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## Santa Clara Co. Mulls Universal Meals for High-Poverty Schools

By Jennifer Wadsworth @jennwadsworth/ February 10, 2020



Local lawmakers want to expand universal meals to the South Bay's neediest schools. (Photo via Shutterstock)

When San Francisco 49ers cornerback Richard Sherman cut a \$7,500 check two months ago to clear lunch debt at Santa Clara's Cabrillo Middle School, the headlines applauded his generosity. And rightfully so.

But that's just part of the story.

News coverage of Good Samaritans footing bills for unpaid school meals overwhelmingly celebrates the gifts without challenging systemic realities that create a need for them in the first place. Left largely unanswered is the question of why, in one of the wealthiest regions of the wealthiest nations, is lunch debt at public K-12 schools even a thing?

A growing coalition of local policymakers say it shouldn't be. At least not for the neediest schools in Silicon Valley.

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With that in mind, the Santa Clara County Office of Education, Second Harvest of Silicon Valley and the YWCA of Silicon Valley are coalescing behind an initiative to provide universal meals at up to 84 campuses in 17 local school districts.

Come Tuesday, Santa Clara County Supervisor Susan Ellenberg will pitch the idea to her colleagues on the five-member Board of Supervisors. The proposal co-sponsored by Supervisor Joe Simitan would direct the county to explore the feasibility of spending \$8 million to feed 12,000 impoverished kids over the next four years.

That breaks down to 60 cents a plate.

“From this action tomorrow, we can see more kids in school, we can know that they’ll behave better—which is not only in their interest but the interest of every kid in the classroom—and that they’ll learn more,” Simitan said at a Monday morning press conference. “I can’t do anything except *expect* a 5-0 vote. That is my hope.”



County Supervisor Susan Ellenberg unveiled her universal meals plan to reporters Monday. (Photo by Jennifer Wadsworth)

In a policy memo detailing the plan, Ellenberg describes how the county plays a vital role in addressing child hunger by administering CalFresh and nutrition programs for women and infants. But federal rule changes designed to dissuade undocumented immigrants from accessing safety net services has made it increasingly difficult for the county to extend support to families in need, the memo goes on to state.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture began offering additional funding in 2015 for high-poverty schools to provide universal meals to K-12 students. Yet in the five years since launching the program, just half of eligible campuses nationwide have taken advantage of the reimbursements because they lack the up-front resources to get started.

In California, only 15 percent of qualified schools have availed themselves of the financial boost—  
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the third lowest state participation rate in the nation.

It's not for a lack of need.

Just 68 percent of students poor enough to qualify for subsidized school lunches in Santa Clara County are signed up for them. Only 35 percent of students eligible for school breakfast take advantage of the program. According to local school officials, that leaves nearly 30,000 children countywide without midday meals and 55,000 without breakfast.

"In the midst of so much plenty," Second Harvest CEO Leslie Bacho lamented, "we still see so many people struggling to make ends meet."

As Simitian sees it, three barriers stand between eligibility and access: bureaucracy, fear and stigma. Extending meals to all students at high-poverty schools counteracts those factors, he said, by eliminating the paperwork and assuaging concerns among immigrant families about information being shared with federal authorities.

That certainly held true during Ellenberg's tenure as a San Jose Unified School District trustee when she took part in an effort to encourage more families to sign up for meal subsidies. Instead of assigning SJUSD staff to single out only eligible families, the district required all households to submit applications for the program. The plan worked, to some extent, upping participation rates by about a third.

"But we still had that gap," Ellenberg recounted.

Now, halfway through her first term as county supervisor, she's taken up the cause once more. This time, by assembling a coalition of public agencies and non-profits to tackle the problem from multiple angles.

Santa Clara County Office of Education Superintendent Dr. Mary Ann Dewan applauded the effort, saying it will likely translate to fewer skipped school days and stronger academic performance. "A core component of health is nutrition," Dewan said Monday. "We all know that regular school attendance promotes achievement."

