



March 12, 2024

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

The Honorable Mike McGuire
 President pro Tempore, California Senate
 1021 O Street, Suite 8610
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Robert Rivas
 Speaker, California Assembly
 1021 O Street, Suite 4510
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Scott Wiener
 Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review
 1021 O Street, Suite 8620
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The Honorable Jesse Gabriel
 Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
 1021 O Street, Suite 8230
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable David Alvarez
 Chair, Assembly Subcommittee 3 on Education Finance
 1021 O Street, Suite 4510
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable John Laird
 Chair, Senate Subcommittee 1 on Education
 1021 O Street, Suite 8720
 Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: SUPPORT - Governor's Proposal to Fully Fund School Meals for All in the 2024-25 Fiscal Year Budget

Dear Governor Newsom, Senate President pro Tempore McGuire, Assembly Speaker Rivas, Budget Committee Chairs Senator Wiener and Assemblymember Gabriel, and Budget Subcommittee Chairs Senator Laird and Assemblymember Alvarez,

The undersigned organizations are writing as the members of the 2024 School Meals for All Coalition to strongly support the Newsom Administration's continued commitment to prioritize and protect school nutrition programs in the California Budget. **We support the Administration's thoughtful commitment to fully fund our state's School Meals for All program in the January Budget proposal, especially during challenging economic times for California families. We strongly support the \$122.2 million in funding for increased participation that will serve an estimated 845 million school meals in 2024–25. We respectfully urge the legislature to uphold this commitment to California's legacy of safeguarding the health of our children by transforming school food.**

California has been a national leader in the movement to provide free meals to all TK–12 public school students. This is due to a shared vision to fight child hunger with more freshly-prepared and California-grown school meals that benefit our state's economy, its environment, and its students. To protect the progress towards this vision, we encourage you to uphold the ongoing commitments proposed in the January Budget that continue to fully fund School Meals for All. We also strongly support maintaining California's state reimbursement of \$0.9760 per meal. While other states struggle with decreased participation and [concerns](#) over the long-term financial sustainability of their school nutrition programs, more California students are choosing to participate in free school breakfasts and lunches, and fewer are going hungry. This is thanks to our state's keen investments in students, schools, and school nutrition staff.

With the conclusion of CalFresh Emergency Allotments in March 2023, [California's 3 million households that rely on CalFresh lost an average of \\$180 per month in benefits](#), or a total of \$500 million per month statewide. As a result of this and the ending of other critical public support and inflation, [1 in 4 households — or a shocking 1 in 3 families with children](#) — are facing the toxic stress and harm of food insecurity. These rates are comparable to those in 2020 during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, and communities of color — Black and Latino households in particular — are facing deep and disproportionate impacts. Amidst devastating and still increasing rates of hunger and poverty, food banks are straining to meet demand. Food banks are receiving more calls from community members seeking food support, serving more people at their food distribution sites, and spending down their food purchasing budgets rapidly. Consistent and reliable investments in our state's School Meals for All program help to address this hunger in impacted communities across California.

Federal school meals programs do not account for the needs of those in states with higher costs of living, like California. School Meals for All is essential for millions of children and their families who continue to struggle with making ends meet in our state's cost environment. For instance, before School Meals for All a family of four needed to make less than \$39,000 a year to qualify for federal free school meals, or less

than \$55,500 to qualify for reduced-priced meals.¹ With these low federal eligibility thresholds, 60% of California public school students (about 3.5 million kids) were qualified for federal free or reduced price meals in 2022-23.² In short, School Meals for All is helping California students and families who are on the margins of living in poverty in California, but who do not meet these extremely low federal thresholds for meal assistance. Additionally, research shows that many hungry students who were eligible for free meals did not participate in school meals programs because of the stigma prior to School Meals for All. Other eligible students did not apply due to concerns that submitting the required paperwork could affect their immigration status. School Meals for All empowers families financially and nourishes students on the margins of poverty, those who suffered stigma, and those who are undocumented.

