

Child Nutrition Reauthorization: What's at Stake for California?

The federal child nutrition programs – school lunch and breakfast, WIC, child care meals, summer food, and after school snacks – will be up for reauthorization in 2009. This represents a great opportunity to improve the effectiveness of these programs. California's kids need stronger child nutrition programs; recent experiences with local innovations should inform national policy. California Food Policy Advocates is currently surveying our state and regional partners to identify priorities for Child Nutrition Reauthorization. We are also reviewing media coverage of child nutrition program data and recent trends to ensure that our proposals reflect the best opportunities to respond to the greatest needs. We expect to publish detailed policy recommendations later in 2008.

California has high levels of poverty, hunger, and food insecurity.

- Over 18% of children in California live in poverty with an additional 24% of children living between 100 and 200 percent of the Federal poverty line. *This means that nearly half the children in California live in families that have trouble putting enough food – much less healthy food – on their table.*
- Over 3.5 million Californians are food insecure
- Over 30% of low-income households with children struggle to put food on the table

California has poor participation in programs that can help childhood hunger.

- Almost 30% of low-income children who are eligible for free- or reduced-price school lunches do not participate in the program
- Almost 60% of low-income children who eat a school lunch do not eat a school breakfast
- Over 75% of low-income children eligible for subsidized summer meals do not receive them

A hungry child cannot learn.

- School breakfast can improve test scores and academic performance while also reducing problems of absenteeism, tardiness, and school discipline
- Adequate nutrition throughout the day is essential to learning
- Over 2500 schools in California do not offer school breakfast

California's hungry children are also at risk for obesity.

- Hunger can coexist with overweight. High-calorie, high fat, low-nutrient foods are often the cheapest foods for low-income families
- Over 30 percent of 7th graders in California have an unhealthy weight
- Federal regulations require these programs to meet certain nutrition requirements – and with Congressional help, these requirements can be even stronger to promote the health of our kids

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What are we asking California's Congressional delegation to do?

Several themes have emerged from our preliminary conversations with advocates, administrators, and other stakeholders, including parents and students. After gathering information from a wide variety of Californians over the coming months, the following list may change. However, the recommendations below reflect ongoing issues in these programs. Stay tuned for more information at www.cfpa.net.

Bring more eligible kids into the program. Recent data shows many families struggle with food insecurity, even in moderately low-income families.

- ***Expand direct certification to include Medicaid.*** Direct certification can improve the accuracy of verifying applications and reach more households
- ***Eliminate reduced-price.*** Many needy families cite this fee as a barrier to participation
- ***Limit paper applications.*** Paper applications are out-dated and inefficient and should not be allowed to keep eligible children from meals. More efficient and accurate methods, such as area eligibility, are necessary.
- ***Upgrade facilities.*** Modern and upgraded facilities can produce better meals and create more attractive eating environments, thus bringing more students into the program.

Quickly update and improve nutrition standards. Significant consensus exists that school meals should rapidly be aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans to teach students healthy, life-long eating habits and to discourage the fast-food, take-out culture in many neighborhoods. Nutrition standards should reflect growing concern about healthy eating and obesity. California has significant experience with nutrition policy improvements that federal policymakers should consider.

- ***Implement incentives to encourage healthier offerings.*** Tie additional reimbursements to nutrition improvements, such as serving fresh fruit.
- ***Increase restrictions on unhealthy food items or ingredients.*** Many schools have successfully eliminated sodas, a la carte foods, and trans fat.

Attention to after school. More students participate in more after school activities than ever before, so after school nutrition matters more today. Renewing California's successful pilot to serve snacks year-round throughout the Summer Food Service Program is a smart move. Schools ought to be allowed to serve healthy snacks with less red tape. After school programs also need a higher reimbursement to pay for the larger, more nourishing snacks that students expect.

Enhance administrative efficiency. Sponsors spend too much time with recordkeeping and paperwork, limiting funds available for expanding operations and improving meal quality.

Increase funding. Food prices, labor prices, and expectations all rose substantially in 2007. When combined with higher nutrition standards and higher costs in California, increased reimbursement is a wise investment in the health of California's children.

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