



## KITCHEN INFRASTRUCTURE + TRAINING (KIT) STATEWIDE SURVEY RESULTS:

# KIT Improves School Meal Access and Quality

DECEMBER 3, 2025

### Summary

The Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) program is particularly important for increasing student access to school meals, especially as many families struggle with affordability. State investments in KIT have enabled schools to significantly increase access to fresh food by funding kitchen infrastructure improvements and staff training. Recent results from a survey with school nutrition leaders at 245 public school districts and charter schools across California demonstrate the tremendous impact of the state's investment in the KIT program. Key results from this survey and subsequent interviews include:

- 86% of school districts have spent between 76-100% of their 2022 KIT funds<sup>1</sup>
- 90% of school districts reported KIT increased student access and/or quality of school meals<sup>2</sup>
  - 76% of school districts increased student access to nourishing school meals
  - 80% of school districts increased meal quality
- 77% of school districts need more KIT funds to improve access to quality school meals
- Many school nutrition leaders reported in interviews that KIT benefited their school nutrition workforce

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<sup>1</sup> In CDE's prior surveys with hundreds of school nutrition leaders, most of the pending expenditures centered around large-scale school kitchen remodels and included factors such as delays at the Department of State Architects, the need to schedule construction for the summer months, and coordination with school construction timelines.

<sup>2</sup> At the remaining 10% of school districts, many wrote in to say that they had projects underway that they anticipated would increase quality and/or access once complete. Others focused their investments on staff training and improving working conditions for the school nutrition workforce (e.g., by repairing broken equipment and improving the flow in cramped school kitchens). One charter school commented that the equipment they had purchased with KIT funds was lost in the LA fires.

The impact of the KIT program on increasing access to school meals is particularly important when many families struggle with affordability. Before School Meals for All, [44% of California's food-insecure families](#) did not qualify for federal school meal assistance because the income limits are set nationally and do not take into account California's high cost of living. [New research](#) shows household food insecurity is decreasing as a result of School Meals for All among both students who were already eligible for school meals (because declining stigma encourages more students to participate in school meals) and students who were previously ineligible for school meals assistance because their family's income was just above the federal income threshold.

## Introduction

School meals are an easy and effective lever for the state to support working families. California's School Meals for All program has proven successful in alleviating costs for families. Federal support is tenuous, as witnessed during the recent federal shutdown. School meals are a critical source of nutrition and relief for many families, guaranteeing at least two meals a day for hungry students. School meals will remain a vital part of the solution to childhood hunger as millions of Californians lose access to SNAP.

Before School Meals for All, [44% of California's food-insecure families](#) did not qualify for federal school meal assistance because the federal income limits do not take into account California's high cost of living. School Meals for All is decreasing household food insecurity for both those who previously qualified for federal school meal assistance (by decreasing stigma) and those who were previously excluded because they made just above the federal income threshold, which, for a family of four in 2025–26, is [\\$41,795 for free school meals and \\$59,478 for reduced-price school meals](#). School Meals are more important than ever as food costs continue to increase. Recently, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported, [“the food index rose 3.5 percent over the year. The food at home index advanced 4.3 percent, with higher prices in 5 of the 6 major grocery store food groups.”](#)

California began funding the KIT program in 2021 to build upon California's groundbreaking leadership in School Meals for All by providing public school districts with tools and training to meet increased demand for free meals and to serve more fresh, local food. It would cost an estimated \$5-8 billion to provide much-needed updates for California public school kitchen facilities to serve freshly-prepared school meals, based on a [2020 UC Berkeley Center for Cities and Schools report](#), adjusted for both inflation according to the DGS California Construction Cost Index and the state's prior investment in KIT. Note that this estimate does not take into account the costs of staff training that is essential to success with freshly-prepared meals.

To date, California has allocated \$895 million for KIT, with \$150 million in KIT Round 1 (2021), \$600 million in KIT Round 2 (2022) that must be encumbered by June 2026, and \$145 million for KIT Round 3 (2025) that must be encumbered by June 2028. While the specific guidelines for KIT have changed each budget year, KIT funds are generally intended to support public school nutrition

programs by investing in the infrastructure and staff training they need to meet increased demand for school meals under School Meals for All and to serve more freshly-prepared food. Since California's School Meals for All program began in the 2022–23 school year, participation in school meal programs has [increased by 9%](#).

