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K-12 FOODSERVICE

School meal advocates are chalking up important wins in state capitols across the country.

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

A Stake in the STATE


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You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone working in the K-12 school nutrition segment today who can remember a time when there was sufficient government funding—despite reimbursements and USDA Foods—to operate school meal programs in a manner that met both cost and stakeholder expectations. Actually, there *was* a time in very recent memory: when pandemic waivers allowed all students to eat meals for free.



Now, one can nitpick the math and question the broad definitions around “sufficient” funding and “successful” operations, but there is broad consensus that the federal school meal programs have been—and continue to be—chronically under-funded in most communities. Keeping the cafeteria doors open typically requires an array of savvy tactics to boost revenues and streamline expenses or tapping a school district’s general funds to make up any shortfalls. Year after year after year, SNA and its allies have appealed to the nation’s lawmakers for more financial support.

And since even the most generous congressional allocations fail to keep up with rising food, labor and equipment costs, SNA, through the work of its state affiliate associations, has long appealed to state legislators and regulators for their support of various initiatives, from underwriting the reduced-price copay to providing extra reimbursement for lunch and breakfast. Over the years, school nutrition advocates have played a critical role in gaining valuable assistance from state governments.

Since the recent expiration of federal waivers for meals for all at no cost, state legislative teams have ramped up their efforts, helping to advance both legislative and non-legislative measures that would ensure children continue to benefit from healthy school meals. At SNA’s 2023 Legislative Action Conference (LAC) in March, a panel representing five state affiliates provided overviews of recent state activities, described strategies for advocacy success and offered advice for other state teams. They provided further reflections for this *SN Plus* article and will reprise their presentation in an upcoming webinar on May 24 (*see the box on page 12*). Each state case study has enough details to support its own full-length article, so we’ll focus on top-line information, impressions and recommendations here, and encourage you to attend the upcoming webinar for a more comprehensive overview.

SUNNY DAYS IN CALIFORNIA



On July 9, 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law Assembly Bill (AB) 130, which established a universal school meals program beginning in SY2022-23. With a few strokes of a pen, school nutrition history was made, as California became the first in the nation to provide school meals at no cost to all public and charter school students state-wide. One-time funding was made available during SY2021-22 to support kitchen infrastructure upgrades and nutrition-related staff training as they prepared for the implementation of universal meals. The

FY2022-23 budget included \$596 million to implement the program, plus \$600 million for kitchen equipment and infrastructure upgrades and \$611.8 million provided on an “ongoing basis” for enhanced reimbursements.

The new state program is centered on three key pillars:

- Local Education Authorities (LEAs) must provide two meals (breakfast and lunch) free of charge each school day to students requesting a meal, regardless of the child’s eligibility for free/reduced-priced meals.
- LEAs with high-poverty schools must adopt a federal universal meal service provision, such as the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or Provision 2.
- LEAs must participate in the federal School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs and serve reimbursable meals that comply with USDA requirements.

State reimbursements will be provided for reduced-priced and paid meals to ensure LEAs receive the same reimbursement for those meal categories as they would for meals served at the free reimbursement rate. For more details about the program, review the California Department of Education’s FAQs page: www.cde.ca.gov/lis/nu/univmealsfaq.asp.

Nicole Meschi, Director of Student Nutrition Services, **Cupertino Union School District**, was President of the **California School Nutrition Association** at the time

the legislation was being developed. Meschi gives all due credit to Senator Nancy Skinner (who introduced the bill), along with Governor Newsom and First Partner Jennifer Seibel Newsom for driving the initiative forward, bolstered by the enthusiastic support of a coalition of more than 200 organizations, including CalSNA. Meschi and a team that included the Association's Public Policy and Legislative Chair and Co-chair, plus CalSNA's legislative advocate, played an integral role in the process, helping to shape the language of the bill and educate legislative leaders in Sacramento about school meals and school nutrition operations.

"We spent a lot of time reviewing and suggesting language for the bill to help ensure that school nutrition operators would be able to successfully implement universal meals," says Meschi. "We also explained federal requirements and described what would and would not change with a state-wide universal meal program."

