

Improving Charter School Nutrition (AB 1594: Eng)

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ISSUE

California public schools are required to “provide for each needy pupil, one nutritionally adequate, free or reduced price meal during each school day” (Education Code §49550). This requirement is meant to ensure that low-income students have access to an essential resource that supports their academic achievement, health and overall well-being. Despite being public education institutions, Charter schools are exempt from this requirement. As the number of charter schools continues to grow across California, so does the number of low-income charter schools students. These students may not have access to the free or reduced-price meals that they would be eligible for and offered in a traditional public school. Families should not have to face hunger and inadequate nutrition in choosing a school for their children.

NEED

100 new charter schools opened in California this fall, bringing the total number of charter schools in California to nearly 1,000. With the largest concentration of charter schools in the country, California charter schools serve over 412,000 students or roughly seven percent of all public school students across the state. There is a similar level of need among charter school students and their peers who attend traditional public schools. 56.7 percent of the state’s students in traditional public schools were eligible for free and reduced-price meals during the 2009-10 school year. In comparison, 55.8 percent of the state’s students in charter schools were eligible for free or reduced-price meals during the same year. Repeatedly, research has shown that school meals matter. School meals help ensure that students receive adequate nutrition, which is essential to the academic achievement and overall well-being of all students. No low-income student, whether attending a traditional public school or charter school, should be without access to these benefits.

REQUEST

Extend the existing state meal mandate so that all K-12 charter schools in California, except for those charter schools that do not offer classroom-based instruction, provide for each needy pupil one nutritionally adequate, free or reduced-price meal during each school day.

HISTORY

California approved the Charter Schools Act in 1992. Charter schools are independent public schools that are attended by choice and are not subject to the same rules and regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Since then a number of proposals have been introduced to fine-tune the charter school system. Pertaining to nutrition, AB 2954 (2006) sponsored by the California School Board Association, would have, among other things, given school districts the option to require new charter school petitions include a description of how the school would provide free or reduced-price meals to eligible students. The legislation was ultimately vetoed by then Governor Schwarzenegger citing a conflict with charter school autonomy. In 2010, Assembly Member Brownley requested that the California State Auditor review California charter schools in an effort to gain a broader understanding of how charter schools are meeting the nutritional needs of students, particularly low-income students. The audit suggests that a significant number of charter schools currently provide meals via the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), while a number of charter schools serve meals without utilizing the federal nutrition programs and others provide no meals at all. Of the schools that did not participate in NSLP and SBP, some adjusted the price of meals for low-income students while others did not. The results of the audit indicate that it is feasible for California charter schools to provide meals, including meals for free and reduced-price eligible students.

OUTCOMES

While maintaining the educational autonomy of charter schools, extending the meal mandate to include charter schools will ensure that low-income students attending all California public schools have access to the essential nutrition benefits for which they are eligible and in need of.