

# School Meals for All: A Qualitative Study Exploring Lessons in Successful Advocacy and Policymaking in Maine and California

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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

**Background** The COVID-19 pandemic focused national attention on food insecurity, equity, and the role of school meal programs in supporting children, families, and communities. In doing so, the pandemic created a rare policy window—an opportunity to advance a longstanding public health goal of guaranteed access to free school meals for all students. In July 2021, California and Maine became the first states to authorize school meal for all legislation (also known as universal free meals).

**Objective** The aim of this study was to explore perspectives of policymakers, state agency officials, and advocates on the conditions and mechanisms that facilitated passage of school meal for all legislation in California and Maine.

**Design** A qualitative case study was conducted.

**Participants** Between December 2021 and June 2022, semistructured interviews were conducted with 30 policymakers, state agency officials, and advocates.

**Statistical analysis performed** Interviews were analyzed using principles of content analysis. Key themes are organized using Kingdon's multiple streams framework for public policy.

**Results** Eleven key themes were identified. Lessons are drawn from the policy and advocacy strategies used to advance laws in California and Maine. For instance, paving the way with incremental policy change, tailoring messaging to diverse audiences, and organizing at the grassroots and grassstops levels were critical to success of advocacy efforts.

**Conclusions** Promising practices can guide efforts to expand access to school meals and advance other child nutrition policies in other states and nationally. Moving forward, lessons learned from implementation of universal free school meal legislation in California, Maine, and other early adopters should be documented and shared.

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SINCE THE INCEPTION OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL Lunch Program in 1946, advocates have argued that school meals should be offered at no charge to all students in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Although federal and state governments have taken incremental steps to expand school meal access during the past decade, until recently, most schools offered meals for free or at a reduced price only to students who qualified based on household income.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic focused national attention on food insecurity, equity, and the role of school meal programs in supporting children, families, and communities. In doing so, the pandemic created a policy window—a rare opportunity to advance longstanding public health goals of increased nutrition security and support for families through guaranteed access to school meals for all students.<sup>3</sup>

When schools nationwide were forced to operate remotely in March 2020, nutrition service providers acted quickly to adapt their operations.<sup>3</sup> The Families First Coronavirus

Response Act gave the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) authority to issue nationwide waivers that granted schools flexibility in determining where, how, and to whom meals were served.<sup>4</sup> One of these waivers, which ended in September 2022, allowed schools to serve meals to all students for free. For many schools, this was their first time implementing a School Meals for All (SMFA) policy (also known as universal free school meals). Some faced challenges with implementation, including inadequate staffing and longer lunch lines, but also observed benefits, including increased meal participation and decreased paperwork, student meal debt, and stigma.<sup>5,6</sup> Prior research has identified other benefits of SMFA such as improved academic performance and diet quality among students.<sup>7</sup>

Although there were efforts by federal lawmakers to extend the pandemic waiver an additional year, as well as discussion of passing national legislation to fund SMFA long-term, neither gained traction. In September 2023, the USDA

## RESEARCH

published a final rule that allows more schools in high-poverty areas to serve universal free meals through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).<sup>8</sup> Although this rule is a step toward expanding free meal access, because it does not guarantee all schools full federal reimbursement for every meal served, some eligible schools will not opt in. Instead, many states have assumed responsibility for guaranteeing ongoing access to school meals for all students. In July 2021, California and Maine became the first states to authorize SMFA on a permanent basis, in part to help address rising levels of food insecurity (in 2021, rates of food insecurity were at 9.6% in California and 9.5% in Maine, both close to the national average of 10.4%).<sup>9</sup> Since then, 6 additional states—Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont—have passed permanent SMFA legislation, and Nevada has authorized SMFA through the end of the 2024 school year.<sup>10</sup> Additional states continue to push for SMFA as well.<sup>11</sup> To capitalize on the present moment, it is essential to examine what policy and advocacy strategies helped advance laws in California and Maine.

## BRIEF LEGISLATIVE OVERVIEW

In July 2021, California and Maine signed into law legislation requiring schools statewide to offer SMFA beginning in School Year 2022–2023.<sup>12,13</sup> In California, Chair of the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee Nancy Skinner (Democrat) first introduced Senate Bill 364, which included SMFA provisions, in February 2021.<sup>14</sup> The bill gained the support of more than 30 coauthors, representing over a quarter of California's state legislature. The bill received unanimous bipartisan support in the California Senate Education and Human Services Committees (6 Yeas, 0 Nays) before being incorporated and passed as part of the budget in the education omnibus budget trailer bill. In Maine, President of the Senate Troy Jackson (Democrat) introduced LD 1679, “An Act To Address Student Hunger through Expanding Access to Free School Meals,” in May 2021. The legislation passed unanimously in the Maine Senate (33 Yeas, 0 Nays) and with strong bipartisan support in the Maine House (Republicans 38 Yeas, 26 Nays; Democrats 75 Yeas, 0 Nays).

