

Assembly Bill 508

Free School Lunch for All Low-Income Students

Assemblywoman Luz M. Rivas

SUMMARY

No student should go hungry in our state. Currently, four out of ten Californians are living at or near the federal poverty line¹. However, these federal poverty guidelines, which determine reduced-price lunch eligibility, fail to accurately capture the financial stress poor families experience in California. Forcing these families to accrue debt when they cannot afford to pay for their child's lunch is antithetical to California values. AB 508 will relieve the financial strain on these families by covering the copayment that students eligible for reduced-price meals must currently pay.

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 2020-2021 School Year, this meant that a family of four earning an annual income between \$34,059 and \$48,470 qualified for reduced-price lunch.

California 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 ensures that no student is turned away from a meal, although they are still required families to accrue debt when they are unable to pay.

Understanding the financial burden paying for school lunch places on families during the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) extended free school lunches to all students. This extension will only cover the 2020-21 School Year.

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

²<https://reports.nlihc.org/oor>

³<https://www.latimes.com/projects/california-coronavirus-cases-tracking-outbreak/unemployment/>

PROBLEM

However, when the USDA extension expires, low-income students who do not attend schools with the highest poverty rates must again pay a 40-cent copayment for reduced-price meals, or accrue debt.

While 40 cents 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 significant financial burden.²

This burden is 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. This precarious financial situation is further aggravated by the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, as millions of Californians continue to lose their jobs.³

Additionally, when parents fail to pay off their children's lunch debt, school districts absorb the cost. Since federal funding does not cover unpaid lunch debt, school districts must utilize their already limited general fund dollars to cover the cost. During a time when school districts are facing alarming budget deficits, California must step up and mitigate the financial strain school districts are experiencing.

SOLUTION

It is time to address this social injustice head-on, rather than maneuver around it. AB 508 will accomplish this by requiring the state to cover the 40-cent copayment for reduced-price lunch on behalf of working families. The bill will thus alleviate the financial stress of school lunch debt for low-income families and school districts.

There have been several heartbreaking stories of children finding 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

Florencio Maldonado Vaca, Legislative Aide
916-319-2039 | florencio.vaca@asm.ca.gov

Support

American Diabetes Association (Sponsors)

