

California must take bold action to support schools and feed children

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We recently paid a visit to Garfield Elementary School in Oakland's San Antonio neighborhood, one of the largest and most diverse schools in Oakland. Twenty-two different languages are spoken there. Since closing its classroom doors on March 13 because of coronavirus, Garfield has become a vital hub for distributing food to tens of thousands of kids and families in Oakland struggling with a sharp increase in food insecurity.

On the day of our visit, Garfield distributed 31,000 meals to Oakland students, predominantly Black and brown children who have continued to rely on school meals as a primary source of food while schools have remained closed in these difficult, ever-changing times. It was inspiring to watch members of our community rising to support one another, and they have done this day after day these past three months.

Now our country is fighting two monumental challenges: a global pandemic claiming more than 120,000 U.S. lives that has created the worst economic recession since the Great Depression and has tripled food insecurity rates in households with children; and structural racism, which has plagued our society for generations. Inequities continue to widen as unemployment has skyrocketed and, according to Cornell University, disproportionately affects communities of color, while schools and other vital public agencies face severe budget constraints when their services are needed most.

California's unprecedented challenges will require a coordinated effort of public and private partnerships. Schools districts are losing money because of the heroic way they have responded to this crisis, and many won't be able to serve meals through the summer and into fall without additional funding. There are

long-term costs as well. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, student nutrition has been proven to positively affect academic achievement and quality-of-life outcomes. The lack of access to healthy food is exacerbated by socioeconomic status and most prevalent in low-income communities of color, meaning children who are forced to miss meals now may face more hardships later.

Places like our hometown of Oakland, with deep traditions of community engagement, protest and civic action, understand what is at stake. Oakland grasps that a community's members cannot lift themselves up without proper nutrition, a steady income and stable housing. Local school districts, including Oakland Unified, have taken the initiative to provide 4 million meals to children during school closures by marshaling resources through a collaborative established by our Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, in partnership with Alameda County Community Food Bank, No Kid Hungry, Office of Kat Taylor, and World Central Kitchen. Oakland is rising to meet this moment, led by volunteers and food service workers, primarily women of color, who have become masked heroes to these children and their families.

Communities throughout California need a strong commitment to provide funding to the school districts that have been unflinching in serving their communities during this crisis. Even with recent federal legislation, there is no bailout on the horizon. School districts are incurring debt and straining their limited resources to stay open and safely serve meals to children in need. Many school districts, like Oakland, could be facing enormous financial shortfalls in a few months. We would like to see a stronger acknowledgement from the state of the scale of these additional COVID-related costs, as well as bold action to provide funding to reimburse schools for months of bringing this service to high-need communities.

California's budget is a statement of our values, principles and priorities as a people. The inclusion of funding that supports schools giving children and families access to food — a most basic human need to foster learning and growth — is a critical lifeline for families now, and our children's future.

The state Legislature has proposed funding through the state budget to school districts to continue providing meals, and we urge the Legislature and Gov. Gavin Newsom to pass this budget. Just as the heroes in Oakland have stepped up to provide food to children and families who have struggled so hard for so long,

California must step up and ensure this much needed funding. Together with our partners, we will continue to do all we can to support children and families in our community through this crisis.

The Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, established by Stephen and Ayesha Curry, is playing an integral role in helping to ensure Oakland kids and families have access to food throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Since the beginning of the pandemic, it has helped to serve more than 3 million meals in partnership with Oakland Unified School District, engaged 108 Oakland restaurants in partnership with World Central Kitchen to put 400 people back to work while preparing 70,000 meals/week for seniors, families, and unhoused individuals, and partnered with Alameda County Community Food Bank to distribute over 2 million meals to Oakland families.