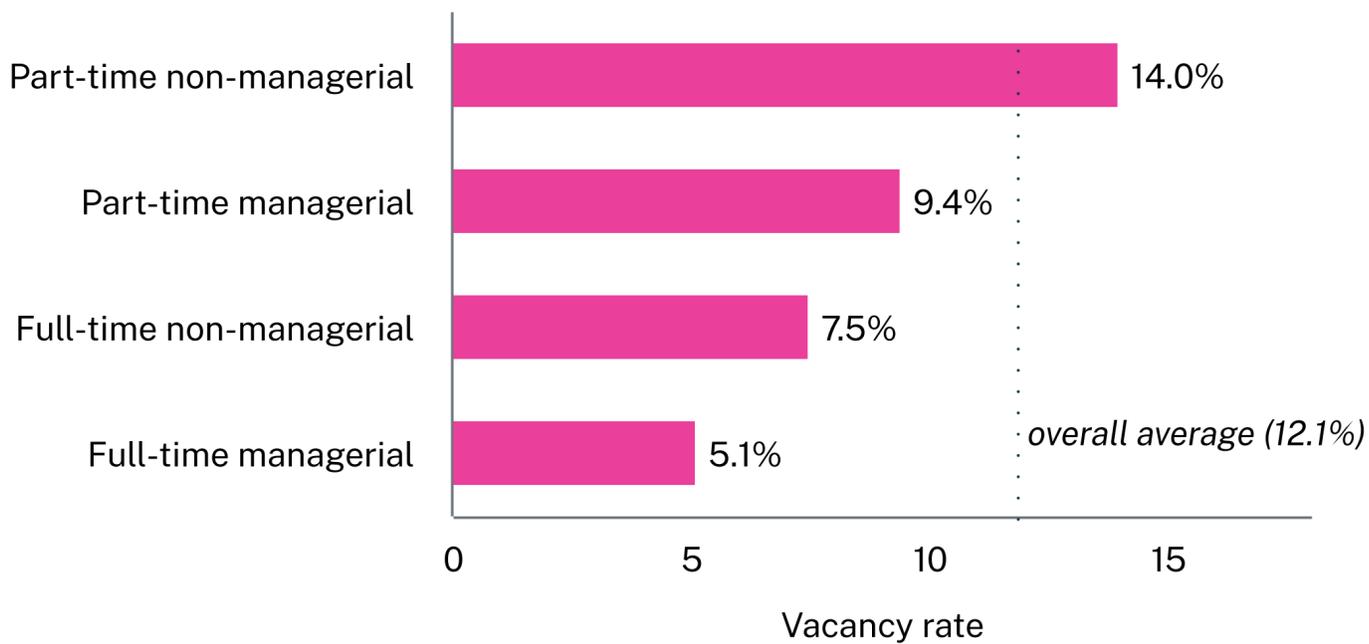


**Recruiting qualified part-time candidates is challenging due to the high cost of benefits [to the employee] should the candidate need them.**

*California School Food Service Director*

## ▼ Food Insight Group

**Figure 2. Vacancy rates are highest for part-time roles**



## Staff shortages are felt across all sizes of districts

Vacancy rates did not appear to be correlated with the size of the corresponding school districts' student enrollment. Table 2, below, shows reported vacancy rates grouped by district size.

**Table 2. Vacancy rates by district size**

Student enrollment	Vacancy rate	Vacancies	Total positions if fully staffed	# of SFAs	% of SFAs
Less than 1,000	8.6%	24	279	50	26.3%
1,000–2,499	12.6%	56	445	32	16.8%
2,500–4,999	9.4%	77	815	32	16.8%
5,000–9,999	13.1%	217	1,655	33	17.4%
10,000–24,999	9.7%	241	2,495	29	15.3%
25,000 and up	13.4%	744	5,563	14	7.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12.1%</b>	<b>1,359</b>	<b>11,252</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

*n = 190 SFAs responding*



**We increased hours for our team last year, making every position a benefited position. This along with an increase in wages, is how we were able to reduce our vacancy number. Without desirable positions that offer competitive wages, benefits, and enough hours to be viable, we won't be able to sustain the workforce necessary to scratch cook!**

*California School Food Service Director*

## School Food Authorities with food service management companies may have slightly lower vacancy rates

School Food Authorities that employ food service management companies have somewhat lower vacancy rates than School Food Authorities with self-operated meal programs (Table 3). Given the variation of staffing models among School Food Authorities that contract with these vendors, additional data collection could illuminate the similarities and differences of staffing issues between these operational models.

