



California School Meals in Jeopardy as Critical Federal Waivers Are Not Yet Extended

Millions of Students Will Lose Access to Free Meals While Food Insecurity Skyrockets

SACRAMENTO, CA (July 28, 2020) – California’s school districts are desperately seeking continued flexibility from state and federal lawmakers to be able to continue feeding millions of students free meals. With over 90% of California students expected to continue distance learning when school resumes—in as little as two weeks for some—school district leaders are urging the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to extend waivers currently in place that create flexibility and allow for universal free meals.

When the pandemic hit, and schools were required to close, school districts pivoted from the National School Lunch Program toward utilizing summer meal programs to provide emergency meal service. The summer meal program model eliminates the need for income verification, allows school districts to serve every child under 18, and provides flexible pick-up options at any school site, regardless of where a student lives or their household income level. Maintaining this level of flexibility and accessibility by temporarily extending the waivers on income verification would allow school meals and school nutrition departments to continue serving as a lifeline to countless students as schools “reopen” and mandated distance learning begins.

In California, the high cost of living, compounded by increasing unemployment makes free school meals particularly important for the many families who are struggling to get by during the pandemic.

“We have over 100 schools and a lot of people don’t live in the same neighborhood as where they go to school,” said Fred Espinosa, Manager of Acquisition and Production at San Diego Unified School District. “Without the waivers and flexibility in place, it will be very challenging for families to access meals.”

COVID-19 has introduced new challenges to our complex and highly regulated school food system. The federal HEROES act would have provided 55% of the difference between what school district nutrition services departments received during pandemic closures and what they received in normal times, but that is stalled in Congress. The California state legislature recently appropriated \$112 million from the CARES act to provide an additional 75¢ per meal, but that much-needed funding will expire at the end of August. Without new sources of funding and flexibility (via waivers), school district nutrition departments will be in the red.

“School districts have already stepped up in an incredible way to provide meals for their communities during this pandemic,” said Adam Kesselman, Executive Director of the Center for Ecoliteracy, whose California Food for California Kids® initiative supports a growing network of 89 public school districts across the state. “School districts need our support right now, and we hope the USDA will use its authority to make these important policy changes to ensure the health and well-being of all students during this critical time.”

A broad coalition, including the California Food Policy Advocates, Center for Ecoliteracy, No Kid Hungry and the School Nutrition Association, have sent tens of thousands of [letters to lawmakers and the USDA](#) urging the approval of the remaining waivers. School districts are still figuring out how learning will take place this academic year, but many students will not be “at school” five days a week with access to breakfast and lunch each day. Instead, schools across the country are making plans to implement staggered schedules, remote learning, or some combination of the two. This means that communities will need the flexibility allowed under the USDA waivers as they navigate the new challenges of providing meals to children at school, sending meals home with children on days when they are not at school, and serving meals at community sites closer to children’s homes.

BACKGROUND

School district nutrition service providers will face a host of new challenges if required to collect payment for meals and check eligibility under the National School Lunch Program, which will create more obstacles for families seeking school meals. Foodservice costs have skyrocketed during the pandemic. Many school districts are providing hazard pay for frontline staff, paying for personal protective equipment, and having to purchase more expensive pre-packaged items and new equipment to serve meals outside of cafeterias. Without the flexibility from state and federal governments, many school districts are now being asked to verify eligibility and collect payment from some parents as they drive through to pick up meals, and parents may be forced to go to multiple school sites to collect meals if their kids attend different schools. These are unnecessary burdens unnecessarily laid at the feet of struggling families in the middle of a pandemic and economic depression.

[New research](#) from the University of California Berkeley’s Institute of Urban and Regional Development and School of Public Health found that many school districts are trying to meet the demand for emergency school meals with fewer resources and drastically higher costs. In a state where 58% of students qualified for free or reduced priced meals prior to COVID-19, school meal programs critically need funding and flexibility to adjust their operations at a pace that matches students' needs.

The need for free school meals is dire as the percentage of families who are considered food insecure skyrockets, even surpassing the depths of the Great Recession, according to economists at Northwestern University. Nearly four in 10 Black and Hispanic households with

children struggle to access food. They are nearly twice as likely to be experiencing food insecurity as similar white families.

“We will continue to champion the nutritional needs of California’s students and their families,” said Kat Taylor, founder of the TomKat Ranch Education Foundation and TomKat Ranch. “With unprecedented unemployment plaguing our state during this pandemic, there is a greater need to ensure that our most under-resourced communities are being served, starting with addressing hunger.”

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The [Center for Ecoliteracy](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to cultivating education for sustainable living. One of its key initiatives, [California Food for California Kids.®](#) supports systems change by improving children's health, education and the state's economy while teaching students where food comes from and how it reaches the table.

About the Office of Kat Taylor

Kat Taylor is active in a variety of social enterprises, public benefit and philanthropic ventures. Concurrently, she serves as co-founder and board chair of Beneficial State Bank, a Community Development Financial Institution whose mission is to bring beneficial banking to under-resourced communities in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner. Taylor is also the owner of TomKat Ranch, a cattle ranch that uses environmentally beneficial practices and research to demonstrate, inspire, and teach the adoption of regenerative agriculture. Taylor serves and has served on many nonprofit boards, including CuriOdyssey, Ecotrust, Good Samaritan Family Resource Center, the Harvard Board of Overseers, Insight Prison Project, KQED, ProPublica and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.