



## School Meal Program Directors, Teachers, Anti-Hunger and Health Advocates Join Calls for Free School Meals for All California Students

*Senate Education Committee to hear testimony on how SB 364 would improve student outcomes, reduce stigma, and recognize the critical roles of school food service workers and California farmers*

April 6, 2021 - (Sacramento, CA) - A growing coalition of voices from across California is calling on lawmakers to support legislation that would ensure every student has access to freshly prepared school meals ahead of an April 7th California Senate Education hearing on SB 364, the “School Meals for All Act of 2021.” School nutrition directors, teachers, nutrition education experts, environmental groups, public health and child poverty advocates, as well as ranchers and farmers, say increasing access to school meals would reduce stigma, improve student behavior and health, invest in school nutrition workers, and support local farmers.

“Having worked in school nutrition for 15 years, I’ve seen how stigma prevents some students from eating school meals,” said Fontana Unified School District Food Service Director Trieste Huey, who recently received a leadership award from CalPERS for how well her department responded to the challenges of the past year. “Hungry children quickly become distracted children. Providing meals for every student would address the food-related barriers students face in learning, so every child is on the same playing field.”

On Wednesday, April 7, the California Senate Education Committee will hear testimony on SB 364, the “School Meals for All Act of 2021,” introduced by Senate Budget Committee Chair Nancy Skinner (D-Oakland). The hearing begins at 9:00am and will be live-streamed at [Senate.ca/gov](https://www.senate.ca.gov).

“It’s simple, students who are hungry don’t learn as well. School meals are integral to education,” said Sen. Skinner. “It’s heartening to see the growing coalition of support for SB 364, the Free School Meals For All Act of 2021, and it’s a privilege to have the backing of the full food and school ecosystem: school nutrition directors, teachers, staff, public health and child poverty advocates, environmental groups, ranchers and farmers.”

The bill 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 disasters. The “School Meals for All Act of 2021” has 30 co-authors from across California.

“Passage of SB 364 represents an important step toward achieving our goal of providing children with healthy and nourishing meals,” said Kathy Saile, Director of No Kid Hungry California.

Access to free school meals will help families free up financial resources at a time when 2.2 million children in California are experiencing hunger, an increase of 860,000 more kids compared with before the pandemic. Black and Latinx households with children have reported food insecurity twice that of white households with children. Evidence shows that proper nutrition directly impacts children’s development, behavior, and ability to learn, and healthy school meals have been shown to reduce Type 2 diabetes, childhood obesity, and heart disease — all risk factors for the coronavirus.

“With increasing food insecurity, school meals have become even more critical for our children,” said Dr. Valerie Gribben, an American Heart Association Volunteer and a pediatrician at the University of California, San Francisco. “While healthy school meals help to combat unhealthy weight and poor cardiovascular health, they also help establish a foundation for a lifetime of healthy behaviors, reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and support cognitive development and academic success.”

By encouraging freshly prepared school meals made from California-grown ingredients, the bill addresses the need for healthy foods from local growers and producers. During the pandemic, some schools and farms developed stronger relationships. Many farmers watched their supply chains break down, losing regular markets for their produce. School nutrition workers continually put their own lives on the line to prepare and serve millions of no-cost, grab-and-go breakfasts and lunches for every child in California.

“We’ve been able to provide a box of fresh produce every single week to our families,” said Palm Springs Unified School District Nutrition Service Director Stephanie Bruce. “Our kids are still getting fresh fruits and vegetables, and sometimes getting things they’ve never seen before, items that they wouldn’t be able to afford normally, and

farmers and businesses have been able to keep their employees employed. It's been a win-win for everyone.”

In the face of economic and educational uncertainty for millions of California children, continuing school meals for all students after the pandemic is a form of stability that is sorely needed for so many. School meals made from ingredients grown by California’s farmers can simultaneously fuel rural economic development and provide a level playing field for all students as our state works to close the achievement gap created by the pandemic.

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, Common Sense, Eat.Learn.Play Foundation, No Kid Hungry, Dolores Huerta Foundation, Western Center on Law and Poverty, American Heart Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, FoodCorps, Growing the Table, Frog Hollow Farm, Stemple Creek Ranch, Culinary Farm at Marin Country Day School, Neighborhood Industries, Fresno Barrios Unidos, Ceres Community Project, Epic Farmshop, Slow Food California, the Agricultural Institute of Marin, Sacramento Food Policy Council, ExtraFood.org, and TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation.

