

Supporting Healthy Eating in the 2007 State Legislative Session

Over the last several years California has led the nation in improving nutrition policies. Much has been done, but given the enormous costs of poor nutrition to our children and to our health care system, much more must be done quickly. To improve the health of low-income Californians, we recommended that the Legislature focus nutrition policy on three key eating environments: school, home, and childcare. We ask that the Legislature make policy changes and investments in each of these environments to reduce future health consequences and costs stemming from diet related illnesses.

1. Healthy Meals at School

By removing unhealthy beverages and snacks, California has taken important steps to making schools healthier places for kids. Now the focus must be on the main foods served at schools, the meals upon which low-income children depend, those served through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. It is the right time for this focus, as an offer of resources from Governor Schwarzenegger in the form of higher reimbursement for free and reduced-price school meals is still on the table. It is also the right time because there is emerging consensus among advocates and the food industry over what must be done make meals more nutritious. Here's a brief list of the most urgent steps the Legislature should take to improve nutrition in school meals:



ELIMINATE TRANS FAT The general public and the food industry seem to be way ahead of schools in recognizing that added trans fats should be completely and immediately eliminated. The Legislature should require that no meals at school contain trans fats added through the cooking or manufacturing process.

BAN DEEP FAT FRYING AT ANY POINT IN THE PREPARATION PROCESS The negative impacts of deep fried food have been known for decades, yet many of the meals served at school still use this unhealthy method. Daily doses of French fries and nachos form the wrong long-term eating habits. And regardless of cooking method, only healthier oils should be permitted for use in schools.

MOVE TO WHOLE GRAINS The benefits of whole grains, 100% whole-wheat flour, and brown rice are well known, but not necessarily to the current generation of school kids. The Legislature should phase in a switch to foods containing at least 50% whole grains. By gradually replacing the bleached white flour currently served with whole grains and 100% whole wheat, kids will get accustomed to the switch and begin to bank the health benefits.

INCREASE FRUIT AND VEGETABLE OFFERINGS Everybody needs to eat more fruits and vegetables, particularly school kids. Some meal programs would benefit from additional servings of fresh fruit and vegetables, while others should begin replacing juices with more nourishing fruit and vegetables. Still others would benefit from utilizing salad bars and other strategies to increase consumption. Now is the time to push more produce.

NEW CHALLENGES:

There are two other important nutrition issues that the Legislature should start to address: 1.) water and 2.) facilities.

Water: Adolescents get about one-third of their calories from beverages, suggesting that increasing water consumption would be an ideal obesity prevention strategy. But while drinking water is widely available in restaurants and other food service areas, students often do not have access to water on campus at mealtimes. California should require that schools make water easily accessible at no charge wherever kids are at school.

Facilities: Many schools do not have adequate physical activity, cafeteria, or kitchen spaces. The Legislature can take steps now to ensure these inadequacies are addressed through targeted use of facilities funds.

2. Healthy Meals at Home

Healthy eating at home isn't always easy – especially for families with limited budgets. But untapped help is available, including as much as \$2 billion in federal food stamp funds. California must tap into these needed resources by taking the following actions to improve food stamps:

REDUCE RED TAPE Paperwork continues to bury administrators and food stamp recipients. We must finally join the other 45 states that have chosen “simplified reporting” for food stamps participants.

CONNECT WITH HEALTHCARE Historically, the majority of people receiving food stamps were also receiving welfare---so the Food Stamp Program and cash aid programs were intertwined. But two changes have happened: 1) The vast majority of food stamp eligibles and participants are now the working poor, who are more likely to be participating in health care programs like MediCAL. 2.) The high costs of diet related illnesses demand that the Food Stamp Program be integrated with health insurance and health care promotion efforts. The easy steps to connect health programs and food stamps must be taken now.



BRING FRESH FRUIT AND VEGETABLES TO LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS In September, Governor Schwarzenegger signed AB 2384 (Leno), a pilot program to make fresh produce more accessible and affordable to food stamp recipients. This landmark legislation needs to be followed up with the funding necessary to implement the pilot. This investment fits well with the Governor's and the Legislature's the vision of a healthy California.

3. Healthy Meals at Childcare and Early Learning Settings

With 6 million students, the focus on improving nutrition in public schools has made sense. But there are many reasons now to focus on pre-schoolers. Unfortunately, the diets and habits of even young children can put them on a path toward overweight and obesity. Policymakers can begin by ensuring that the progress made in schools is imported into early learning settings, especially those those childcare settings that have state/federal funding or oversight:



INCREASE FRUIT AND VEGETABLE OFFERINGS Efforts to increase fruit and vegetable consumption in schools, such as SB 281, should be extended into early learning settings. Providing resources and requirements for childcare providers to meet children's dietary recommendations for fruit and vegetables will do much to improve the meals.

Improve Nutrition Standards, Improve Reimbursement. The Governor has offered state funds to increase reimbursement for low-income children's school meals in conjunction with demands for improvements to nutrition.

This same approach of increased resources and raised standards should be pursued for the 1 million California children in childcare every day.