The legislation in both states requires schools to maximize federal reimbursement by opting into CEP, where possible, or enrolling eligible students in free and reduced-price meals. The states reimburse schools for the difference between the federal reimbursement and the maximum reimbursement rate, resulting in each meal generating the same total reimbursement for schools. In both states, schools receiving SMFA reimbursement must serve free breakfast and lunch.

In California, the legislature allocated an estimated \$650 million for SMFA and approved additional funding for school kitchen infrastructure upgrades, foodservice staff training, farm to school grants, and increased meal reimbursements. In Maine, the legislature initially allocated only part of the funding for SMFA—\$10 million of the \$34 million estimated in the fiscal note—but committed the remaining funds as part of the supplemental budget the following year.<sup>15</sup>

Although Maine and California are politically, geographically, and demographically distinct, there were many similarities in the conditions and mechanisms that facilitated passage of SMFA legislation. This study identifies those common factors. Promising practices can guide

## RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

**Research Question:** In July 2021, California and Maine became the first states to authorize universal free school meals. What lessons about how to successfully develop and advance laws to expand school meal access can be drawn from the experiences of Maine and California and inform similar policy efforts in other states and federally?

**Key Findings:** This qualitative case study identifies the conditions and mechanisms that facilitated passage of these laws. Lessons include paving the way with incremental policy change, tailoring messaging to diverse audiences, and organizing at the grassroots and grassroots levels.

efforts to expand access to school meals in other states and nationally.

## METHODS

In this qualitative case study, semistructured interviews were conducted between December 2021 and June 2022. The Merrimack College Institutional Review Board deemed this study protocol to be exempt because research posed minimal risk to interview participants. Interviews were conducted by a White female researcher (A.A.H.) with experience conducting qualitative research and interviews and a background in child nutrition policy research. The interviewer had no prior relationship with interviewees. Interviewees were informed of the purpose of the study and the researcher's job title and professional background. Interviews were conducted through videoconferencing, allowing interviewees to see the researcher.

Three categories of stakeholders were recruited: state elected officials and their staff, staff of state agencies that provided input on policy, and advocates from nonprofit or lobbying organizations. Because efforts to advance SMFA legislation in California and Maine built on years of advocacy across the country, advocates at both the national and state levels were interviewed.

An initial list of 21 stakeholders was developed based on prior knowledge of advocacy and policymaking efforts in California and Maine. Stakeholders were invited to participate via an email that described the goals of the study. A snowball sampling approach was used as an additional 10 stakeholders were recommended (including colleagues in their organization) by those interviewed until theoretical saturation was reached.<sup>16</sup> Only 1 stakeholder who was invited to participate declined, instead sharing links to their public statements on the topic. Legislative text, advocacy coalition websites, press releases, and other media coverage were also reviewed to provide additional context for the research team and to inform the interview questions.

Interviews followed a semistructured interview guide (Figure). Questions were developed by the first author based on a review of the literature related to nutrition policymaking and advocacy and reviewed and refined by the full research team. Interviewees were asked about the role they/their organization played in the policymaking or advocacy process, perceived factors that contributed to passage of SMFA legislation, and advice for other states. Interviews were conducted

