

George Manalo-LeClair: California should invest in student nutrition

By George Manalo-LeClair Special to the Mercury News

Posted: 09/11/2015

As a state senator, George Moscone wanted low-income students to get at least one nutritious meal a day. Moscone was incredibly prescient: We now have a mountain of evidence that demonstrates how hunger negatively impacts learning. Kids who are fed do better on tests and are less likely to be tardy, absent or disruptive. Economic analyses now demonstrate that investing in nutrition is a wise and worthy endeavor.

But this policy was not immediately put into law. Then-Gov. Ronald Reagan repeatedly thwarted Moscone's efforts. It wasn't until a new governor took office in 1975 that Moscone was finally successful. Exactly 40 years ago, Jerry Brown signed SB 120 establishing the expectation that low-income students receive one nutritious school meal a day. Today, the name of the small state supplement to federal school lunch funding still pays homage to this visionary: the Moscone nickel. Over time, the "nickel" has grown to 22 cents a meal, remaining a small but smart investment.

Could a similarly visionary effort find its way into law 40 years later? While Brown is governor once again, times have certainly changed. Recently, Brown has driven education reforms that prioritize local control. These reforms enable local administrators, with the input of parents and community members, to make decisions that best meet the needs of their students and schools. That makes sense. But some needs are so fundamental that the state should ensure they are met for every child in every community. No student should go hungry in any district or in any school.

How can we build on Moscone's legacy? His 1975 bill guarantees one meal, which in practice is school lunch, for millions of low-income students across California. In 2015, decades of research show that school breakfast has the power to increase academic success and improve health. Yet 2.2 million of our state's most vulnerable children miss out on the benefits of school breakfast each day. California can make a new commitment to school breakfast. Funding to serve breakfast would support the academic achievement and the health of students across our state. Such action would also provide local communities with a powerful and proven tool to reduce absenteeism and improve test scores.

How else can we build on his legacy? By extending Moscone's vision to charter schools. Low-income students enrolled in California's growing number of charter schools have no guaranteed access to school meals. That's because charter schools, despite being public schools, are not held to the law that Moscone and Brown put on the books many years ago.

On this 40th anniversary of starting the meals program in California, let's commit to giving all students access to the nutritious meals they need to be successful in school and in life.

George Manalo-LeClair is the executive director of the California Food Policy Advocates. He wrote this article for this newspaper.