

September 19, 2017



The Honorable Edmund G. Brown, Jr.
Governor, State of California
c/o State Capitol, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Senate Bill 138 (McGuire) – SUPPORT

Dear Governor Brown,

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) respectfully requests your signature on SB 138 (McGuire). SB 138 will improve school districts' ability to identify low-income students, reduce child hunger, and support student success with nutritious school meals. We are proud to sponsor of this legislation, having long worked on policies to improve the health and well-being of low-income Californians through increasing their access to nutritious, affordable foods.

In your very first year as Governor in 1975, you signed into law a guarantee that low-income children should have a free or reduced-price meal each school day. You now have the chance to do even better by California kids by seizing SB 138's new opportunity and technological advancements to seamlessly connect children to school meals through Medi-Cal, and to provide federally-funded, universally-free meals to students in our highest poverty schools.

More than one in four California children live in poverty. Over 1.7 million California households with children struggle to put food on the table.¹ When a child goes hungry, their ability to learn, grow and thrive is compromised. School meals are extremely effective at fighting the devastating effects of child hunger. SB 138 seeks to reduce child hunger by providing schools with the best available tools to address the inequities that create opportunity gaps. CFPA has worked closely with the California Department of Education over the past decade to improve access to school meals by establishing and enhancing a state-level direct certification system. With this history and experience, we feel confident that SB 138 will give children a better chance to succeed.

We strongly urge your signature on SB 138 for the following reasons:

- **School meals are proven to promote child health and support student success.** School meals mitigate the harmful effects of poverty on students' health, emotional wellbeing, and overall development. Research shows that school nutrition significantly improve students' cognitive abilities, reduce absenteeism, and improve behavior. Low-income students directly benefit from improved access to high-quality school nutrition.

¹ California Health Interview Survey, 2015. Accessed at: <http://ask.chis.ucla.edu/>

- **Directly certifying children for school meals with Medi-Cal is effective and efficient.** California was recently granted permission to use Medi-Cal data to directly certify low-income students into school meals, without the need for additional paperwork that can miss immigrant and low-literacy families. Evaluations show that Medicaid direct certification improves enrollment without additional costs, and increases the reach of free school meals. It was piloted in 14 California districts with very positive results. SB 138 expands this successful pilot statewide, and magnifies the success of Medi-Cal.
- **Serving universally free school meals in very high poverty schools is a key strategy to fight hunger, promote equity and support academic achievement.** Federal universal meal provisions allow high-poverty schools maximize federal funding and serve free meals to all students, while decreasing administrative burdens on school staff. SB 138 helps remove the barrier of processing paper applications for each student, and gives students access to the healthy meals they need to learn.
- **SB 138 is urgently needed to protect California children from federal threats to the social safety net.** Congress and the Trump Administration are attempting to roll back gains in healthcare expansion, and to make harmful cuts to safety net programs that mitigate poverty. SB 138 would reduce harm to California children and communities.

Over the past decade, as CFPA has worked to establish and improve direct certification in California, we have seen improvements that have increase participation in school meals. However, at time when California has the authority to extend Medicaid Direct Certification statewide, the opportunity to identify so many eligible children has never been so great, and at a time when there is so much federal uncertainty, the threats to school meals have never been so significant. Now is the time to maximize participation in the school meal programs and extend the basic nutritional benefits to students in need.

Thank you for your leadership on issues of healthy, equity and forward-thinking social justice. We respectfully request your support of this important legislation.

Sincerely,



Elyse Homel Vitale, MPH
Senior Advocate
California Food Policy Advocates

cc: Senator Mike McGuire (author)