Questions were adapted based on whether the stakeholder was an advocate, policymaker, or and state agency official, and whether the stakeholder worked in Maine, California, or nationally.
<b>Background:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long have you worked at [your organization]?</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] Before we jump into discussing the recent passage of the universal free school meals in [California/Maine] is there anything important you think that I should know about the recent history of advocacy and policymaking around universal free meals in [California/Maine]?</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] How did you (or your organization/office) start working on the issue of universal free meals?</li> <li>• What role did you (or your organization/office) play in making universal free meals a reality in your state?</li> </ul>
<b>Getting the law passed:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] How did universal free meals get onto the state's policymaking agenda this year?</li> <li>• What factors contributed to making it possible for [California/Maine] to pass this law? Which of those factors do you think was most important? (<i>probe: policymakers, advocates, COVID-19, political culture, public opinion polling</i>)</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] Who were the major players that had a role in getting this law passed? (<i>probe: Was there anyone missing?</i>)</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] What was the role of the coalition of advocates in getting this law passed?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o [For advocates only] Who was part of the coalition of advocates?</li> <li>o [For advocates only] Who were the key stakeholders they engaged?</li> <li>o [For advocates only] How were the advocacy efforts funded?</li> <li>o [For policymakers only] Who were the advocacy groups you heard most from – the ones you think of as driving the advocacy work?                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Whose voices were the most impactful in shaping your thinking? Were there any voices that were missing that could have been impactful?</li> </ul> </li> <li>o [For policymakers only] What types of messaging did advocacy groups use that was most impactful in shaping your thinking? (<i>probe: Who did this messaging come from? Was there any messaging they used that fell flat?</i>)                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ What data or evidence was most impactful in shaping your thinking? What data or evidence could have been valuable but was unavailable?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• [For policymakers only] What types of messaging did your office use, in turn, to persuade other lawmakers? Your constituents? (<i>probe: Was there any messaging they used that fell flat?</i>)</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] What challenges or obstacles did [California/Maine] encounter when moving this law forward? How did you overcome those obstacles? (<i>probe: Was there anyone against the law? What were their arguments?</i>)</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] What type of messaging was used to move this law forward? How was that messaging received? (<i>probe: What type of messaging do you think was most impactful? For whom? By whom? Was there any messaging that fell flat?</i>)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o What data or evidence was most valuable in the advocacy efforts? What data or evidence could have been valuable but was unavailable?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Mechanics:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [For California advocates and policymakers only] How were decisions made about what other policy ideas to include in the legislative package?</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] How does [California/Maine] plan on funding this legislation? How was that funding stream selected? Were other funding sources considered? What trade-offs were considered?</li> <li>• [For advocates and policymakers only] To what degree were those who will be implementing the legislation, like officials from the department of education or food service directors, involved in the policymaking process?</li> </ul>
(continued on next page)

**Figure 1.** Guide for semi-structure interviews with advocates, policymakers, and state agency officials about perceived conditions that facilitated passage of school meals for all legislation in Maine and California, December 2021 to June 2022.

## RESEARCH

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [For advocates or state agency officials only] What role do you imagine your organization will have in the roll-out of universal free meals? What support do you think will be needed to facilitate implementation?</li> <li>• How does [California/Maine] plan to handle the ongoing collection of free and reduced-price meal applications? How was that approach selected? Were other approaches considered? [For state officials only] Was your office involved in this plan?</li> <li>• How does [California/Maine] plan to support schools and districts as they make the transition to universal free meals? How was that approach selected? Were other approaches considered? [For state officials only] Was your office involved in this plan?</li> </ul>
<b>Concluding:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other states are considering passing similar legislation authorizing universal free meals. What advice would you share with them?</li> <li>• [For advocates or policymakers only] What do you think would be needed to get similar legislation passed at the federal level? For example, what types of evidence? What types of advocacy and messaging?</li> <li>• Is there anyone else with whom you think I should speak to learn more about how this legislation was passed in [California/Maine]? Could you connect me to them?</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** (continued) Guide for semi-structure interviews with advocates, policymakers, and state agency officials about perceived conditions that facilitated passage of school meals for all legislation in Maine and California, December 2021 to June 2022.

on Zoom. Interviews lasted between 24 and 72 minutes (median 45 minutes). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interviewer also took notes during the interview. Race and ethnicity, sex or gender, and age information for stakeholders were not collected.

### Data Analysis

Interviews were analyzed in alignment with the principles of content analysis using an immersion/crystallization approach.<sup>17</sup> After reviewing all interview transcripts, themes were abductively generated by the principal investigator. A directed approach to content analysis was used to guide coding, whereby initial coding began with a theory—Kingdon's multiple streams framework for public policy—and then during data analysis, themes were identified from the data.<sup>18</sup> Kingdon's multiple streams framework for public policy explains that policy change occurs when three streams—problem definition, politics, and policies—intersect and form a window of opportunity.<sup>19</sup> The framework also emphasizes the role of policy entrepreneurs in bringing these 3 streams together. Coding was grounded in these 4 domains: problem definition, politics, policies, and policy entrepreneurs. The larger research team then discussed identified themes, which were then coded and organized by the principal investigator using an open coding approach with feedback from the research team. The codes were then used to create themes within the 4 domains. Themes and quotations were shared with 3 key informants for input and their feedback was incorporated.

