



Frequently Asked Questions:

Improving Charter School Nutrition: Hunger Should Not Be a Choice

AB 1594 (Eng) Improving Charter School Nutrition would extend the needy-student meal mandate to California charter schools, ensuring that all low-income California students whether attending a traditional public school or public charter school, have access to these essential nutrition benefits.

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Why is it important to offer a nutritionally adequate meal on a daily basis to low-income students at free or reduced-price in every California school?

School meals have a positive impact on the well-being and academic achievement of students. The benefits are clear across the board; whether attending a traditional public school or public charter school. Therefore, access to adequate nutrition should be considered a component of a comprehensive educational environment in every school.

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. Many families depend on free and reduced-price (FRP) meals as a critical component of the nutrition safety-net offered to low-income Californians who may find it challenging to make ends meet. FRP meals play a critical role in student success, as well as supporting households who may be struggling to put enough food on the table on a day-to-day basis.

How many California charter schools currently offer one nutritionally adequate meal to low-income students? How many do not?

Due to the extraordinary year-to-year growth in the number of charter schools across California, it is difficult to capture an accurate up to date representation of the nutrition environments in charter schools. The most recently available data from the California Department of Education (CDE) indicate that of the 815 charter schools active during the 2009-0 SY, 432 participated in NSLP and therefore offered meals that met USDA's nutrition standards and were priced according to student need. During this same school year, 370 charter schools participated in the School Breakfast Program (SBP). The SBP also meets nutrition standards established by USDA and is priced in a way that addresses the needs of low-income students.

Though it is unclear how many, a number of charter schools across California provide meals outside of the federal nutrition programs. These meals may or may not meet the NSLP/SBP nutrition standards and these meals may or may not be priced according to student need. Because CDE does not track the provision of meals outside of the federal and state nutrition programs it is

unclear how many charter schools are providing meals on a daily basis outside of the state and federal nutrition programs.

In addition, a number of charter schools do not offer meals on a regular basis. While, charter schools that provide non-classroom based instruction do not usually offer meals.

This lack of consistency relegates the role that adequate nutrition plays in ensuring academic achievement and overall student well-being. Moreover, this means that low-income students who attend California charter schools may or may not have access to these essential resources.

Are there any differences between the level of need among charter school students and students attending traditional public schools?

Measured in terms of eligibility for FRP meals, the level of need among California students varies from district to district. Across California an average 56.7% of *all* public school students, including those attending charter schools, are eligible for FRP meals.

Available data indicate that approximately 55.8% of charter school students are FRP eligible. While 56.8% of traditional public schools students are FRP eligible.

Using FRP eligibility as an indicator of need, California charter school students do not experience a significantly different level of need than students attending traditional public schools. Considering the positive impacts of school meals, access to FRP meals among low-income students in both setting should be equally important.

How many students would this proposal impact?

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, just over 412,000 California students or about 7% of the total student population attend charter schools. In the 2010-11 school year alone California experienced the largest one-year growth in the history of California charter schools and across the nation. This unprecedented growth does not show signs of slowing down as trends indicate the continued expansion of charter schools across the state. As the number of charter schools in California continues to grow, so does the number of FRP eligible students who may or may not have access to FRP meals.

Didn't the California State Auditor just review California charter school nutrition environments? What were the results of the audit?

While the state auditor cited concerns regarding the quality of available data at the time of the review, the audit proved effective in depicting the wide range of nutrition environments across California charter schools.

At the time the audit was conducted, the State Auditor identified 815 active charter schools – 451 appeared to be participating in NSLP and/or SBP and 151 appeared to provide instruction outside the classroom and therefore were not participating in either. 213 schools served meals through an alternative program, did not serve meals on a regular basis or did not serving any meals at all. The auditor surveyed the 213 schools and gathered responses from 133 schools that mentioned a myriad of reasons for providing meals outside of the federal nutrition programs or not at all. These findings can be found on the California State Auditor’s [website](#).

Though the auditor’s key recommendations focus on the quality of available data, the survey findings emphasize a lack of consistency in access to FRP meals by low-income students attending charter schools. In addition, the findings indicate that it is feasible for charter schools to successfully participate in the federal meal programs.

