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March 20, 2012  
The Honorable Julia Brownley  
California State Assembly  
State Capitol  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
Via facsimile 916.319.2141

Re: SUPPORT from the sponsor of AB 1781

Dear Assembly Member Brownley,

California Food Policy Advocates writes in strong support of AB 1781, thanking you for introducing legislation to support and strengthen the school meal programs by taking steps to decrease stigma in the cafeteria.

The California State Legislature has taken steps in the last decade to improve the nutritional quality of food available at K-12 public schools. Additionally, the United States Department of Agriculture released new nutrition standards this January, the first significant changes in 15 years, that will strengthen the quality and variety of the school meal programs. Local communities across the state have also take strides to improve the nutritional quality of school meals by switching to scratch cooking as a way to improve the menus and offer more appealing food. As the new program requirements are implemented statewide, it is critical that all students, including students who are newly eligible for free or reduced price meals, feel comfortable participating in the school meals programs.

While public schools in California are required to make a free or reduced price nutritious meal available to qualifying students, there is no requirement that these meals be available in all food service lines on campus. The practice of having lines that do not offer the reimbursable school meal and only offer à la carte items for purchase identifies students that must go elsewhere on campus to receive their school meal. Consequently, many low-income students face painful stigma and avoid participating in the school meal programs, leading them to purchase less nutritious à la carte items, or even going without a meal to prevent the embarrassment of receiving a free meal. Further more, students who miss out on these complete, balanced meals due to stigma could be at risk of food insecurity.

Removing stigma in school cafeterias creates school environments in which all students are treated and viewed equally. Increased participation in the meal programs brings the nutrition, health, and academic benefits of school meals to more students, while drawing additional federal funds (per-meal reimbursements) in to California. These funds can be used to purchase more nutritious and appealing foods, and to continually improve the school meal programs.

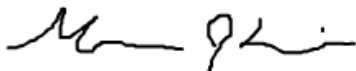
Many districts in California have been leading the way, making improvements to school food to make it more nutritious and appealing to students. With all of the new federal requirements to update school meals, it is critical that *all students* in California feel encouraged to participate in the meal programs. Students should never be told, “you have to go to the other line to get your meal”. By ensuring the federally funded school lunch or breakfast is available to students in any food service line they stand in at school, stigma decreases and participation in the meal programs is encouraged.

USDA has recognized the importance of working to eliminate stigma by requiring schools to prevent the identification of low-income students (7 CFR, Section § 245.8). The State of California has also acknowledged the importance of reducing stigma by including requirements to prevent the identification of low-income students in the State Education Code (Section 49557). However, current practices have evolved since these requirements were written and it is time for California to explicitly prohibit a practice that stigmatizing students participating in the meal program.

It is of utmost importance that no students feel stigmatized from participating in the program, regardless of their household income status. CA needs to support meal program participation since 1 million low-income students miss out on the benefits of lunch and 2 million miss out on the benefits of breakfast. Additionally, due to low meal program participation, CA misses out on hundreds of millions of federal dollars that could be going into local communities, supporting local jobs and local economies.

We thank you for introducing AB 1781 and look forward to supporting this critical legislation as it continues to move through the legislative process.

Sincerely,



Markell Lewis  
on behalf of  
California Food Policy Advocates