



September 4, 2012

The Honorable Edmund G. Brown Jr.
Governor, State of California
California State Capitol
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RE: AB 1594 (Eng) Signature Request from Sponsor

Dear Governor Brown,

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) requests your signature on Assembly Bill 1594. AB 1594 will extend the needy-student meal requirement to California charter schools, ensuring that all low-income California public school students have access to affordable school meals.

Currently, California's needy-student meal statute requires traditional public schools to "provide for each needy pupil, one nutritionally adequate, free or reduced-price meal during each school day" (Education Code §49550). The benefits of school meals are evident for all students; improved academic achievement, reduced absenteeism, improved nutrient intake, and more. Free and reduced-price meals play a particular role in preventing hunger and providing nutritious, balanced meals to children who may otherwise not have access to them. With that said, California's charter schools are currently exempt from the requirement to provide this essential resource to eligible students.

In the fall of 2011, California charter schools served over 412,000 students or 7% of all public school students across the state. As a national leader in the growth of the charter school movement, California also has the opportunity to bolster its role as a national leader in school nutrition. Passage of AB 1594 would make California the first state to guarantee that low-income charter school students have access to affordable meals. California has significantly invested in making nutrition and student wellness a priority. AB 1594 underscores this commitment and ensures that all students are ready to learn, grow, and achieve.

While a number of charter schools participate in the federal meal programs or provide meals through an alternative program, many do not. Moreover, charter schools that do not participate in the federal nutrition 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 need. This lack of consistency is troubling as the number of charter schools across California continues to grow. The proposed requirement is an opportunity to advance charter schools and their mission by ensuring the provision of meals.

Under the proposed requirement charter schools would need to provide one nutritionally adequate meal (as defined by the USDA) per day to all eligible students. To fulfill this requirement charter schools will have the option of participating in the federal nutrition programs or an alternative meal program. As is current practice, if a charter school chooses to

provide meals via the federal nutrition programs they will receive the same federal reimbursement for meals served as a traditional public school. Counter to common misconceptions about the programs, the federal reimbursement can be used to cover the costs of food, staffing, and equipment.

When well-managed, the federal meal programs are cost effective and provide schools with sufficient resources to deliver a nutritionally balanced meal to students who may not have access to such a meal otherwise. While concerns have been raised regarding the disparity in funding between traditional public schools and charter schools some charter schools may be missing out on these additional resources. Leaving federal resources behind during tight budget times puts charter school students at an academic disadvantage and charter schools at a financial disadvantage.

In addition to the availability of funding for the purpose of providing meals, there is flexibility in how schools can meet the guidelines established by the federal meal programs. For example, a charter school can become a sponsor and vend meals from a neighboring school district or private entity. In this case the charter school would be responsible for administration of the program, but would not require the capacity to prepare meals on site. A charter school could also enter into an agreement with a school or school district that is a meal program sponsor. The sponsor would then provide meals, staff, and administrative support to operate the program.

There are a number of models currently in practice, both in traditional public schools and charter schools, offering evidence that the provision of meals is possible under a variety of circumstances. This flexibility makes it possible for schools of different sizes, with varying capacities, and in diverse locations to provide meals through the federal nutrition programs.

However a school approaches the provision of meals their availability ensures that charter schools are a viable option for all the state's children regardless of family means or income. Families should not have to face hunger and inadequate nutrition when choosing a school for their children.

As sponsors of AB 1594, CFPA is proud to be working with Assemblymember Eng to improve access to school meals by all low-income students. We ask that you do the same by signing AB 1594 into law.

Please feel free to contact Alexis Fernández, Nutrition Policy Advocate, at 510.433.1122 x111 or alexis@cfpa.net if we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,



George Manalo-LeClair
Executive Director