2025-2026 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY

KERN COUNTY
SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAM

The Well-Fed Student

Release Date
March 17, 2026

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SUMMARY:

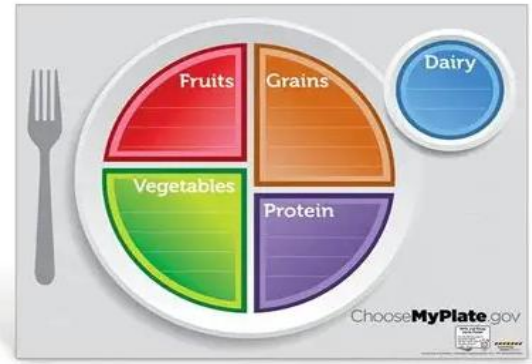
Most public schools participate in the National School Lunch Program, which provides low-cost or free lunches for more than 30 million school children per day. Signed into law in 1946 by President Harry S Truman, the government originally implemented the program under the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to absorb farm surpluses, while simultaneously providing meals to schools. These programs have grown to include breakfast, lunch, snacks, and supper. In the School Year 2022-2023, California became the first state to implement a statewide Universal Meals Program and School Breakfast Program. Numerous studies have linked the benefits of nutrition for growing children and adolescents, not just for physical health, but also behavioral health, cognitive performance, and academic achievement. Food insecurity and malnutrition correlate closely with social, emotional, and academic problems.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

Pursuant to Penal Code §933.5, the 2025-2026 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) investigated the operations and management of the California Universal School Lunch Program in Kern County public schools. This investigation was to determine if the needs of the community and compliance with regulations were being met.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with staff from the Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS), and nutrition officials from various schools. The Grand Jury also toured several school cafeterias and food preparation areas. Inquiries were also made about what happens to the leftover food from the cafeterias. Additionally, the Grand Jury reviewed the various laws, policies, food guidelines and official USDA websites.



This is a typical nutrition plate as recommended by the USDA, posted in a school cafeteria.
Website: www.myplate.gov

Picture of a school cafeteria salad bar with fruits and vegetables.
Photo taken by the Grand Jury

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

A. There are 53 school districts under the KCSOS; this includes elementary, middle, and high schools.

B. All school districts must adhere to the USDA guidelines for nutrition, and provide the five components of a balanced diet: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy products.

C. All food handlers and food managers must be certified by the State and observe safe food handling practices.

D. Each school district has its own specified approved food vendor and their own nutritionally approved menus. Some school kitchens also use produce grown in their outside and hydroponic gardens.

E. Some school districts work together to increase bargaining power in purchasing food from different vendors, allowing greater variety in their menus.

F. Many school districts have their own websites that include scheduled menus with nutritional information.

G. A local wellness plan[1] for each district is also available on each website to encourage good choices and establish healthy eating habits.

H. The USDA website titled "Team Nutrition,[2]" is a good resource for school lunch programs. Nutrition related posters can be printed from this website at no cost.

I. Another USDA website called "Meal Planner,[3]" contains a large amount of information for creating nutritious school menus.

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[1] A wellness plan is committed to providing a healthy school nutrition plan for healthy eating habits. It fosters student performance, attendance, and education, by supporting healthy eating and physical activity for children's health.
[2] www.fns.usda.gov, www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition
[3] www.fns.usda.gov/tn/menu-planner-school-meals

J. In an effort to make meals healthier and tastier, cafeterias are looking into going back to on-site preparation.

K. Effective January 1, 2026, new State regulations mandate removal of certain ultra-processed foods from public schools.

L. To help avoid food waste, many schools are implementing innovative ideas such as salad bars, "finishing tables" for students who eat slower, and monitored "sharing tables" where students can place items such as uneaten fruit and/or unopened containers.

M. The Kern County Health Department's program, "Waste Hunger not Food," or the Community Action Partnership of Kern (CAPK), collect leftover edible food and distributes it to needy families through various non-profit organizations. This program began in 2018, four years before the passage of SB1383[4].

N. Free breakfast, snacks, lunch, and suppers, are provided at all public elementary, middle and high schools.

O. While schools can pull from numerous State and Federal funding streams, Title 1[5] funds are not available for school meal programs.

FINDINGS:

F1. If school districts do not post current lunch menus on their websites, it diminishes students' ability to decide what to eat.

F2. Not all schools are using nutritional posters as recommended by the USDA.

F3. Many schools do not have garden programs to provide fresh fruit and vegetables for educational purposes.

F4. The school kitchens and cafeterias visited by the Grand Jury appeared to be clean and well organized.

F5. Not all school districts' websites have a current local wellness plan available.

F6. School districts do not consistently work with other districts for bargaining power in purchasing food from different vendors.

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[4] SB1383 requires mandated edible food generators (such as grocers, food distributors, and schools) to donate their excess edible food to local food recovery organizations or services that distribute food to people in need.

[5] The main goal of Title 1 is to supplement state and local funding for low-achieving children, particularly in high-poverty schools, and to help students reach proficiency on challenging state academic standards. Title 1 funding makes it one of the largest federal programs supporting education.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Grand Jury recommends the Kern County Superintendent of Schools:

R1. Send a memorandum to all school district nutrition supervisors by August 1, 2026, advising them to post current menus on their websites if they are not already doing so. (Finding F1)

R2. Coordinate all schools to use school age-appropriate nutrition related posters in their cafeterias using "Team Nutrition" website to access printable posters, by August 1, 2026. (Finding F2)

R3. By July 1, 2026, send out an advisory to all nutrition supervisors and principals to reach out to other schools and visit their cafeterias to share ideas. (Finding F6)

R4. By August 1, 2026, send out a memorandum to all schools to have their current local wellness plan available on their websites, using the KCSOS website for guidance. (Finding F5)

COMMENTS:

The Grand Jury would like to thank the Kern County school officials for their cooperation in the investigation of the schools' nutrition programs. We would also like to thank the staff for sharing their time and knowledge.

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM:**
  Kern County Superintendent of Schools
  Findings F1 – F6
  Recommendations R1 – R4

RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(c) AND 933.05:

- **PRESIDING JUDGE**
  SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
  COUNTY OF KERN
  1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
  BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301

- **FOREMAN**
  KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
  1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
  BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury do not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.