**Table 3. Vacancy rates by operational model**

Food service management company?	Vacancy rate	Vacancies	Total positions if fully staffed	# of SFAs	% of SFAs
Yes	8.3%	26	3,312	18	9.5%
No	12.2%	1,333	10,940	172	90.5%
Total	12.1%	1,359	11,252	190	100%

*n = 190 SFAs responding*

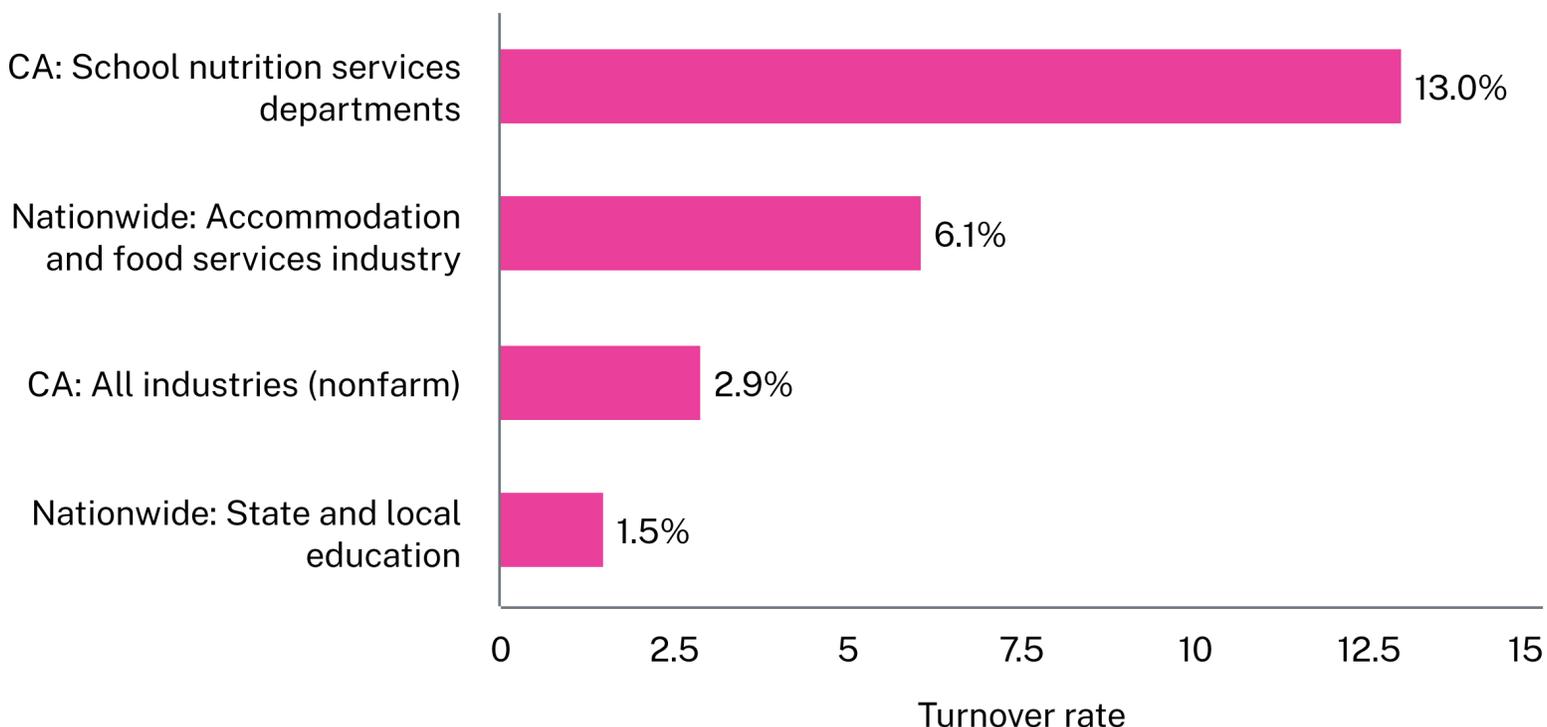


# Turnover

## 13% of school nutrition positions turned over during the 2022–23 school year

While vacancy rates offer a snapshot in time of open positions, turnover rates describe the churn of people through positions across the school year. During the 2022–23 school year, 141 responding School Food Authorities had a combined 13.0% annual turnover rate. This rate represents 1,108 separations<sup>3</sup> across an average annual employment of 8,550 budgeted positions. Figure 3 illustrates this rate compared to relevant state and nationwide industry totals.

