

Assembly Bill 1995

Free School Lunch for All Low-Income Students

Assemblywoman Luz M. Rivas

SUMMARY

Almost 4 in 10 Californians are living at or near the federal poverty line,¹ and yet the federal poverty guidelines fail to capture the actual financial stress poor families experience in the state. Forcing these same families to accrue debt when they cannot afford to pay for their child's lunch is antithetical to California values. AB 1995 will lighten the financial strain on these families by covering the 40-cent copayment that students eligible for reduced price meals are currently paying.

BACKGROUND

To ensure that every student has access to a school meal, the federal government provides meals free of charge or at a reduced price to eligible families through the National School Lunch Program. To qualify for reduced price meals, families must earn between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level. For the 2019-2020 School Year, that means a family of four earning between \$33,475 and \$47,638 qualifies for reduced price meals.

California recently passed legislation in an effort to ensure no low-income student goes hungry. In 2017, SB 138 (McGuire, Chapter 724, Statutes of 2017) enabled the highest poverty schools and districts to serve lunch at no charge to all of their students.

That same year, SB 250 (Hertzberg, Chapter 726, Statutes of 2017) put an end to school lunch shaming by prohibiting schools from treating students with unpaid school lunch fees differently from the rest of their peers. This ensured that no student was turned away from a meal, even if they had unpaid lunch fees.

Recognizing the financial stress that school lunch debt has on working families, several states, including Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, Ohio, Vermont and Washington State, have completely eliminated the copayment for students eligible for reduced price lunch.

PROBLEM

While these policies moved the state in the right direction, low-income students who do not attend schools with the highest poverty rates must still make a 40-cent copayment for reduced price meals.

While this might not seem like a lot of money, for many California working families, many of whom might be a paycheck away from homelessness; it can be a real financial burden.²

The problem is further exacerbated for families with multiple school-aged children who rapidly accrue debt when they cannot afford to make the copayments. With time, unpaid lunch fees accumulate and low-income families often find themselves owing large sums of money that they simply cannot afford to pay back.

Furthermore, students eligible for reduced price meals already experience an increased risk of food insecurity. According to a 2018 report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 31% of families earning less than 185% of the poverty level—the threshold for reduced price meal eligibility—were food insecure.³ For California, that percentage translates to about 155,000 students who lack access to adequate nourishment on any given day.

As the wealthiest state in the Union, one undernourished child is one too many. In a state where inmates are provided three meals a day free of charge, it raises the question if it is appropriate to force our most vulnerable families, whose only crime is being poor, to accrue debt when they cannot afford to pay for their children's lunch.

SOLUTION

With food insecurity and high cost of living increasingly threatening low-income California families, it is time the State completely eliminates this stress, rather than maneuver around it.

AB 1995 requires schools to provide students who are eligible for reduced price lunch, a meal free of charge. School districts can request a reimbursement from the State for the costs incurred.

There have been several heartbreaking stories of children identifying creative ways to help their peers pay off their school lunch debt. While their kindness and solidarity is admirable, children should not be the ones worrying about the school hunger crisis—it is the State's responsibility.

CONTACT

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¹ <https://www.ppic.org/publication/poverty-in-california/>

² <https://reports.nlihc.org/or>

³ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=94848>

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