



Bill Could Make California First in Nation to Provide School Meals to All Kids

Legislation would recognize that nutritious food is fundamental to learning, increase access to freshly prepared school meals for six million students, and promote California-grown food during the pandemic and beyond

February 10, 2021 - (Sacramento, CA) - At a time when food insecurity has increased dramatically due to the ongoing global pandemic, proposed legislation to provide free school meals for all with increased access to freshly prepared, California-grown items would help to address health and wealth inequities among students, according to a coalition of school nutrition, anti-hunger, and child poverty advocates as well as California ranchers and growers.

Introduced by Senate Budget Committee Chair Nancy Skinner (D-Oakland), [SB 364, "School Meals for All."](#) could make California the first state in the nation to ensure all kids have access to nutritious, locally grown food without creating additional administrative barriers for schools. It would also make California the first state in the nation to extend the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program indefinitely, ensuring that children have access to food during holiday breaks or emergencies. "School Meals for All" has more than 20 co-authors from across California.

"Free meals should be part of the educational day, it shouldn't be based on someone's income," said Stephanie Bruce, Food Service Director at Palm Springs Unified School District. "If we're going to ensure that our students and the next generation are going to be successful, nutrition needs to be a part of this. Especially during this pandemic, we have an obligation to make sure that our students are healthy as well as educated."

Access to free school meals will help families free up financial resources at a time when [6.2 million households](#) in California do not have access to nutritious food, with Black and Latinx households with children reporting food insecurity [twice](#) that of white households with children. [Evidence](#) shows that proper nutrition directly impacts children’s development, behavior, and ability to learn. School meals have also been shown to reduce Type 2 diabetes, childhood obesity, and heart disease — all risk factors for the coronavirus.

“School meals are as essential to learning as textbooks or computers,” [said Sen. Skinner](#). “We provide every child the opportunity of a free education. We should do the same with nutritious school food.”

School districts and essential food service workers have been handing out free meals year-round during the pandemic thanks to emergency extensions from a USDA program designed to provide no-cost meals to kids during the summer. But when the USDA waivers expire in June 2021, millions of kids will lose access to free meals, perhaps the only food they get all day.

“Child hunger was pervasive before the pandemic, now we are witnessing truly heartbreaking levels of hardship I hoped I would never see,” said Natalie Caples, Co-CEO, Central California Food Bank. “Schools are some of our closest and best partners, and together we are doing everything we can to feed children and their families. Being on the front lines of crisis, we know more has to be done, and this bill will make a huge advance in our work to mitigate hunger across the Central Valley. We must all work together to ensure our children have a healthy and hunger-free future.”

SB 364 prioritizes low-income children; it will ensure that no student has to pay for the food they need to learn, reducing the stigma associated with free and reduced-price meals and helping all families living in California, which has a higher cost of living than all other regions except for Hawaii and Washington, D.C.

“A lot of families that didn’t qualify for free meals were on the fence because the income eligibility guidelines are federal, and we’re in California,” said Gary Petill, Food Service Director at San Diego Unified School District. “There’s a higher cost to live in San Diego than Mississippi or Tennessee. It’s a shame. Families are struggling to try to get the meals.”

By promoting California-grown food, the Senate bill will expand market opportunities for local ranchers, farmers, and growers. It will help educate students about how their food choices can make a difference to their communities and the planet.

“Not only would California-sourced meals provide healthy, nutrient dense proteins to school children, but it would also create learning opportunities about local agriculture, food systems, and carbon farming,” said Lisa Poncia, co-owner of Stemple Creek Ranch in Marin County. “We are huge proponents of our public schools, and this would be a welcome partnership.”

