

## News Release

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# **New Study Shows California K-12 School Food Staff Shortages Are Three Times Higher Than Public School Teacher Shortages Nationwide**

Shortages can negatively impact quality of meals and student meal participation

**California** – The first [study](#) of K-12 school food staff shortages in California revealed the rate of unfilled positions in the state’s school food programs is three times higher than unfilled positions for U.S. public school teachers. High vacancy rates are negatively impacting school food staffs’ ability to provide access to and serve students healthy and appetizing meals. The study was conducted by the [California School Nutrition Association](#) and the [Chef Ann Foundation](#) in partnership with [Food Insight Group](#).

In 2022, California became the first state to implement a [universal free meals program](#), which provides free breakfast and lunch to all K-12 students regardless of their household’s income. Improved access to school meals is associated with [better attendance and higher test scores](#) – students are more motivated to learn and are able to better pay attention in class when they are not hungry or undernourished. While the program is highly lauded by school food groups and children’s health advocates, expanding access to school meals requires more school food staff to both meet the increased demand and maintain or improve the quality of meals.

“California is leading the nation in school food reform – it has worthwhile and ambitious goals for supporting the lifelong health and success of kids,” said Josh Rogers, California School Nutrition Association’s co-chair for the Public Policy and Legislation Committee. “The next step forward is to address the gaps that are serving as barriers to realizing the state’s commendable vision, which includes developing long-term solutions to school food staff shortages that were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and remain pervasive.”

Further compounding school food staff shortages is the competition for labor with adjacent sectors including fast food and retail. California [recently committed](#) to increasing the minimum wage for many fast food workers in the state to \$20 per hour. This wage hike doesn't include California school food workers who prepare and serve food to students in [more than 10,000](#) public K-12 schools.

“The success of our universal school meals program depends on districts being able to hire and keep qualified and experienced school nutrition staff,” said Adam Weinberger, association president of the California School Employees Association. “This long-standing challenge is exacerbated by wages rising in other employment sectors. Wage increases and more full-time positions with benefits are needed to retain experienced school food professionals, attract qualified new hires, and achieve California’s goals for healthy school meals.”

Food service directors within California’s School Food Authorities submitted data to the vacancy rate study during the 2022-23 school year. The results revealed that School Food Authorities had a combined vacancy rate of 12% and turnover rate of 13%, considerably higher than the nationwide food accommodation and service industry, state and local education industry, and California statewide industry rates. The research also illustrated that high vacancy and turnover rates can negatively impact the quality of meals served.

“Without a larger, more robust school food workforce, our collective vision of providing fresh, healthy, scratch-made school meals remains out of reach,” stated Mara Fleishman, CEO of the Chef Ann Foundation. “It’s imperative that we address this challenge in order to fulfill our aspirations for healthier kids and a more sustainable planet.”

The study additionally showed that one third of California School Food Authorities added a total of 236 new positions at the start of the 2022-23 school year largely to accommodate increased student participation in school meal programs resulting from the universal free meals policy and to meet existing operational needs. Yet 15% of School Food Authorities were not able to fill these new jobs with qualified applicants, and 39% were only able to partially fill openings. Even if positions were filled, the study found, the turnover rate for school food staff was still more than eight times higher than the national average across state and local education employees.

The food service directors who participated in the study noted a perceived gap between knowledge and skill required for these positions compared to the wages they offered and difficulty competing with fast food or retail jobs. “The work that we do is physically demanding and takes training and skill. It’s not the stereotype of the ‘lunch lady,’” one California food service director participating in the study said. “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.”

One promising solution to addressing school food program staff shortages is a statewide school food [pre-apprenticeship](#) and [apprenticeship](#) program launched by the Chef Ann Foundation in partnership with the state of California in 2022. Registered with the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, the Healthy School Food Pathway program provides paid, on-the-job learning and supplemental training to professionalize a culinary career in school food and upskill the existing school food workforce. Close to 50 school districts across the state are participating in the program. Yet, pay for most school food workers hovering near the state’s minimum wage and limited positions with benefits continues to pose a recruitment challenge for the program.

The full report, [\*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\*](#), includes further information on research methodology, school food program vacancy and turnover rates, job creation and hiring data, and other insights.

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[Chef Ann Foundation](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit working to ensure that school food professionals have the resources, funding, and support they need to provide fresh, delicious, scratch cooked meals that support the health of children and our planet.

[California School Nutrition Association](#) strives to educate and empower its members to provide healthy school meals to foster an environment where children achieve overall wellness and lifelong success.

[Food Insight Group](#) is a food systems research and policy firm that partners with anchor institutions, philanthropic foundations, and community-based organizations to identify root causes of, and develop innovative solutions to, food system challenges.