

18. School Meal Program

What It Is

The number of children enrolled in school meal programs is measured by the percentage of school children kindergarten through twelfth grade who receive free or reduced price meals at school. A child's family income must fall below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$33,458 for a family of four in 2002) to qualify for reduced-cost meals, or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$23,530 for a family of four in 2002) for free meals.

Why It Is Important

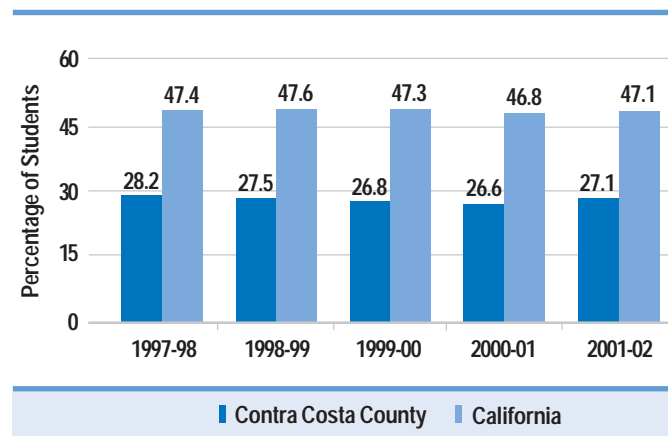
The number of children receiving free and reduced cost meals is an indicator of the number of children living in low-income households. The school meal program helps address inadequate nutrition for low-income children. For some children, the school meal is the most significant meal of the day.

Children who are hungry have trouble concentrating in class and have less energy for school. In addition, their health and development can be affected by poor nutrition.

How We Are Doing

The percentage of children in Contra Costa County who receive free or reduced cost school meals decreased from 28.2% in 1997-98 to 27.1% in 2001-02, as compared to 47% statewide in the same year. In part this reflects the inadequacy of the Federal Poverty Level as a measure of eligibility for free/reduced cost meals in a high cost area such as Contra Costa County; many families struggle to meet their basic needs, but still earn too much to qualify for meal programs, which are linked to the Federal Poverty Level.

Figure 18.1 — Percentage of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Cost Meals



Source: State of California, Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit, 2002.

