

May 4, 2023

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: SUPPORT - Protecting Our Progress on School Nutrition Investments in the 2023-24 Fiscal Year Budget

Dear Governor Newsom,

The undersigned organizations are writing as the members of the School Meals for All Coalition to strongly support the Administration's continued commitment to prioritize and protect school nutrition programs in the California Budget, and urge additional funding for school nutrition programs in the 2023-24 Fiscal Year Budget to build California's legacy of transforming school food.

California has been a national leader in the movement to provide free meals to all K–12 public school students. This is due to your vision to fight child hunger with more freshly-prepared and California-grown school meals that benefit both our state's economy and its environment. To protect the progress towards this vision, we encourage you to uphold the ongoing commitments proposed in your January budget and current budget bills, to continue School Meals for All and provide school districts with an increased per-meal reimbursement of $0.9678 per meal (AB 221/SB 72). In light of the California Department of Education's recent update regarding the strong participation in school meal programs, we encourage you to fully fund School Meals for All with the additional $99M required, in line with the Senate's April budget proposal. At the same time, continuing to make strong investments in transforming school food will help realize the full potential of school meals to nourish our students, support local farmers, and benefit the planet.

As over half of states consider passing permanent free school meals legislation,[1] and federal legislation to enact a national program is discussed,[2] California continues to be a beacon for this movement. Ensuring the success of our first-in-the-nation program is now more important than ever. These investments make nutritious food more accessible to every California student as families struggle with rising food prices and continued economic difficulties. California's leadership demonstrates how the food schools purchase can have positive outcomes for our working lands and rural economies.

The journey to successfully implement California's School Meals for All policy is well underway among school districts. It sets the foundation for transforming school food by expanding the many co-benefits of freshly-prepared, California-grown school meals. The School Meals for All coalition co-sponsors have been visiting California school districts and farms to spotlight the implementation of these nutrition programs. We have worked to showcase the successes of these programs on the ground, and to learn about barriers to success by talking with administrators, staff, students, and parents. These visits have consistently demonstrated the critical importance of policies like augmented reimbursements and Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) funding toward realizing a robust statewide school meals program. We commend these critical investments that are making tangible positive changes — that more nutritious and freshly-prepared meals are being served to our kids regardless of income.

Hearing positive stakeholder stories about School Meals for All implementation is especially welcome considering hunger rates are still high in our state. A survey of California food banks showed that they are still serving 50 percent more people than they were before the pandemic.[3] About eight million Californians, roughly 20 percent of our state's population, are currently experiencing food insecurity, even after the worst of the pandemic's economic stagnation during 2020 and 2021. Even more concerning is that food insecurity remains especially high among low-income Black, Latinx, and Asian-American families. Sadly, hunger will likely continue to worsen following federal COVID-19 emergency food assistance cuts - totaling $500M per month - included in the federal Omnibus bill.

We appreciate the leadership and strong commitment to continue the progress that has been made in school nutrition programs with $1.4 billion in ongoing funding to implement the School Meals for All program and augment state reimbursement rates proposed in the January Budget, in spite of projected budget deficits. This is especially important in the face of the continuing supply chain challenges and the higher costs of food, labor, and other consumer goods.[4] In fact, of all of

[1] Food Research and Action Center, accessed 2.2.23

[2] United States Congress, HR 3115, 2021-2022 *see also* The White House, Summary: National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, 9.27.22

[3] California Association of Food Banks, Rising Hunger Resulting from Rapidly Rising Cost of Gasoline in California, 12.5.22

[4] The OC Register, Inflation is Producing, and Hiding, Hunger in Southern California, 12.2.22; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index, Los Angeles Area, 10.22; LA Times, In Battle with Big Oil, Newsom Rips Into Valero's 500% Rise in Profit Amid Soaring Gas Prices, 10.25.22

the existing state-level policies that support the implementation of School Meals for All, 83 percent of school nutrition directors ranked the increased reimbursement as one of the "most important" according to a recent Center for Ecoliteracy survey with 40 public school districts that collectively serve over 530,000 students.

In addition to the ongoing funding to implement the School Meals for All program and augmented reimbursements, there are a number of other policies that are foundational for the continued success of California's School Meals for All program. These include:

- The Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) ($600 million)
- The California School Nutrition Best Practices Incentive Funding ($100 million)
- Evaluation of School Meals for All ($1.3 million for 2023-24)

Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) funding provides California with an opportunity to continue to improve the infrastructure required to serve more freshly-prepared, California-grown school meals. KIT funding continues to be in very high demand among school districts. According to data from the California Department of Education (CDE), in 2021, 85-90% of school districts opted-in to receive the $150M available in KIT funding for updating infrastructure, purchasing or repairing equipment, or engaging school nutrition staff in training. Almost all (92%) eligible California agencies applied for KIT funding in 2022. Continuing to invest in Kitchen Infrastructure and Training is essential, and each year helps to get the state closer to the estimated $5.81 billion in total investment required to make all California public school kitchen facilities capable of scratch-cooking.[5] We urge the Governor to build on the Senate's leadership in proposing a $100M investment in Kitchen Infrastructure and Training as a part of their April 2023 budget proposal.

California state government leaders should also consider new equity investments supporting scratch cooking within other institutions that prepare food for children. For example, KIT funds cannot be used at juvenile detention centers. The state should work to identify sources of funding to support food service operations for children that are not supported by the KIT funding.

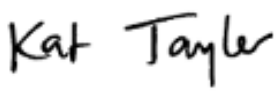
We also encourage the legislature and the administration to use their federal lobbying capacity to support current federal legislative proposals to establish universal school meals nationally. Until that is achieved, we encourage the state to join us in advocating for a statewide Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) option and increase the CEP multiplier from 1.6 to 2.5 to maximize the number of meals federally reimbursed at the free rate. This would be transformational for the country and financially reinforce California's Universal School Meals Program. An estimated 91-96 percent of meals served would be reimbursed by the federal government at the free reimbursement rate under CEP expansion, allowing for significant reinvestment of funds to strengthen support for school meals in California.[6]

[5] Kitchen Infrastructure Survey Report, University of California Berkeley, Survey: Are California Public Schools Scratch-Cooking Ready?, 2020

[6] Food Research and Action Center, Fact Sheet, Build Back Better Act, accessed 2.2.23

Collectively, these school nutrition investments fight hunger, improve food quality, increase student access to healthy school meals, provide necessary kitchen infrastructure, incentivize California-grown procurement, and support school nutrition staff. We, the members of the School Meals for All coalition in 2023, are proud to support the Administration and legislature's continued commitment to prioritize and protect these foundational school nutrition programs. We continue to support these important investments and urge continued funding for school nutrition programs in the 2023-24 Fiscal Year Budget to build California's legacy of transforming school food.

Sincerely,



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State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond
The Honorable Toni Atkins, President pro Tempore, California Senate
The Honorable Anthony Rendon, Speaker, California Assembly
The Honorable Nancy Skinner, Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee
The Honorable Phil Ting, Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
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