



Free School Meals for All Considered in California State Budget
New study shows school meals are primary source of nutrition for children as California takes lead in federal effort to increase access to free school meals

May 4, 2021 - (Sacramento, CA) - On the heels of a White House proposal to increase access to school meals and in advance of a California budget hearing on May 5, a coalition of more than 100 organizations is calling on lawmakers to support policies from the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021.” School nutrition directors, teachers, labor organizations, health experts, environmental advocates, racial equity champions, child poverty advocates, ranchers, and farmers are raising awareness about the benefits of school meals and the essential work of school nutrition professionals in a week of action culminating on School Lunch Hero Day (May 7).

“Free school meals for all is based on a simple, compelling premise: universal schools, universal meals,” said Senate Budget Committee Chair Nancy Skinner (D-Oakland), who introduced the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021.” “Everyone benefits if meals are just part of the school day. It will improve learning and is less of a hassle for families and less bureaucracy for our schools.”

On Wednesday, May 5, the California Senate Budget Subcommittee on Education will hear testimony on how policies from the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021” would improve student health and academic achievement while supporting California farmers and ranchers.

“We are at a critical moment to invest in our children and their education,” said Adam Kesselman, Executive Director of the Center for Ecoliteracy. “Senator Skinner’s School Meals for All benefits California families, schools, and agriculture. The time is now.”

In April, the California Senate Human Services Committee and the California Senate Education Committee unanimously passed the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021.” The bill has 30 co-authors from across California. This proposal could make California the first state in the nation to permanently provide two free meals to all K-12 students while incentivizing local purchases from California farmers and supporting low-income families in reducing child hunger when schools are closed.

“No child should go hungry in California, home to the fifth-largest economy in the world. Yet, child hunger has reached shameful levels, with deep inequities for low-income communities of color. Budgets are statements of values, and California must take a strong stand against child hunger,” said Andrew Cheyne, Director of Government Affairs for the California Association of Food Banks. “Parents can’t save for a rainy day if their children are hungry, and we need the state to use its resources to fight hunger right now.”

Acknowledging the ongoing need and importance of school meals, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recently extended several emergency feeding waivers that began during COVID-19 through June 30, 2022 — allowing all children nationwide to access free meals at school sites. School Meals for All would provide a seamless transition so that California families can continue to access the free school meals they have depended on during the pandemic.

Additionally, in the American Families Plan, the Biden administration proposed an investment of \$45 billion to help low-income Americans have greater access to nutrition assistance through the school meals program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) program. The provisions that California is considering would extend [EBT benefits](#) during school breaks and disasters lasting more than five days — such as those caused by the state’s frequent wildfires.

“No parent should have to worry about whether their child will have access to food, especially when our state produces nearly half of the country’s fresh produce,” said Jessica Stender, co-chair of the Stronger California Advocates Network, a collaborative campaign of more than 50 advocacy groups and coalitions from across the state. “The past year proved how crucial school meals are to families. School Meals for All will help California families regain economic security as we rebuild from the pandemic.”

[A new study from Tufts University](#) shows school meals are the primary source of nutritious meals for American children. Researchers found that the [Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#) greatly improved the nutritional quality of school meals. Policies from the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021” could further improve school meals for California children, providing them with fresh, nourishing meals as California recovers from the pandemic.

“School Meals for All should be our biggest priority,” said Mark Chavez, Director of Nutrition Services at Long Beach Unified School District, the third-largest public school district in California. “When meals are free for everyone, more students participate. This has benefits for students, families, and school districts.”

Across the state, school nutrition directors like Mark Chavez — alongside thousands of school nutrition professionals — have continued to provide school meals throughout the pandemic despite the challenges of weather, wildfire smoke, and COVID-19 outbreaks. In celebration of their dedication, May 7 is the [8th Annual School Lunch Hero Day](#), a day to acknowledge the contributions of school nutrition professionals in reducing child hunger and providing nutritious meals to students. The School Meals for All coalition will participate in a week of action to raise awareness about the benefits of school meals and the essential work of school nutrition professionals.

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

What People Are Saying About School Meals For All

“We know that a hungry child cannot learn. Senator Skinner’s proposal for School Meals for All is a righteous investment in assuring that all children have access to proper nutrition and equal access to a successful outcome in school and in life.”

— Mark Lowry, Director, **OC Food Bank**, a program of Community Action Partnership of Orange County

“I’m asking a lot of my staff to be on the frontlines. We can’t make meals from home. We can’t clean a school from home. I value my employees who show up to work and distribute meals. We feed everyone.”

— Elizabeth Powell, Food and Nutrition Services Director, **Pasadena Unified School District**

“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 of Food Services, **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, **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**

“As classified professionals working on the front lines serving meals to students every day, we see first hand how food insecurity jeopardizes the success of students and families. Funding anti-hunger programs like the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021” is critical to providing the nutrition necessary to ensure students are healthy and families feel supported.”

— Ben Valdepeña, Association President, **California School Employees Association**

“California Teachers Association believes nutrition has a direct effect on a student’s ability to learn. Schools should offer fresh and locally grown produce whenever available, and access to safe, clean, contaminant-free drinking water throughout the day. The opportunity to participate in nutritious breakfast, lunch and other school nutrition programs shall be uniformly available in all public schools including charter schools every day that school is in session.”

— Seth Bramble, Legislative Advocate, **California Teachers Association**

“California will continue to lead nationally and set a strong example for the federal government by supporting school food policies that close the harmful educational, economic, and health gaps that have only widened during the pandemic. Providing our school children with fresh, California-grown meals advances their education and development.”

— Kat Taylor, Founding Director, **TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation** and Principal, **Office of Kat Taylor**

“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**

“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**

“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

"Having helped distribute almost 8 million school meals with the Oakland Unified School District since the pandemic began, Eat. Learn. Play. has been on the front lines of addressing food insecurity among children in our community. Hunger takes a profound toll on kids’ health, happiness and ability to be successful in school, but when they get the nutritious food they need, they feel better, learn more and grow up stronger."

— Chris Helfrich, CEO, **Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation**

“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. The “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021” 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**

“What we’ve heard from our community health ambassadors and promotors (community health workers) networks is that many families are experiencing food insecurity and are simply not talking about it or seeking assistance out of shame or fear. This means that students are dependent on school meals to receive their daily nutritional intake now more than ever. As the largest ethnic population in California K-12 schools, Latino children in California are more likely to experience food insecurity as more of them live in low-income households compared to white children. For many low-income Latinx students - school meals provide a stable, and in some cases, the most nutritious meal of their day. Universal school meals would assist Latinx students in fighting hunger and ensuring a positive impact in their lives and health outcomes.”

— Mar Velez, State Policy Sr. Manager, **Latino Coalition for a Healthy California**

"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**

"School nutrition has entered a new era. In order to prioritize health equity for our kids and the fiscal wellbeing of our school nutrition programs, we need to make universal free meals a guarantee. Doing so will eliminate administrative red tape and allow child nutrition professionals to focus on what matters most: feeding our children well!"

— Jen McNeil, RDN, SNS, Former Child Nutrition Director and Founder of **LunchAssist**

“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 and Member, **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, **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 farmer’s 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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