If so many charters are already providing meals, why is there a need for the proposed requirement?

While a significant number of charter schools participate in the federal meal programs or provide meals through an alternative program, many charter schools do not. Moreover, schools that do not participate in the federal meal programs are not subject to the nutrition standards established by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and do not necessarily price meals according to student need.

This lack of consistency is particularly troubling as the number of charter schools across California continue to grow. In addition, many charter schools are being established in urban settings, such as Los Angeles, Fresno and San Diego, where we know that the number of FRP eligible students is particularly high. As charter school growth continues and more students make the move from traditional public schools to charter schools, ensuring that all eligible low-income students have access to FRP meals supports academic success, as well as overall student well-being. Families should not have to make the choice to leave such a critical resource behind when considering their child’s educational needs.

Under the proposed requirement would charter schools be required to participate in the federal nutrition programs?

No. As is current practice, 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. All schools, including charters, would also continue to have the option to meet the meal mandate by providing nutritiously adequate meals, on a daily basis, at free or reduced-price for eligible students through the State Meal Program or an alternative non-reimbursable model.

The [State Meal Program](#) is a child nutrition program funded by the state of California. The program provides funding to public school districts and county superintendents of schools that make

nutritious, FRP meals available to low-income students. The State Meal Program was established as an alternative to the federal meal programs, providing some financial support to help defray the cost of these meals.

Reimbursement for the provision of nutritionally adequate meals may be obtained through either the federal meal programs or the State Meal Program. In order to be reimbursed through NSLP, a school must make nutritionally adequate meals available to *all* students (not just low-income students). Schools that choose to make nutritionally adequate meals available *only* to needy students may participate in and be reimbursed under the State Meal Program, though reimbursement is substantially higher under NSLP.

Under the current proposal, charter schools will continue to have the option of providing a nutritionally adequate meal, on a daily basis, at free or reduced-price for eligible students through a non-reimbursable program paid for with individual school funds.

What is a nutritionally adequate meal?

As related to this proposal, a nutritionally adequate meal is defined as a meal that qualifies for reimbursement under the [National School Lunch Program](#) (NSLP). Reimbursable meals meet nutrition standards established by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that ensure the meal is nutritionally balanced. These nutrition standards serve as minimum guidance for preparing meals and, as is the case in many schools, can be modified for the better.

If a charter school decides to meet the proposed requirement via participation in the federal nutrition programs, such as NSLP, what would this entail?

NSLP is a federally funded program that assists schools in providing nutritious lunches to students at reasonable prices. NSLP is operated on a reimbursement system based on the number of meals served. All public schools, including charters, and nonprofit private schools are eligible to participate. In order to operate NSLP, the lunch program must be open to all students and FRP meals must be available to eligible students. In addition, the meals offered must meet the nutrition guidelines established by USDA.

Breakfast can also be offered in schools through the federal [School Breakfast Program](#) (SBP). There are a wide range of benefits in offering breakfast.

With so many schools across the country participating in the federal meal programs there are many examples for how to manage and operate a successful meal program. Many schools, including charters, have successfully addressed unique challenges in providing school meals including facility limitations, staffing concerns, and participation. These existing solutions serve as a model for charter schools looking to participate in any of the federal meal programs.

Some charter schools already serve meals outside of the federal meal

programs; will they be able to continue doing so?

Yes. The proposed requirement does not designate a specific program for delivering meals, rather ensures that low-income students are receiving one, nutritionally adequate FRP meal per day. If a charter school is currently using its own meal program or would like to start using its own program the meals would need to meet the nutrition standards established by USDA to qualify as nutritiously adequate and the meal would need to be available at free or reduced-price for eligible students.

Many schools that have developed a non-traditional component to their meal program such as, an edible school garden, manage to participate in the federal nutrition programs and receive full reimbursement. As an NSLP or SBP sponsor a school can receive reimbursement for meals as long as they meet the nutrition standards, pricing guidelines for low-income students, and administrative requirements.

How much will it cost charter schools to meet the requirement?

