

April 12, 2021

The Honorable Melissa Hurtado
Chair, Senate Committee on Human Services
1020 N Street, Room 521
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Senate Bill 364 (Skinner) Free School Meals For All Act of 2021 - SUPPORT

Dear Chair Hurtado,

NextGen California is pleased to support SB 364, which would establish a mechanism to provide free school meals for all California K-12 students and, in so doing, increase access to healthy, freshly prepared food that is grown by California farmers.

Although California produces nearly half of our country's fruits and vegetables, our kids are going hungry at alarming rates. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, over two million California children were experiencing food insecurity and struggling to receive adequate nutrition. Now, as schools are closed and families struggle to pay bills, food insecurity in California has skyrocketed to levels never before seen. This hunger crisis hits communities of color the hardest, with Black and Latino families reporting food insecurity twice that of white households. To address the issue of food insecurity during the pandemic, the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) made specific policy changes to provide resources that enable the continued serving of free school meals — even though most kids are learning remotely. However, this free school meals program is set to expire in September 2021, eliminating a critical nutritional resource for children and families facing the economic hardships of the pandemic.

SB 364 will allow schools to serve free meals to every student and also establishes an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) program to ensure that students have access to food even when schools are closed (e.g., during breaks, holiday periods, and prolonged emergencies). This specific provision would make California the first state in the nation to build on the current Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program and ensure that kids have access to food even when schools are closed.

Aside from the immediate need to reduce child hunger, a growing body of research continues to show that proper nutrition benefits a child's physical and emotional development, ability to learn, and creates lifelong healthy eating habits. California's roughly 6.2 million K-12 students are currently in the midst of obtaining an education that will have monumental impacts on the rest of their lives and SB 364 will ensure that each one of them has the nutritional intact they need to learn and thrive. Moreover, the purchasing of more school food from local farmers will bolster the state's economy and support California farmers.

SB 364 will reduce child hunger, improve the school academic environment, help low-income families, and provide economic and social benefits that support California farmers, school food workers, and our teachers. For these reasons, NextGen California is proud to support SB 364 and respectfully requests your "aye" vote on this bill.

Sincerely,



Arnold Sowell Jr.

Executive Director, NextGen California