The impact of the KIT program on increasing access to school meals is particularly important when many families struggle with affordability. A new survey shows that state investments in the KIT program have helped schools rise to the occasion to increase student access to fresh food by investing in school kitchen infrastructure and staff training. KIT funding is also essential for school kitchens to comply with [AB 1264 \(Gabriel\)](#) and Governor Newsom's [Executive Order](#), which will require schools to phase out ultraprocessed foods of concern and move from heat-and-serve meals to freshly-prepared meals—something most school kitchens are not fully equipped to do.

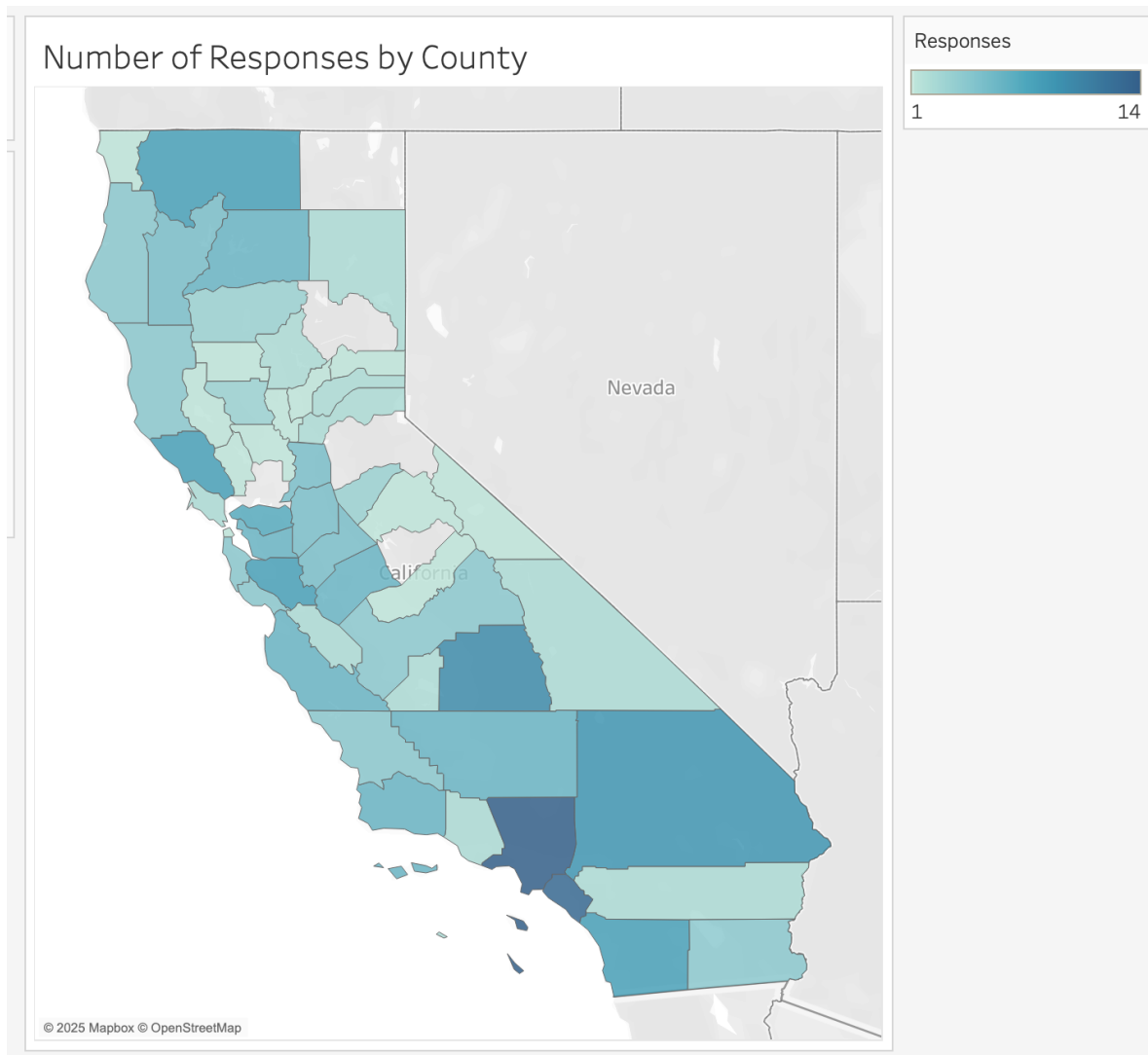
The School Meals for All Coalition co-leads (Office of Kat Taylor, NextGen California, Center for Ecoliteracy, and the California Association of Food Banks) conducted a survey and follow-up interviews with school nutrition leaders across California in October and November of 2025. The goals of the survey and interviews were to gain a better understanding of:

- How school districts are spending the 2022 KIT funds (which must be spent by June 2026)
- Whether KIT funds are increasing students' ability to access school meals
- Whether KIT funds are increasing school meal quality
- What future needs remain to equip school nutrition departments to meet the increased demand for school meals, respond to new USDA nutrition standards, and reduce ultraprocessed foods of concern

This report was prepared by the Center for Ecoliteracy to summarize the results of the KIT surveys and interviews.