The education process was not insignificant, Meschi continues. "It was a challenge to ensure that legislative leaders really understood the differences between operations across the state. We don't all have the same facilities; we don't all run the same programs; and district and department funding models and support can be very different." The CalSNA legislative team immersed themselves in meetings with senior Senate and Assembly Education Committee staff, the Senate Budget Committee and the Legislative Analyst's Office.

While universal school meals

has wide support within the school nutrition community across the nation, the concept is not, well, *universally* embraced, given the wide array of district profiles and community

characteristics. "We knew there would be a lot of concerns from operators," says Meschi.

For example, the California program now requires all schools to serve two meals, and many districts were not participating in the School Breakfast Program. "This would be a challenge to implement for many reasons: facilities, staffing and food shortages, to name a few," Meschi notes. CalSNA also wanted to weigh in on realistic implementation timelines, especially in light of ongoing supply chain challenges and staffing shortages.

"As representatives of school nutrition operators throughout the state, we wanted to ensure that we were listening to them, understanding their concerns and challenges. We really analyzed, questioned and researched how the bill would impact each operator in the state," recounts Meschi.

Ultimately, the benefits of the universal program are persuasive: It provides equity for all students. It reduces hunger. It creates opportunities for current/new employees, with increased hours and benefits. It creates goodwill within the community. It enables students to be more prepared for learning. It provides flexibility in how families leverage their financial resources.

"I felt really honored to be able to represent all of the amazing people who operate school meals in this state," says Meschi. "It was a lot of work to convince people that universal feeding is what is best for kids, so I felt responsible to make sure that the rules, regulations and support that came out of that bill were the best they could be for every operator. I feel we accomplished this." An added plus, she notes, is that CalSNA developed strong relationships with California's legislative leaders. "This will help us continue to work together to do what is best for all students in California."

MAINE MAKES ITS MARK



Although Maine Governor Janet Mills signed universal school meals legislation a few days *before* California's Newsom, funding for Maine's new program required a different process (and was ultimately not fully allocated until April 2022). But this detail certainly does not diminish the historic achievement of child nutrition advocates—and the win for school children in Maine, where one in five experience food insecurity (the highest rate in New England), but 40% are not eligible for free school meals.

The campaign for School Meals for All legislation began well before the pandemic, driven by Full Plates, Full Potential, a non-profit organization established in 2014 with a mission to address food insecurity among children in Maine by improving their access to meals at school. The group partnered with an impressive network of allied organizations, including the **Maine School Nutrition Association**. Early achievements included expansion of the Summer Food Service

Program, afterschool meals and breakfast after the bell service. It also led a successful effort to eliminate the reduced-price copay category for both school breakfast and lunch, and this became the model for The School Meals for All legislation. Like the California program, the bill requires Maine schools to maximize available federal funding through CEP and Provision 2.

Although Maine had a Democratic majority in the legislature in 2021, Mills, also a Democrat, stressed the importance of gaining strong bipartisan support to secure the necessary funding for universal meals. Advocates meeting with legislators from both parties emphasized the merits of School Meals for All. Key testimony came from Assistant Senate Minority Leader Matt Pouliot, a Republican who had personal experience with food insecurity in his youth. A noted fiscal conservative, Pouliot made the case that investment in universal school meals was a smart financial decision, countering the societal costs of food

insecurity. In June 2021, the bill passed with overwhelming bipartisan support—unanimously in the state Senate and by a 151 to 26 vote in the state House. While the legislature initially allocated funding only for SY2022-23, the bill establishes a permanent program for Maine to continue to provide universal school meals into the future.

Alisa Roman, Director of Nutrition and Transportation, **Lewiston Public Schools**, served as Maine SNA President in 2020-21 and is cycling back to this leadership role as the Association's current President-Elect. While she applauds the leadership role of Full Plates, Full Potential for the success of School Meals for All, she notes that "it really took a 'village' to get the work done." Key champions in the state capitol, as well as important partners, such as the Maine chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics and American Heart Association, were crucial partners.



It was a significant challenge, given that advocacy efforts were taking place during the middle of the pandemic. But that made it even more meaningful to Roman: "This work was a bright star, helping to make everything my team was doing to feed our community worth it," she says. "I'm so proud of our state for putting students first."

