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46TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

AB 996: Breakfast for Toddlers

BILL SUMMARY:

This bill would require the California Department of Education to issue instructions for how school district could serve younger siblings a federally reimbursable meal at a school site that their older sibling attends.

BACKGROUND:

The California Department of Education administers the Federal School Breakfast Program, which serves pupils enrolled in school a federally reimbursed breakfast for free or a very reduced-price. For some school children, there would be no breakfast without this morning meal. While California should be proud of the work we are doing to expand access to this important school meal through Community Eligibility and Breakfast After the Bell programs, we should also be looking at new and innovative opportunities to prevent hunger for children 0-5, during their most important developmental years.

Many elementary school students who are eligible for a free or reduced-price meal have younger siblings at home who are also suffering with food insecurity and could benefit from a free breakfast or morning snack. Although there are federal programs serving young children, securing locations where these federally funded meals for young children can be served for a breakfast or morning snack can be surprisingly difficult.

Hunger among children of immigrant families is expected to increase in the coming years as a result of anti-immigrant policies pursued by former President Trump, which has resulted in many eligible immigrants dis-enrolling from the CalFresh program. These policies are also contributing to the fact that participation in the Women, Infant and Children's (WIC) program is

at an all-time low. Because elementary schools are protected from ICE personnel intrusion and programs serving children are exempt from public charge, this bill could provide an important lifeline of nutrition to low-income children of immigrant families.

PROBLEM:

Hunger among children is known to have significant short and long-term repercussions. In the short-term, a child experiencing hunger is less likely to be able to focus in school, to avert school disciplinary action or to participate in extra-curricular activities. In the long-term, child-hood hunger increases the likelihood that the child will experience developmental delays, cognitive deficiencies and adult auto-immune diseases that are both costly and painful.

Throughout the state, many soup kitchens, originally established to serve only adults have opened family sections for parents and guardians and their young children. While essential to prevent hunger among very poor children and their families, these facilities are hardly child-friendly—they are not trained in preparing food that adequately addresses the unique nutritional needs of children.

Despite food insecurity among families in California during normal circumstances, COVID-19 proved how significant the issue really is. The impact of COVID-19 led to the signing of a federal waiver, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which allows parents and guardians to pick up meals and bring them home for their children. However, once schools are back in-person, this waiver will no longer expand food access and security to siblings of enrolled students who are enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program.

SOLUTION:

There is no federal prohibition to serving younger siblings of school-age children a morning snack through the Child and Adult Care Food Program at the same time and location as school-aged children receive their federally reimbursed school breakfast program. However, because there are specific rules for each program, having guidance from the state Department on how one could co-locate program delivery to prevent hunger for all the children in the community will support schools that wish to implement a Breakfast for Toddlers Program.

Ultimately, siblings of enrolled students who qualify for the free or reduced lunch program will continue to receive the food security that they are already receiving due to the federal waiver signed in 2020 (in response to COVID-19). This bill will address the hunger needs of younger children who are not yet of school-age to have access to food, specifically breakfast, to ensure that they are fed the most important meal of the day.

SUPPORT:

Western Center on Law and Poverty (Co-sponsor)
Discovery Inc., (Co-sponsor)

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