

## **Policy Recommendations**

### *School Districts*

#### Implement Breakfast Programs in All Schools , Particularly in “Severe Need” Schools

All school districts in California should offer breakfast at **all** their schools. Approximately 1,500 schools in California currently fail to offer breakfast to their students. Many of these schools contain significant populations of low-income students; in more than 500 schools, known as severe-need schools, well over 40 percent of the students participating in the school’s lunch program are from low-income homes. Federal reimbursement for breakfast served in severe need schools is 26 cents higher than the regular reimbursement rate. This higher rate for severe need schools helps to ensure the financial feasibility of breakfast programs. The benefits of breakfast – for academic performance, health and well-being -- are too important to be withheld from these children.

#### Continue California Fresh Start at the District

School breakfast delivers many nutrition benefits. Calcium from the milk may be the most conspicuous, but other nutrients provided by breakfast are essential to good health, as well. Fresh fruit, for example, is widely acknowledged to be an excellent obesity-prevention strategy in addition to its other healthful properties. California Fresh Start has brought the benefits of fresh fruit to many school districts, but now the Legislature has withheld funding for the program’s continuation. Until state funds resume, districts should continue to provide fresh fruit in their breakfast menus, relying upon the savings from eliminating servings of juice as a source of at least most of the additional fruit – a nutrition win-win.

#### Implement Breakfast Options to Expand Participation

A recent report by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), *School Breakfast in America’s Big Cities*, confirms that the districts that make breakfast a part of the school day, such as by serving breakfast in the classroom or during a mid-morning break, have the highest participation rates. Conversely, districts that only offer breakfast in the cafeteria before school struggle to serve sufficient numbers of students.<sup>1</sup> All schools should identify and implement the appropriate option for their circumstances – classroom breakfast, second chance breakfast, grab ‘n go, breakfast on the bus, or some other variation – designed to appeal to the most students.

All these various breakfast options operate much more easily when the meal is universally free. In addition, as the recent FRAC report indicates, expansion of participation almost always requires that the meal be universally free. For these two reasons, school districts should carefully consider implementing Provision 2.

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<sup>1</sup> *School Breakfast in America’s Big Cities*. Food Research and Action Center, August 2007.  
<http://www.frac.org/pdf/urbanbreakfast07.pdf>

## Apply for State Start-Up and Expansion Grants

All schools starting a breakfast program and all schools implementing a breakfast option to expand participation should apply for state start-up and expansion grants at each site. School districts should avail themselves of CDE's \$15,000 per site startup and expansion grants to make sure they have the right equipment and do the right marketing to start a new breakfast program or to implement one of the breakfast options.

## Encourage Active Student and Parent Participation in Meal Design and Service

Consumer/student participation has repeatedly been shown to be indispensable to successful school meal participation. Given the conspicuous underutilization of the breakfast program, advice, guidance and buy in from students and parents are particularly important to close the participation gap. The best way to do this is for districts to survey parents of elementary students and directly survey middle and high school students to identify their dietary habits and preferences for menu items. This is only one of the recommendations contained in CDE's *School Nutrition By Design*<sup>2</sup> – an excellent compilation of strategies to improve nutrition quality in school food – and, of course, local school wellness policy committees provide a tailor-made forum for this sort of student/parent involvement in meal planning an service.

## *Nutrition Services Division (NSD)*

CDE's Nutrition Services Division has undertaken an ambitious training program including numerous workshops across the state on breakfast's role in closing the achievement gap. These efforts should be supported and sustained. Among the recommendations listed in the next section for the State Legislature is one to increase funding for many of the activities NSD undertakes to work on breakfast. The following recommendations in this section for NSD keeps this recommendation in mind.

