

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

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ISSUE

During mealtime at public schools in California, students face short lunch periods, crowded cafeterias and pressure to impress their peers. While public schools in California are required to make a free or reduced price nutritious meal available to qualifying students, there is no requirement that these meals be available in all food service lines. The practice of having lines that do not offer the reimbursable school meal and only offer à la carte items for purchase identifies students that must go elsewhere to receive their school meal. Consequently, many low-income students face painful stigma and try to avoid participating in the school meal programs, leading them to purchase less nutritious à la carte items, or even going without a meal to avoid the embarrassment of receiving a free meal.

NEED

Among the 3.3 million California public school students who are eligible for a free or reduced-price meal, seventy percent participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and only thirty percent participate in the School Breakfast Program (SBP). That translates to over one million low-income students missing out on the benefits of lunch, and well over two million low-income students missing out on the benefits of breakfast. Because students avoid participating in the meal programs out of fear of being labeled “poor”, stigma in the cafeteria, particularly due to à la carte-only lines, must be decreased.

REQUEST

During meal times, a reimbursable school meal must be available in 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.

HISTORY

USDA explicitly prohibits overt identification of students’ eligibility for free or reduced-price meals “by the use of special tokens or tickets or by any other means.” USDA declares that low-income students eligible for a free or reduced-price meal “shall not be required to use a separate dining area, go through a separate serving line, enter the dining area through a separate entrance or consume their meals or milk at different time” [7 C.F.R. § 2541.1(b)]. Therefore USDA prohibits schools from having a line explicitly for low-income students, and a line for paying students. While USDA explicitly prohibits the overt identification of students’ eligibility status for free or reduced price meals, it does not ensure that these students be served at all points of sale. 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 their meal.

OUTCOMES

Removing stigma in school cafeterias creates school environments in which all students are treated and viewed equally. Increased participation in the meal programs brings the nutrition, health and academic benefits of school meals to more students, while drawing additional federal funds (per-meal reimbursements) in to California. These funds can be used to purchase more nutritious and appealing foods, and to continually improve the school meal programs.