### **Quotes in Support of School Meals for All**

“School meals for all would remove the stigma associated with the meal program.”  
— Jennifer LeBarre, Executive Director, Student Nutrition Services, **San Francisco Unified School District**

“School meals for all would be a lifesaver. It would impact the future for many of our children.”  
— Michelle Drake, Director, Food & Nutrition Services, **Elk Grove Unified School District**

“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**

“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. Universal free meals not only nourish students but also offer financial hope to strained programs. Fiscal solvency, delicious school foods, valued employees, these are some of the many benefits of universal free school meals.”  
— Erin Primer, Director, **San Luis Coastal Unified School District**

“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. 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.”

— Gary Petill, Food Service Director at **San Diego Unified School District**

“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**

“Freshly prepared school meals made from California-grown ingredients is a critical step towards greater equity. School nutrition workers and local producers - especially those who practice organic and regenerative methods - deserve recognition as the heroes of food security while children deserve to grow up healthy, no matter their zip code.”

— Kat Taylor, 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 championing 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. ”

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

“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**

“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 are pleased to be 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 Latino 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**

"Limited access to real food is driving our health crisis which threatens our children's ability to thrive. Every child in California deserves healthy school meals."

— Nora LaTorre, Mom & CEO, **Eat REAL and Founder K-12 program**

"Every day we see the essential role schools play in feeding our students, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made that clearer than ever. Child hunger is at unprecedented levels for modern times, and communities of color are bearing a disproportionate burden. SB 364 will ensure all California kids are nourished by removing unnecessary barriers to food access while allowing school nutrition professionals to focus on sourcing and serving healthy meals."

— Jackie Hemann, California Program Director, **FoodCorps**

"Free school meals for all have been needed in our schools for so long. It has reduced the burdens from our families, and the administrative burdens in the Nutrition Services

Department. Knowing that our kids have access to nutritional meals every single day for free is amazing. It's needed in our lower income areas, and we've been able to do it successfully over a year with no negative impacts to our budget, so I don't see why we would go back."

— Lacey Piper, MS, RDN, Director of Child Nutrition and Wellness, **Rio School District**

"Child hunger was pervasive before the pandemic, now we are witnessing truly heartbreaking levels of hardship I hoped I would never see. 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."

— Natalie Caples, Co-CEO, **Central California Food Bank**

"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."

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

"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**

"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. We are huge proponents of our public schools, and this would be a welcome partnership."

— Lisa Poncia, co-owner of **Stemple Creek Ranch in Marin County**

“Our goal is to empower youth to make healthy food choices that will positively impact their long-term health. What better way to do that than through offering healthy, locally-sourced, culturally-relevant meals in schools. In addition, the use of vital services like CalFresh/EBT and Pandemic-EBT increased by 87% during Covid-19 at our Bay Area certified farmers markets. Taken together, school meals and Pandemic-EBT will ensure nutrition security for all children.”

— Andy Naja-Riese, Chief Executive Officer, **Agricultural Institute of Marin**

“We can’t have a conversation about an equitable and sustainable food system without also including school food as a central piece in the discussion. By investing in School Meals For All, California can seize the opportunity to positively address some of the most pressing food system issues of the day - market access and equity for BIPOC and California farmers, student health and nutrition, environmental sustainability, and shared prosperity for front line food service workers.”

— Brenda Ruiz, President, **Sacramento Food Policy Council**

“Providing nutritious food to schools and institutions is a deep passion of Richards Grassfed from our founding. We believe School Meals for All is in line with our mission and we are happy to support it!”

— Carrie Richards, Owner, **Richards Grassfed Beef**

"The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened food and nutrition insecurity for children, and school meals are sometimes the only reliable food kids get in a day. It's essential that we feed children meals to support their health and wellbeing, regardless of their parent's ability to pay or navigate complicated eligibility requirements. Nutritious meals are critical to set kids on a path for success in the classroom, and they play a vital role in building lifelong healthy habits. We look forward to working with Senator Skinner to make sure every child has access to healthy food."

— Jessi Silverman, Policy Associate, **Center for Science in the Public Interest**

“School Meals for All: food for thought for the next generation.”

— Nadia Rosen, CEO, **Epic Farmshop**

“Thousands of children in Marin County were food-insecure before COVID-19; during the pandemic, we are seeing more need than ever. School meals and Pandemic-EBT are critically important to our children’s health, to our farmer partners, and to accelerating food justice: helping to bring the day when all in our communities have the food they need -- a basic human right.”

— Marv Zauderer, Founder and Executive Director, **ExtraFood.org**

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