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HEALTH & WELFARE | DAILY REPORT

Bill would ensure free meals for needy charter school students

March 28, 2012 | [Bernice Yeung](#)



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the soft tacos and chicken pot pies served at lunch are made from organic and locally sourced ingredients.

The meals are delivered every day, ready to eat, in reusable bento boxes that generate minimal trash. Depending on the child's family income, the lunches cost anywhere from nothing to \$3.

"The kids are getting the nutrition they need, they like the food, and it has made the school a better place," said Marc Kessler, Charter Council chairman of the nonprofit elementary and junior high school.

But not all California charter school students are on the receiving end of a warm meal at lunchtime.

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At the Blue Oak School in Chico, where 60 percent of the charter school's student body comes from low-income households, it's a source of school pride that

Charter schools are exempt from many requirements of the state Education Code, including the [state law](#) that says public schools "need to provide each needy pupil one nutritionally adequate free or reduced-price meal during each schoolday."

Whether charter schools should also guarantee a meal to low-income students is the subject of a state Assembly Education Committee hearing today on a [bill](#) that would extend the free and reduced-price meal mandate to charter schools.

Assemblyman Mike Eng, D-Alhambra, introduced the legislation "because nutrition is so important," he said. The bill "levels the playing field so children, whether in public or charter school, will have the same advantages that will lead to classroom performance, higher test scores and lower obesity rates."

According to a 2010 [state audit \[PDF\]](#), about 18 percent of classroom-based California charter schools don't offer low-income students breakfast or lunch, though needy children attend charter schools at about the same rate as traditional public schools.

The audit reported that 39 charter schools spanning the state, from Ukiah to Bakersfield and San Diego, did not serve any meals at all. The state auditor also was unable to determine what kind of food program – if any – was in place at 80 campuses because charter schools are not required to report whether they have a meal program.

Alexis Fernández of California Food Policy Advocates, which sponsored the legislation, said the bill is aimed at making sure no public school student goes hungry.

"The bill seeks to ensure consistency in access to nutrition benefits; because we don't necessarily know what all charter schools are doing in terms of meeting the nutritional needs of students (cost, frequency, and quality), a proposal like AB 1594 (Eng's bill) would provide that consistency," Fernández wrote in an e-mail.



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Fernandez said some charter schools also are unaware that they can qualify for federal and state funds to support a meal program.

But the California Charter Schools Association opposes the bill. “We believe there are significant barriers to charter schools to participate in these programs, despite a desire and willingness to do so,” said Colin Miller, the association’s vice president of policy.

Some charter schools don’t have kitchens, for example. Some are so small that they don’t have enough students to make a lunch program financially feasible.

Both of these factors affected the ability of Sycamore Academy of Science and Cultural Arts, a charter school in Wildomar, to serve lunch to its low-income students.

“We don’t have a kitchen or facility to heat up lunch,” said Richard Shepler, the school’s director and principal. “We’d have to use an outside vendor, and it would be too costly, and we’d have to take it out of the general education budget to pay for it.”

But Shepler isn’t ignoring the connection between nutrition and learning. “You have to have your basic needs met before you can attend to something like learning,” he said.

Instead, the school does what it can by connecting low-income families with local food banks. And if students show up at school without lunch, teachers and administrators offer kids a packaged lunch or snack, which the staff purchases out of pocket, Shepler said.

Funding snags also forced Holly Pettitt, director of the Nevada City School of the Arts, to shutter a popular free and reduced-price lunch program launched last fall. After two months, the school abandoned the program because it learned that as a for-profit charter school, it did not qualify for federal reimbursements.

“Our poverty levels were rising, which is why we considered doing it,” Pettitt said. “We were watching kids come to school hungry, and we wanted to provide lunch. We have snacks we provide when a child forgets lunch, so we make sure they are fed, but we are not able to provide a hot lunch.”

Pettitt said she would support Eng's bill if it came with money to support meal programs. "I'd love it if the legislation were passed along with funding,” she said.


At Blue Oak, where low-income students can get a free plate of spaghetti or a bean-and-cheese burrito at lunch, the school decided to start a lunch program after Kessler, the board chairman, noticed that the school's director had an office stash of granola bars – it’s what hungry students were given if they don't have a lunch or snack.

Kessler acknowledged that the food program is expensive, and government reimbursements don't always cover costs. The school pays about \$15,000 a year for a part-time employee to manage, monitor and distribute the hot lunches. Still, he said it’s worth it.

“We felt there were two areas where this affects the school: in student performance and also in behavior," he said. "There may be a cost, but there’s also a cost to behavior problems and low student achievement, and so we found the money and made it a priority.”

Serving lunch also makes the school more accessible to low-income students, Kessler added. “If you don’t serve free lunches, you are by default not going to get as many needy kids (coming to your school),” he said. “I feel strongly that charter schools should do this, whether or not it's required.”

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