

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 6, 2016

The Honorable Tom Torlakson
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
California Department of Education
1430 N Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Superintendent Torlakson:

On behalf of the children and families that we represent throughout California, we urge you to apply to the U.S. Department of Agriculture to use Medicaid enrollment data to automatically enroll low-income children for free or reduced price school meals. We appreciate your leadership to strengthen our schools and mitigate hardship for low-income children. California has been extremely successful in its implementation of the Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Project, and it is our sincere hope that California will build upon that success by applying to expand the program statewide.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs play a critical role in ensuring that low-income children receive two nutritious meals during the school day so that they are ready to learn and thrive. We were delighted by your recent announcement that more than 300,000 additional low-income students were automatically enrolled for free school meals. This success was the result of collaborative efforts among state agencies, school districts, counties, state legislators and food policy advocates. Historically, California has lagged behind other states in connecting school-aged children who participate in the state's CalFresh program with free school meals.

Over the last year, 14 school districts in California have taken an important step toward improving access to free school meals for low-income children by participating in the Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Project. Through the demonstration, approved school districts are able to paperlessly enroll income-eligible students into school meals. This process, which uses Medicaid data and school enrollment records to identify eligible children, is seamless for families and efficient for schools. The number of free and reduced price eligible students in districts served by this demonstration is over 240,000.

As of Fall 2015, participating districts reported matching over 31,000 students for free meals using Medicaid data. Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) reported enrolling 1,718 students for free meals based on Medicaid data, of which 768 students had not been previously enrolled. SAUSD expects to see future participation growth that results in increased reimbursement dollars for their meal programs as a result of the Demonstration Project. Further, San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) reported an increase of 8,900 students directly certified for free meals after beginning to match with Medicaid data when compared to the same time period in the previous year. SDUSD has seen additional benefits, such as a decrease in the number of applications that require processing or verification, resulting in reduced administrative burden.

In January, USDA announced its intention to allow states like California to apply to expand these successful Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Projects statewide. This is a critical opportunity for California to ensure that hundreds of thousands of eligible low-income children receive school meals. Moreover, if Congress enacts changes to the verification process that are being considered, using direct certification to streamline enrollment for school meals will reduce the potential administrative burden of verification on school districts and prevent eligible children from losing free or reduced price meals.

By connecting school children with the free or reduced price meals for which they qualify, we can help reduce food insecurity for California's poorest students and position them to flourish in the classroom. Under your leadership, we hope to see California utilize the successful programs developed over the past year and begin using Medicaid data to directly certify free meals statewide by the start of the 2016-17 school year. We understand that there may be some challenges as you develop the systems to directly certify students for reduced price meals and would like to see this process scaled up as quickly as possible. We urge you to act on California's behalf by the April 15, 2016 deadline.

We greatly appreciate your attention to this matter and we look forward to working with you to ensure that California can take advantage of this opportunity.

Sincerely,



Susan A. Davis
Member of Congress

Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress



Mark Takano
Member of Congress


Janice Hahn
Member of Congress


Loretta Sanchez
Member of Congress


Grace Napolitano
Member of Congress


Sam Farr
Member of Congress

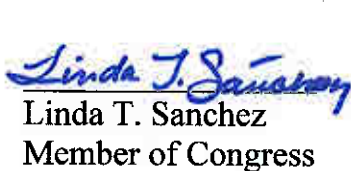

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Zoe Lofgren
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Karen Bass
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Jerry Brown, Governor of California