



SOAPBOX

Kids can't learn if they're hungry. Here's a bill that will help.

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The budget signed by Gov. Jerry Brown will provide public schools with \$74.5 billion, a \$27 billion increase over the last six years. That's great for our schools. But students have a better chance to reach their full potential if they are well-nourished.

Many families face an uncertain future as the federal social safety net weakens, which is why Senate Bill 138 by Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, is so important.

It would leverage California's leadership in expanding Medi-Cal enrollment to connect 650,000 more low-income students to free school meals. The highest poverty schools would be called upon to offer federally funded, free breakfast and lunch to all students, critical to ending child hunger.

About 20 percent of kids in California face food insecurity. A report from No Kid Hungry shows 3 out of 4 teachers see students who regularly come to school hungry. This takes a toll on students' academic performance, their behavior and their health.

If lawmakers approve SB 138, California could expand a successful pilot program that enrolls low-income students for free meals through verified Medi-Cal income data. SB 138 would also alleviate the paperwork burden on families and schools so fewer kids would fall through the cracks. And by encouraging high-poverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, SB 138 could bring up to \$15 million in federal funds to California every year.

Students who eat breakfast attend an average of 1.5 more days of school per year, score 17.5 percent higher on math tests and graduate from high school at higher rates. Increasing access to school meals would strengthen and support our investment in education.

California has shown leadership by advocating for our state's most vulnerable. We can build on that tradition by taking the next, logical step to fight child hunger by passing SB 138.

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