# Mountain View VOICE

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## Santa Clara County to pilot free school meal program for all

By Kate Bradshaw

In Santa Clara County schools with a large number of students from low-income families, filling out paperwork to prove a child's eligibility for free breakfast and lunch may soon be a thing of the past.

A proposal to start a pilot program in Santa Clara County to provide free school breakfasts and lunches to all students in participating high-need schools moved forward last month when the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to have staff flesh it out into a comprehensive four-year pilot program.

The initiative, co-sponsored by supervisors Susan Ellenberg and Joe Simitian, would be the first such program in the state. Ellenberg said she's hoping to have the initiative lined up in time to start in the 2020-21 school year.

In Mountain View, two schools will be eligible to participate, Castro Elementary in the Mountain View Whisman and Alta Vista in the Mountain View-Los Altos High school districts.

"With the free and reduced lunch rate of 84%, many families at this school have to make a choice of paying rent or food," said Debbie Austin, Mountain View Whisman School District's director of child nutrition in a statement. "By feeding everyone we eliminate the need to ask students for payment. Meals at school will help many children be healthier, miss fewer days of school and a full stomach makes for a mind that can concentrate

on learning."

The program will also eliminate the need to encroach on general funds to cover the cost of unpaid meals, she said.

About 1 in 3 children in the county experience food insecurity, according to Tracy Weatherby, vice president of strategy and advocacy at Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, the local food bank.

"School meals are one of the most crucial tools to make sure that those kids are ready to learn and thrive," Weatherby said.

"At a time where there is great fear in our community and stigma around applying for free and reduced price meals, these universal meals programs build strong community by feeding all the children in a school together," she said in a letter to the board.

Mary Ann Dewan, county superintendent of schools at the Santa Clara County Office of Education, expressed strong support for the pilot program. "The intersection between health and education is undeniable," she told the supervisors. "Families in Santa Clara County are facing very real challenges related to housing, child care and food insecurity. Food insecurity is top of mind for many families. The lack of consistent access to an adequate amount of nutritious food has harmful educational and health consequences for children."

However, not all needy children are eligible for federally supported school meal programs — the income thresholds don't account for the high local cost of

living causing financial hardship, according to a memo by county staff. According to Santa Clara County staff, the threshold to be eligible for school meal programs is 185% of the federal poverty level, or less than \$50,000 for a family of four — a very low threshold that excludes many financially struggling households in expensive Santa Clara County.

Changes in federal rules about who can access the subsidized food support, as well as fears surrounding the federal "public charge" rules that could prevent immigrants from becoming citizens, has made it hard for the county to get food assistance to eligible families.

Plenty of eligible students currently do not take advantage of existing meal programs, staff report. In Santa Clara County, only 35% of eligible students participate in the school breakfast program and only 68% in the school lunch program.

According to research, staff note, kids who do participate in school breakfast programs have higher standardized test scores, fewer behavioral problems and higher attendance rates.

The idea is to offer the pilot program to all school campuses in the county that have at least 70% of students who are eligible for free or reduced price meals, or otherwise have a high proportion of students who qualify for some form of federal assistance — which at the last count in 2019, represented 84 schools in 17 school districts countywide. The county expects only half of the eligible schools to participate,

and would set aside \$2 million in funding per year while also leveraging additional federal support. The pilot program is expected to expand school meals to about 12,000 children throughout the county, offering 3 million meals a year at a cost of about 60 cents per meal.

"The quick and dirty of it is this: Kids aren't participating (in school meal programs) because of fear, because of stigma, and because of bureaucracy. We get rid of the fear, the stigma and the bureaucracy and those kids are going to participate. And when they do participate, their attendance is going to go up, their behavior's going to be better, and they're going to be learning more — and that is a great return on investment by anybody's measure," Simitian said at the meeting.

Staff will also explore possible sources for matching funds to support the program. ▣

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