

Frequently Asked Questions:

Breakfast: The Building Blocks of Learning AB 1916

Assembly Member Bonnie Garcia has introduced legislation, AB 1916, to increase access to breakfast at low-income schools. This brief responds to common questions about this proposal.

What is the School Breakfast Program and why is it important?

Since the 1960s, the School Breakfast Program has provided students nationwide with nutritious meals that improve their academic performance and health. Children who eat a school breakfast not only consume more fruits, vegetables and calcium than non-participants, but they also achieve better test scores and have better classroom behavior. There is also emerging research showing that kids who eat breakfast are less likely to be overweight than kids who don't.

How many California schools offer the School Breakfast Program? How many children eat school breakfast?

More than 8,500 California schools offer the School Breakfast Program, representing the full diversity of our state—rural, urban and suburban schools; schools with lots of low-income kids, schools whose pupils have a higher income; and schools with students of all racial and ethnic groups. Statewide, about 18% of students eat school breakfast.

Why is participation so low?

There are numerous reasons why school breakfast participation is so low in California. First and foremost is the problem that about 1,200 California schools don't even offer the breakfast program.

What would AB1916 do?

AB1916, authored by Assembly Member Bonnie Garcia (R-Cathedral City), would require all schools that qualify for the "Severe Need" reimbursement rate to offer school breakfast, unless they demonstrated that doing so would cause financial hardship.

What is "Severe Need" reimbursement?

The federal government offers a higher rate of breakfast reimbursement—\$1.51 compared to \$1.27—to schools that serve at least 40% of their school lunches to low-income children. Why? Because the federal government believes that once schools pass the 40% threshold they have a special responsibility to serve both breakfast and lunch.

Why should California require “severe need” schools to offer breakfast?

Health and education are two of the “big-ticket” items in California’s budget. It simply doesn’t make sense to undermine these investments. School breakfast is a proven contributor to good health and strong academic performance. Why miss this opportunity to supplement the state’s investments in education and health with money and support from the federal government?

Why is a mandate needed?

Schools have had the option to join the School Breakfast Program for more than 40 years. Although numerous organizations—including the state and federal government and advocacy groups—continue to provide technical assistance to schools on the value and feasibility of school breakfast, this school-by-school approach is too slow. For some schools, it’s not an active decision not to have breakfast, but a passive decision to retain the status quo. Kids shouldn’t suffer because of adult inaction.

Does the bill allow schools that just can’t make breakfast work to opt out?

Yes, schools that demonstrate a financial hardship from serving school breakfast (because, for example, they have an extremely small number of students) are exempt from this requirement.

How does this bill fit in with California’s Obesity Prevention efforts?

Research is beginning to demonstrate the eating a healthy breakfast is an effective obesity-prevention strategy. Kids who eat breakfast are less likely to be overweight than those who don’t. These findings shouldn’t be a surprise, since school breakfasts include more fruits, vegetables and calcium—all of which have a role in weight management—than other sources of breakfast. Moreover, USDA has set nutrition standards for calories, fat, saturated fat, protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium and iron for school breakfast and, thanks to the Governor and Legislature, California now pays school districts 10 cents more per meal if they increase the amount of fruits and vegetables they serve with breakfast. School breakfasts should keep improving, but for now, research shows that they are frequently the most nutritious morning meal option kids have.

Won’t schools lose money on breakfast?

School breakfast can and does make financial sense in all types of schools. In addition to federal and state reimbursement, California also provides more than \$1 million a year in start-up funds for schools newly offering or expanding their breakfast programs. School districts may also set fees for reduced-price students up to 30 cents per meal; there are no limits for what districts may charge full-pay students and staff.

If breakfast is so great, why aren’t all schools doing it?

Given the complexity of education policy, schools today may not realize how affordable and beneficial the School Breakfast Program really is. It’s up to the State Legislature and the Governor to focus their attention on the fact that good nutrition and good academics are strongly linked and should be a priority.