

Aren't public schools already required to offer meals to students?

In 1975, during his very first year as governor, Jerry Brown signed a law to protect children from hunger by guaranteeing that all low-income public school students would have access to at least one free or low-cost school meal each school day. Low-income charter school students are the only low-income public school students not protected under this law.

Are charter schools public schools?

Yes, charter schools are publicly funded schools that are considered by the State of California to be an integral part of the public education landscape.

California first authorized charter schools in 1992. Charter schools are exempt from most of the laws and regulations that govern other publicly funded schools. Currently, these exemptions include an exemption from offering meals to students in need.

I know students at charter schools who get meals every day. How would AB 1871 make things any different?

Many charter schools in California voluntarily make free and reduced-price meals available to students in need. The charter schools that voluntarily offer free and low-cost meals to their students show us that meal programs work in a variety of charter school settings. For example,

- A charter high school in Los Angeles County that enrolls more than 3,000 students contracts with a nearby school district to offer meals. Two in every three students at the school are low income.
- A K-8 charter school in Alameda County that enrolls 170 students contracts with a vendor to offer school lunch. More than 1 in 4 of the school's students are low income.
- An independent study charter school (grades 7-12) that enrolls more than 100 students in Stanislaus County offers meals two times per day. Almost 90% of the enrolled students are low income.
- A charter school in Sacramento County that enrolls 200 students serves lunch and breakfast free of charge to all students. One in 10 students at the school are low income.

Students shouldn't have to rely on voluntary efforts to protect them from hunger. Granting charter school students guaranteed access to school meals is necessary to

- Protect current students and the rapidly growing number of new charter school students from the harmful effects of hunger;
- Ensure that this protection will not be reneged over time; and
- Provide equitable access to a basic resource that supports academic success.

Don't most charter schools focus on homeschooling and other alternative education programs?

The vast majority of California charter schools require their students to regularly be present on site with schedules like that of traditional public schools. At least three quarters of California charter schools require at least 80 percent of instruction (e.g., four or five days per week) to happen at a school site. Among the remaining charter schools with alternative schedules, many require regular attendance on site anywhere from one to three days per week.

Do charter schools enroll students who need school meals?

Charter schools are not allowed to discriminate against low-income students in admissions policies and procedures. More than 340,000 low-income public school students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals attend California charter schools. Given California's particularly high cost of living, even more students who do not meet the federal criteria for subsidized school meals are likely to be living in need. In fact, when factors such as the cost of living are taken into account, California has the nation's highest rate of child poverty.

Are there students in charter schools who don't have access to school meals?

More than 80,000 children who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals attend a California charter school without access to free and reduced-price meals, or in many cases, any meals at all. For example,

- A K-8 charter school in Alameda County that enrolls 115 students does not offer any meals. Nearly all of the students (95%) at the school are low income.
- A K-12 charter school in Riverside County that enrolls more than 1,300 students does not offer any meals. Well over half of the students on campus are low income.
- A charter school in Placer County that enrolls more than 450 students requires onsite attendance four days per week and does not offer any meals. Nearly one in 10 of the students at the school are low income.
- A K-12 charter school in Humboldt County that enrolls more than 120 students only offers a paid (full-price) lunch program. More than 80% of the school's students are low income.
- A K-8 charter school in San Diego County enrolling more than 800 students only offers full-price meals and only on certain days of the week (as a fundraiser). One in three students at the school are low income.
- A K-8 charter school in San Diego County enrolling more than 1,600 students requires up to three days of onsite attendance per week and does not offer any meals. One in five students at the school are low income.

Existing state law creates a two tiered system for low-income students in public schools: students in traditional public schools are protected from hunger during the school day and students in charter schools are not.

What resources are available to schools for offering meals?

All public schools, including charter schools, can participate in the federal school meal programs. Participating schools receive federal funding for each meal served. Generally, schools receive the highest reimbursement for meals served to the lowest-income students. California schools can also receive state funding for meals served to low-income students.

School meal programs receive categorical, entitlement funding that exists independent of school general funds. State and federal funding can be used for food, staffing, equipment, and other expenses necessary for the operation and administration of a school meal program.

Public grants and loans are also available to support the startup, expansion, and improvement of school meal programs.

What happens if a school doesn't have a cafeteria or a kitchen?

While all students deserve access to first-rate school facilities, many public schools -- including charter schools -- face infrastructure challenges and are still able to offer meals without a kitchen or cafeteria.

A statewide survey found 70 percent of California school districts deal with infrastructure limitations when serving nutritious school lunches. These limitations range from a lack of physical space to inadequate plumbing and electrical capacity. Despite these limitations, school districts have found ways to offer meals to students in need as is required by state law. These same options (see below) are available to charter schools facing facilities challenges.

I've heard that school meal programs are really complicated.

Educating children is hard work. Caring for children is hard work. Feeding children is hard work. But being a hungry child is harder.

To fight hunger, break the unrelenting cycle of poverty, and close California's persistent achievement gap, all students must have equitable access to the basic resources that support health and learning.

All schools, including charter schools, have several options in how they administer and operate school meal programs. For instance, schools can

- Offer meals with or without using the federal or state nutrition programs.
- Prepare meals at an onsite or central kitchen;
- Contract with a local school district or other entity to prepare and deliver vended school meals; or

FAQ • AB 1871

- Contract with a “food service management company” (a school district or other entity) to handle any aspect of their school meal program such as determining student eligibility for free and reduced-price meals; oversight of program compliance; managing meal payments and reimbursement claims; and purchasing food, supplies, or equipment.

AB 1871 would guarantee that students in need have access to nutritious, free or reduced-price meals no matter where they go to school. AB 1871 would also maximize flexibility for charter schools to meet this expectation in the way that works best for their students.

Why Does this Matter?

No child should go hungry in a California public school. Charter schools are intended to expand choice in public education and, by law, are open to all students, including low-income students. School meals are a critical resource for all students in need, whichever public school they attend. California should not make hunger a school choice.



“Everyone deserves to have equal opportunities and by having free or low-cost meals, everyone does.”

Mussa Adam, Charter School Graduate
UC San Diego Youth Advisory Council