The legislation is co-authored by Senate Majority Leader Bob Hertzberg (Principal co-author, D-San Fernando Valley), Senator John Laird (Principal co-author, D-Santa Cruz), Senator Josh Newman (D-Fullerton), Senator Susan Talamantes Eggman (Principal co-author, D-Stockton), Senator Ben Hueso (D-Imperial County), Senator Monique Limon (Principal co-author, D-Santa Barbara), Senator Mike McGuire (Principal co-author, D-Healdsburg), Senator Bob Wieckowski (D-Fremont), Senator Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco), Assemblymember Marc Berman (Principal co-author, D-Menlo Park), Assemblymember Eloise Gómez Reyes (D-Inland Empire), Assemblymember Robert Rivas (Co-author, D-Hollister), Assemblymember Cristina Garcia (D-Los Angeles), Assemblymember Miguel Santiago (D-Los Angeles), Assemblymember Wendy Carrillo (D-Los Angeles), Assemblymember David Sen-Fu Chiu (D-San Francisco), Assemblymember Freddie Rodriguez (D-Chino), Assemblymember Sharon Quirk-Silva, (D-Fullerton), Assemblymember Ken Cooley (D-Sacramento), Assemblymember Adrin Nazarian (D-San Fernando Valley) Assemblymember Jim Cooper (D-Sacramento), Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia (D-Riverside), Assemblymember Marc Levine (D-San Francisco), Assemblymember Mark Stone (D-Santa Cruz), and Assemblymember Carlos Villapudua (D-San Joaquin).

Members of the School Meals for All coalition include: The Office of Kat Taylor, the Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, California Association of Food Banks, Food Research & Action Center, GRACE/End Child Poverty, Nourish California, Eat.Learn.Play Foundation, Dolores Huerta Foundation, Western Center on Law and Poverty, Common Sense, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Growing the Table, Frog Hollow Farm, Stemple Creek Ranch, Culinary Farm at Marin Country Day School, Neighborhood Industries, and TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation.

Quotes from Coalition Members

“When Oakland Unified School District offered free meals, our participation numbers increased, providing much needed revenue. More importantly, families from all income groups told us they have come to rely on these meals as a reliable source of nutrition for their kids.”

—Dr. Kyla Johnson-Trammell, Superintendent, **Oakland Unified School District**

“Freshly prepared school meals made from California-grown ingredients address many pressing challenges. School districts can alleviate child hunger and malnutrition with nutritious meals sourced from local and climate-friendly growers, many of whom have been economically devastated by the pandemic. As the nation’s largest agricultural economy, California farmers and ranchers could be the heroes of food security, environmental justice, and economic resiliency.”

— Kat Taylor, co-sponsor of the bill, Founding Director, **TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation and Principal of The Office of Kat Taylor**

“School meals have always been a powerful lever in promoting student health and academic achievement, and increasing food security — the pandemic has underscored their value in supporting resilient communities. Now is a critical moment to make school

meals part of the educational day. Senator Skinner's School Meals for All is a bold vision whose time has come."

— Adam Kesselman, Executive Director, **Center for Ecoliteracy**

"California has always been a leader in creating models for progressive change. NextGen California applauds Senator Skinner for introducing this important measure, which will help to ensure that no student goes hungry in our state -- this food insecurity crisis has only been exacerbated by the ongoing global pandemic. Providing healthy, freshly prepared free school meals for every student will not only prioritize equity but end 'lunch shaming' practices that can lead to bullying and students skipping lunch altogether."

— Tiffany Germain, Research and Policy Advisor, **NextGen California**

"No child should go hungry, yet right now 30% of households with children in California are food insecure — disproportionately impacting Latinx and Black families. Children who grow up hungry struggle with learning in school and face lifelong consequences. This pandemic has proven that we have the tools to feed kids. School meals for all kids and statewide Better Out Of School Time Nutrition are possible, and we cannot go back. We have a moral obligation to ensure a hunger-free future for our children, and we couldn't be prouder to support Senator Skinner to achieve this bold vision."

