

Talking Points: Child Nutrition Reauthorization

Why is child nutrition so important to California?

California has high rates of hunger

California ranks 11th worst in the country for hunger and food insecurity. It also ranks 45th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia in child poverty and has 4.4 million people that are on the brink of hunger.

Thousands of eligible California children do not participate in Child Nutrition Programs.

Only 41 percent of low-income children in California who eat free- or reduced-price school lunch also receive breakfast at school. In 2001, 1.8 million low-income children ate free- or reduced-price school lunch during the school year, but only 10 percent of them received Summer Food meals.

California does not take advantage of options to increase program participation.

Only 27 percent of California's school districts use direct certification to *automatically qualify* kids for school meals if they already get TANF or food stamp benefits. Of the 923 California school districts that offer school lunch, only 68 use Provision 2 of the School Lunch Act, which lets them feed more kids with less paperwork.

Why are the child nutrition programs so great?

They can impact academic performance.

School breakfast improves test scores and school performance, and it reduces problems of absenteeism, tardiness, and school discipline. Programs such as WIC and the Child Care Food Program help get kids ready for school by providing them with nutritious foods - good nutrition during the preschool years impacts brain development and function and can determine how a child is going to perform in school.

They have been shown to be effective and have broad based support.

The child nutrition programs have been shown to be effective tools in decreasing hunger and increasing access to food for children. Programs such as school breakfast and lunch and the WIC program have had broad support from both Congress and the President. The purpose of the WIC Program is to prevent poor birth outcomes, such as infant mortality and low birth weight, and to improve the nutrition and health of participants. Dozens of scientific studies have shown WIC to be a cost-effective and positive public health intervention

They have the potential to fight obesity.

Obesity rates have more than doubled among school-aged kids over the past 30 years. Along with this dramatic increase in obesity, the number of kids that now experience traditional "adult" diseases - diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol - has also skyrocketed. Physical inactivity, overweight and obesity cost California \$25.1 billion annually. Because kids can receive up to 2/3s of their nutritional needs each day at school, the quality of the foods they eat at school can have a major impact on their health and weight.

What are some specific problems and solutions?

Problem # 1: WIC Program is underfunded.

Solution: Fully fund WIC. Despite the benefits of the WIC program, not every eligible person can participate. Recent economic downswings have resulted in some of the highest participation rates in the history of WIC. When funding for WIC is not adequate, many 3 and 4 year old children are turned away from the program, ages when good nutrition plays a crucial role in school readiness. Ensure stable support for WIC by guaranteeing full funding for all potential eligible participants.

Problem #2: Too much paper

Solution: Let districts serve summer meals under National School Lunch Program guidelines. Due to the success of a number of pilot programs, USDA has approved claiming of summer meals under the school lunch program as a waiver of current regulations, and has cut down on self-monitoring requirements of experienced summer food sponsors. USDA should make these simplifications permanent under reauthorization AND extend these improvements to community child nutrition programs, so that these programs can serve year-round meals and snacks under one set of guidelines.

Problem #3: Low participation rates

Solution: Boost school breakfast and lunch participation by feeding all children for free in high-need communities. Current law allows high-need schools to serve all children for free, under such efficiency options as Provisions 2&3 of the National School Lunch Act. In California, schools that use this option have experienced dramatic increases in school breakfast and school lunch participation. There is less stigma for participating students and less paperwork for participating schools – making it easier to access the school meal programs. By requiring ALL schools where 85 percent of the children qualify for free- or reduced-priced meals to use these options, participation in the school meal programs could soar.

Problem #4: Programs hard to access

Solution: Require all states to directly certify children from families who are receiving TANF and/or food stamp benefits. One simple way to help eligible children receive free-or low-cost meals is to require states to match children enrolled in TANF or the Food Stamp Program with statewide student enrollment information. By doing this, districts can automatically qualify eligible children to receive free meals. In California, over 200,000 additional children would qualify for free school meals, bringing increased dollars to the state. This direct certification can also improve the integrity and accuracy of the enrollment process in the school meal programs.

Problem #5: Too much junk food in schools

Solution: Authorize the USDA to limit the sale of junk foods in schools. Currently, USDA can only regulate foods of minimum nutrition value sold in eating areas during meal times. USDA does not have the power to regulate foods sold in other locations at any other time during the school day. While nutrition guidelines exist for foods sold as part of the reimbursable National School Lunch Program, fast foods such as pizza, chips, ice cream and French fries are often sold “a la carte” – separate from the NSLP.