**Figure 3. Reported turnover rates for California school nutrition departments exceed turnover rates of relevant state and national industries**



Source: California School Nutrition Vacancy Rate Survey; Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, June 2023 rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Job separations happen for a variety of reasons, including quitting, layoffs and discharges, retirements, and disability. It does not include transfers within the same organization, such as a promotion or change from a part-time role to a full-time role.

## Part-time positions have higher turnover rates

Mirroring vacancy rates, annual turnover rates are higher for part-time positions when compared to their full-time counterparts. As described in Table 4, this is true across both managerial and non-managerial roles, with a 15.1% turnover rate across part-time non-managerial roles, compared to 7.7% for their full-time counterparts. Part-time managerial roles reported the highest annual turnover rate among these groups, though the size of this group is comparatively smaller than the other position types.

**Table 4. Turnover rates by position type**

Position type	Annual turnover rate	Separations	Average employment
Managerial, full-time	7.6%	46	604.55
Managerial, part-time	26.2%	17	65
Non-managerial, full-time	7.7%	151	1,966.5
Non-managerial, part-time	15.1%	894	5,913.5
Total	13.0%	1,108	8,549.5

*n = 141 SFAs responding*

Other available school food industry surveys have, similarly, found higher turnover rates amongst part-time staff. A 2022 survey of Wisconsin food service directors also reports a 15.1% turnover rate amongst part-time, non-management staff. Rates were much lower amongst full time and management level roles (Gaddis & Trongone, 2023). The School Nutrition Association’s 2019 survey of 1,042 school districts nationwide found a 6.1% average turnover amongst part-time, non-management level employees, compared with 3.0% turnover for full-time, non-management level employees and 0.8% turnover for management level employees (School Nutrition Association, 2020).

Replacing workers due to turnover is costly. Estimates from 2012 by the Center for American Progress put the typical cost of turnover for positions earning less than \$30,000 annually at 16% of the employee’s salary, and 20% of salary for workers earning less than \$50,000 (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Survey respondents spoke to this issue, noting the costs of turnover in terms of time, expense, role shifts, productivity, and neglected priorities.



**Decreased vacancy rates, turnover and absenteeism would allow us to focus more on the food and the students than constantly training and onboarding new staff.**