### RESULTS

Interviews were conducted with 30 key stakeholders. Of these, 5 were state elected officials or key staff, 5 were staff of state agencies that provided input on policy, and 20 were advocates from nonprofit or lobbying organizations. Fifteen

worked in California, 8 worked in Maine, and 7 worked at the national level.

### Converging of Multiple Streams

Stakeholders discussed their perceptions of conditions and mechanisms that facilitated passage of SMFA legislation in Maine and California at each level of Kingdon's multiple streams model. Eleven key themes were organized according to the 4 domains within the multiple streams framework. Stakeholders highlighted the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in shaping the problem definition; how policy solutions were influenced by incremental policy change, ambitious goal settings, and an eye toward sustainability; and how Democratic control of the state houses and budget surpluses created a friendly political environment for SMFA legislation. They also noted the important role of policy entrepreneurs in pushing legislation forward, including a broad advocacy coalition and strong legislative champions who used tailored messaging and solicited input from those who would be responsible for policy implementation.

#### Domain 1: Problem. Theme 1: COVID-19 highlighted child hunger and the importance of school meals.

Stakeholders explained the COVID-19 pandemic cast a spotlight on child hunger and the need for intervention. Some advocates and policymakers described how footage shown on television during the early days of the pandemic of long lines of cars waiting at food banks highlighted the number of hungry children in their communities and the importance of social programs like school meals. One interviewee explained how SMFA was viewed as a way of addressing inequities that had become more evident during the pandemic:

*The pandemic has really brought these equity issues to light... And a lot of folks in California [saw SMFA as] the*

most equitable policy we can go after. California advocate 2

**Theme 2: Families came to rely on school meals during the pandemic.** Stakeholders noted that the looming expiration of the temporary waivers that allowed schools to serve SFMA during the pandemic posed a problem: Families came to rely on free school meals. Politicians expressed concern that not extending free school meals after the waivers expired might be seen by families as taking away a critical benefit. One interviewee explained:

*The COVID pandemic and the federal waivers for universal free meals created a unique opportunity to show that this could happen because it was happening and it was possible and it changed the narrative around having a benefit taken away that [families] had come to depend on during this period.* California advocate 1

**Domain 2: Politics. Theme 1: Democratic control of state government created a favorable political environment.** Stakeholders in both states highlighted 2 common political factors that contributed to successful passage of SMFA legislation. First, Democrats—a party that has traditionally been more supportive of antipoverty policies—controlled both houses of the state legislatures and the governors' offices in both states. One interviewee said,

*We also had a very friendly political climate, which we had not had for a long time in Maine. We had a Democratic majority...[we] work with leadership on both sides of the aisle but this kind of policy would just never pass with a Republican majority.* Maine advocate 1

**Theme 2: Large budget surpluses minimized concerns about fiscal impact.** Second, both states were experiencing considerable budget surpluses due, in part, to an influx of federal pandemic recovery funds. Because California Proposition 98<sup>20</sup> requires that a considerable portion of the state's general fund be dedicated to education, stakeholders explained state was able to make investments in school meals without cutting funding for other programs. When asked about factors that facilitated passage of the SMFA legislation, an interviewee said,

*The first [magic ingredient] was the availability of funding. There was enough money to fund our base funding needs as well as this, which is not always the case... The second was having both houses and the administration thinking this was a priority.* California state agency official 2

**Domain 3: Policy. Theme 1: Incremental policy change laid the groundwork for SMFA.** Stakeholders highlighted how Maine and California had paved the way for SMFA through incremental policy changes in the years before the pandemic, and in the process, developed strong advocacy coalitions that were well positioned to mobilize in the push for SMFA. One interviewee explained:

*These kinds of incremental policy changes that disrupt the status quo are helpful to get to the next thing.* California politician 1

Vital legislation that stakeholders credited with laying the groundwork included:

- Eliminating the reduced-price copay for school meals. Stakeholders highlighted how Maine had passed legislation in 2019 to provide state funding to offset the reduced-price meal charge, allowing students eligible for reduced-price meals to receive breakfast or lunch at no charge.<sup>21</sup>
- Requiring eligible schools to participate in existing federal meal provisions. Stakeholders in California noted the importance of legislation passed in 2018 that required all schools in very high-poverty areas to opt into CEP or Provision 2 (federal provisions that allow eligible schools to offer universal free meals).<sup>22</sup> Interviewees highlighted how the number of schools using CEP grew after California began participating in a USDA demonstration project to use Medicaid data to identify students eligible for free or reduced-price meals without submitting a school meal application.<sup>23</sup>
- Banning meal shaming. Stakeholders explained that legislation banning meal shaming, or the practice of embarrassing students with meal debt, was also critical. Although this legislation has important benefits for school climate and student nutrition, it requires school nutrition programs, which already operate on tight margins, to absorb student debt. Many advocates and legislators described anti-meal shaming legislation as an unfunded SMFA mandate—requiring schools to serve meals to students regardless of their ability to pay, but without funding to cover the costs. One policymaker described anti-meal shaming legislation as a “back-door” to SMFA.

**Theme 2: COVID-19 waivers demonstrated SMFA was feasible.** Stakeholders also highlighted how the federal waivers that allowed schools to offer universal free meals served as a proof of concept. By demonstrating that schools were capable of serving free meals to all students, the waivers allayed concerns that SMFA would be too logistically challenging to implement. One interviewee emphasized,

*The reality is, if we hadn't had the pandemic, this may not have happened. It just laid out how it could work. People started talking about how much better it was.* Maine politician 1

Advocates and policymakers explained that after this softening period, they wanted to be ambitious and push for comprehensive SFMA legislation. They said they were surprised to find they did not have to settle for less. One interviewee said:

*If we had tried an incremental approach, we would have ended up having all these exact same conversations, we just would have gotten less in the end.* Maine advocate 3



## RESEARCH

**Domain 4: Policy Entrepreneurs. Theme 1: Strong and broad advocacy coalitions organized at multiple levels.** In Maine, all stakeholders credited Full Plates Full Potential ([fullplates.org](http://fullplates.org)), a statewide nonprofit advocacy coalition, with leading the push for SMFA. Advocates noted that Full Plates Full Potential has strong ties to local policymakers: The organization was cofounded in 2014 by the former President of the Senate and grew out of the legislature's Task Force to End Student Hunger. Advocates credited the organization's success in advancing other child nutrition policies, including a mandate to serve summer meals in eligible communities and legislation promoting "breakfast after the bell" and afterschool meals, to these long-standing relationships. Full Plates Full Potential quickly formed a coalition of supporters, including membership organizations representing school nutrition staff, principals, teachers, superintendents, and school boards, as well as advocacy groups focused on hunger, farm-to-school, poverty, and job creation.

In California, stakeholders explained that the push for SMFA was led by legislative champion Senator Skinner and the School Meals for All Coalition ([schoolmealscoalition.org](http://schoolmealscoalition.org)), made up of more than 200 organizations. At the helm of the coalition were the Center for Ecoliteracy ([ecoliteracy.org](http://ecoliteracy.org)), the California Association of Food Banks ([cafoodbanks.org](http://cafoodbanks.org)), NextGen California ([ca.nextgenamerica.org](http://ca.nextgenamerica.org)), TomKat Ranch ([tomkatranch.org](http://tomkatranch.org)), and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond. Coalition partners explained that they developed a coordinated communication strategy and harnessed the power of research and data to make the case for SMFA. The coalition noted that they worked at the grassroots level—mobilizing diverse stakeholders to sign onto letters in support of the legislation, call their representatives, and testify at hearings—as well as the grasstops level—using relationships with the Office of the Governor and Office of the First Partner to move the legislation forward.

In both states, stakeholders emphasized the importance of building consensus within a broad advocacy coalition. Advocates brought together diverse groups whose work intersects with school meals, including those with interests in labor organizing, agriculture, climate change and sustainability, social justice and equity, hunger, public health, and education. Finding common ground where possible and considering unlikely partners contributed to success; for example, an advocate noted that although the food industry lobby and public health advocates are often at odds, SMFA was an area of alignment. One interviewee described:

*We brought together a coalition of unusual stakeholders. Business interests, different state groups that weren't necessarily focused on nutrition or weren't even focused on kids but were focused on economic opportunity in communities, and that enabled us to build a bipartisan push in the state.* National advocate 7

In both campaigns, a core leadership group focused on building consensus and coordinating with partners. Advocates explained that coming to consensus meant that some partners had to drop related legislative priorities in the short-term to advance SMFA legislation.

