

# Meal Participation Continues to Rise in States After Two Years of Healthy School Meals for All

1

Despite declining student enrollment, all states that implemented two full school years (SYs) of permanent Healthy School Meals for All policies — California, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont — served record numbers of breakfasts and lunches.

**Over 86 million more reimbursable meals were served in the second year of implementation (SY 23-24) compared to pre-pandemic levels (SY 18-19).**

Meal participation spiked in year one (SY 22-23), with increases ranging from 0.7% in California to 21.6% in Maine. Participation continued to grow across the board in year two, with gains ranging from 0.8% to 5.8% compared to year one, and overall increases of 6.2% to 25.4% compared to pre-pandemic levels. Kids keep coming back for more—proving the need, demand, and impact of these policies to fuel kids' health and learning.

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the landscape of child nutrition programs, as federal waivers allowed schools to offer free meals to all students regardless of income. Before the pandemic, these programs operated on a tiered payment system, where eligibility for free or reduced-price meals was determined by need. When the waivers expired in June 2022, school meals reverted to the tiered system, and responsibility for ensuring universal access to healthy school meals shifted to individual states. California and Maine were the first to establish permanent policies starting SY 22-23. Vermont initially adopted a one-year pilot in 2022 before making the policy permanent with Act 64 in 2023. Similarly, Massachusetts funded a temporary program before securing permanent funding starting SY 23-24. Nevada also launched a temporary program using pandemic recovery funds for SYs 22-23 and 23-24; however, its data are excluded here due to the program's temporary nature. To date, eight states have implemented permanent programs, with many others pursuing similar efforts.

**Note:** These states maintained continuous free meal program and therefore trends may differ for states that temporarily returned to the tiered-payment system.

Fig 1. State Meal Participation Increase Over Time

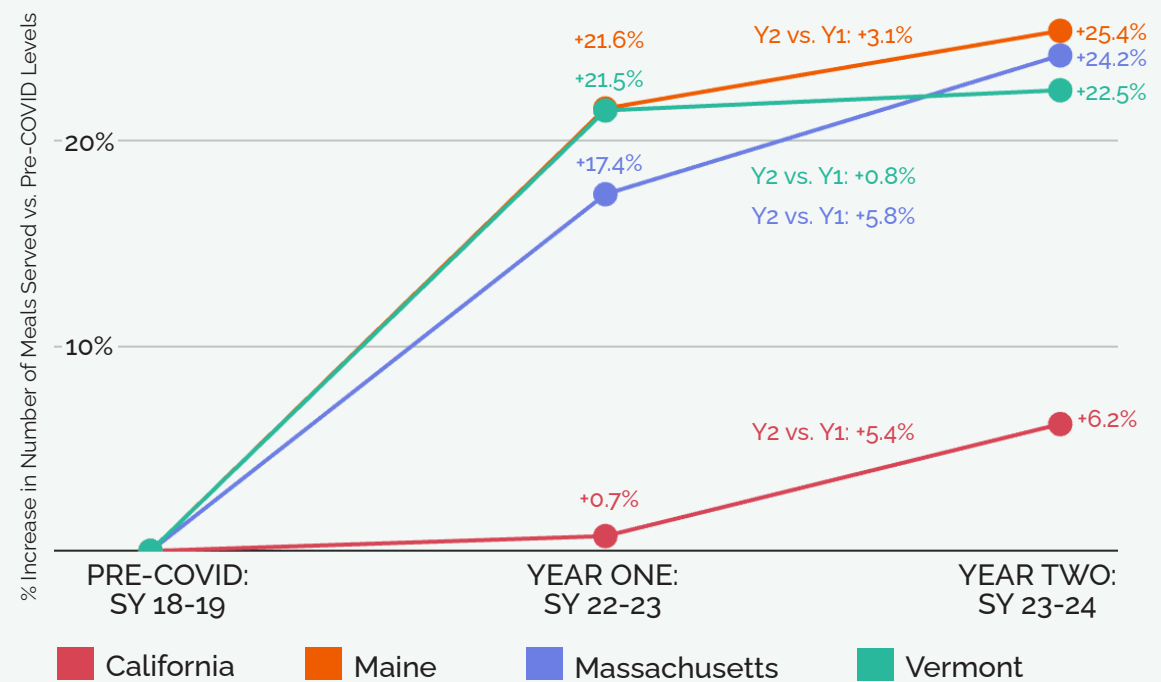
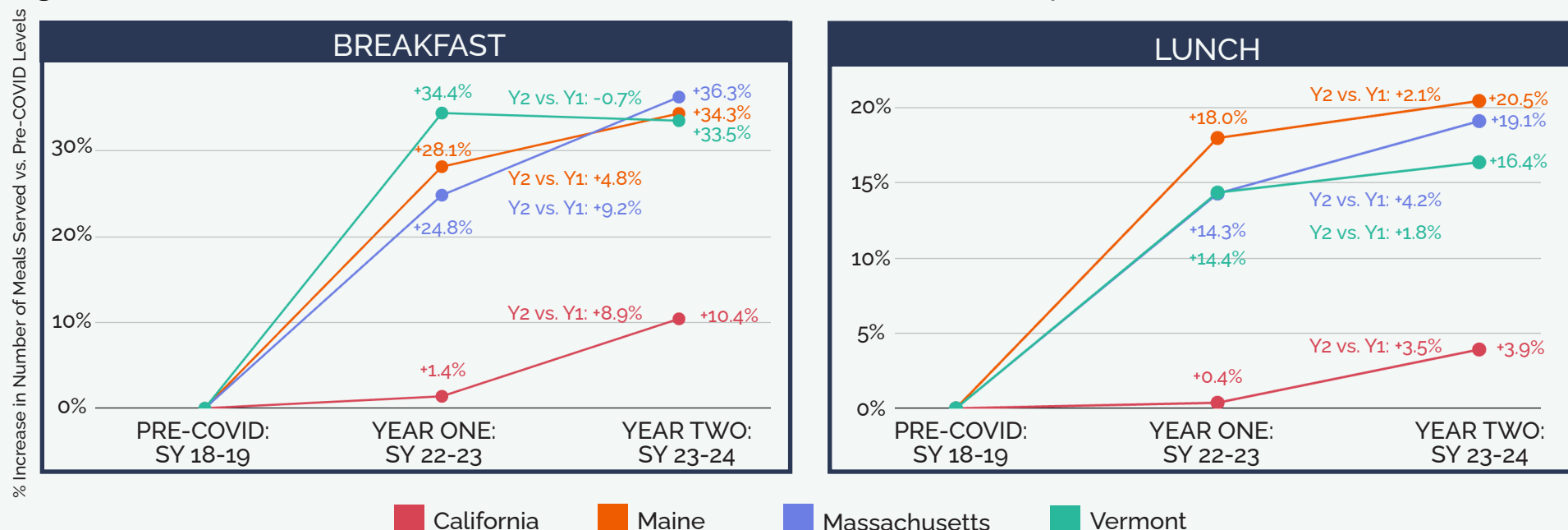


