



California Poised to Be First in Nation to Permanently Provide Free School Meals to All Kids
Senate and Assembly propose free School Meals For All as a “common sense” solution in their budget

June 3, 2021 - (Sacramento, CA) - In an historic early agreement on the Legislature’s Budget, California is poised to be the first state to permanently adopt free school meals for all students. A coalition of nearly 200 health, nutrition, education, labor, community-based organizations, and food banks is now calling on Governor Gavin Newsom to support the Legislature’s Budget proposal and adopt ongoing funding for School Meals for All to help end child hunger, improve learning and behavior, create less bureaucracy, and help close the achievement gap in our schools.

“The Legislature’s Budget lets California’s K-12 students know they don’t have to worry about being hungry at school anymore,” said Senate Budget Committee Chair Nancy Skinner (D-Oakland). “The actions taken by the budget committees yesterday embraced the essential elements of my bill, SB 364, Free School Meals for All, to give all students access to free, healthy, locally-grown school meals. And by doing so, we improve learning, reduce hunger, and help California’s farmers and food producers.”

On Wednesday, both the Senate and Assembly Budget Committees approved funding to increase state school meal reimbursements by \$54 million in the 2021-22 fiscal year and provide \$650 million in ongoing Proposition 98 funding, beginning in 2022-23, to cover the costs of offering a free breakfast and lunch for all students.

Providing free breakfast and lunch for all ensures that every student has the health, energy, and focus needed to thrive in school and lay the foundation for a successful future.

“As someone who has been on free and reduced school lunches, I’m thankful my colleagues are pushing for school meals to receive adequate funding for two free meals a day without creating school meal debt,” said Assemblywoman Luz Rivas (D-San Fernando Valley), who has led a multi-year campaign to make school lunches free for low-income families. “California has the fifth-largest economy in the world – we have a moral obligation to make sure no student experiences hunger as we rebuild from this pandemic.”

Nearly one-fifth of California’s residents can’t afford basic needs, according to the Public Policy Institute of California, and about half of the state’s children are in poverty or on the cusp, many kept just above the poverty line by social safety net programs like school meals.

“For millions of California students, the breakfast and lunch they get at school are the only meals they can count on, and the pandemic has shone a spotlight on the incredibly important role daily, nutritious school meals play in fighting child hunger and food insecurity,” said Kathy Saile, No Kid Hungry California Director. “As part of its commitment to an equitable recovery, California has stepped up in a big way to ensure that all kids can have access to school meals, regardless of income, and we applaud this robust investment.”

By encouraging freshly prepared school meals made from California-grown ingredients, the Legislature’s Budget also addresses the needs of local growers and producers. During the pandemic, many farmers watched their supply chains break down, losing regular markets for their produce.

“Investment in school nutrition is an investment in the future of agriculture,” Taylor Roschen, California Farm Bureau Federation. “California produces the healthiest, freshest and highest quality products in the world. Our school-aged children should be the beneficiaries of that California-grown bounty.”

President Joe Biden has proposed to offer low-income families food subsidies during the summer and expand reimbursements for meals to school districts that qualify but according to the [Center for Ecoliteracy](#), up to half of the public schools in California – and the 2.9 million students they serve – would not be eligible to receive the many benefits because they do not have a high enough percentage of students meeting

federal low-income requirements of less than \$48,470 per year for a family of four to qualify. California needs its own complementary plan.

“California will continue to lead nationally and set a strong example for the federal government by supporting school food policies that close harmful educational, economic, and health gaps that have only widened during the pandemic,” said Kat Taylor, Founding Director of TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation and a cosponsor of the School Meals for All proposal. “We urge the Governor to provide our school children with fresh, California-grown meals to advance their education and development.”

A new study from Tufts University showed that school meals are the healthiest source of meals for American children: researchers found that the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 greatly improved the nutritional quality of school meals. School Meals for All will further improve school meals for California children, providing them with nourishing meals as California, and the families that have been hit the hardest, continue to recover from the pandemic.

“We are thrilled to see California lead the way in recognizing the essential role of school meals as we emerge from the pandemic,” said Curt Ellis, Co-Founder and CEO of FoodCorps. “Free, healthy school meals for all kids support families, farmers, and school nutrition professionals who work every day to make sure kids get the food they need to thrive.”