Since the adoption of School Meals for All, coalition co-sponsors have been visiting school districts and farms to spotlight the impacts of California’s nutrition programs. We have seen firsthand the successful implementation of California’s School Meals for All on the ground, while also learning about the practical and administrative challenges of freshly preparing locally-sourced meals at scale by talking with administrators, staff, students, parents, and farmers. These visits have consistently demonstrated the critical importance of policies like state reimbursements, which have been essential for supporting a robust statewide school meals program.

School Meals for All funding is still addressing long-term issues of historical underfunding of school food service programs. According to school nutrition leaders in our state, program investments are significant as supply chain challenges continue, as well as increased costs for food, labor, and other consumer goods.³ In fact, out of all the existing California state-level policies that support the implementation of School Meals for All, 92 percent of school nutrition directors ranked the state meal reimbursement as either “very important” or “most important,” according to a recent Center for Ecoliteracy survey with 49 public school districts that collectively serve over 1.49 million students and 24 percent of California’s total school meals served.

The report published in February by the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) proposed significant cuts to the state meal reimbursement and the School Meals for All program. The School Meals for All coalition opposes the LAO’s proposals, as they fail to acknowledge the significant harm that would be inflicted on our children, school food workers, educational institutions, and families. In short, the LAO’s proposals would jeopardize the capacity of school nutrition programs to provide food for students and hire staff to serve meals. Cuts to essential program funding will exacerbate staffing shortages and vacancies among school nutrition positions, with ramifications for students in the form of fewer points of service, leading to longer lunch lines, more kids going hungry, and thus, undermining their ability to learn. The LAO’s

¹ California Department of Education, Income Eligibility Scales for School Year 2023–24, Accessed [3.4.24](#)

² California Department of Education. 2022-23 data. Available at: <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/Cbeds1.asp?FreeLunch=on&cChoice=StatProf1&cYear=2022-23&cLevel=State&cTopic=FRPM&myTimeFrame=S&submit1=Submit>

³ 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](#)

proposed cuts also do not take into account the current initiatives that will reduce outyear budget pressures and increase federal funding for School Meals for All, such as improving direct certification processes and probabilistic matching, and increased numbers of families submitting income information in 2024 because of Summer EBT.

Nationally, recent poll results show that universal school meals have garnered widespread support, and have been adopted as a priority in the “Biden-Harris Administration National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health,” released in September 2022. We 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 an increase to the Community Eligibility Provision (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, which already draws down an estimated \$2.6 billion in federal funding. With a higher multiplier, an estimated 91 - 96 percent of meals served would be reimbursed by the federal government at the free reimbursement rate, allowing for significant reinvestment of funds to strengthen support for school meals in California.⁴

California’s leadership on School Meals for All is serving as a beacon for the movement to increase access to school meals across the country. Over half the states in the U.S. are now considering passing permanent free school meals legislation,⁵ and eight additional states now have universal school meals policies in place.⁶ Ensuring the success of our first-in-the-nation program is more important than ever, especially as federal leadership in the Biden Administration and USDA show support for establishing a national universal school meals program. Our investments make nutritious food more accessible to every California student as families struggle with rising food prices, increased hunger, and economic difficulties.

California’s commitment to these critical school nutrition investments fights hunger, improves food quality, increases student access to healthy school meals, incentivizes California-grown procurement, and supports school nutrition staff. We, the members of the 2024 School Meals for All coalition, are proud to support the Administration and Legislature’s bold vision and continued commitment to protect these foundational school nutrition programs. We will continue to support these important investments and urge full funding for school nutrition programs.

Sincerely,

⁴ Food Research and Action Center, [Fact Sheet](#), Build Back Better Act, accessed 2.2.23

⁵ [Food Research and Action Center](#), accessed 2.2.23

⁶ Food Research and Action Center, accessed 1.10.24

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