In her advocacy role, Roman demonstrated perseverance—both in making the case for universal school meals and in overall lobbying. "I could rationalize the need for increasing access to school meals, but I struggled at first to find answers to rationalize the money it would require," she

reflects. "But the more I learned about all the other education initiatives that are fully supported by tax money, the more comfortable I felt about making the case. Instead of focusing on how child nutrition was 'supposed to' work, I focused messaging on how it 'could' work. The cost to feed students may seem high, but it's no higher than a laptop per student, textbooks and other services that are fully funded. Making an argument about cost is an easy way for people to deflect the real issue: Hungry students can't learn."

Roman notes that some in Maine's legislature simply could not be convinced of the many merits of School Meals for All: improved physical, social and mental health for children; equity; improved learning, behavior and concentration; reduced stigma; food security; and increased reimbursements from increased participation. Her takeaway: "Realize that there will always be a flat 'no' in your advocacy efforts, but just keep sharing your story to get to the 'yes.'"

Maine SNA and its partners haven't lost sight of implementation challenges. These include helping school administrators understand the CEP provision of the new program. New systems to collect the free/reduced-price data that drives other general education funding need to be developed, notes Roman. Serving more students also will necessitate creative solutions to ongoing staffing challenges. Still, they are prepping to tackle some other advocacy priorities. Topping the list, says Roman, is "seat time" for eating, as well as ways to continue to train and support cafeteria staff.

 *Realize that there will always be a flat 'no' in your advocacy efforts, but just keep sharing your story to get to the 'yes.'* 

KIDS COUNT IN COLORADO



Achieving universal school meals in Colorado required a double dose of advocacy: first with lawmakers and then with Colorado voters. Proposition FF was approved as a ballot measure by Colorado's House and Senate in May 2022, largely along party lines, with Democrats driving its passage. In Colorado, a bill that is referred to voters does not require the governor's signature and cannot be vetoed.

In November 2022, voters approved Proposition FF by a 57% to 43% margin. The measure will help pay for school meals by limiting state tax deductions for those making more than \$300,000 per year. The increased revenue will be used to create and fund the Healthy School Meals for All (HSMA) program under Colorado's Department of Education. The new program is expected to begin in SY2023-24. Districts will be able to participate on an opt-in basis, but will be expected to operate CEP at all eligible sites to maximize the federal reimbursement. The state funding will make up the difference between the federal reduced-price and paid rates and the free reimbursement rate.

This victory has been an especially sweet highlight in the leadership year of **Colorado School Nutrition Association** 2022-23 President Molly Brandt, RD, SNS, Executive Director of Business Services Strategic Initiatives, **Adams 12 Five Star Schools**, but she knows its success is rooted in efforts that began almost 20 years earlier! "Colorado SNA has been diligently working for nearly two decades, building relationships in our state legislature and seeking out child nutrition champions," says Brandt.

She credits the Association's 2004 decision to hire its own lobbyist, who has been at the heart of several state wins, including securing state matching funds and covering the reduced-price co-pays for breakfast and lunch. "We also rely on our lobbyist to coordinate meetings, to be our ears at the Capitol and track legislation of all types that might affect school nutrition operations," says Brandt.

Colorado SNA and its allies have been successful at chipping away, bit by bit, the barriers that impede access to school meals. For example, in 2008, they championed

*We can be heard. We can make a difference.
And we are not alone. We are surrounded by
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passage of the Lunch Protection Act, which was born from discussions about “lunch shaming” proposals. Colorado SNA leaders capitalized on that narrative to eliminate the reduced-price category for grades K-2 instead. In the years that followed, it was expanded, first to 5th grade, then to 8th grade and, in 2018, through 12th grade, covering all grades in SY2019-20. This was very significant in the journey to HSMA, says Brandt.

She’s also pragmatic about the role COVID-19 and pandemic waivers (and their eventual expiration) played in the success of the HSMA initiative. “Timing was on our side, and it was the right moment to capitalize on it. Voters had recently experienced two years of free meals and returned to paid meals and applications only three months before the ballot vote. Plus, they were experiencing increased inflation and were aware that every penny counts,” says Brandt. “The thought of going back to free meals was appealing to many voters.”