*California School Food Service Director*



# Job Creation and Hiring

## School Food Authorities are adding positions but having trouble filling them

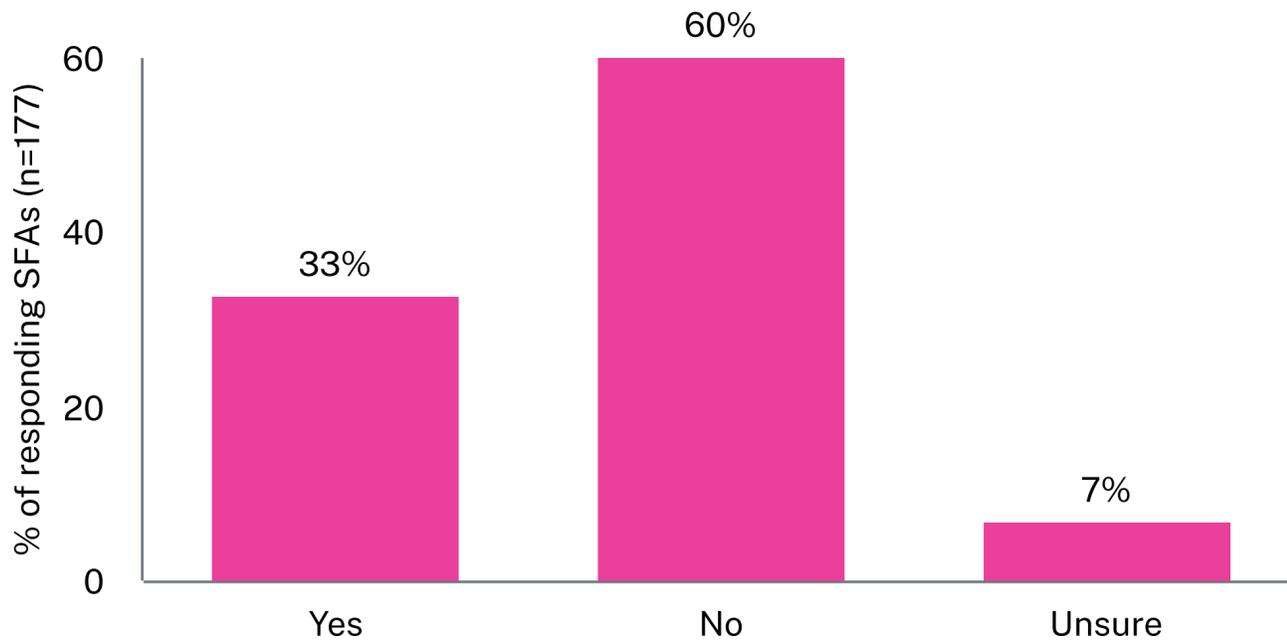
One third of School Food Authorities added a total of 236 new positions at the start of the 2022–23 school year (Figure 4). These roles included cooks and cafeteria staff, drivers and warehouse workers, permanent substitutes, supervision and management roles, and specialized roles like farm to school and wellness coordinators. These positions were intended to address program expansion (opening new schools and central kitchens, increased production and service needs, or new mealtime points-of-service); increased participation from the transition to universal free meals, and meeting existing operational needs (increased scratch cooking capacity, enhancing kitchen or site management, deliveries and warehousing roles).

Respondents reported mixed success in their ability to fill these new positions. 15% of School Food Authorities were not able to fill these new jobs with qualified applicants, and 39% of respondents were able to fill “some of them” (Table 5).

## ▼ Food Insight Group

In describing these challenges, food service directors described a perceived gap between the knowledge and skill required for these positions compared to the wages they offered and the difficulty of competing with fast food or retail jobs. Some respondents also noted that the lack of benefits or the added cost of benefits to part-time employees made these jobs less desirable or impractical for potential candidates.

**Figure 4. One third of SFAs added positions for the 2022–23 school year**



**Table 5. Less than half of SFAs were able to fill their new positions with qualified candidates**

Were you able to fill your new positions with qualified applicants?	% of responding SFAs	# of SFAs
All of them	45.8%	27
Some of them	39.0%	23
None of them	15.3%	9

*n = 59 SFAs responding*



It is difficult when large companies like McDonald's offer a lot more money per hour. We cannot afford to pay at those rates. Thus, it makes getting qualified and reliable staff difficult.

*California School Food Service Director*



The work that we do is physically demanding and takes training and skill. It's not the stereotype of the "lunch lady." The demand of the job has changed for the better but most don't understand. We need qualified, trained individuals, and we need the pay to reflect that as well.

*California School Food Service Director*



The labor is increasing, as these positions are labor intensive. However, the wage does not reflect the hard work all of the kitchen staff endure. It is hard to get someone qualified in these positions and convince them to stay when the wages are behind [the wages of] fast food, grocery stores, etc. At this point, the only “selling point” is that they do not have to work weekends, nights or holidays, and that if they have students in the district, it can match the students’ schedule. This is not a large population we can focus our [hiring] efforts on.

*California School Food Service Director*





# Comparison to prior years

## Pandemic-era staffing issues persist

Food service directors indicated that vacancy and turnover issues that were amplified during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic have not diminished. Nearly three quarters (73%) of respondents indicated that their vacancy rates were about the same or higher when compared to the prior school year (2021–22), and 78% of respondents indicated that turnover was about the same or higher than the previous school year, as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6).