Fig 2. Detail: State Increases in Breakfast and Lunch Participation Over Time



## Breakfast participation dramatically increased.

While all states experienced increases in meal participation, breakfast participation rose at a higher rate than lunch (see Fig. 2). Massachusetts showed the greatest growth, with a nearly 25% increase in breakfast participation in the first year, totaling over a 36% increase when comparing the second year to pre-pandemic levels. Although Vermont saw a slight decline of 0.7% in breakfast participation from year one to year two, the state still achieved a 33.5% increase compared to SY 18-19. Three of the four states—Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont—had similar breakfast participation increases of over 33% when comparing year two of implementation to pre-pandemic levels.

This increase may be, in-part, due to program design; states like Vermont and California require schools to serve both breakfast and lunch for full reimbursement, prompting schools to add breakfast programs and boost meal participation.

Increased participation is not just about numbers, but about the students benefiting from regular, nutritious meals. These data indicate that Healthy School Meals for All policies effectively empower students to start their day with breakfast, which is essential for their academic performance and overall well-being.

## States served more meals despite all seeing declining enrollment.

From SY 18-19 to SY 23-24, all states experienced a decline in public school enrollment: -2.0% in Vermont, -4.5% in Maine, -3.9% in Massachusetts, and -5.6% in California. Together, this drop in student enrollment totaled 395,000 across the states. Despite this decrease, over 86 million more meals were served in SY 23-24 compared to pre-pandemic levels. That means record numbers of meals were served to fewer students, further illustrating the success of Healthy School Meals for All programs and highlighting the demand for consistent access to meals in school.

## Higher meal participation supports local food economies.

3

As engagement in school meal programs grows, so does market demand for local food, creating ripple effects that contribute to growing and sustaining local food businesses. According to the [2023 USDA Farm to School Census](#), more than 69% of school food authorities report serving local food in the four observed states. These states also provide additional support for farm to school through grant programs, local food purchasing incentives, participation in the federal Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement program, and locally implemented grassroots efforts. Healthy School Meals for All programs deliver broad benefits: they support health equity and the well-being of children, create stable institutional markets for farmers, and foster stronger local economies and connections within communities.

Table 1: State Enrollment and Number of Meals Served Over Time

State	PRE-COVID: SY 2018-19				YEAR ONE: SY 2022-23				YEAR TWO: SY 2023-24			
	Breakfast	Lunch	Total	Enrollment	Breakfast	Lunch	Total	Enrollment	Breakfast	Lunch	Total	Enrollment
CA	288,000,000	536,000,000	824,000,000	6,186,278	292,000,000	538,000,000	830,000,000	5,852,544	317,000,000	555,000,000	872,000,000	5,837,690
ME	8,409,406	15,372,074	23,781,480	180,817	10,776,072	18,138,027	28,914,099	173,931	11,297,457	18,517,232	29,814,689	172,624
MA	35,674,670	85,337,056	121,011,726	951,631	44,530,747	97,537,073	142,067,820	913,735	48,608,333	101,653,380	150,261,713	914,959
VT	4,178,088	7,568,774	11,746,862	84,280	5,615,047	8,655,880	14,270,927	84,032	5,577,852	8,808,574	14,386,426	82,617

### State Data Sources:

$$\% \text{ Change} = (\text{New \#} - \text{Original \#}) / \text{Original \#} \times 100$$

#### California

- **Meal Participation:** Center for Ecoliteracy. (2024, October). "More California Students are Eating School Meals than Ever Before." <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/article/more-california-students-are-eating-school-meals-ever>
- **Enrollment Data:** CA Dept. of Education Annual Enrollment Student Enrollment Data Portal. (2024, May). *Enrollment Multi-Year Summary by Grade*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/edtop.asp>

#### Maine

- **Meal Participation:** Email correspondence with MDE staff, August and October 2024.
- **Enrollment Data:** ME Dept. of Education (n.d.). *Student Enrollment Data Portal*. <https://www.maine.gov/doe/data-warehouse/reporting/enrollment>. Accessed October 1, 2024.

#### Massachusetts

- **Meal Participation:** MA Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education Public Records Request P004262-092024. Submitted September 2024.
- **Enrollment Data:** MA Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2024, January). *Information Services: Enrollment Data*. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/enroll/>. Accessed October 1, 2024.

#### Vermont

- **Enrollment and Meal Participation:** Data request with the VT Agency of Education. Submitted September 2024.



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