Advocates also noted the importance of including in their coalition people with experience maneuvering through the state capitol, including advocacy organizations with existing

ties to legislators and paid lobbyists. These policy insiders played an important role in securing meetings with legislative staffers, winning support among policymakers, and identifying critical moments for the advocacy coalition to weigh in. State advocates also explained that they benefited from support from national antihunger advocacy organizations providing technical assistance with data, drafting the legislative text, and funding paid lobbyists.

**Theme 2: Strong legislative champions, including those with lived experience, navigated legislation forward.** Stakeholders said that in both states, senior lawmakers served as champions of SMFA legislation, generating support among their colleagues and navigating the bills through the legislative process. In Maine, after drafting the initial SMFA bill with input from local stakeholders and a national anti-hunger organization, Full Plates Full Potential approached the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate, both Democrats, to cosponsor the legislation. Advocates said that they also won strong support from an influential Republican senator on the taxation committee. He offered testimony using arguments focused on the fiscal benefits of SMFA that resonated with fellow Republicans. Each of these champions also had a personal connection to school meals: all 3 had experienced food insecurity as children, and the President of the Senate was also a former teacher. One advocate noted the importance of having these legislators who were passionate about child hunger champion the bill:

*The fact that at the public hearing we had the Speaker of the House, the Senate President, and a pretty powerful person in the Republican party talking about their personal experience of childhood hunger...that's really powerful.* Maine advocate 2

Full Plates Full Potential also contracted with paid lobbyists who helped navigate the legislation through the capitol.

In California, stakeholders highlighted how Senator Skinner and her chief of staff, Jessica Bartholow, shared a longstanding commitment to addressing child hunger. In December 2020, when they realized that free school meals would end with the expiration of the federal waivers, they began to explore legislative options to expand school meal access. Around the same time, TomKat Ranch, the Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, and the California Association of Food Banks contacted Senator Skinner's office with a proposal to work on SMFA. Together, they helped form the coalition of advocates to move the legislation forward. As chair of the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee and the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, stakeholders said that Senator Skinner was well positioned to navigate the bill through the legislature and secure buy-in from other legislators. One interviewee said:

*Having a powerful ally in Senator Skinner and in the budget was very powerful in overcoming the funding obstacles.* California politician 2

When a similar bill was proposed by legislators in the House, Senator Skinner's office worked with them to consolidate the legislation and support. As in Maine, influential California policymakers, including Assemblywoman

Luz Rivas (Democrat) and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond had experienced poverty as children and were able to speak directly to the importance of the legislation.

**Theme 3: Students, families, educators, and school nutrition professionals were persuasive messengers.**

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of identifying and elevating the voices of credible messengers. In both states, advocates said politicians with lived experience were especially persuasive when sharing their stories with their colleagues. Politicians said that they were also moved hearing the voices of those who stood to be most directly influenced by SMFA: students, families, educators, and school nutrition professionals. One interviewee said:

*Find the voices that are the most compelling: The school nutrition directors, the school nurses, teachers saying... 'I am paying out of pocket for granola bars because I know these kids are hungry, not naughty.'* Maine advocate 2

Another interviewee said,

*At the hearing...a lot of students came forward to talk about their experiences with free and reduced lunch and the stigma and all that [expletive] you have to go through as a kid to just eat. And all the teachers and principals...talking about kids being embarrassed and being hungry...There certainly was a big part of the legislature that probably started having flashbacks to when they were kids.* Maine politician 1

Advocates explained that they worked to elevate these voices. For example, the Center for Ecoliteracy activated their network of nearly 100 school districts across California, connecting school nutrition directors directly with their local policymakers and helping them craft testimony and public opinion pieces.

**Theme 4: Messaging tailored to specific audiences resonated well.**

Although there was no formalized opposition to SMFA in Maine or California, according to advocates, those who did not support the legislation typically offered 2 reasons. First, opponents argued that SMFA should be implemented at the federal, not state, level. Advocates said they responded by emphasizing that they were also pushing for SMFA at the national level and that the state legislation maximized federal funding, ensuring no federal dollars were left on the table. Second, some opponents believed the state should not cover the cost of school meals for those students who could afford to pay. Advocates said they responded by explaining that SMFA was the only way to reach the many students who are hungry but not eligible for or enrolled in free or reduced-price meals. Advocates said they used data to highlight the number of students who were food insecure and yet did not qualify for free or reduced-price meals based on household income. This was especially pertinent in California, where cost of living is high. They also emphasized that factors like stigma, documentation status, and limited literacy or English-language proficiency may keep families who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals from enrolling. One interviewee said that they used messaging that emphasized:

*There's a lot of kids out there who are desperately poor and who would be eligible for free school meals if their parents submitted the paperwork, but whose parents will never submit the paperwork... Providing something for all children is the only way to reach the poorest and disenfranchised children and the children suffering the most.* California politician 1

Advocates highlighted the importance of tailoring their messaging to their audience. For example, advocates noted that messages about how SMFA maximize federal reimbursement resonated with those who were fiscally conservative, whereas messages about minimizing stigma resonated with parents. In Maine, substance abuse disorder prevention was important to many lawmakers, so advocates highlighted how SMFA may help promote student health, academic success, and engagement. Advocates also said that they used national polling to help them identify which messages work best; for example, several advocates cited how a national messaging study found that the term "universal meals" was unpopular, so they chose to use the language of "healthy meals for all" and "school meals for all".<sup>24</sup>

Stakeholders highlighted 2 messages that they believe were effective with politicians on both sides of the political aisle. First, that SMFA is an investment in education and families. Advocates highlighted how school meals were as fundamental to helping students learn as textbooks. One interviewee said that in their messaging to families and politicians, they emphasized:

*We don't charge them [students] for a bus, we don't charge them for a book. Why are we charging them for a meal?* Maine state agency official 1

The Maine legislature had recently committed to covering more than half of public education costs. Advocates argued this historic investment in public education would go to waste if the state did not also invest in meeting students' basic needs and addressing hunger.

Second, advocates emphasized how SMFA can help alleviate the financial burden on school foodservice divisions. Meal shaming bans, which mandated that schools serve meals to students regardless of their ability to pay, required schools to absorb student unpaid meal debt. Advocates highlighted how SMFA took this burden off of schools, who operate on tight budgets even in normal circumstances but were facing even greater strain during the pandemic.

**Theme 5: Implementers provided critical input and support for legislation.**

In both states, advocates and lawmakers noted that they engaged those who would be responsible for policy implementation, including nutrition services divisions in their respective Departments of Education, district foodservice directors, and financial and legal teams within their state governments. Advocates noted that these stakeholders provided valuable input on policy language and thinking through how the policy would be operationalized.

In Maine, advocates said that Full Plates Full Potential had close relationships with the Maine Department of Education Child Nutrition Office and the Maine School Nutrition Association (the state collective of district food service directors),

## RESEARCH

having partnered with both groups in past legislative campaigns. Full Plates Full Potential worked with the Child Nutrition office to draft the legislation and estimate implementation costs. The child nutrition director offered testimony about the potential benefits of the legislation students and cost savings to the state. One interviewee said:

*If [the child nutrition director] had not been supportive, it wouldn't have gotten beyond him. Maine advocate 3*

In California, stakeholders explained that Senator Skinner first approached Superintendent Thurmond, who directs the California Department of Education (CDE), to serve as a legislative cosponsor. Superintendent Thurmond, who had previously been a champion for CEP, signed on and tasked the CDE Nutrition Services Division with partnering with Senator Skinner's office to advance the legislation. Senator Skinner's office had an existing relationship with the CDE Nutrition Services Division and helped navigate the relationship between CDE and the broader coalition. According to stakeholders, CDE played a critical role in drafting the legislative language and had regular calls with Senator Skinner's office to ensure the legislation was feasible and considered the diverse needs of districts across the state. One interviewee explained about CDE:

*They are the subject matter experts, so we leaned in on them heavily as we navigated this bill. This wouldn't have come to fruition without their expertise. California state agency official 4*

CDE also looped in state legal and finance offices into the process to think through potential challenges to the legislation and develop solutions. Superintendent Thurmond, who is an elected official, was also able to use his position and his government affairs team to advocate for SMFA, which the CDE Nutrition Services Division could not do.

## DISCUSSION

This case study identifies the problem definition, policy solutions, political conditions, and policy entrepreneurs that facilitated passage of SFMA legislation in California and Maine. Stakeholders described a confluence of factors—heightened national attention on child hunger, a budget surplus, single-party control of the state legislature and the governor's office, people in power with lived experience of child hunger, and the looming end of pandemic meal waivers—that created a policy window that legislators and advocates acted on swiftly.

Kingdon argued that policies are most viable after a prolonged softening period, where the groundwork is laid for change.<sup>19</sup> A history of stakeholder agenda-setting and incremental policy change, through which advocates cultivated trust and developed channels of communication with key stakeholders, set the stage for SMFA legislation. By building broad advocacy coalitions, organizing at the grassroots and the grassroots levels, identifying strong legislative champions, activating persuasive messengers, tailoring their messaging to their audience, and involving those responsible for policy implementation in the process, advocates and legislators in Maine and California were able to pass the first-of-its-kind legislation.