If a charter school chooses to participate in a federal meal program they will receive the same reimbursement as a traditional public school or nonprofit private school that participates. Experience has shown that when managed correctly, the federal meal programs can be cost effective and in some cases, can bolster a school's financial stability.

If a charter school chooses to participate in the State Meal Program they will also receive a meal reimbursement, though significantly less than that offered through the federal meal programs. If a charter school chooses to operate an alternative meal program that does not offer reimbursement the financial implications may vary.

How much reimbursement do schools currently receive for meals served through NSLP?

The current (July 2011-June 2012) basic cash reimbursement rates are as follows:

Free Lunch	Reduced Price Lunch	Full Price Lunch
\$2.77	\$2.37	\$0.26

Higher [reimbursement rates](#) are in effect for Alaska and Hawaii, and for schools with high percentages of low-income students.

Some would argue that current school meal nutrition standards aren't very good, why impose them on charter schools?

In recent years, much work has been dedicated to improving school nutrition with a particular emphasis on the nutrition standards established by USDA. Reimbursable school meals served through the federal nutrition programs meet specific nutrition standards that ensure meals are nutritionally balanced. This is particularly important for low-income students who may not have access to a nutritionally balanced meal if a school meal is not offered at a reasonable price.

In an effort to continue improving school nutrition, USDA is currently working on updating the nutrition standards to more closely align school meals with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (very similar to the 2010 guidelines). The recommendations for these new standards were made by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) using the best available science to develop an outline of what and how much students should be eating in school. The recommended standards present an opportunity to further support the role of school meals in ensuring student well-being and academic achievement.

Studies have shown that the nutritional quality of lunches brought from home is poor when compared to school lunches. In addition, studies have shown that students who eat school meals through NSLP generally have a higher intake of most nutrients, milk, fruits and vegetables and lower intake of sugar sweetened beverages and candy than students who ate mainly non-NSLP meals.

The nutrition standards established by USDA serve as a minimum requirement for a nutritionally adequate meal and help pave the way for future improvements. Many schools, including some charters, go above and beyond the established nutrition standards to provide students with even more healthy options. Schools that are working to exceed the current nutrition standards are encouraged to continue doing so under the proposed requirement.

Charter schools face unique operational challenges; will they be able to meet the proposed requirement within their current environments?

Yes, there are a variety of creative ways to deliver schools meals effectively. Solutions exist for facility and administrative challenges, as well as start-up and ongoing management. For example, a neighboring district or school with an existing meal program can act as a meal vendor and take on not only meal preparation, but also some administrative responsibilities. Schools can have meals delivered or partner with other schools to increase their purchasing power.

Quite a few options exist as many schools currently serving meals have faced these same obstacles. Moreover, with a significant number of charter schools currently providing meals either through the federal meal programs or an alternative program, we know it's possible and that there are many charter schools that provide models for how to do this.

Why impose a requirement? Can't we give charter schools a chance to provide their low-income students with a nutritionally adequate, FRP meal?

Charter schools currently have the option to participate in the federal meal programs or State Meal Program and receive the same level of reimbursement as all other participating schools, yet many do not participate. As the number of charter schools across California continue to grow the proposed requirement supports consistency in access to benefits by all low-income students. This consistency is critical as many low-income families across California struggle putting food on the table.

Any requirement on charter schools is a threat to the very autonomy that makes them unique from traditional public schools. Is this a slippery slope?

Provision of school meals supports the academic achievement of all students, whether attending a traditional public school or a public charter school. This requirement does not threaten charter schools' autonomy in designing alternative education models, but rather supports the potential success of these models. The proposed requirement should be viewed as an opportunity to advance charter schools and support the overall well-being and academic achievement of student's attending them.

Charter schools provide families with choice; isn't the possibility that a meal program isn't available simply part of that choice?

Parents and students should not have to leave an essential resource, such as school meals, behind when making the decision to attend a charter school. The choice provided to parents is to seek educational quality and equity. Access to school meals, particularly FRP meals, supports the likelihood that parents and students will be successful in making this choice.



For more information about Improving Charter School Nutrition, please contact Alexis Fernández at alexis@cfpa.net or 510.433.1122 ext. 111 or visit www.cfpa.net