**Figure 5. Vacancy rates were similar to the previous school year (2022–23 compared to 2021–22)**

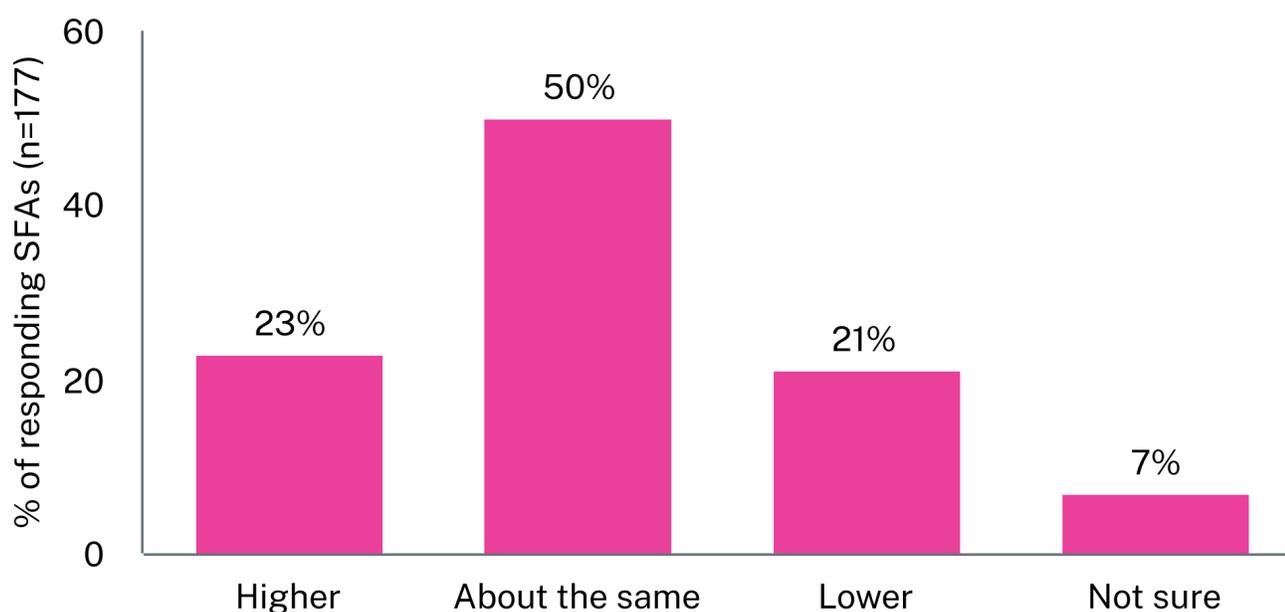
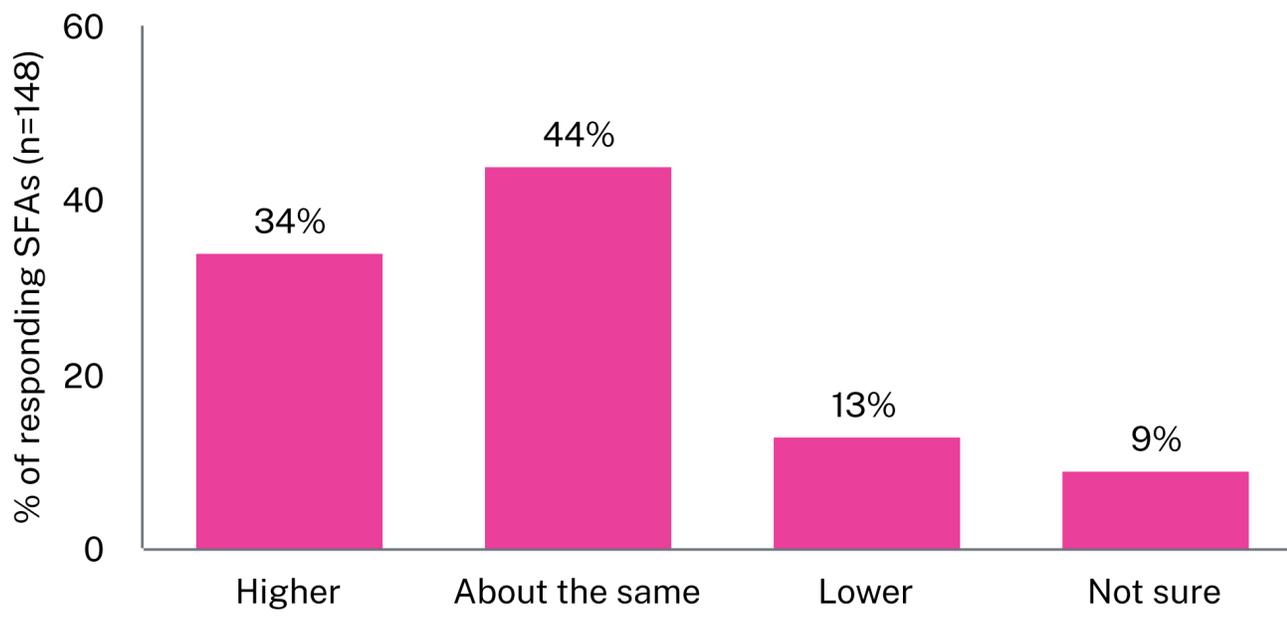