This case study is the first in the peer-reviewed literature to explore the conditions and mechanisms that facilitated passage of SMFA legislation. Although studies examining policy change are common in some fields, few exist in the field of child nutrition policy. One prior study explored the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the federal law that reauthorized the child nutrition programs.<sup>25</sup> In that study, Schwartz and Wootan<sup>25</sup> also identified the importance of incremental policy change and in building broad advocacy coalitions with both traditional and nontraditional partners. Schwartz and Wootan<sup>25</sup> also found that advocates reworked their messaging to have wider political appeal by de-emphasizing how the legislation would expand government authority. In the present study, many advocates similarly highlighted how they reworked their messaging to use an education frame, rather than a welfare frame, to garner more bipartisan support.

Stakeholders in both states pointed to a considerable budget surplus as an important factor that contributed to passage of SMFA legislation. Maine and California were not alone in experiencing considerable increases in their rainy-day funds (also known as budget stabilization funds) during the pandemic due to an influx of federal COVID-19 relief funds and higher-than-expected tax revenues; nationally, states increased their collective rainy-day funds in Fiscal Year 2021 by 50% from the year prior.<sup>26,27</sup> In 2024 and beyond, as COVID-19 relief funding winds down, many states and localities are facing budget shortfalls.<sup>28</sup> In these circumstances, SMFA advocates may need to consider creative funding mechanisms for SMFA legislation; for example, Colorado will fund SMFA by capping itemized and standard state income tax deductions for high-income earners.

## Future Research

Moving forward, lessons learned from implementation of SMFA legislation in California, Maine, and other early adopters should be documented and shared. Anecdotal reports suggest that efforts to pass SMFA have been stalled in other states due to budget limitations and concerns about how the switch to SMFA will influence school poverty data—data that are often used to allocate federal, state, and grant funds and that schools traditionally collect through school meal applications.<sup>29</sup> It may be especially valuable to share the strategies that early implementers develop to address these concerns. To help develop realistic estimates regarding the costs and benefits of SMFA, research should also capture changes in student meal participation; the structure and stability of school and state finances; and influence on schools, students, and families. Finally, more case studies that provide insight into the policy strategies and advocacy best practices that result in the passage of child nutrition policies are needed to guide policymaker and advocates in the field.

## Limitations

This study had some limitations. First, a snowball sampling approach was used and findings represent only the ideas and opinions of those interviewed. Next, demographic data on stakeholders, including race, ethnicity, gender, and age, were not collected; these factors may influence stakeholders' perspectives, especially on policymaking and



power, and even their willingness to participate in the study. However, only 1 person invited to participate in the study declined. Next, although we developed a semi-structured interview guide, we adapted the questions for each interviewee based on their role, state, and responses to prior questions; as such, we did not pilot test the interview guide. One researcher reviewed all transcripts, which meant there was less diversity of perspectives and interpretations than there may have been if multiple coders had been engaged; however, the full research team discussed and provided feedback on all identified themes. Next, although themes and quotations were shared back with some interview participants for feedback, this was not feasible for all participants. However, participants that reviewed did confirm the interpretations of the results were accurate from their perspectives. Next, findings may not be generalizable to other states or other points in time. The study focused on 2 states that successfully passed SMFA legislation about 1 year after the pandemic began and did not consider the experiences of states that attempted but did not ultimately pass SMFA legislation. It is possible other states used similar strategies to those used California and Maine but experienced a different result. Despite the idiosyncrasies of Maine and California, important lessons can be derived from their experiences. Finally, this study focuses only on policy adoption and not implementation. It is not yet fully known what challenges states may experience during implementation nor the impact of these SMFA policies on student and other outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

In early 2021, a confluence of factors created a unique policy window and policy entrepreneurs in California and Maine acted quickly to pass landmark legislation guaranteeing access to free meals for all students. Many of the strategies used to advance SMFA legislation in these states can serve as a blueprint for efforts to promote state meal policies elsewhere.

Lessons from California and Maine could also be leveraged in the ongoing push for federal SMFA policy. In addition to extending free meal access to millions of children in states without SFMA legislation, federal legislation would alleviate the burden on families and school nutrition professionals in states with SMFA legislation by eliminating the need to collect and process school meal applications.

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