

OPINION

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CHERYL DELL | Publisher and President
JOYCE TERHAAR | Executive Editor and Senior Vice President
DAN MORAIN | Editorial Page Editor | (916) 321-1907 for comments on opinion pages



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School day breakfast bill feeds more kids

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Nearly 4 in 10 California public school students say they didn't eat breakfast the previous day. That not only hampers their ability to learn, it endangers their health. Studies show that children who eat breakfast get more of the important vitamins and minerals they need and tend to choose healthier food throughout the day.

The federal government subsidizes school breakfasts for low-income children, but many never get it. Some shy away because of the stigma attached to accepting the free or reduced-price meal. Others are from families that can't get them to school early enough to eat in the cafeteria before class begins.

Assembly Bill 1240 seeks to remedy this by requiring schools with large numbers of low-income students to offer a nutritious breakfast after the start of the school day.

The bill would require schools where 40 percent to 60 percent of students are eligible for reduced-price meals to offer breakfast to all students, but not necessarily after the bell.

Schools with between 60 percent and 80 percent of students eligible would have to offer breakfast to all after the start of the school day. And schools where more than 80 percent of the students qualify would have to offer the morning meal to all students for free.

The change would bring more than \$300 million in additional reimbursements to California from the federal government, according to the sponsors of the bill, the California Food Policy Advocates.

Many California schools already serve breakfast after the bell.

The Los Angeles Unified School District in 2011 began providing breakfast free to all students in its classrooms and now serves about 350,000 students a day. The districts in Compton, Long Beach, Oakland and San Diego have similar programs, as does Rancho Cordova, where the principal told The Sacramento Bee's Diana Lambert that serving breakfast after school starts encourages more kids to eat – and get to school on time.

Some teachers have objected to the distraction of serving food in the classroom. But while AB 1240 mandates that schools offer breakfast, it makes clear that schools don't need to cut into instructional time. They could serve the meals in the classroom, at a central location during an extended break, from hallway carts or while a teacher takes attendance.

This seems like a sensible and low-cost way to give all students a healthy start to the school day, and to recoup federal money now being left on the table. Also helpful is SB 708, which would standardize online applications for school breakfast and lunch programs.

Both bills moved out of their respective education committees Wednesday. Lawmakers should continue to move them along, perhaps with a sunset date on the "breakfast after the bell" bill so that it will have to be reviewed after full implementation to ensure that it is not causing more problems than it solves.

No kid should miss the most important meal of the day, given all we know about its value now.