Figure 6. Turnover rates were similar or higher than the previous school year (2022–23 compared to 2021–22)





# Implications

## **School Food Authorities anticipate widespread staffing challenges this school year**

Heading into the 2023–24 school year, food service directors expected ubiquitous labor challenges (Figure 7). More than three in five respondents reported concern about staff showing up to work (63%), a systemic issue in low wage work. Analysis by the Urban Institute estimates that there was a “50 percent increase in the number of absences from illness, child care needs, and family or personal obligations” during the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to the two years prior (Boyens et al., 2022). In a labor force that is largely female, the interconnected issues of illness, child care, and employment also have an outsized effect. According to the National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families, “Research on care-work disruptions has shown that these interruptions can result in work absences and job termination” (Ferreira van Leer et al., 2021). Wages can also play a direct role in absence: researchers Du and Leigh find that “a \$1 increase in minimum wage led to a 16.1% reduction in absences from work due to illness,” and that find that higher wages can have particularly positive effects for the lowest earners and those who are not employed year round (Leigh & Du, 2018; Du & Leigh, 2018).

## ▼ Food Insight Group

Food service directors were equally concerned with having enough staff to meet the student participation levels they expected (62%)—particularly given the welcome increase in school meal participation due to California’s Universal Meals Program.

A third, equally prominent concern amongst food service directors was recruiting qualified candidates to fill vacant positions (62%). This finding mirrors a top challenge noted elsewhere: a 2022 survey of Wisconsin food service directors found that “58% of schools experience significant challenges finding and hiring non-management level employees” (Gaddis & Trongone, 2023). Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the national School Nutrition Association’s 2019 survey registered this same issue as a top challenge, with 37% of respondents indicating that “finding and hiring non-management level staff” was a “significant challenge” (School Nutrition Association, 2020).



**The expected trend of preparing more food from scratch and the required salad bar options are a strain on employees. Also, now that all students [receive free meals] our participation is well above normal. It’s great to have the [higher meal participation] numbers, but we need more positions and better equipment, and with older facilities it’s hard to accommodate that.**

