



School Meals For All Bill Would Nourish Students Beyond Pandemic

California Senate Human Services Committee to hear testimony on how SB 364 will ensure all California students have access to free meals at school and during holiday breaks or disasters, improving nutrition and health

April 19, 2021 - (Sacramento, CA) - School Meals for All will nourish students as California recovers from the pandemic and beyond, according to a growing coalition of more than 100 organizations calling on lawmakers to support SB 364, the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021,” ahead of the California Senate Human Services Committee hearing on April 20. School nutrition directors, teachers, labor organizations, child nutrition experts, environmental groups, pediatricians, and child poverty advocates, as well as ranchers and farmers, say evidence shows that increasing access to school meals for all students, including during holiday breaks or disasters, improves a child’s health and ability to learn.

"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," said Chris Helfrich, CEO of the Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation. "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."

On Tuesday, April 20, [the California Senate Human Services Committee](#) will hear supporting testimony and vote on the “Free School Meals for All Act of 2021,” introduced by Senate Budget Committee Chair Nancy Skinner (D-Oakland). On April 7, the California Senate Education Committee unanimously voted in favor of SB 364. The

bill passed with strong bipartisan support and no formal opposition. The bill has 30 co-authors from across California.

“It’s heartening to see the growing recognition that students and schools will all do better when free, nutritious meals are just part of a normal school day,” said Sen. Skinner. “And what a bonus if those meals are prepared onsite with locally grown foods. That’s the promise of SB 364, the School Meals For All Act of 2021.”

SB 364 could make California the first state in the nation to ensure all kids have access to two nutritious school meals every school day, and will support school districts in providing freshly-prepared meals using Californian ingredients.

If passed into law, SB 364 would make California the first state in the nation to extend the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program indefinitely, ensuring that children have access to food during holiday breaks or disasters. After the 2019 Camp Fire, the U.S. Department of Agriculture allowed Butte County schools and Paradise Unified School District (PUSD) to serve free school meals to all children. However, because the fire’s devastation was so severe and widespread, many families in Butte County were displaced for a longer period than was recognized by federal regulators. Because of this emergency, families became refugees in their own county, with many of the 32,000 children served by PUSD suffering from hunger into the 2019-2020 school year. SB 364 would provide EBT benefits to students impacted by wildfires and other disasters.

“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,” said Ben Valdepeña, Association President for the California School Employees Association, who represent more than 250,000 school support staff throughout California. “Funding anti-hunger programs like SB 364 is critical to providing the nutrition necessary to ensure students are healthy and families feel supported.”

SB 364 will 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.” We can correct the stigma that school meal programs are anti-poverty programs and instead create a statewide school meal program that builds healthy habits and community.

“What we’ve heard from our community health ambassadors and *promotorx* (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,” states Mar Velez, State Policy Sr. Manager at the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California. “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.”

Members of the [School Meals for All](#) coalition include: 50 Acterra Action for a Healthy Planet, Agricultural Institute of Marin, Alameda County Community Food Bank, Alameda County Office of Education, American Academy of Pediatrics California, American Heart Association, API Forward Movement, Bay Area Community Services, Bay Area Ranchers Cooperative, California Alternative Payment Program Association, California Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, California Association of Student Councils, California Certified Organic Farmers, California School Nurses Organization, California School-Based Health Alliance, California Association of Food Banks, CA Teachers Association, CA State Council SEIU, California School Employees Association (CSEA), Californiahealth+ Advocates, Californians for Pesticide Reform, Center for Ecoliteracy, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Ceres Community Project, Children's Advocacy Institute, Common Sense, Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County, Culinary Farm at Marin Country Day School, Dolores Huerta Foundation, Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, Eat REAL, Ecology Center, Epic Farmshop, ExtraFood, Food for People, Food Bank for Humboldt County, Food Research & Action Center, Foodcorps, Fresh Approach, Fresno Barrios Unidos, Friends Committee on Legislation of California, Friends of the Earth U.S., Frog Hollow Farm, GRACE/End Child Poverty CA, Growing the Table, Healthy Schools Campaign, Hunger Action Los Angeles Inc., Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District, Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, Los Angeles Food Policy Council, Marin Food Policy Council, Healthy Kids Collaborative, Mt. Diablo Unified School District, Natural Resources Defense Council, Neighborhood Industries, NextGen California, No Kid Hungry California, Oakland Unified School District, Office of Kat Taylor, Open Heart Kitchen, Redwood Empire Food Bank, River City Food Bank, Roots of Change, Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services, Sacramento Food Policy Council, San Diego Food Bank, San Francisco-Marin Food Bank, San Luis Coastal Unified School District, Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County, San Jose Bridge Communities, San Luis Coastal Unified School District, San Mateo County Food Systems Alliance, Sierra Harvest, Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County, Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, No Kid Hungry California, Stemple Creek Ranch, The Edible Schoolyard Project, The Resource Connection Food Bank, The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, Tomkat Ranch, Union of Concerned Scientists, Urban & Environmental Policy Institute, Vista Unified School District, Western Center on Law & Poverty, and Westside Food Bank.

Quotes in Support of School Meals for All

"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

“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**

“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**

"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 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**

“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 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**

###

Media Contacts:

School Meals for All Coalition/Office of Kat Taylor: Lucy Saunders,
Lucy.saunders@fahrlc.com (213) 332-4000

Center for Ecoliteracy: Anne Moertel, anne@ecoliteracy.org

NextGen California: Milena Paez, milena.paez@nextgenpolicy.org

FRAC: Colleen Barton Sutton, CBSutton@frac.org

CAFB: Lauren Lathan Reid, Lauren@cafoodbanks.org (415) 200-9468