## Demographics of Survey Respondents

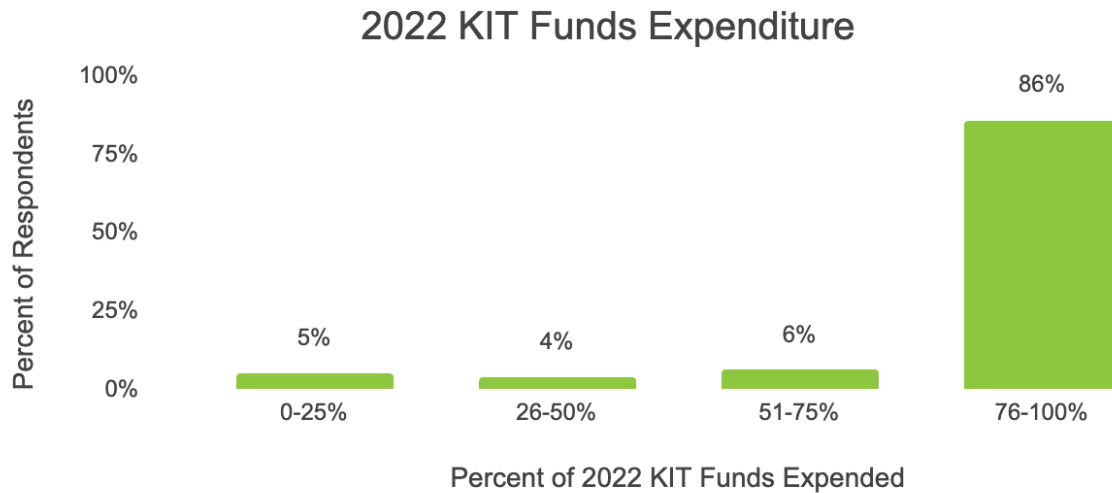
The 245 public school districts and charter schools across California that responded demonstrate the tremendous impact of the state's investment in the KIT program. Over 250 responses were received from school nutrition leaders, representing 209 unique public school districts and 36 unique charter schools. Combined, responding school districts enroll 2.1 million students across 3,929 schools and served around 362 million school meals last year, which amounts to 37% of the meals served in California. These school districts span every region of the state and range from urban districts with tens of thousands of students to suburban and smaller rural districts with fewer than 100 students. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 16 respondents, using a stratified random sample to identify two interviewees in each of the eight [CDFA regions](#).



## Results

### **86% of school districts have spent the vast majority of their 2022 KIT funds**

School districts have until June 2026 to spend the second round of KIT funds. The majority of school districts (86%) have spent between 76-100% of their 2022 KIT funds. During the course of the survey, an option was added to differentiate between 76-99% spent and 100% spent. Of the 127 school nutrition leaders who responded after this option was added, 45% responded that they had spent 100% of their 2022 KIT funds and 32% responded that they had spent 76-99% of their 2022 KIT funds. In CDE's prior surveys with hundreds of school nutrition leaders, most of the pending expenditures centered around large-scale school kitchen remodels and included factors such as delays at the Department of State Architects, the need to schedule construction for the summer months, and coordination with school construction timelines.