*California School Food Service Director*

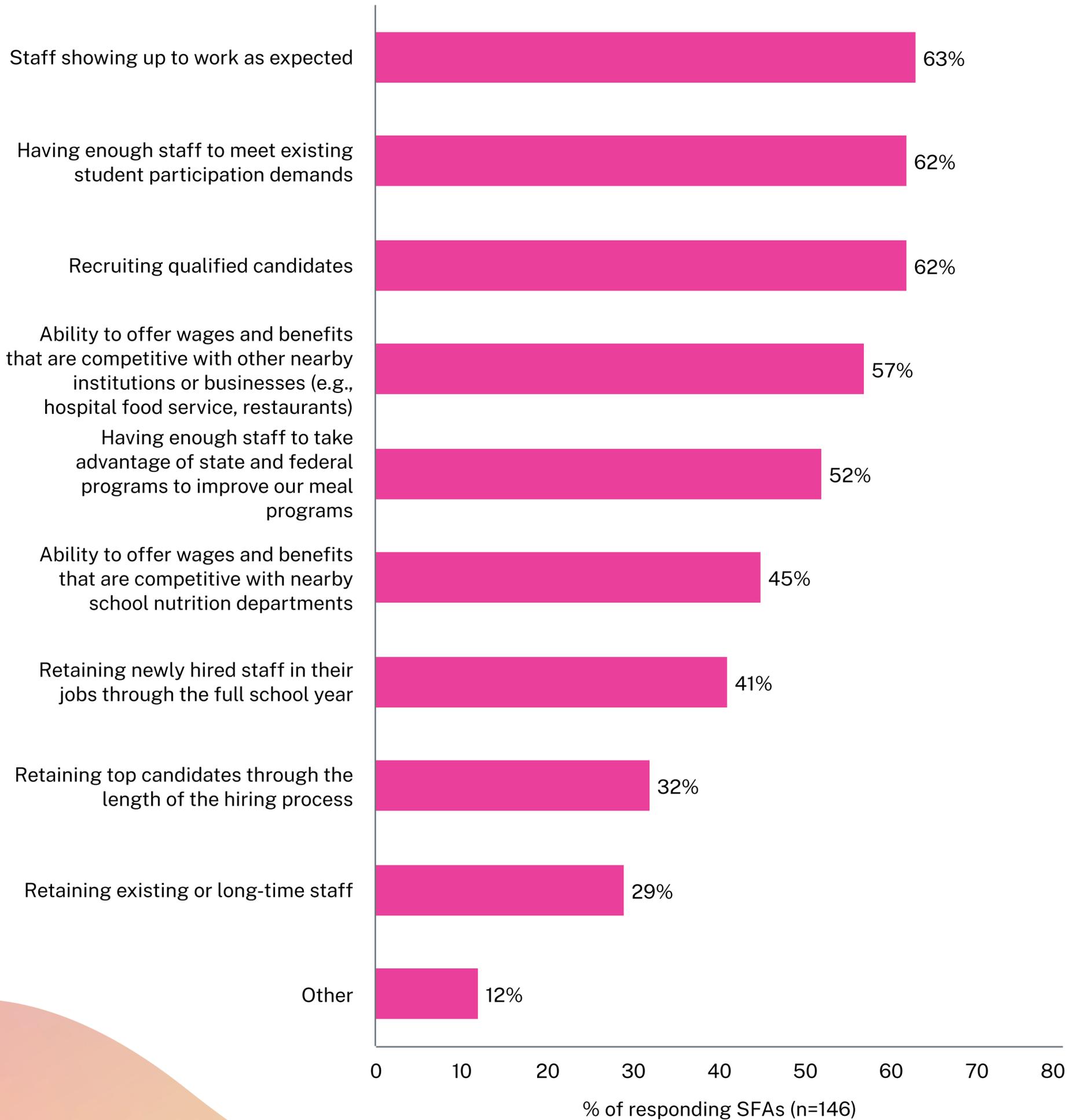
Adequate compensation is a pervasive issue. More than half of respondents (57%) expressed concern that their compensation packages were not competitive with nearby institutions or businesses. This survey was conducted before California announced its intent to raise the minimum wage for fast food workers to \$20 per hour in April 2024, which is expected to have a ripple effect into food service and related industries (Sumagaysay & Agrawal, 2023).



**Our staff are tired because of serving 40% more meals due to universal meals [while] being understaffed. They also served all during COVID. Morale is not what it used to be. We increased wages to some of the highest in the area [within school nutrition departments], but still can’t compete with Target, etc.**

*California School Food Service Director*

Figure 7. Top staffing challenges anticipated by School Food Authorities headed into the 2023–24 school year





# Realizing California's Vision for School Meals

## *The (missed) opportunity to improve school meals*

At their core, persistent staffing issues prevent School Food Authorities from providing the quality of meals that they're striving for. Respondents spoke of the impact of these issues not only on the quality of meals they serve, but also on student meal participation and, therefore, their bottom line. A qualitative analysis of food service directors' comments illuminated key areas that lead to missed opportunities for school meal improvement:

### **IMPACT ON SCHOOL MEAL SERVICE**

Staff shortages lead to last-minute menu changes and greater use of pre-packaged items, longer lines (resulting in reduced time to eat or students skipping meals altogether), and less efficient operations.

## RECRUITMENT, HIRING, AND COMPENSATION CHALLENGES

School meal operators are concerned that they cannot recruit or retain employees with the level of skill required to achieve their program goals, particularly given competition from adjacent sectors and, in some cases, the burdensome district or School Food Authority hiring process.

