



## Frequently Asked Questions:

# Boost School Meal Participation: Lining up to Remove Stigma (AB 1781 Brownley)

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*Boost School Meal Participation ensures that a reimbursable school meal be made available at any service line that school food services operates, manages or from which school food services receives revenue, thereby decreasing stigma and creating an environment in which all students, particularly low-income students, are encouraged to participate in school meals.*

**Have questions? Please contact Markell Lewis at 510-433-1122 x 107 or [markell@cfpa.net](mailto:markell@cfpa.net)**

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### Do students skip meals out of embarrassment?

Students are very sensitive to how they are perceived by their peers and peer pressure. When the cafeteria environment is structured to inadvertently identify students in need of a free meal, the stigma and embarrassment is enough to force some students to skip the meal. In Janet Poppendieck's book, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, a Santa Cruz high school alumni explained,

“Our campus was big and split by the upper level and lower level. The kitchen was on the lower level and you could only get the free or reduced lunch on the lower level. My school was very segregated in that white kids ate upstairs [from the à la carte service] and Mexicans ate downstairs [from the reimbursable meal service]. I was eligible for free lunch but chose not to get it, because I was embarrassed”

If students don't succumb to peer pressure to purchase à la carte items, they often choose to go hungry rather than risk identification as low-income by participating in the school meal program.

### Isn't it all just “school food”?

USDA and California Department of Education (CDE) provide funding for meals and snacks offered through the school meal programs (school lunch, school breakfast, and after-school snack and supper). Therefore, foods sold individually and not as part of the complete, balanced USDA reimbursable school meal or snack, are “competitive” foods because these individual items compete with the federal and state-funded offerings. The “school meal” is available to all students regardless of household income status. Students from low-income households are eligible to receive the meal for free or at a reduced price. All other students pay full price for the meal. The school receives full or partial reimbursement, depending on the eligibility status of the student, for *all* school meals served.

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Competitive foods can be individual items sold “à la carte”, such as a slice of pizza, bag of chips, beverage, or second helping of the reimbursable meal’s entrée. Competitive foods also include foods sold outside of school food service operations, such as from vending machines, or student or parent run snack stores. Competitive foods are not funded by USDA or CDE and are only available to students who can purchase them.

### **If the school meal is available to all students, how is stigma a problem?**

While USDA explicitly prohibits the overt identification of students’ eligibility status for free or reduced price meals, it does not protect the students from other ways by which they can be identified. The presence of service lines that *do not* serve a reimbursable meal creates an environment in which students could be identified as low-income because they must go to another service line or area to receive the reimbursable meal.

*Imagine this scene:*

Two students head off to lunch after the bell rings. In the courtyard, there is a food service line where only competitive food is sold, and there are no reimbursable school meals available. Kelly, who relies on the free school meal for which she is eligible, tells her friend Sarah that she has to go to the line inside the cafeteria to get lunch. While Sarah can go into the cafeteria to purchase the same meal Kelly gets for free, Kelly can’t get a meal in the courtyard service line because she doesn’t have any money to purchase competitive foods. Kelly feels embarrassed that she must go to the other line to receive her meal.

### **Why is participation in the school meal program so important?**

Students that don’t participate in the meal program are missing out on the health and nutrition benefits of the complete, balanced school meal. The passage of the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act 2010 will ensure that school meals are made even healthier to align with current Dietary Guidelines for Americans. School meals must meet strict standards that ensure adequate nutrition and access to a variety of healthy foods. All students should have access to these healthful meals so that they are well nourished and ready to learn.

### **How will this affect operations and do all meals, including hot meals need to be sold everywhere, even at the snack kiosk in the courtyard and in vending machines?**

This legislation does not propose to require **all** reimbursable meal choices to be available in each line. If the school can’t offer even one reimbursable meal, such as a cold sandwich with fruit and milk, in addition to à la carte products, that line should *only* be used for a reimbursable meal – or be closed to eliminate the à la carte only line.

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## Will staff need to be trained?

Little, if any, additional training would be necessary.

## What would schools have to do to comply with this proposed law?

Certainly, there are no compliance issues if all food service lines only serve the reimbursable meal. If the school has a food service line that does *not* offer a reimbursable meal, they would have to make necessary changes to make a meal available in that line. That might mean making room in the refrigerator for milk to be sold along side chilled à la carte beverages. A basket of apples might be placed on the counter in order to offer fruit to the students. If the service line is already selling hot à la carte foods, a hot entrée that is part of the reimbursable meal could easily be made available to the students. If there are no hot items already being sold, then a cold entrée such as a salad or sandwich could be offered to students as part of a reimbursable meal.

## Would student-run fundraisers have to offer a school meal too?

This proposed requirement to have a reimbursable school meal at all lines *only* applies to those lines that are operated or managed by school food service and from which school food service receives revenue. SB 12/965-compliant vending machines from which revenue goes to students, parents or clubs and approved student fundraisers would not be affected by this legislation.



*For more information, please contact Markell Lewis at [markell@cfpa.net](mailto:markell@cfpa.net) or 510.433.1122 ext. 107 or visit [www.cfpa.net](http://www.cfpa.net)*