

## Opportunity

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Children grow and develop rapidly within the first five years of life. They need nutritious diets to support a healthy start, both physically and academically. With more than one million children enrolled in California's licensed early childhood education (ECE) programs, educators are uniquely positioned to support a young child's nutrition needs. Unfortunately, California has slashed overall funding for ECE by 40% in the past six years and cut nutrition-specific funding by 85% in the past three years. This has left early childhood educators without adequate resources to provide nutritious foods, particularly those serving our most disadvantaged children.

Although resources have been depleted in recent years due to a grim state budget environment, California is currently experiencing an increase in state revenue. It is important to ensure California's stability both now and in the long term, which means putting aside money for a rainy day fund *and* *also* making prudent investments that build for a healthy future. Investing in ECE nutrition is one such investment.

By restoring nutrition reimbursements for early childhood educators at a level equal to that provided for meals served in K-12, California policymakers can support the health of our young children and help fulfill our state's well-established commitments to increasing kindergarten readiness and decreasing the achievement gap. California has the opportunity to ensure that our youngest children have access to a healthy, well-nourished start in life.

## Action

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CFPA requests the Legislature take the following action:

- Require the state to reimburse all ECE programs enrolled in the USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) \$0.2229 for each free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch served.

This proposal is analogous to California's long-standing, state-funded contributions to K-12 meals, where school districts are also reimbursed \$0.2229 for each breakfast and lunch served.

## Why This Matters

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Ensuring our youngest children have access to healthy meals throughout their day is important for countless reasons. Through this proposed investment, the state could provide support for over 73 million nutritious meals per year.<sup>1</sup> Investing in early childhood nutrition reaps many benefits:

- The first 5 years of life are when taste preferences and eating habits are formed. Ensuring our youngest children have access to healthy foods is vital to their ongoing health.
- Good nutrition in early childhood has been linked to improved cognitive ability. Healthy nutrition is a key strategy for shrinking California's academic achievement gap.

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<sup>1</sup> Meals served were estimated from the most recent California Department of Education's records of free and reduced price CACFP breakfasts and lunches served from October 2011 through September 2012.

- Research has linked enrollment in CACFP to better nutrition *and* better overall quality of care. California should take advantage of the established CACFP infrastructure to ensure these reimbursements are supporting nutritious meals.
- A small nutrition investment in ECE has the power to support educators, families, and children.
  - Early childhood educators serving our most disadvantaged children need state resources to stay in business and to support their high quality programs – including nutritious meals.
  - Meals served in ECE programs impact overall household food budgets by freeing up much needed resources that would have been allocated to purchasing food.
  - Healthy foods in the bellies of our young children mean a healthy start to a healthy life in California.
- Investing in ECE nutrition is an equitable approach to strengthening the state’s existing investment in K-12 nutrition. For decades K-12 schools have deservedly received a state-funded reimbursement for meals served. Providing equivalent funding to ECE programs ensures young children enter school with healthy eating habits and make the most of the nutritious meals provided in K-12 settings.
- Supplementing CACFP makes it more appealing and feasible for ECE programs to participate in this federally funded program. A relatively small state contribution can incentivize participation and draw federal dollars into local economies that would otherwise be left on the table.
- Investing in ECE nutrition is a preventive health strategy that can decrease future state spending caused by unhealthy diets. Nationally, obesity among preschoolers has tripled in the past 30 years. In California, the nearly 25% of children, age two to five, who are overweight or obese are at risk of developing chronic diseases which contribute to escalating health care costs and negatively impact quality of life.

## HISTORY

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Recently, the California Legislature has prioritized nutrition in ECE settings. For example, AB 2084, enacted in 2010, improved the nutritional quality of beverages served in all licensed child care. In 2012, AB 1872 garnered broad Legislative and community support to set basic nutrition standards for all foods served in licensed family day care homes, however the bill was vetoed by the Governor. Last year, AB 290, a bill that established nutrition training for early childhood educators, was passed.

In contrast to these legislative efforts, the Governor eliminated the majority of ECE nutrition funding in 2012. With an improving budget environment, this proposal is a logical accompaniment to previous legislative efforts.

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*For more information on Early Childhood Education: Nutrition Investments please contact Elyse Homel Vitale at 510.433.1122 ext. 206 or [elyse@cfpa.net](mailto:elyse@cfpa.net) or visit [www.cfpa.net/ECEBudget2014](http://www.cfpa.net/ECEBudget2014)*