## IMPACT ON SCRATCH COOKING AND PROGRAM QUALITY

Food service directors note that achieving California's goals for school food requires investments in food, equipment, and training, but also longer-term solutions to staff shortages. They have appreciated being able to use current grant funds or supplemental funds for staff, but they request more sustainable solutions. Food service directors also describe how the cycle of staff shortages strain current staff, reduce their program quality, and thus affect employee morale and retention.

**We often closed serving lines when we just did not have enough people to run the serving lines. Students would just walk away because they did not want to wait in the long line. We then lost the participation, which might not bounce back even after we were able to fill the positions. Furthermore, managerial staff had to work as a substitute worker at the school kitchen to ensure meals are produced and served timely. Because of managerial staff being pulled away from their duties, they were not able to focus on mentoring, coaching, and monitoring their team members' performance, which then caused more absenteeism and turnover. Non-managerial staffers were also asked to work extra hours, which resulted in burn-out and job-quitting, which then created more vacancies. It was a never ending vicious cycle. As a result, the quality and consistency of meals to students suffered and employees' morale remained low.**

*California School Food Service Director*

**Short-staffing greatly impacts the ability to feed students. Unlike other departments, the amount of work cannot be reduced if staff are missing. We can't just "put off" the work, students still need to eat and we cannot turn away students because we don't have enough staff. Having more staff also allows for meals to have better quality and the capability to create more scratch items and rely less on pre-packaged items.**

*California School Food Service Director*

## Realizing California's investments in school food

Despite these challenges, food service directors spoke of a vision for school meals that mirrors state and federal investments. They describe a desire to meet the growing demand for school meals, while investing in their workforce, upgrading their kitchen facilities, procuring California-grown and produced foods, and cooking more food from scratch in-house. When they envisioned a future without high vacancy and turnover rates, respondents described the following opportunities:

### CALIFORNIA'S SCHOOL FOOD PRIORITIES<sup>4</sup>

Provide free, equitable access to the School Meals for All program for every K-12 student

Increase capacity for schools to prepare and serve freshly prepared meals

Engage students with nutritious, delicious, culturally relevant meals so they are prepared to learn

Invest in school food careers and workforce development

Expand and create inclusive access to school food markets for a wide range of California food producers<sup>5</sup>

### OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS STAFFING ISSUES AND REALIZE STATE PRIORITIES

#### Themes

Invest in menu development

#### In food service directors' words

“I am adding positions now and I just increased everyone to full time. This will free myself and my managers up so that we can innovate - come up with new recipes and train staff to prepare more foods at their sites. We will move to reusables and managers will be available to work at sites to facilitate this transition. We are considering expanding the program to bake some of our breakfast items if we have time to think and test, and train bakers. We are thinking about expanding to add suppers at the high school. If managers are freed up [from substituting] we can spend more time at sites coaching staff and providing support.”

*(continued on next page)*

<sup>4</sup> These priorities are evidenced by recent state investments in the Universal Meals Program, School Food Best Practices Funds, Kitchen Infrastructure & Training Funds, and the California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program.

<sup>5</sup> In particular, small to midsize producers, socially disadvantaged producers and producers who utilize climate smart agriculture practices and production systems, such as certified organic.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS STAFFING ISSUES AND REALIZE STATE PRIORITIES** *(continued)*

**Themes**

**In food service directors' words**

**Expand scratch cooking**

“We could scratch cook more often and make the meals more favorable to the students without sacrificing quality for speed of service. [...] If I didn't have to run short everyday, we could implement more freshly made entrée's and feed more students. Scratch and fast scratch wouldn't seem so difficult if I were fully staffed.”

**Engage students in food and nutrition education**

“With lower vacancy rates, turnover, and absenteeism, we could improve the service to students, we could produce more scratch-cooked meals, we could better our nutrition education to the students, and work more collaboratively with the school sites toward improving overall health and nutrition for our students.”

**Invest in employee training, support, and well-being**

“Lower turnover rates would lead to higher quality staff being retained into leadership. This would lead to a higher quality of service for the students.”

**Increase operational and meal time efficiency, to meet participation demand**

“We could serve more students. If I had the staff, I could open up more points of service to feed more kids.”

# Acknowledgements

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Photo credits: Food Insight Group and Chef Ann Foundation

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## OUR MISSION

FIG is committed to building just, equitable, and resilient food systems.

We believe that all people have the right to access good food — food that nourishes people, communities, and the planet.

**Good food for the common good.**

### Contact

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