Brandt and her leadership team

in Colorado SNA recognize that the passage of HSMA will bring on an increased workload that will involve more training, data analysis, operational adjustments, increased meal production and the need for more storage capacity. They were also aware that many among their membership would associate the new program with the stress and back-breaking workload experienced during the height of the pandemic. To help address this, the Association has developed a

communications plan intended to help disconnect HSMA meal service from memories of COVID meal service.

Still, Brandt admits to being unprepared for the spectrum of emotions exhibited by her own team. “The day after the election, it wasn’t all roses and sunshine, as I expected. I showed up for work with sparkling juice, ready to celebrate. I didn’t anticipate the other emotions that might be present, but employees felt sad, happy, worried, excited, anxious, settled and so on,” she recounts. “Ultimately we postponed the toast and celebration to allow space and time for everyone to sort through these feelings. We’ll celebrate in August, when we see the impact of this vote in action with student smiles and family thank-yous.”

In tandem with helping districts make the transition to HSMA, Colorado SNA will now turn attention to collaborating with SNA, other state affiliates and national partners to advocate for a federal reimbursement rate that reflects inflation, wage increases and changes in the cost of living, says Brandt. And if increased participation means longer cafeteria lines, then creative solutions around the time-to-eat issue will also be on the agenda.

In the meantime, Brandt is going to enjoy the high of her firsthand experience with successful advocacy. “We can be heard. We can make a difference,” she says. “And we are not alone. School nutrition professionals are surrounded by individuals and organizations that really care.”

POTENTIAL IN PENNSYLVANIA



Advocacy approaches—and levels of experience—fall along a broad spectrum. Your state association's leadership may be closer to the beginning of a campaign to gain legislative support for a universal school meals program, rather than executing implementation plans. The **School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania (SNAPA)** formed the Pennsylvania School Meals for All (SM4A) Task Force just over a year ago, following SNA's 2022 LAC in Washington, D.C., where attendees were among the first to learn that Congress would not extend meals at no cost into another school year.

Nicole Melia, MS, RD, LDN, Food & Nutrition Services Supervisor, **Great Valley School District**, and SNAPA Public Policy & Legislative Committee Chair, teamed up with Melissa Froehlich, SNS, Coordinator of School Nutrition Services, **North Penn School District**, and SNAPA Public Communication Committee Chair, to launch the Task Force. "Our goal was to share the positive impacts that universal meals had on students in our state during the pandemic. We were on the front lines of serving kids and saw what a positive change it was for students not to worry about money or stigma when *everyone* received a nutritious school meal," says Melia. "With the blessing of the SNAPA Executive Committee, we worked to get involved in anti-hunger conversations that were happening among allied organizations across the state. People recognized the role of school meals in providing food security, and they would connect us with another group and then another. Our circle of support and advocacy kept expanding—and now we have a coalition."

SNAPA is the leading driver of the initiative. It hosts a landing page for information about the SM4A campaign that includes talking points, identifies benefits and features an organization sign-on to join the coalition and a petition to collect individual support. They've also been active on social media.

To make the case for SM4A,

Coalition members ran the numbers for a variety of different state funding scenarios: What would be needed to cover breakfast and lunch? Just breakfast? Just the reduced-price category? What about increasing reimbursements? Armed with data, they began cold-calling and sending personal emails to state lawmakers and influencers, including then-First Lady Frances Wolf's office, sharing concerns about the return of paid meals (and meal applications) in SY2022-23. To prepare for partisan opposition, they had talking points that emphasized benefits likely to resonate, pointing out the advantages to the agriculture industry and how only a minority of families in the state currently can afford to pay for school meals.

"We were very lucky to find supporters who took up the cause," says Melia. These included two legislators in Pennsylvania's House and Senate who each sponsored bills, although these stalled in committee. But hopes were buoyed in October when then-Governor Tom Wolf signed an executive order authorizing free school breakfast for all students throughout SY2022-23.

Today, only a little more than a year

since launching the Task Force, Melia is thrilled with the progress and achievements so far. "I never expected that we would be where we are!" she says. "Nothing will ever beat getting the call informing us that the governor was going

to announce free school breakfast for all students."

