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## SOAPBOX

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# 3 actions that can ensure kids are nourished and ready for school

BY VALERIE RUELAS AND GEORGE MANALO-LECLAIR

*Special to The Bee*



A parent's first instinct is to protect their children. Try as we might, we can't always keep our kids safe from injury, keep them from getting sick, or even shield them from the ugliest aspects of our recent presidential election.

The protective powers of low-income parents are especially challenged. Just over 2 million children in California live in a "food insecure" household that struggles to put food on the table. And try as they might, parents in these households are not always able to protect their children from the most damaging aspects of hunger and food insecurity.

Food insecurity can have significant negative impacts on children's physical health, on their mental health and on their academic achievement. So it probably comes as no surprise that many parents take steps to protect children from such harm.

One California mom's story has stuck with us: At meal times, she would pour herself a large glass of water. Then another. She'd keep drinking until she felt full. She wanted to feel full so she wasn't tempted to take food from her kids.

Many parents employ similar strategies, reducing their own food intake or buying cheaper, less nutritious food. All in the hope of protecting children from the stress and consequences of food insecurity.

But research shows that such shielding strategies are not always successful. Children are aware of their family's struggles for food – even if the parents don't think they are. And some children employ some of the same coping strategies. Teens especially are aware and active – as they seek to protect younger siblings, attempt to hide the family's struggles, or try to earn money at the expense of their studies.

How can we support parents' efforts to provide for their children and free children from the stress and consequences of food insecurity?

According to the national nonprofit Share our Strength, 62 percent of America's teachers regularly see kids who come to school hungry because they aren't getting enough to eat at home. There are three high-impact actions we can take right now to ensure kids are nourished and ready to learn:

First, we can act to give parents of students in charter schools that same confidence that parents in traditional schools have: that they can get at least one school meal a day. Right now in California, charter schools do not have to provide any meals at all, let alone a free or reduced-price meal to a struggling student.

Second, we can act to move school breakfast after the first school bell. This could include serving breakfast in the classroom or it could be as simple as “grab-and-go” or “second chance” breakfast options to make breakfast available when and where students are able to eat.

Finally, we can ensure that all schools are using a new option to enroll students covered under our state’s health care program for low-income Californians, Medi-Cal, into free school meals. It is an option available to all districts statewide next school year. If all school districts used this cost-effective option, over a half million more eligible students would be enrolled in free school meals.

Taken together, these actions can help turn homes and schools into places where children can be protected from hunger. We can and should use our collective, protective powers to create hunger-free communities in California.

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