



March 3, 2025

The Honorable Mike McGuire
 President pro Tempore, California Senate
 1021 O Street, Suite 8610
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Robert Rivas
 Speaker, California Assembly
 1021 O Street, Suite 4510
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Scott Wiener
 Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review
 1021 O Street, Suite 8620
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Jesse Gabriel
 Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
 1021 O Street, Suite 8230
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable John Laird
 Chair, Sen. Budget Sub. on Education
 1021 O Street, Suite 8720
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable David Alvarez
 Chair, Assem. Budget Sub. on Ed Finance
 1021 O Street, Suite 5320
 Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: SUPPORT - Full Funding for School Meals for All and Kitchen Infrastructure and Training in the 2025–26 California Budget

Dear Senate President pro Tempore McGuire, Assembly Speaker Rivas, Budget Committee Chair Wiener, Budget Committee Chair Gabriel, Budget Subcommittee Chair Laird, and Budget Subcommittee Chair Alvarez,

The undersigned School Meals for All Coalition members are writing to express our strong support for critical school nutrition programs in the 2025–26 FY California budget. We thank the Legislature for your consistent leadership and continued support for this landmark policy, as these meals provide crucial resources for California students and families. We also greatly appreciate your leadership in responding to the devastating fires in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties.

We are grateful for 2025-26 full funding for School Meals for All and the \$150 million for Kitchen Infrastructure and Training in the Governor’s proposed January budget. We respectfully ask that you support these proposed investments and advocate for their inclusion in the Legislature’s 2025–26 FY budget.

California is a national leader in the movement to provide free meals to all TK–12 public school students. This program reflects our shared goal to fight child hunger by providing more freshly-prepared and California-grown school meals to all California students. The success of the School Meals for All policy means more California students are nourished by free school breakfasts and lunches. California’s student meal participation has [increased](#) by 7.8% since the law was implemented, serving 64 million more meals annually, even as student enrollment and attendance have declined. Notably, California schools will serve nearly 1 billion meals through the universal school meals program in 2025–26.

School Meals for All is essential for millions of children and their families who live in, and on the margins, of poverty. Federal eligibility requirements do not account for the needs of families in states with a higher cost of living like California. For instance, in states without School Meals for All, a family of [four](#) needs to make [less than](#) \$40,560 a year to qualify for federal free school meals or less than \$57,720 for reduced-price meals. Research [shows](#) that 44% of food-insecure families in California do not qualify for federal school meal assistance, making California’s School Meals for All program essential to children’s food security. In short, our state policy is helping California students and families who are struggling to put food on the table, but do not meet the federal threshold for meal assistance.

Currently, [1 in 5 California households](#) — or a shocking 1 in 4 families with children — are facing the stress and harm of food insecurity, which continues to rise as Californians grapple with the aftermath of the pandemic, natural disasters, and the rising costs of living which makes it challenging for households to put food on the table. Hunger impacts families and families of color more — Black and Latino households in particular. Amidst devastating and still increasing rates of hunger and poverty, food banks are a bellwether for establishing the scale of need and are currently straining to meet the sustained and heightened levels of demand. In 2023, the California Association of Food Banks’s

41-member network served 6 million Californians a month, a 20% increase year over year with fewer resources. Demand at food banks increases on days when school is out of session, demonstrating that free school meals are an essential part of the solution to addressing childhood hunger.

Prior to School Meals for All, families who were eligible for federal benefits did not apply for free or reduced-price meals due to stigma and concerns that submitting the required paperwork could affect their immigration status. Hungry students skipped breakfast and lunch at school. Now, both students and school nutrition professionals report that the stigma has dissipated. School Meals for All empowers families and nourishes students on the margins of poverty, those who suffer stigma, and those who are undocumented.

According to a [study from Tufts University](#), school meals also provide the best nutritional quality of any source. A substantial body of evidence also shows that students who participate in school meal programs have improved attendance, behavior, and academic outcomes, as well as decreased tardiness.

The proposed funding for Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) is crucial to successfully implementing the School Meals for All program. School kitchens throughout the state are rising to meet the increased demand for meals, but many have inadequate kitchens and facilities to meet this demand. For instance, one school district reported that their school kitchens were built in the 1970s and 1980s to serve 100 meals a day, and those same kitchens are now serving over 500 meals a day. The KIT program has been essential to upgrading needed equipment and infrastructure — like ovens, refrigerators, kitchens, and serving lines — to feed hungry students. At the same time, this program is transforming the quality of school meals by providing resources and staff training to serve more freshly-prepared school meals with California-grown ingredients. KIT funding to date has benefitted almost all of California's schools and students, with 92% of Local Education Agencies across all California counties benefiting from the 2022 funds. However, much more remains to be done as UC researchers [estimated](#) that \$5.8 billion is required for all California schools to be capable of freshly preparing school meals.

Ensuring the success of our first-in-the-nation program is more important than ever as we face looming federal threats to child nutrition funding. Under the current administration, the House of Representatives is already considering [proposals](#) for the upcoming Budget Reconciliation that would increase costs for school meal service and make it more difficult to get meals to students who need them.

California's leadership on School Meals for All is serving as a beacon for the movement to increase access to school meals across the country. Over half of the states in the U.S. are considering permanent free school meals legislation. [Seven other states](#) beyond California currently have universal school meals policies in place, and New York's Governor recently [included](#) Universal School Meals in the state budget proposal to be finalized in April. Legislatures and state executives across

the country understand that these policies make nutritious food more accessible to every student as families struggle with rising food prices, increased hunger, and economic difficulties.

California's commitment to these critical school nutrition investments fights hunger, increases student access to healthy school meals, and supports school nutrition staff. **The School Meals for All coalition is proud to stand behind California's vision of transforming school food and urge the continued protection of these foundational school nutrition programs.**

Sincerely,



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Office of Kat Taylor



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