— Andrew Cheyne, Director of Government Affairs, **California Association of Food Banks**

"Providing free school meals for all students is critical to addressing the alarming spikes in childhood hunger and learning loss caused by COVID-19. We applaud Senator Skinner for introducing School Meals For All bill, providing low-income children with free meals at school and an EBT card when they are at home when schools are closed. These critical strategies will go a long way in ensuring low-income children can access the nutrition they need for their health and learning."

— Luis Guardia, President, **Food Research & Action Center**

"Every day, California families face hunger and hardship exacerbated by COVID-19 and perpetuated by racist, classist, xenophobic systems that drive deeply entrenched inequities in health and well-being. Everyone in California should have the food they need to thrive. We share Senator Skinner's goal of ending childhood hunger, and we know school meals are a critical resource for both nutrition and educational opportunity. We look forward to working with the Senator to make equitable, inclusive access to school meals a reality for all children who call California home."

— Tia Shimada, Director of Programs, **Nourish California**

"With nearly 2 million children living in poverty in the wealthiest state in the nation, there should be no reason any child should go hungry in CA. Senator Skinner's bill will help us get one step closer to reaching our mission of ending child poverty."

— Jackie Thu-Huong Wong, VP of Policy and Advocacy, **GRACE/End Child Poverty CA**

“When we maximize our resources to allow all students to access well-balanced and nutritious meals, we also allow them to grow into their full potential and focus on being kids instead of worrying about when they will have their next meal. As one of the wealthiest states in the nation, we need to do everything in our power to eliminate hunger, especially for Black and Latinx children who live in higher rates of poverty and food-insecure food homes. We are excited to work with Senator Skinner on this measure to ensure that all children who enter California’s school system are fed.

— Christopher Sanchez, Policy Advocate, **Western Center on Law & Poverty**

“Roughly 1 in 7 California kids struggle with hunger. We must do better! California is the 5th largest economy in the world; providing free meals to our school-aged kids should not be a tough decision.”

— Jim Steyer, Founder and CEO, **Common Sense**

“If we don’t act now, our kids suffer, our farmers suffer, our program suffers. We need to make some big changes, and we need to make them now.”

— Erin Primer, Director, **San Luis Coastal Unified School District**

“Knowing that our fruit is not only feeding, but nourishing families in our local community, has been the most rewarding endeavor in the life of our farm and is exactly why we began farming in the first place. Every farmer we know would be honored to grow food for kids.”

— Farmer Al & Becky Courchesne, **Frog Hollow Farm** in Contra Costa County

“Kids and families won’t have to worry about the money for the meals and can focus on what’s truly important, their education.”

— Jamie Phillips, Food Service Director, **Vista Unified School District**

“As a long-time school chef, I know the importance of feeding all school communities delicious, healthy, scratch-made meals prepared from local ingredients. Connecting school lunch to school gardens and local farms. This not only nourishes our children but also teaches them where their food comes from and how to fuel their bodies in ways that are healthy for them and the planet. School nutrition is essential and is a very important piece of every child's education and provides building blocks for a lifetime of healthy habits.”

— Jason Hull, Executive Chef/Co-Director, **Culinary Farm at Marin Country Day School, Member of CIA Healthy Kids Collaborative**

“Over the last 11 months, we have delivered over 2 million meals throughout Fresno County, witnessing first-hand the economic devastation that has been left by this COVID-19 pandemic. As a company that has dedicated itself to the eradication of poverty in the City of Fresno, this bill will effectively distribute resources directly to the many families in need, while empowering them to choose themselves what is best for themselves.” - Anthony “AP” Armour, Executive Director, **Neighborhood Industries**

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Media Contacts:

School Meals for All Coalition/Office of Kat Taylor/Center for Ecoliteracy: Lucy Saunders, Lucy.saunders@fahrlc.com (213) 332-4000

NextGen California: Milena Paez, milena.paez@nextgenpolicy.org

FRAC: Colleen Barton Sutton, CBSutton@frac.org

CAFB: Lauren Lathan Reid, Lauren@cafoodbanks.org (415) 200-9468