

SB 138 (McGuire): Count Me In! Expand Access to School Meals



Direct certification with Medi-Cal helps schools. Universal free meals help high-poverty schools, children and families.

Medi-Cal direct certification gives schools better data, though data doesn't always lead to action. State policy should guide districts towards equity for disadvantaged students.

- **Lack of geography plays an unfair role in determining whether students have access to free school meals.** A district's decision to use a universal meal provision in high-poverty schools- even when it's fiscally beneficial - does not always reflect student need. Despite years of outreach and data showing high need, less than half of the highest poverty schools use a universal free meal provision, despite it being beneficial for schools and their students.
- **Other states require universally free meals in very high poverty schools.** Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Washington DC and West Virginia all require universally free meals in targeted schools. California has the highest child poverty rate in the nation. There is a need for state action.
- **Many districts think they can't use universal free meal provisions that remove individual meal applications without risking LCFF funding.** There is misunderstanding about the alignment between LCFF and universal meal provisions. By calling upon very high poverty schools to use a universal meal provision, SB 138 would overcome this barrier and allow local control.
- **Federally-funded universally free meals prevent LCFF funds from being unnecessarily spent on unpaid meal debt.** Unpaid meal debt is a growing problem that must be paid off with non-federal revenue – usually district general funds. Universal meal provisions feed all students and provide schools federal funding for school meals, leaving LCFF funds for other critical services.

Universally free school meals are particularly important for students of color in schools with concentrated poverty, who face myriad systemic barriers to success.

- **Universally free school meals remove stigma and overt identification,** which is more important than ever for immigrant students. Fears around school meal applications have intensified this year. This barrier is removed when federally-funded school meals are available free of charge to all students.
- **Universally free school meals are particularly important for Latino and Black students.** California's food insecurity rate is highest among Black and Latino families. California also has the most segregated schools in the nation, by race, language and class. Students of color are concentrated in high-poverty schools, which perpetuates economic, racial and health inequities.
- **Universally free meals support working poor families as they pursue self-sufficiency and upward mobility.** Eligibility for free school meals is set by the the federal poverty line. However, the federal poverty line does not accurately reflect the true level of California poverty. This problem is intensified as an unintended consequence of minimum wage increase, as working poor families are lose free school meals and other benefits before they can afford to pay for them on their own.