

Commentary | How we can fight child hunger



Proposed legislation would use Medi-Cal enrollment data to help connect 650,000 more low-income students with free school meals. (Union-Tribune file photo)

By **MELISSA D'ARABIAN**

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For a child, going to school hungry is more than just an annoyance — it can be embarrassing and isolating to feel like the only kid who can't afford to buy lunch, and a rumbling tummy can be a huge distraction during class when kids should be focusing on learning.

I know this to be true because it was my reality growing up. I was raised by a single mom who was putting herself through college and medical school, so sometimes sending me to school with a bagged lunch or with the money I needed to buy lunch at school just wasn't a possibility.

At first, I tried to hide it by getting IOU meal tickets from the principal's office — but that ended quickly after my mom couldn't pay the school for the tab I had rung up. It was only after a sympathetic receptionist figured out the real problem and connected me with a free lunch program that I was able to feel confident about getting a full meal at school every day.

Today, one in five California kids struggles with hunger, and our state needs more than just sympathetic receptionists to help manage hunger on that scale. That's the reason I'm so thankful for Senate Bill 138 by Senator Mike McGuire (D-Healdsburg), which takes her one kind action and multiplies it by using existing Medi-Cal enrollment data to help connect 650,000 more low-income students with free school meals.

For parents who struggle to put food on the table — many of whom may not speak English or who may work multiple jobs to try and make ends meet — filling out the paperwork necessary to enroll their kids in free and reduced-price meal programs can be a challenge. By removing this hurdle for families that are already enrolled in Medi-Cal — not to mention the burden this paperwork puts on school administrators who are trying to get as many at-risk kids enrolled as possible — California can help ensure that more kids have access to healthy school meals.

Equally importantly, SB 138 encourages especially high-poverty schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, which helps kids' overall nutrition, health and academic performance. Studies show that kids who eat school breakfast attend an average of 1.5 more days of school per year, score 17.5 percent higher on math tests and are 20 percent more likely to graduate high school — meaning these meals are about academic success and competitive ability just as much as they are about physical well-being.

Moreover, by providing more meals to more at-risk kids, this measure has the additional benefit of bringing some \$15 million in federal funds to California every year, which boosts our schools and our local economy.

Because of my upbringing, I've been a coupon clipper and a budget-conscious shopper my entire life. But for some families, even the tightest penny-pinching may not be enough to ensure their kids start their day with a healthy meal — and that can result in lifelong impacts. Studies show that children who skip breakfast are more vulnerable to repeating a grade, have slower memory recall and demonstrate increased errors in their schoolwork. Later in life, that could yield fewer job prospects and lower earning potential.

Having experienced school with and without a full stomach, I know firsthand what a big impact being hungry can have on a kid; even missing one meal a day can take a toll. That's the reason I believe we should do everything in our power to ensure kids get the healthy school meals they need to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

SB 138 is the kind of forward-thinking legislation that could make a big difference for San Diego students and for our community at large — because whether we notice their struggle or not, nearly one in five kids locally are living below the poverty line.

I will always be grateful to the school lunch program that I had growing up, and I know parents and students across the state will be grateful to our California State Legislature for swiftly passing this important bill.

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