

Senate Bill 364

School Meals for All

Senator Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley

THIS BILL

In California, every child has the right to a free education, regardless of their income and what they are able to pay. Yet, while we know that good nutrition supports classroom learning, our schools are required to implement out-of-date and bureaucratic applications to determine financial need before serving a child a meal. This not only undermines California's ability to prevent hunger, experienced by 1 in every 5 children in our state, but also undermines our ability to focus on child learning and development in the school settings.

SB 364 makes school meals available to every public school student without red-tape or paperwork. This bill will cut school administrative costs, improve learning, help families and support California farmers and food producers.

ISSUE

Before the pandemic, to receive a free meal at a California public school, a student would have to:

- Attend a school where more than 40% of students qualify for free meals.
- Live in a household with CalFresh or Medi-Cal recipients.
- Apply for a free meal, verifying that their family income is at or below 130% of the Federal poverty level (FPL).

The only exception to this rule is in the serving of Afterschool Suppers, which were enacted with the passage of AB 626 (Skinner, 2013), which are offered free to all students participating in afterschool programs, regardless of income and without a needs tested application.

During the pandemic, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has taken steps to allow schools to provide a free meal or multiple meals at a school site to any student that needs food. However, the federal waivers that allow for the "Universal Free Meal" program is set to expire at the end of this summer, taking away a critical nutritional resource from children and families as they struggle with the long-term economic impacts of the COVID-19 recession.

Additionally, the California Department of Education and the California Department of Social Services implemented the federal Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which allowed the state to provide EBT food benefits equal to the value of lost school meals to nearly 4 million children that qualify for free and reduced meals. Despite the success of this program, there is no plan for P-EBT to continue post-pandemic.

While essential anti-hunger programs are set to sunset, California remains one of the states suffering from the most food-insecurity, despite being one of the most abundant producers of food. Shortchanging our School Meal Programs means that they neither prevent hunger among the nearly 745,000 children who are low-income in California, nor do they support our food system economy or job creation in the school meal programs.

SOLUTION

SB 364 seeks to ensure free meals for all school children, while maximizing available federal funds to support California's food economy and combat child hunger by:

- Ensuring every public school student is served free meals without requiring their family to apply.
- Increasing student access to California-grown and freshly prepared food.
- Establishing the Better Out of School Time (BOOST) Nutrition Program, modeled on the P-EBT program, to prevent child hunger during regularly scheduled school breaks and emergency school campus closures.
- Increasing child privacy and safety net program connection for school meal applications using an online application, until meal applications are permanently phased out.

SUPPORT

California Association of Food Banks
Center for Ecoliteracy
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Common Sense
Culinary Farm at Marin Country Day School,
Dolores Huerta Foundation

Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation
Food for People, The Food Bank for Humboldt
County
Food Research & Action Center
Friends Committee on Legislation of California
Frog Hollow Farm
GRACE/End Child Poverty CA
Growing the Table
Hunger Action Los Angeles Inc.
Los Angeles Regional Food Bank
Marin Food Policy Council
Member of CIA Healthy Kids Collaborative
Neighborhood Industries
NextGen California
Nourish California
Office of Kat Taylor
Redwood Empire Food Bank
Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services
San Francisco-Marin Food Bank
San Luis Coastal Unified School District
Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County
Sierra Harvest
St. Joseph's Family Center
Stemple Creek Ranch
The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano
TomKat Ranch
Vista Unified School District
Western Center on Law and Poverty

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