

News Release

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Contact

Jessica Christopher

jessicachristopher@curatorpr.com

610-945-8615 (PT)

Chef Ann Foundation Applauds California for Reducing Ultra-Processed Foods in School Meals

*First-in-nation bill offers powerful public health intervention for reducing
diet-related chronic diseases among children*

Los Angeles, CA – California Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law a [bipartisan bill \(AB 1264\) that will phase certain ultra-processed foods out of school meals](#). This makes California the first state in the nation to take action on reducing students’ access to and consumption of a category of foods [linked](#) to rising rates of chronic diet-related diseases.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [estimates](#) that approximately 62% of kids’ and teens’ daily calories come from ultra-processed foods. **Limiting access to ultra-processed foods in schools – where nearly 30 million students eat breakfast and/or lunch five days a week – can be one of our nation’s most powerful public health interventions for protecting and improving the health of children.**

More than a dozen states have introduced bills to limit or eliminate ultra-processed foods in schools. California’s bill stands out as one of the most comprehensive and practical. One of the barriers to date on enacting legislation on ultra-processed foods is that there is not currently a formal definition of ultra-processed foods. Through this bill, California will adopt a formal, science-based definition of “ultra-processed food” by June 2028. By July 2029, schools will need to begin to phase out foods that meet this definition from menus. By taking a phased approach to implementing these changes, California is giving school food service departments the runway they need to adjust their operations, train their staff, and adapt their menus to include more freshly prepared meals.

This bill strengthens California’s comprehensive efforts to improve access to and the quality of school meals. The state was the first in the nation to [make school breakfast and lunch free for all students](#). It was also the first to [ban certain harmful additives in school meals](#). It’s [invested in upgrading school kitchens](#) so school food departments have the infrastructure they need to cook more meals from scratch. It’s built a [farm-to-school program](#) to help schools serve fresher, locally procured ingredients. Additionally, Governor Newsom issued an [executive order](#) directing state agencies to explore ways to reduce the harms of ultra-processed foods and further investigate food dyes, with a special emphasis on school meals.

Labor challenges are consistently identified as a top barrier for districts tasked with implementing the state’s school food reforms. Critically, California has invested in building a skilled school food workforce that has the culinary knowledge needed to prepare fresh, appetizing, made-from-scratch meals. This investment resulted in the creation of Chef Ann Foundation’s [Healthy School Food Pathway](#), which consists of the nation’s first registered pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and fellowship programs for school food professionals. The program has since expanded to Colorado and Virginia, and is slated to launch in other states in coming years.

As more ultra-processed foods are phased out, fresh meals prepared with whole ingredients will need to take their place. Moving forward, we will be looking to California to continue investing in growing, upskilling, and fairly compensating the school food workforce; improving school kitchen infrastructure; and increasing local procurement of fresh ingredients. These investments will be key to replacing ultra-processed foods with healthy scratch-cooked meals.

“We at the Chef Ann Foundation have been advocating for serving all students fresh, scratch-cooked school meals since 2009. We’re proud to have advocated for the passage of AB 1264 and applaud California for continuing to lead the nation on protecting children’s health by tackling the systemic barriers to improving school food. California students are on a path toward a better future.” –Mara Fleishman, CEO

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About Chef Ann Foundation

[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. To date, the organization has reached more than 16,000 schools and 4.4 million kids in all 50 states with healthy school food programming.