



School Meals For All Can Strengthen Farm to School Coalition Recognizes Inequities in Local Food Production and Access During Black History Month

Sacramento, CA (Feb 10, 2022) – As California prepares to make good on its historic pledge to provide 6.2 million students with free school meals, a group of legislators and advocates are calling for a fully-funded commitment to strengthen connections between schools and California’s socially disadvantaged and climate-smart farmers so that students have increased access to California-grown, freshly-prepared meals.

“Universal free school meals for all is a game-changer for families, especially for those who benefit from the program, but previously didn’t qualify due to our state’s high cost of living,” said Assemblymember Kevin McCarty, who sits on the California Legislative Black Caucus. “Providing these meals will ensure every student is well-fed and focused on learning—setting them up for a successful educational journey. I am thankful we have a budget that makes this all possible.”

Black and Latinx families continue to suffer from higher levels of hunger than white families, while many small-scale farmers and producers of color have struggled to get their products to markets due to pandemic-related supply chain disruptions. By strengthening connections between small, socially disadvantaged farmers and school

districts, California can increase resiliency, cultivate a more equitable food system, and promote access to nutritious food.

“For years, I have focused on creating a school garden program to teach children who live in urban areas about the importance of growing food and eating healthy meals from local farmers,” said Assemblywoman Luz Rivas (D-San Fernando Valley). “In districts like mine that are food deserts, it’s especially important to reconnect our students with the importance of farming and the associated health benefits of eating locally grown food. I was proud to have worked on our universal school meals program last year, and I am looking forward to working with my colleagues in the Legislature to ensure the meals we provide to our students are California-grown and healthy.”

Roughly 80% of California farms operate on less than 180 acres, and according to the USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, about 20% of California’s agricultural producers are socially disadvantaged: African American, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hispanic, Asian-American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander. These small-scale farmers are key but often-marginalized players in the food supply chain. By connecting small, disadvantaged farmers with school districts across the state through programs like Farm to School, and with recent developments such as USDA allowing for California to increase the school micro-purchasing threshold, Schools Meals for All can further build upon farm-to-school efforts to incentivize new market opportunities and capacity building.

“We invest in our children’s development and future with what we feed them,” said Assemblymember Robert Rivas. “Locally-sourced food and farm-to-school programs, as a part of School Meals for All, provide our children the nutrients they need to be well-fed, healthy, and ready to learn!”

The School Meals for All Coalition champions investments that boost rural and agricultural economies, help mitigate climate change, fight child hunger, strengthen regional school food supply chains, and support school nutrition workers.

Beginning in the 2022-23 school year, all public schools will be required to offer two free meals per day to all 6.2 million students, regardless of income. Gov. Newsom’s budget builds on this School Meals for All commitment by proposing \$480 million in additional investments, including doubling Farm to School Grant Program funding, and \$450 million over three years to upgrade school kitchens and support school nutrition professionals in serving more freshly prepared, California-grown meals.

“California went to the head of the line as the first state to guarantee that all of our public school students are offered two free meals a day. But we’re not done. The Free School Meals for All campaign is committed to ensuring that students have access to nutritious, local, and sustainably grown food,” said Sen. Nancy Skinner, author of California’s Free School Meals for All Act. “One tool to achieve that goal is strengthening farm-to-school partnerships between California’s historically disadvantaged and climate-smart farmers.”

TomKat Ranch, Office of Kat Taylor, Center for Ecoliteracy, NextGen California, and the California Association of Food Banks led the 2021 School Meals For All Coalition, with over 200 organizations advocating to make free school meals available to all K–12 public school students in California.

What People Are Saying

“Our collective vision for both equity and regenerative agriculture in California must include school food as a central, catalyzing piece in the discussion. By investing in School Meals For All, California can seize the opportunity to positively address some of the most pressing food system issues of the day - market access and equity for BIPOC and California farmers, health and nutrition for all of our students, climate-smart agriculture, and shared prosperity for front line food service workers.”

– Chef Brenda Ruiz, President, **Sacramento Food Policy Council**

"Scratch-cooking allows us to put our personal touch into every meal served and ensure our students receive food created out of love. We want our students to be properly nourished and supported for their academics, and as they prepare for their journey into the world."

– Eric Span, Director of Nutrition Services, **Sweetwater Union High School District**

“During the pandemic, school meal programs provided essential support to California farmers. At Palm Springs Unified, we fostered a partnership with farmers in the Coachella Valley, helping to keep them in business and keep students fed with fresh, local foods. At Oakland Unified, building relationships with local farmers will allow us to be resilient to supply chain issues and serve fresh, local school meals. Now is the time for the state to support these connections—it’s a win-win for everyone.”

– Stephanie Bruce, Senior Executive Director of Nutrition Services, **Oakland Unified School District**

“Time is of the essence as California looks to make good on its historic commitment to provide quality School Meals For All, thanks to the leadership shown by Governor Gavin Newsom and the State Legislature, especially Senator Nancy Skinner and Assemblymembers Kevin McCarty and Luz Rivas. We look forward to continuing to work with Governor Newsom and the Legislature to ensure school administrators and farmers have what they need to provide free, locally-grown school meals to all

students.”

– Kat Taylor, Cofounder, **TomKat Ranch** and Principal, **Office of Kat Taylor**

“California is leading the way for our country to make healthy school meals a part of every child’s educational day. School districts in the California Food for California Kids® Network serve 330 million school meals each year. Their top priority is ensuring free school meals made with fresh, local ingredients are available to all students, permanently. Investments in school meal programs are an investment in children’s health and learning.”

– Zenobia Barlow, Interim Executive Director, **Center for Ecoliteracy**

“We applaud Governor Newsom’s prioritization of investments critical to helping California continue to provide universal free school meals for all students. As the pandemic continues, hunger levels in our K-12 school populations remain incredibly high, and this additional funding will not only reduce food insecurity among our students, but also improve equity and access issues. We look forward to working with the Governor and the Legislature to ensure schools provide more healthy, freshly prepared, climate-smart meals.”

– Tiffany Germain, California Research and Policy Advisor, **NextGen Policy**

“No child should go hungry, and food banks know firsthand child hunger spikes when school meals aren’t available. We are very grateful to Senator Skinner for continuing her national leadership pushing to ensure children are fed not only when school is in session, but also during out-of-school times when children miss out on school meals. It is also critical to improve school meal access by streamlining the process for families and schools to make it easier to apply.”

– Itzúl Gutierrez, Senior Policy Advocate, **California Association of Food Banks**

“With food supply challenges impacting school meals throughout the nation, TomKat Ranch and our coalition of regenerative ranches are pleased to provide climate-smart, grass-fed beef to several Northern California schools to help them meet their protein procurement needs while also supporting rural economies by purchasing direct from local producers.”

– Kathy Webster, Food Advocacy Manager, **TomKat Ranch**

“School Meals for All sets our children up for success. They receive the nutrition they need to flourish, the exposure to where it comes from, and the education to continue working towards a food system and planet where future generations can thrive.”

– Nora LaTorre, CEO, **Eat REAL**

“We grow more than enough food to feed everybody but the problem comes with the distribution of those foods as well as the power structures.”

– Nelson Hawkins, Founder, **We Grow Urban Farms (Sacramento)**

“Free school meals help working- and low-income parents save money on food so that they will have more for rent.”

– Susan Park, Executive Director, **Asian Americans for Housing and Environmental Justice (Los Angeles)**