



Governor’s May Budget Revise Embraces Universal School Meals
Proposed investments in California’s school meal programs are a strong first step toward providing school meals for all K-12 public school students

May 14, 2021 - (Sacramento, CA) - California Governor Gavin Newsom’s May Revision of his state budget proposal to the Legislature unveiled on Friday is a strong step toward making school meals a vital part of our children’s education, according to a coalition of more than 180 organizations urging lawmakers to adopt free school meals for all California students.

“At a time when the pandemic has alerted our nation to the critical role of our schools in addressing child hunger, California has once again demonstrated its leadership by making Farm to School programs and school meals for all a priority,” said Kat Taylor, co-founder of the TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation and co-sponsor of the Free School Meals for All Act of 2021 (SB 364 - Sen. Nancy Skinner). “Funding for school meals for all, even when classes are not in session, acknowledges that freshly prepared California-grown meals are an essential educational tool for smarter, healthier, and stronger generations. We look forward to working with Governor Newsom and the legislature to make healthy school meals truly free to every student.”

If adopted into the state’s final budget in June, this proposed investment would help to ensure more students have access to school meals during a period of increased economic insecurity for California families. The budget would provide an additional \$150 million to encourage local educational agencies to participate in one of the federal universal meal provisions, helping serve free school meals in more of California’s public schools.

“A hungry student has a hard time learning,” said Senate Budget Committee Chair Nancy Skinner (D-Berkeley), who introduced the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021.” “I’m so glad Governor Newsom’s proposed budget includes funding for free school meals, as called for in SB 364, School Meals for All. Newsom’s plan also smartly includes \$100 million to upgrade school kitchens and train cafeteria staff, plus fund the

Farm to School initiative — all essential to support free, healthy, locally grown school meals.”

“No child should go hungry in school,” said Assemblywoman Luz Rivas (D-Arleta), who introduced legislation again this year to make school lunches free for low-income families. “As someone who has worked on this issue for several years, I applaud Governor Newsom for this first step towards a universal school meals program. I have made this a budget priority in the Assembly and I look forward to working with Assembly Budget Chair Ting and Senate Budget Chair Skinner to help our low-income families and communities of color prevent child hunger.”

In California and elsewhere, the hunger crisis has hit communities of color the hardest, with Black and Latinx families with children having reported food insecurity at twice the rate of white households. While the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has taken steps to allow the continued service of free school meals, this de-facto free meal service is set to expire June 30, 2022, at the end of the 2021-22 school year, taking away a critical nutritional and financial resource from children and families as they continue to experience crippling economic hardship.

“Universal school meals is the best way to ensure that no child goes hungry,” said Assemblymember Marc Berman (D-Palo Alto), principal and co-author of SB 364. “Local schools and leaders in my district, such as Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, have been unrelenting in their pursuit of this goal, and today is a major milestone for them and for all California students.”

The proposed budget includes a total of \$30 million in funding for Farm to School programs, as well as an additional \$100 million investment in much-needed school kitchen infrastructure and professional staff development.

“The Governor's proposed budget is a strong first step in recognizing the critical role school meals play in children's health and educational outcomes,” said Adam Kesselman, Executive Director of the Center for Ecoliteracy, which is a co-sponsor of the Free School Meals for All Act of 2021. “We are thrilled to see an expansion of California's successful Farm to School initiative. With 1 billion school meals served in the state each year, California has an incredible opportunity to support local farmers and better equip school nutrition professionals to nourish our students. We look forward to supporting the Governor and the legislature on realizing the full vision of School Meals for All.”

“We applaud the Governor's prioritization in combating the hunger crisis impacting our state, which has only been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic, and providing investments to help our state move towards free school meals for all students,” said Tiffany Germain, Research and Policy Advisor of NextGen California, which is a co-sponsor of the Free School Meals for All Act of 2021. “All Californians should have equitable access to the resources they need to live healthy, productive lives. These

critical investments will help families across the state put food on the table, and help schools provide more healthy, freshly prepared meals to students.”

Additional access to free school meals through expanding participation in federal school food provisions will help families free up much-needed financial resources. 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.

“The American Diabetes Association (ADA) applauds the inclusion of funding in the May Revision to the Governor’s Budget to support programs aimed at bringing nutritious food for our state’s residents,” said Lisa Murdock, Senior Vice President of Advocacy of ADA. “Access to nutritious food is a key component in preventing or delaying the onset of prediabetes and diabetes and is also critical to maintaining health for those who already have the disease. Our state’s schools offer a lifeline for children’s nutrition and we’re very pleased to see the state prioritize Universal Meals and other programs that increase access to nutritious food in the Governor’s May Revision.””

Nearly 4 million Californians have diabetes and another 10.3 million have prediabetes and are at-risk for developing the disease, according to the ADA. Studies have found that the risk of Type 2 diabetes decreased by 37% among those with high access to healthy food environments. Food insecurity carries with it a two-fold risk for development of diabetes and yet all too often California children experience hunger and food insecurity.

“We applaud the Governor for recognizing the ongoing child hunger crisis created by COVID-19 and embracing the concept of universal school meals,” said Andrew Cheyne, Director of Government Affairs for the California Association of Food Banks, which is a co-sponsor of the Free School Meals for All Act of 2021. “Food banks know first-hand that this elevated need will last for years, and we call on the Governor and Legislature to make the investment necessary to create permanent school meals for all. Hungry parents can’t save for a rainy day if their children don’t have enough to eat, and we need the State to maximize this historic surplus to advance a hunger-free future for California’s children.”

Notably, legislation to fully establish a comprehensive School Meals for All program in California (SB 364) has been moving successfully through the legislative process with unanimous support. In April, the California Senate Human Services Committee and the California Senate Education Committee passed SB 364 with unanimous bipartisan support. This proposal would make California the first state in the nation to permanently provide two free meals to all K-12 public school students, while incentivizing local purchases from California farmers. The bill has 30 co-authors from across California.

“We are encouraged by the Governor’s support for Universal School Meals for California’s children,” said Marvin Deon, Vice President of CA Policy for Common Sense. “Our work to protect kids and promote their healthy growth depends heavily on

them being well nourished. We are pleased that the Governor is prioritizing the well-being of kids and families and look forward to the continued discussions on how to end the child hunger crisis in this state.”

By including incentives to freshly prepare meals, proposed funding would support professionals working on the front lines serving meals to students every day, through training and modern equipment. Free school meals for all would also help reduce the stigma associated with free and reduced-price meals at school — a problem that is all too real, and all too relatable for many children. If every child has access to school food that is tasty and nutritious, it will remove the perception that school meals are “just for poor kids.”

“FRAC commends Governor Newsom’s commitment to addressing the alarming spikes in childhood hunger with the California Comeback Plan,” said Luis Guardia, president of the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC). “The Plan’s proposal makes Healthy School Meals for All a reality in California and will support greater academic achievement, attendance, and health as children return to the classroom and schools work to overcome the learning disruptions caused by COVID-19. FRAC calls on the state Legislature to quickly pass this bill and looks forward to working with the U.S. Congress and the Biden administration to make Healthy School Meals for All a reality nationwide.”

“All California kids deserve to learn, grow, and achieve at their fullest potential, but the pandemic has exacerbated persistent inequities throughout California,” said Tia Shimada of Nourish California. “The Governor’s proposed ongoing investments would allow thousands more schools to continue to serve meals free of charge to all students, while drawing down over \$1 billion in federal funding. We thank the Governor for this commitment and urge the Legislature to craft a budget that builds upon these priorities that advance equity and proven solutions.”

School Meals For All Coalition Members: <https://schoolmealsforall.org/supporters>

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