

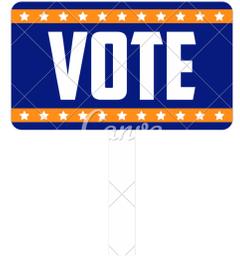
Introduction

It is estimated that **2.1 million children** in California do not have access to enough food necessary for an active and healthy life (1). **One in four** children in California may go to bed hungry each night (1). Low-income children, who are at risk for poor nutrition during child development, often solely depend on school meals for nourishment. In 2015-2016, low-income students depended on **714,000,000** free or reduced school meals (2). Despite the apparent need, too many eligible children are unnecessarily missing out from the health benefits of participating in free school meal programs.

RECOMMENDATION:

VOTE for SB 138

Assembly members, vote for SB 138 to increase the number of children who have access to free or reduced nutritious food at schools in California.



Background

Direct Medi-Cal certification is a tool that uses Medi-Cal participant data to identify children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. This bill proposes a statewide expansion of the 2015-2016 Medi-Cal certification pilot program which was responsible for enrolling an additional 60,000 students into school meal programs in 14 school districts and an additional \$33 million in federal reimbursements for school meals (3). This bill capitalizes on the fact that almost all low-income children covered by public health insurance in California, receive Medi-Cal. The Direct Medi-Cal certification tool allows school districts to be less dependent on paper applications and to more efficiently enroll eligible students into the school meal programs.

Scope of the Problem

Over **2 million** eligible children in CA are missing out on **free breakfast** every school day (3).

Over **1 million** eligible children in CA are missing out on **free lunch** every school day (3).

Millions of California's low-income students eligible for free school meals experience hunger during meal times or have an increasingly large unpaid balance on their meal card (3). Research suggests that experiencing difficulties to obtaining quality food is associated with children's behavioral, academic, and emotional problems (4). School meals have been shown to reduce risk for obesity, diabetes, hunger, tardiness, and suspensions (4). Too many eligible children are unnecessarily missing out from free school meals and their benefits due to the complexities of the current school meal program enrollment process. Current law mandates school districts to make available paper and electronic applications to enroll students to receive free or reduced-price meals (3). However, the current enrollment process presents problems for students who have absent parents. Second, it is administratively burdensome for small and understaffed school districts. Lastly, it contributes to the stigma associated with free or reduced-price meals (5).

How does SB 138 help increase the number of children receiving free or reduced-price school meals?

This bill enables California's Department of Education to provide school districts with Medi-Cal participation data from the California Department of Health Care Services (3). Local educational agencies then use Medi-Cal participant data to directly identify and enroll eligible students to participate in free or reduced-price meal programs. In addition, school districts with very high poverty schools must apply to receive the federal universal meal service provision so that all students in such schools receive free school meals (3).

Who supports SB 138?

Stakeholders in support of this bill which are largely anti-hunger and healthy food access advocates argue that school districts are already using direct certification to enroll SNAP recipients to school meal programs therefore, expanding direct certification to Medi-Cal recipients is feasible (5). Supporters argue this bill helps reduce barriers experienced while enrolling students into school meal programs.

California Action for Healthy Kids | California Alternative Payment Program Association | California Association of Food Banks | California Catholic Conference | California Food Policy Advocates | Children's Defense Fund California | Community Grains | Feeding San Diego | Food Access Coalition | Food for People, Inc. | Health Officers Association of California | Hunger Action Los Angeles | SF-Marín Food Bank United Way of California | Western Center on Law & Poverty (3)

Benefits of SB 138 (4)

-  Administrative burden for schools
-  Benefit the health of an additional 500,000 children in 72 CA schools
-  5-7% increased participation in school meal programs

Who opposes SB 138?

No official opposition (3). Conservatives who traditionally oppose spending of public programs are also likely to oppose SB 138. The opposing side might use the analysis of the Senate Committee on Appropriation as evidence. The appropriation committee noted a fiscal impact of \$1.1 million for state meal reimbursements along with a \$130,000 from the General Fund (10). However, SB 138 also provides schools with an opportunity to maximize reimbursement and achieve cost savings. Additionally, the same analysis created by the appropriations committee reports that the costs to implement direct-Medi-Cal certification are "minor and absorbable."¹⁰

References:

1. California Association of Food Banks. (2017) Hunger Fact Sheet. Retrieved from, <http://www.cafoodbanks.org/hunger-factsheet>.
2. California Department of Education. (2017) Food Programs. Retrieved from, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/sn/>
3. California Legislative Information. (2017) School meal programs: free and reduced- price meals: universal free meal service, S. 138, 2017-2018. Retrieved from, http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB18
4. Leos-Urbel J, Schwartz AE, Weinstein M, Corcoran, S: Not just for poor kids: the impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes. *Econ Educ Rev* 36:88–107, 2013.
5. California Food Policy Advocates. (2017) Policy Actions. Retrieved from, <http://cfpa.net/archives/5507#more-5507>
6. Mike McGuire. Bill analysis: School meals programs -- free and reduced priced meals (SB 138). 2017. Retrieved from, http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB138

SUPPORT: California constituents requests for the Governor and Legislature to VOTE for SB 138 and support a statewide expansion of Direct Medi-Cal Certification pilot program.

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