## Intervene in Poor Performing Districts

NSD should work with districts to start-up and improve breakfast by providing resources and technical assistance. Of particular concern should be those districts not serving breakfast and those with breakfast participation below the statewide average of number of students eating breakfast for every 100 who eat lunch. The experience of districts in California and around the country demonstrates that increasing participation is contingent upon incorporating breakfast into the academic day. The use of the various breakfast options tailored to each district's unique demographics and circumstances is necessary to ensure increased participation. NSD can offer trainings, materials, and other forms of technical assistance to districts to improve breakfast.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/schnutrtn071206.pdf>

## SMI Review

In 1995, USDA launched the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) to improve the nutrition quality of school lunches and breakfasts. SMI nutrition standards require school meals to comply with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans for children over two. The SMI regulations enhance the existing nutrition requirements for these programs and provide schools with a variety of alternatives for planning menus.<sup>3</sup> In addition, SMI includes programs and resources to support schools and school food authorities (SFAs) in their efforts to improve school meals.

NSD should evaluate breakfast programs using School Meal Initiative regulations - regulations that represent stricter nutrition standards than are currently in place. In addition to conducting these reviews regularly, the results should be made available for public information and use.

## SHAPE Menu Planning

Shaping Health as Partners in Education (SHAPE) is a menu planning system that places a greater emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains. With this emphasis, SHAPE also falls in line with the Dietary Guidelines as well as with recommendations arising from the preponderance of academic research. NSD should continue their current activities of working with districts on breakfast by incorporating SHAPE menu planning standards into breakfast.

## *California Legislature*

### Breakfast Mandate for "Severe Need" Schools

"Severe need" schools are those with the greatest percentage of low-income students. Because low-income children are already more likely to under-perform academically, to be overweight or obese, and to suffer worse health outcomes than their wealthier peers, these students stand to gain the most from breakfast – in terms of improved academic performance, enhanced nutrition, and better health. Children attending severe need schools deserve the opportunity to consume a nutritious breakfast to start their school day off right. Not only do students benefit from access to school breakfasts, schools and school districts can raise their test scores and can bring in potentially large sums of federal and state reimbursement. The federal government reimburses severe need schools \$1.61 and \$1.31 per free or reduced price breakfast served, respectively – 26 cents higher than the non-severe need school meals. This reimbursement is in addition to the state's providing \$0.21 for every free and reduced-price breakfast (with the recent passage of SB 80.)

By mandating breakfast in all severe need schools, California can take a big first step in closing the achievement gap. However, safeguards, such as waivers or exemptions, should be put in place for those unique situations where some schools, despite the higher reimbursements and start-up funds, still cannot make breakfast work financially. Another option is to stagger implementation so that

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<sup>3</sup> *The Road to SMI Success*. Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, January 2007. [http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/smi\\_intro.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/smi_intro.pdf)

larger districts implement first, followed by medium sized districts, and finally by small districts. With staggered implementation, smaller districts can learn from the practices of larger ones.

### Resume Funding for the California Fresh Start Program

In 2005, the California Legislature authorized the California Fresh Start Program as a pilot to provide \$18.2 million to increase fresh fruit and vegetable consumption in school breakfasts. This pilot program provides an extra ten cents in reimbursement per meal to schools for offering fresh produce. Preliminary versions of an evaluation being conducted by the Center for Weight and Health, at the University of California, Berkeley, found that the program was successful in increasing fresh fruit offerings - by nearly 300 percent. Moreover, many of these offerings were California grown. However, the legislation which authorized this program did not guarantee continued funding and the Legislature did not reauthorize funding for the 2007-2008 academic year. A testament to the popularity of this program is that many school food service directors around the state are going to attempt to continue providing their students with additional servings of fresh fruit despite the lack of continued funding.

With growing concerns around overweight and obesity in children, this program can have a profound impact on influencing the dietary habits of California's children. By providing students with the means to eat healthfully, school meals can make great strides to improving their nutrition and health. A recent literature review found that increased fruit and vegetable consumption has consistently been demonstrated by academic research to help combat obesity and maintain a healthy weight.<sup>4</sup>

Although the recent increase in reimbursements resulting from SB 80 might be thought to compensate for the loss of funds from Fresh Start, there is no guarantee that these higher state reimbursements will be spent on fresh fruits and vegetables. With Fresh Start, there is a stream of funding dedicated to providing healthy options for children. The Legislature should resume funding for Fresh Start at the earliest possible time.

