



February 24, 2012

The Honorable Mike Eng
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Re: Support for AB 1594 from the sponsor

Dear Assembly Member Eng,

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) is pleased to be sponsoring AB 1594, legislation that will extend the needy-student meal requirement to California charter schools, ensuring that all low-income California students have access to the nutrition benefits provided by free and reduced-price (FRP) meals.

Currently, California's needy-student meal statute requires public schools to "provide for each needy pupil, one nutritionally adequate, free or reduced-price meal during each school day" (Education Code § 49550). Despite being public education institutions, charter schools are exempt from this requirement. This exemption results in a lack of consistency in access to FRP meals by low-income students attending charter schools. While some charter schools provide FRP meals through participation in the federal meal programs, it is unclear how many of the remaining charter schools offer FRP meals through an alternative meal program or how many offer no meals.

School meals have a positive impact on the academic achievement and overall well-being of students. These benefits are clear, whether a student attends a traditional public school or charter school. For this reason, access to adequate nutrition should be considered a component of a comprehensive educational environment. This is particularly true for low-income students who depend on school meals as a significant portion of their daily food intake; either because they may have limited access to nutritious foods or would otherwise not eat a meal during the school day.

As the number of charter schools across California continues to grow, so does the number of low-income students who may or may not have access to FRP meals. In the fall of 2011, 100 new charter schools opened in California. Bringing the total number of charter schools across the state to just over 980. With the largest concentration of charter schools in the country, California charter schools serve 412,000 students or roughly seven percent of all public school students across the state. In the 2010-11 school year California experienced the largest one-year growth in the history of California charter schools and across the nation.

Using FRP meal eligibility as an indicator of need, there is a similar level of need among charter school students and their peers who attend traditional public schools.

Approximately 55.8% of charter school students are eligible for FRP meals, while 56.7% of traditional public school students are also eligible for FRP meals. Considering the positive impacts of school meals and the similar level of need among traditional public school and charter school students, access to FRP meals should be considered equally important in both settings.


The likely continued growth of charter schools across California and the percentage of students attending them who are eligible for FRP meals indicate a clear need for consistency in access to school meals. As mentioned, while a significant number of charter schools participate in the federal meal programs or provide meals through an alternative program, many schools do not. The proposed requirement would ensure that low-income students across California have access to a nutritiously adequate meal on a daily basis that is priced according to student need.

Not only does the proposal seek to improve school meal access for low-income students, it also promotes the opportunity to seek increased federal funding to do so. Under the proposed requirement charter schools will continue to have the option to provide meals through the federal nutrition programs. If a charter school chooses to participate in the federal meal programs they will receive the same reimbursement as traditional public schools and nonprofit private schools that choose to participate. As currently demonstrated in many California charter schools, participation in the federal meal programs makes offering FRP meals to low-income students a logistically and financially viable option. Charter schools will also have the option of providing a nutritionally adequate meal, at free or reduced-price for eligible students through a non-reimbursable program.

AB 1594 preserves choice in that it allows charter schools to decide how they will provide low-income students with access to free or reduced-price meals; whether through the federal meal programs or an alternative program. Even within the federal meal programs there are many creative and innovative models that address meal distribution, facilities, food procurement and more that make providing students with access to free or reduced-price meals feasible for all schools.

AB 1594 should be viewed as an opportunity to advance the mission of charter schools and support the well-being and academic achievement of students attending them. Parents and students should not have to leave an essential resource behind when making the decision to attend a charter school. Access to school meals should be available to all low-income students regardless of whether they attend a traditional public school or charter school.

Sincerely,



George Manalo-LeClair
Executive Director, California Food Policy Advocates