

Senate Bill 138 School Meal Programs

free and reduced priced meals: universal free meal service

Policy Brief

SUMMARY:

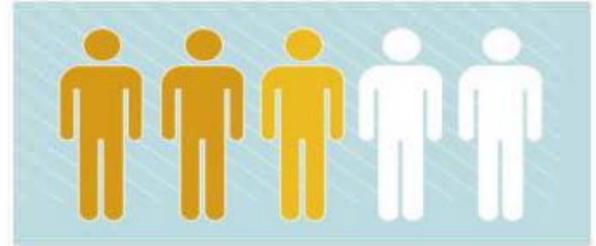
California leads the nation in the number of children living in poverty, with higher rates of poverty now than before the recession.¹ There are 1.7 million households with children in this state that struggle to provide enough food which equates to one in four children going hungry each day.⁶ School meals are an essential way to feed children from these low-income households.

Students that are well-nourished gain both health and academic benefits. Three out of five children in California are eligible to receive free or reduced-priced lunches yet 30% of these students miss out on school lunch and 62% miss out on school breakfast each day.⁶

This means that 1 million of eligible children are not receiving school lunch each day and 2 million are not receiving school breakfast.⁵

Since 2016, California has been allowed to directly enroll students into the school meal programs using Medi-Cal data.¹ SB 138 improves this process and ensures schools utilize this data to reach more students. SB 138 also ensures schools with very high poverty rates apply for universal free meals for every student using federal funds.³ With the future of the healthcare system unknown, it is important to maximize this opportunity to feed low-income students in California's school districts.

3 out of 5 children are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches in California Public schools



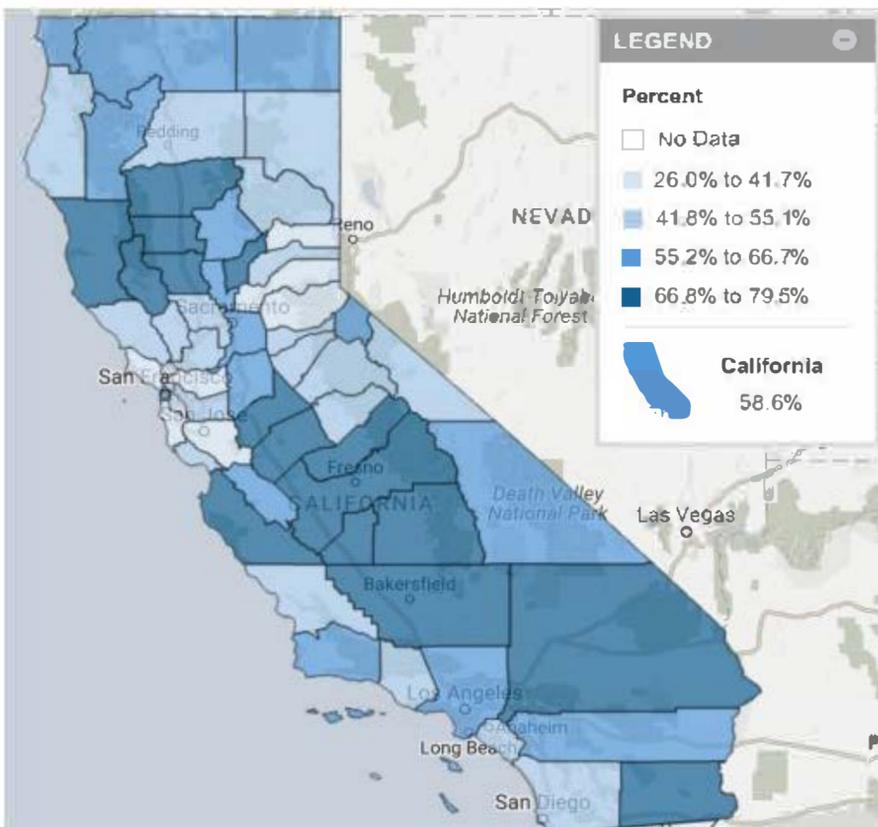
PROBLEM:

In order for students to participate in the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, they must first be enrolled through an online or paper application. Parents are asked to fill out these applications each year to ensure the families meet the income eligibility requirements.

Enrolling students via online and paper applications is a challenge in California and many low-income students fall through the cracks.¹ Direct certification of students using Medi-Cal data should be used to increase the reach of school meals allowing school nutrition programs to focus on child health instead of burdensome paperwork.

Additionally, effective direct certification will increase the number of free and reduced-priced meals served at schools so that schools can apply to serve universally free breakfast and lunch to all students in schools with high poverty rates.³

Students eligible for free or reduced-price meals by county



Recommendation:

- Support SB 138 to improve identification of low-income students and to increase access to school meals.
- Medi-Cal data will be used to directly enroll low-income students in school meal programs.
- Very high poverty schools will provide universal free meals to every student and will receive maximum federal reimbursements.



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Why Medi-Cal Direct Certification?

- School districts have access to data that can directly certify students that are on CalFresh without receiving another application but only 24% of kids are enrolled in CalFresh compared to 60% of kids enrolled in Medi-Cal.⁵
- Medi-Cal direct certification matches students names living in households with incomes 133% of the federal poverty line or less to school enrollment records. If a student is matched then he/she will be automatically enrolled to receive free school meals without a paper application.
- The use of Medi-Cal data to directly enroll students in school meal programs was pilot tested in 14 California school districts last year. The pilot program saw a huge increase of students enrolled in free and reduced-priced lunch programs. Among the 14 districts participating in the pilot 60,000 additional students were enrolled which brought in more than \$33 million in federal meal reimbursements.
- The California Department of Education estimates that SB 138 has the potential to benefit over 500,000 students in the state.⁵
- SB 138 would require the California Department of Education Nutrition Services Department to conduct an additional administrative review, but this process would be added to reports they are already completing every three years.
- The California Department of Education indicates the cost to implement this bill would be \$130,000 in annual General Fund and one consultant position to review and process Community Eligibility Provision applications, provide technical support, and train new staff but this bill would generate an additional \$1.1 million in Proposition 98 General Fund for additional state meal reimbursements.

SB 138 will help students in need gain access to resources that can improve their health and help them perform better in school. Now is the time to act and support this straightforward solution.



For questions or additional information, please contact:

**Olivia Kosten
ogkosten@berkeley.edu**

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