



California Legislature Approves Additional \$80M for Emergency School Meals *USDA Extends Free Meals for Kids Through December 31, 2020*

August 31, 2020 (Sacramento) - California public school districts received welcome news on Monday, after state lawmakers approved additional funding for emergency school meals. In the same vein, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently heeded calls from school food service advocates across the country, and extended important waivers which give schools the flexibility to serve free meals to all children throughout the fall.

About 97% of California students are starting the school year with distance learning. The Center for Ecoliteracy and the Office of Kat Taylor have responded to this new reality by advocating to give communities funding and flexibility as they navigate the new challenges of providing meals to children.

“State and federal lawmakers clearly recognize that while the pandemic may create uncertainties, one thing is certain, hungry children must be fed,” said Kat Taylor, Founder of TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation. “The short-term extension of the USDA waiver, as well as the additional state funding, are important steps, but we must consider the entire 2020–21 school year. We look forward to continuing our work with legislative leadership at the state and federal level to ensure all children have access to healthy school meals during and after this public health crisis.”

Alongside other advocates, a bipartisan group of 45 California legislators, as well as a coalition of over 1,300 organizations, including the Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, Eat .Learn. Play. Foundation, Good Samaritan Family Resource Center, Western Center on Law and Poverty, No Kid Hungry, TomKat Ranch, and the Office of Kat Taylor, urged the USDA to issue these waivers as soon as possible. The USDA’s action comes just 11 days after Secretary Sonny Perdue dismissed the opportunity to extend the waivers by punting to Congress in an August 20 letter he sent to federal lawmakers and after many school districts had already started back for the year.

At the onset of the pandemic in March, the USDA agreed to feed all children under 18 years old via waivers set to expire when the school year resumed or at the end of August. On a parallel track, the California Legislature recognized in June that supplemental funding was critically needed to help cover the additional costs and losses of revenue for schools, associated with COVID-19 food service. The \$112 million approved by the legislature earlier this year was crucial, but not nearly enough. This additional \$80 million allocation is necessary to extend

much-needed funding that provides school districts with an extra \$0.75 for every breakfast and lunch that they served during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic from mid-March through August 2020.

However, the additional funding does not address the entirety of school districts' deficits or the support they will need in the new school year. An August survey of 39 school districts, representing 800,000 students, by the Center for Ecoliteracy revealed that 92% of school nutrition departments are experiencing budget deficits at the start of the school year. If the patterns observed with this small sample of districts hold true, the Center for Ecoliteracy estimates that school food departments across the state could be facing a combined \$325M budget deficit for the first six months of the pandemic.

“In light of these sobering projections,” said Adam Kessleman, Executive Director at the Center for Ecoliteracy, “we are pleased to see California legislators responding swiftly with this additional funding. Combined with essential USDA waivers, the additional funding will help ensure access to consistent, healthy meals during a time of compounding crises.”

The waivers and additional funding come at a time when families are facing job losses, lapsed unemployment benefits, and pending evictions. Many parents report that without easy access to school meals, they would not be able to feed their children. Student nutrition has tremendous effects on educational achievement and quality of life outcomes later in life. Lack of access to healthy food is exacerbated by socio-economic status and is most prevalent in low-income communities of color.

The pandemic has shed light on the very real disparities that exist in health and food-access conditions across socio-economic and racial lines. School food is one of many strategies that can improve equity and long-term health outcomes for all students regardless of race or economic status.

About the Office of Kat Taylor

Kat Taylor is active in a variety of social enterprises, public benefit and philanthropic ventures. Concurrently, she serves as Co-founder and Board Chair of Beneficial State Bank, a Community Development Financial Institution, whose mission is to bring beneficial banking to under-resourced communities in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner. Taylor is also the owner of TomKat Ranch, a cattle ranch that uses environmentally beneficial practices and research to demonstrate, inspire, and teach the adoption of regenerative agriculture. Taylor serves and has served on many nonprofit boards, including CuriOdyssey, Ecotrust, Good Samaritan Family Resource Center, the Harvard Board of Overseers, Insight Prison Project, KQED, ProPublica and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

About Center for Ecoliteracy

The Center for Ecoliteracy is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to cultivating education for sustainable living in K–12 schools. Their California Food for California Kids® initiative builds the

capacity and commitment of school districts to provide all students with fresh, locally-grown food and educate them about how their food choices can make a difference to their communities and to the planet.