### Requiring SHAPE Menu Planning

Because the SHAPE menu planning system places a greater emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains, the meals resulting from this system should adhere better to the Dietary Guidelines as well as with generally accepted dietary recommendations from nutrition experts. Therefore, the Legislature should require NSD to develop SHAPE standards for breakfast and require school districts to implement SHAPE.

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<sup>4</sup> Ritchie LD, et al. "Preventing Obesity: What Should We Eat?". *California Agriculture*. Volume 61, Number 3, 2007.

## Expand Funding for Start-Up and Expansion Grants

The state should appropriate more funding for start-up and expansions grants to schools for breakfast programs. NSD should be directed to accord priority to schools that plan to start a new breakfast program, with priority to severe need schools, or implement a breakfast option.

## Require SMI Review for Breakfast

California should require that SMI reviewers evaluate school breakfasts and that reviewers incorporate obesity prevention criteria into their screenings of meals. These reviews should be released for public use at regular intervals. In order to accomplish this, the Legislature should appropriate sufficient resources for planning and conducting these reviews.

## *Congress*

With the reauthorization of many child nutrition programs in 2009, the federal government has the opportunity to review and improve the School Breakfast Program. Congress should consider the following recommendations.

## Federal Commodities for the School Breakfast Program

Federal commodities provide much-needed resources for many school food service directors around the state to complete their menus. School food service directors find commodities indispensable to maintaining fiscal solvency. Although schools can currently use commodities for both breakfast and lunch, the amount of funds schools receive to purchase commodities is based on participation in lunch, and the funding makes it difficult to spread the commodities over both meals.

Congress should establish a separate commodity entitlement for the breakfast program, with food items appropriate for that meal, with an emphasis on fresh fruit and vegetables, which might be acquired through the DOD Fresh program. By establishing separate commodity entitlements for breakfast and lunch, directors will be better able to use federal commodities for both programs allowing many districts to be able to begin or sustain breakfast programs while also remaining financially responsible.

## Provision 2

Provision 2 is a financing option that allows school districts serving all students at no charge to avoid keeping track of free, reduced-price, and paid student categories in order to claim meal reimbursement. This administrative streamlining is particularly useful in making classroom breakfast and second chance breakfast easy to operate. One complaint with Provision 2 has been that the base year is difficult and costly: schools are required to serve all their students without charge, but federal and state reimbursements are low until meal applications are submitted and students are certified for free or reduced-price reimbursement. In addition, schools are burdened by unusually

heavy costs in the base year because they customarily have to actively solicit students and their families to complete and submit meal applications. To promote classroom breakfast and the other options that expand participation, Congress should encourage schools to implement Provision 2 by providing one-time-only grants to schools to cover these base-year costs.

### Eliminate the Reduced-Price Tier

Districts around the state and around the country have been eliminating the reduced-price category for school meals. By eliminating the reduced-price level, districts can expand eligibility for free meals to children in families earning less than 185 percent of the FPL. This results in a win-win situation for students and their families and for school districts. For many cash-strapped families, even the minimal reduced price charge can represent too high a hurdle to participate in the program. Moreover, the reduced-price charge may pose a perceived (and sometimes real) barrier to participation in the meal programs. By removing the reduced-price fee, districts can encourage greater participation in the free program. For school districts, the advantage lies in increased federal reimbursement as well as a reduction in the administrative and paperwork burdens of administering the three-tiers of pricing (free, reduced, and paid).

### Universal Classroom Breakfast

Experiences across the country confirm that the best route to increasing participation in breakfast programs is to incorporate breakfast into the academic day. By providing a quick, convenient, and nutritious breakfast in the classroom, students are able to consume a healthy meal while not disrupting their usual academic schedule. Federal grants and technical assistance should be provided to states and districts for scaling up classroom breakfasts to achieve universal classroom breakfast. When combined with Provision 2, universal breakfast is a feasible option for many districts.