



February 17, 2026

The Honorable Monique Limón
 President pro Tempore, California Senate
 1021 O Street, Suite 8518
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Robert Rivas
 Speaker, California Assembly
 1021 O Street, Suite 8330
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable John Laird
 Chair, Senate Budget and Fiscal Review
 1021 O Street, Suite 8720
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Jesse Gabriel
 Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
 1021 O Street, Suite 8230
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Sasha Renée Pérez
 Chair, Sen. Budget Sub. on Education
 1021 O Street, Suite 6720
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable David Alvarez
 Chair, Assem. Budget Sub. on Ed Finance
 1021 O Street, Suite 5320
 Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Melissa Hurtado
 Chair, Sen. Budget Sub.
 1021 O Street Suite 6510

The Honorable Steve Bennett
 Chair, Assem. Budget Sub.
 1021 O Street Suite 4710

Sacramento, CA 95814

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RE: SUPPORT - Funding for School Meals for All and Supporting Programs in the 2026-27 California Budget

Dear Senate President pro Tempore Limón, Assembly Speaker Rivas, Senate Budget Committee Chair Laird, Assembly Budget Committee Chair Gabriel, Senate Budget Subcommittee Chair Pérez, Assembly Budget Subcommittee Chair Alvarez, Senate Budget Subcommittee Chair Hurtado, and Assembly Budget Subcommittee Chair Bennett,

The undersigned 100+ School Meals for All Coalition members are writing to express our strong support for critical school nutrition programs in the 2026–27 FY California budget. We thank the Legislature for your consistent leadership and continued support for California's first-in-the-nation School Meals for All program. Transforming the school food system is complex and benefits from multiple proven policies to improve student access to and the quality of school meals, food education, kitchen infrastructure, connections to local farmers, and training and career development for school nutrition professionals. Together, these complementary policies and investments create an ecosystem of support that can accomplish so much more for California's students and the people who nourish them.

We are grateful for the inclusion of funding for School Meals for All, \$100 million for Kitchen Infrastructure and Training, \$25.2 million ongoing for the Farm to School Grant program, and \$14.3 million for California's Healthy School Food Pathway program in the Governor's proposed January budget. We respectfully ask that you support these proposed investments and advocate for their inclusion in the finalized budget.

California is a national leader in the movement to provide free meals to all TK–12 public school students. School Meals for All reflects our shared goal to fight child hunger by providing more freshly prepared and locally grown school meals to all California students. Thanks to the success of this program, California schools are anticipating serving nearly 1 billion meals during the 2026–27 school year. School Meals for All is a simple and effective lever to address affordability for working families, with [over 81%](#) of California parents reporting that free school meals save money.

School meal participation has [increased](#) by nearly 9% since the inception of School Meals for All, serving 73 million more meals annually, even as student enrollment has

declined. It has also reduced the [stigma](#) surrounding school meals while making nutritious foods more accessible for those living in and on the margins of poverty.

Federal school meal eligibility requirements do not account for the needs of families in states with a higher cost of living, such as California. Research [shows](#) that 44% of food-insecure families in our state do not qualify for federal school meal assistance, making School Meals for All essential to ensuring children's food security. Currently, [1 in 5 Californian households](#) — or a shocking 1 in 4 families with children — are facing the stress and harm of food insecurity, which continues to rise with the cost-of-living crisis and federal cuts to safety net programming. This includes H.R. 1, which resulted in the largest SNAP cuts in program history and [nearly 800,000 Californians](#) losing vital CalFresh benefits. Without the assistance of school meals, [an additional quarter million Californians would be living in poverty](#).

Increasing the output of nutritious school meals also increases operational demand, requiring adequate kitchen infrastructure and trained school nutrition staff. The proposed funding for the Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) program is critical for upgrading kitchen facilities, purchasing necessary equipment, and training staff to ensure schools have the proper resources to serve students. In a survey conducted with 245 schools and districts on the impacts of KIT, [90%](#) of school districts reported an increase in student access and quality of school meals, but [77%](#) indicated needing additional funding. According to a recent study, California public schools need [\\$5.8 billion](#) in kitchen facility upgrades to be able to serve freshly prepared foods. While prior funding for KIT has made progress in addressing these issues, sustained investment is essential to carry out California's groundbreaking commitment to remove ultraprocessed foods of concern from school meals by 2035.

While KIT addresses operational capacity needed to prepare meals, the Farm to School Program works to strengthen the food supply through partnerships with local farms. This enables schools to serve fresh ingredients, improve meal quality, and expand educational opportunities that promote healthier lifestyles while also creating economic opportunities across California's agricultural sector. [Extensive evaluation](#) has been done in partnership with the Farm to School grantees, and the results are clear: this program is effective at serving students in under-resourced communities, supporting climate-smart practices, and building valuable relationships between farmers and schools.

Research shows that registered apprenticeship programs assist employers in

attracting and developing a diverse and highly-skilled workforce, leading to improved productivity and reduced turnover. The California Healthy School Food Pathway Program is designed to help address decades of underinvestment in training by partnering with Local Education Agencies to offer hands-on, paid culinary apprenticeships and operational education focused on serving freshly prepared school meals. This enables California schools to build a well-trained workforce capable of preparing nutritious meals for students long-term.

California's leadership on School Meals for All is a beacon for the movement to increase access to school meals across the country. Eight [other states](#) and dozens of Legislatures across the country have followed closely behind. California's commitment to these critical school nutrition investments creates a path that other states can follow, amidst federal setbacks, fights hunger, and increases student access to healthy school meals while supporting school nutrition staff and local farmers.

The School Meals for All Coalition is proud to stand behind California's vision of transforming school food, and we urge the continued protection of these foundational school nutrition programs.

Sincerely,

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California Association of Food Banks

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