But Melia recognizes that the work is far from over. With participation higher than when the dollar amount for universal free meals in Pennsylvania was initially calculated, SNAPA and its allies are working on new bills that allow for funding increases each year and charges the Pennsylvania Department of Education with estimating the annual allocations. "This was a good pivot," she asserts. "There are also conversations about increasing the state subsidy if SM4A doesn't pass for school lunch, and we're waiting for the governor's budget to be approved to extend free breakfast and remove the reduced-price copay for families."

At press time, SNAPA was organizing a "Day at the Capitol" in Harrisburg on May 1, partnering with the National Farm to School Network for a session at Temple University on "Communicating the Benefits of Values-Aligned Universal School Meals," before heading to the Capitol building to lobby for SM4A.

At this advocacy event, SNAPA members will surely be propelled by increased confidence. "We are the experts on school meals. We run these programs every day, and we interact with students. We *should* have seats at the table when school meals are being discussed," says Melia. The SM4A initiative has given her a greater sense of purpose within SNAPA. "We are there to nourish bodies and feed minds—this really feels like a path to that mission."

MOBILIZING IN MARYLAND

Annapolis



No one can accuse school nutrition professionals of throwing in the towel when a worthy goal is on the line! In Maryland, school nutrition advocates have been working to improve access to school meals since 1998, with the pilot of the ground-breaking Maryland Meals for Achievement initiative supporting school breakfast through alternate service models such as breakfast in the classroom. Positioned as a research project, the program's outstanding results (improved academic performance, school attendance and student attention, with decreased behavior concerns and school nurse visits) have served as the foundation for school breakfast advocacy for more than 20 years.

Flash forward to today. In 2022, longtime **Maryland School Nutrition Association (MdSNA)** leader Mary Klatko, Federal Legislative Chair, was asked to team up with Immediate Past President Barbara Harral to co-chair the Association's State

Legislative Committee following the departure of the former chair. Klatko had already testified before the state Senate on a bill that would extend universal breakfast and lunch in SY2022-23. MdSNA's position was to support the bill "with amendments." The bill was not voted out of committee, and its sponsor, Delegate Kirill Reznik, asked Klatko to explain why she had not given it her full support. "I explained that it was because the bill was poorly written, and to my surprise, he agreed!" recounts Klatko. "He then suggested that we work together to get it passed in the 2023 session of the Maryland General Assembly. Barbara and I consulted on the language, and he took it verbatim."

This is what can result when you've built a reputation as *the* expert authority, and MdSNA's long commitment to advocacy and relationship-building has earned the group's representatives this respect. Reznik added the new language to the latest

iteration of a bill initially proposed in 2016 to eliminate the reduced-price copay. Unfortunately, the new legislation, SB0557/HB0628, seeking universal expansion, had not moved out of Committee by the end of Maryland's legislative session in April.

Klatko says she and her colleagues were surprised that the bill did not move forward. "The Maryland budget had a \$2.2 billion surplus, so we anticipated there would be financial support for the bill but we were wrong," she says. "We testified before both Committees, with large numbers of advocates present, representing our coalition. We also organized email campaigns to key lawmakers, encouraged MdSNA members to send emails and posted on social media. But the bill did not move."

MdSNA is committed to keep trying. "We garnered tons of support for the legislation this year," says Klatko, pointing to a rally that earned media coverage by TV networks and other news organizations. "And we have a group ready to get together in the fall to plan next year's campaign. Delegate Reznik was hired by Governor Wes Moore, so we'll need a new sponsor in the General Assembly, but we already have several offers."

Klatko's closing thoughts reflect the dogged determination that advocacy often requires. "The University of Maryland's mascot is a terrapin [a type of turtle]. They move slowly, but they always get where they want to go," she notes. "MdSNA will get there next year—or the following year or the one following that. But we *will* get this bill passed and financially supported." **SN+**

Patricia Fitzgerald is Editor of School Nutrition.

DON'T MISS WEBINAR!

Healthy School Meals for All: Successful State Strategies

May 24, 1:00 pm ET

State advocates play an integral role in educating legislators, stakeholders and the public about the importance of expanding school meal programs. In this webinar, advocates from California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland and Pennsylvania will come together to share lessons learned from their advocacy efforts within the various political realities of their communities.

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