

# Officials Foresee Hungry Students If Budget Is Cut

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Proposed budget cuts in school nutrition programs may double or even triple the cost of a school lunch for nearly 1 million California public school children, state officials predict.

Officials fear cutbacks may mean children will go hungry at school because their parents cannot afford the price of a lunch, or because they are too embarrassed to accept the free lunches that the Reagan administration proposes to offer only to the "truly needy." At worst, education officials fear poor children may not come to school at all if forced to stand in cafeteria "bread lines" if they want to eat.

Based on calculations by the Office of Child Nutrition Services in the state Department of Education, the truly needy under Reagan's proposal would include any child whose annual family income (for a family of four) falls below \$10,270 — or about half of the nearly 2 million California children participating in the school lunch program.

The budget cuts proposed by Reagan and Gov. Brown would eliminate an estimated \$43 million in federal and state support for child nutrition programs, primarily school lunches, including \$30 million at the federal level and \$13 million in state programs. The cutbacks are aimed primarily at the nearly 1 million students paying full or reduced prices for school lunches.

According to state figures, the cost of a reduced-price lunch would more than triple to 65 cents, while the cost to a student paying full price would nearly double from 75 cents to more than \$1.30.

Each day in California, state officials estimate, 1.9 million students eat school lunches. Of those lunches, 61 percent are served for free or at reduced prices, using a system of confidentially marked "meal tickets" to avoid embarrassment. That percentage is up 3 percent over last year.



Bee photo  
**L. GENE WHITE**  
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"The program has grown, and the percentage of free and reduced-price meals has increased," said L. Gene White, director of the state Office of Child Nutrition Services. "In some rural and inner-city areas, it is the only meal they get."

In a report to the state Board of Education last week, state nutrition experts cited clear ties between school performance and good nutrition.

"The Legislature should reaffirm its commitment of enhancing a child's learning capabilities by meeting the nutritional needs of all children," the report concluded. "This should be accomplished by making adequate funding available for schools and child development programs which provide nutritious

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meals to children through school food programs."

The department also recommended improved nutritional standards, already surprisingly high, according to the report, in the food available for sale on school premises. Vending machine and snack bar offerings, particularly in high schools, were a matter of some concern to state nutritionists, who also recommended more teaching about good nutrition in the schools.

State board members declined, however, to urge more funding — or to halt proposed cutbacks. Instead, they said financial constraints on the public schools may preclude subsidized lunches for all children.

White has predicted the equivalent of "bread lines for poor children" if the school lunch cutbacks are approved, and only "needy" children will eat the school lunches. "The kids will be embarrassed and

*'The kids might not show up for school at all'*

they might not show up for school at all," she said.

She also said some cafeterias may be forced to close because local districts cannot afford to operate food services without subsidies.

In the report prepared for the department and the board by a research team from San Jose State University, the eating habits of students in 299 California elementary, intermediate and high schools throughout the state were studied. Overall, the team found that "the foods available to students during school hours are generally of good nutritional quality," and urged increased support for the school lunch program.

Food in elementary schools, which offer less variety (and no vending machines or snack bars) was found to be of the highest nutritional quality, with a decline in quality in intermediate and especially high schools.

Educators have long contended that students who eat well perform well in school. Although they make no clear cause-and-effect analysis, some point to the low achievement test scores of 12th-graders — whose test scores have been persistently plummeting in California schools, while the scores of elementary school students have shown a slight increase in recent achievement testing.

"There is no way we can state a direct relationship (between nutrition and test scores)," White said, "but it's an interesting analogy."

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According to the nutrition study, "more sandwiches, fast foods and snack items were served at high schools than at other school levels," with a corresponding decrease in the quality of students' nutritional intake. At the intermediate level, food offerings included candy, soft drinks, chips, ice cream and other snacks. In the elementary schools, by contrast, such items were nonexistent or limited.

"In general, as grade level increased, nutritional adequacy declined," the report concluded.

Student intake of salt and refined sugar exceeded recommended dietary maximums, the report said, particularly among high school students. Although 11th-grade girls were found to consume the fewest calories, they ate the highest amount of refined sugar.

Among female high school students generally, the study found they had the "lowest caloric, iron and vitamin A intake" of all students in the sample.

The study urged "increased support" for standard cafeteria-style school lunches, "found to be the most nutritious source of food on campus at every school level." Suggesting more student participation in food planning and preparation, the research team also urged "better training of food service personnel to ensure the preparation and serving of high quality, attractive food."

The team also suggested more attention be paid to the quality of food in high school snack bars and, especially, in vending machines.

"Over 50 percent of high schools sampled had vending machines, almost all of which were unrelated to the school food service," the study concluded. "Foods from vending machines had low nutritional ratings because such machines frequently offered only soft drinks and candy."

The researchers found little ethnic differences in the nutrition of students included in the random sample, although the team said the random sample tended to reflect a "predominantly suburban, middle-class character." The only significant ethnic finding, according to the report, was that "in general, at each grade level those with Spanish surnames had a lower nutrient intake" during a 24-hour period.

The team urged further nutritional research among students in predominantly minority, urban schools — those expected to be hardest hit if the school lunch cutbacks are adopted.

Many schools also offer government-subsidized breakfast programs, and state education officials expect those programs to be similarly affected by cutbacks. According to state records, 65.9 million breakfasts were served in California schools, 80 percent of them free and 5 percent at reduced prices.