

## SENATE THIRD READING

SB 411 (Pérez)

As Amended September 02, 2025

Majority vote

**SUMMARY**

Requires the California Department of Education (CDE), with support from the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), to develop and provide a statewide web application on the internet enabling families to submit federally required information, in adherence with specified requirements, to determine eligibility for school meal programs beginning with the application for summer 2028 benefits, contingent upon an appropriation.

**Major Provisions**

- 1) Requires the CDE, with support from the CDSS, to comply with federal regulations by developing and providing families with a statewide application that is made available through a single statewide website that enables families to submit federally required information, contingent upon an appropriation made by the Legislature for the express purpose of implementation of the website.
- 2) Requires the statewide application to adhere to all of the following:
  - a) Is made available with sufficient time for families to apply for summer of 2028 benefits;
  - b) Has the ability to, upon completion of the application, be routed to the applicant family's LEA to determine Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (Summer EBT) Program (SUN Bucks in California) eligibility;
  - c) Meets the requirements for CDE's new student benefit form that is in an alternative electronic format that meets the requirements and purposes of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), and also the federal requirements to determine eligibility for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), and SUN Bucks;
  - d) Is limited, with regard to information requested, to minimum requirements under federal law and guidance; and,
  - e) Is translated with accessible language into at least all threshold languages that are required for the CalFresh program.
- 3) Exempts the statewide application from the Project Approval Lifecycle of the Department of Technology.
- 4) Requires, upon request, a school district, COE, or charter school to make an electronic device available for families to use to access the statewide application.
- 5) Clarifies that no online application for free or reduced-price meals shall be made available online or made accessible online by a school district, COE, or a school food authority if the online application allows for the information provided by an applicant to be used by a private entity for any purpose not related to the administration of a school food program, or if the

online application requires an applicant to waive any right or to create a user account in order to submit the application, to include charter schools.

- 6) Clarifies that school districts, county offices of education (COEs), and charter schools are included in the current requirement for the CDE to follow federal guidelines and regulations to maximize flexibility for local educational agencies (LEAs) to distribute summer meals through noncongregate distributions.

## COMMENTS

*School Meal Programs.* Federal nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program support LEAs serving meals to students during the school day. LEAs participating in these programs receive a per-meal reimbursement rate which varies by student based on household income (commonly referred to as eligibility for free- or reduced-price meals). Additionally, the state supplements federal funds for these programs with additional state funds for each meal served.

AB 130 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 44, Statutes of 2021, establishes California's Universal Meal Program which requires every school district, COE, and charter school to provide two nutritionally adequate meals to any student who requests them, regardless of income eligibility. LEAs must participate in the NSLP and School Breakfast program in order to receive reimbursement from the state for these meals. However, federal funds are provided only for meals served to income-eligible students, which necessitates LEAs to still collect family income information for purposes of federal reimbursement. Additionally, because the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) provides supplemental funding to LEAs partially based on their concentration of low-income students, defined as students eligible for free- or reduced-price meals, accurate reporting of this information has significant fiscal implications for LEAs.

*SUN Bucks and the Universal Benefits Application.* Established by the federal government in 2023, the SUN Bucks, or Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program provides permanent EBT benefits to students over the summer when school is not in session. Eligible students receive an EBT card with \$120 to purchase eligible groceries. The CDSS administers the SUN Bucks program in collaboration with the CDE.

While existing federal requirements allow some LEAs to receive reimbursement for students without each student individually identified as eligible (known as Community Eligible Provision or Provision 2 schools), the SUN Bucks program requires individual student eligibility verification to receive the benefit. This misalignment across federal meal programs created the need for a universal benefits application (UBA), which the Legislature, through SB 153 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review), Chapter 38, Statutes of 2024, required CDE to develop to meet the purposes of eligibility for supplemental LCFF funding and federal meal programs, including SUN Bucks. Recently, the CDE completed and published the UBA, however, federal regulations did not require the UBA to be an interactive web-based tool and it exists as a downloadable form on CDE's website for LEA use, translated into several languages. This bill requires the CDE, with support from the CDSS, to develop and provide a UBA that allows families to complete and submit the required information completely online.

### According to the Author

"California has largely led in nationwide efforts to expand access to school meals for students. The state's leadership on this front includes action in 2022 to become the first state in the nation

to provide free school meals, regardless of income eligibility. Complementary to uniform school meals, California enacted efforts to adopt the SUN Bucks program in 2023. The SUN Bucks program is a summer based program where students are provided an EBT card with \$120 during the summer to purchase eligible groceries from eligible providers.

Although California has undertaken tremendous efforts to provide and expand access to school meals, there are still existing gaps in accessibility on three major fronts. First, while California enrolled 5 million eligible students for SUN Bucks, there are still approximately 1.8 million eligible children yet to apply due because these students are not directly determined and eligible and enrolled. The second factor contributing to gap in access to school meals is reservations from families to apply for meals if their student's school is using a third party platform application. There are examples of third party based applications collecting sensitive information, which can be sold or compromised without notification.

SB 411 addresses the aforementioned gaps in school meal access by creating an accessible and secure year-round child nutrition safety net program by: establishing a statewide website for families to apply for SUN Bucks; requiring school meal applications to include the SUN Bucks application; codifying key child privacy protections to protect personal data; as well as supporting school nutrition professional opportunities to work additional hours providing on-site meal options during school breaks and emergency closures."

### **Arguments in Support**

The California Teachers Association writes, "CTA also believes nutrition has a direct effect on a student's ability to learn. School breakfast, lunch and other nutrition programs should focus on quality food with a healthy balance of nutrients and that all students should have access to sufficient quantities of quality, affordable and nutritious food. The opportunity to participate in nutritious breakfast, lunch and other school nutrition programs shall be uniformly available in all public schools including charter schools every day that school is in session. By requiring the CDE to coordinate with the DSS to comply with federal Summer EBT laws, this bill will help to streamline the process, making it easier for students and their families to receive the benefits when students are not in school and do not have the same access to food. This ensures our students are healthier and happier during Summer School and outside school hours."

### **Arguments in Opposition**

None on file

## **FISCAL COMMENTS**

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee:

- 1) One-time General Fund costs of approximately \$3.2 million in the first year of implementation, and \$2.8 million ongoing, for the CDE to acquire an additional 12 staff and information technology resources necessary to develop and maintain the data system to collect income eligibility applications from families.
- 2) Minor and absorbable workload for the CDSS to support the CDE in developing the application website.

**VOTES****SENATE FLOOR: 38-0-2**

**YES:** Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Jones, Laird, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Niello, Ochoa Bogh, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Valladares, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

**ABS, ABST OR NV:** Limón, Reyes

**ASM EDUCATION: 9-0-0**

**YES:** Muratsuchi, Hoover, Addis, Alvarez, Bonta, Castillo, Garcia, Lowenthal, Patel

**ASM HUMAN SERVICES: 7-0-0**

**YES:** Lee, Castillo, Calderon, Elhawary, Jackson, Celeste Rodriguez, Tangipa

**ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 11-0-4**

**YES:** Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Ahrens, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache

**ABS, ABST OR NV:** Sanchez, Dixon, Ta, Tangipa

**UPDATED**

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