### KIT increased student access and/or quality of school meals at 90% of school districts

In keeping with the intention of the KIT program to help school districts feed the increasing number of students who rely on school meals since the passage of School Meals for All, the vast majority (78%) of school districts reported that they have used KIT to respond to increased student participation. The purchases range from the kitchen/operational infrastructure needed to serve a greater volume of food (e.g., more cold and dry storage, ovens, sinks, and trucks) to improvements that help move more students through lunchlines in the same amount of time (e.g., dual-sided serving lines, grab-and-go carts, more points of sale). School nutrition leaders also pointed to cafeteria design improvements that reduced the stigma around school meals that had prevented hungry students from participating. In part because of these KIT investments, 66% of responding school districts reported increased student participation in meals.

| Percent of Responding School Districts | How are you using your KIT investments to help increase students' <b>access</b> to meals? Check all that apply. |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 87%                                    | Kitchen/operational infrastructure                                                                              |
| 55%                                    | Staff training                                                                                                  |
| 54%                                    | Serving line efficiency                                                                                         |
| 44%                                    | Cafeteria design                                                                                                |
| 4%                                     | Students' access did not change as a result of KIT funds                                                        |
| 5%                                     | Other                                                                                                           |

A second goal of the KIT program is to increase student access to high-quality, freshly-prepared school meals, which are often more appealing, nutritious, and culturally relevant. Freshly-prepared school meals can increase purchases from local farmers and make it easier for school districts to avoid ultraprocessed foods of concern. Eighty percent of responding school districts reported that KIT funds had increased the quality of their school meals (e.g., freshly prepared, locally sourced, and expanded menu offerings). At the school districts we interviewed, KIT provided the space for innovation and improved menu offerings, whether that was freshly preparing proteins for the first time because they had trained staff and the proper equipment, rolling out salad bars, or introducing a new pozole recipe. KIT improvements to food quality also included the basics – ensuring proper food safety and the ability to keep food at the correct temperatures (e.g., a refrigerated truck to transport fresh produce in 100-degree heat or produce sinks so that a school kitchen was allowed to wash and chop fresh produce).

| Percent of Responding School Districts | How are you using your KIT investments to help increase the <b>quality</b> of meals? Check all that apply. |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 85%                                    | Kitchen/operational infrastructure                                                                         |
| 71%                                    | Storage/transportation                                                                                     |
| 63%                                    | Cafeteria design (e.g., salad bars, improved hot/cold serving equipment)                                   |
| 52%                                    | Staff training                                                                                             |
| 4%                                     | Quality of meals did not change as a result of KIT funds                                                   |
| 3%                                     | Other                                                                                                      |

### **Many reported benefits for the school nutrition workforce**

While it was not directly asked in the survey, many school nutrition leaders emphasized the tremendous benefits that KIT has had on staff morale and working conditions. Frontline school nutrition staff are often the lowest-paid employees in the school district. KIT funds were used to improve working conditions, with some school nutrition leaders noting they were finally able to install HVAC systems in hot school kitchens. Others spoke about the dignity, respect, and empowerment their staff felt after receiving functional equipment and participating in high-quality training, which opened up many more possibilities for creating new, freshly-prepared school meals and reduced turnover and absenteeism.

### **77% of responding school districts need more KIT funds**

While significant progress has been made with the state's investment in KIT, much more remains to be done. Some school districts described the investments in KIT as bringing them back to square

one after decades of underinvestment in school kitchen facilities and band-aid repairs on failing equipment. In the 2024–25 school year, the responding school districts freshly prepared an average of 54% of school meals, and 55% of school food was California-grown. While there is still significant uncertainty about the upcoming USDA nutrition standards for salt and sodium, most (52%) of school districts said they would need more KIT funds to meet these standards (24% were unsure). Sugar and sodium limits are easier to meet with school kitchens that are capable of producing freshly-prepared meals with perishable ingredients, which require more storage, infrastructure upgrades, and staff training.

### **KIT would help reduce ultraprocessed foods of concern**

KIT funding is crucial for schools to comply with AB 1264 (Gabriel) and Governor Newsom's Executive Order, both of which will require a move away from ultraprocessed foods and toward freshly-prepared meals, something most current kitchen facilities cannot yet support. Many of the interviewed school districts spoke about how additional KIT funds would help reduce ultraprocessed foods of concern, because these foods are easier to avoid in freshly-prepared school meals. For instance, one school nutrition director said they were able to freshly prepare raw proteins for the first time with KIT equipment and training, replacing a processed product on their menu.

## **Conclusion**

Survey findings from 245 school districts and charter schools show that the KIT program has significantly improved student access to school meals, enhanced meal quality, and strengthened the school nutrition workforce across California. Most districts have effectively used KIT funds to modernize kitchen facilities and respond to increased participation, yet a substantial majority indicate that additional resources are needed to fully meet upcoming USDA nutrition standards. Expanded investment in KIT will be critical to ensuring that school nutrition departments can continue providing fresh, nutritious, California-grown, and appealing meals at scale, support a skilled workforce, and realize the goals of the School Meals for All program.