

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

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