

California's Charter Schools

Some Are Providing Meals to Students, but a Lack of Reliable Data Prevents the California Department of Education From Determining the Number of Students Eligible for or Participating in Certain Federal Meal Programs

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This report concludes that the California Department of Education (Education) databases are not reliable enough for it to accurately identify all California charter schools that participate in the federal School Breakfast program (breakfast program) or the National School Lunch Program (lunch program). Moreover, Education cannot determine the number of students at either traditional or charter schools who qualify for or who participate in these programs. Despite the limitations of Education's data, we were able to identify 815 charter schools active in California as of April 2010. Charter schools are exempt from many of the laws that apply to school districts. In particular, they are exempt from California law that requires schools to provide each needy student with one nutritionally adequate free or reduced-price meal during each school day. Further, as is true for school districts, participation by charter schools in both the breakfast and lunch programs is voluntary.

According to Education's data, 451 charter schools were participating in the breakfast or lunch program and an additional 151 were providing instruction to their students outside the classroom either online or independently, and thus do not provide meals. We surveyed the remaining 213 charter schools to identify those that provide an alternative meal program and those that do not provide meals to their students. Of the 133 responses we received, 46 charter schools stated that they offer their students an alternative meal program, 39 stated that they do not provide meals to their students, and 41 stated that they were in fact participating in the programs. The remaining seven do not provide meals either because their students receive instruction outside the classroom or their students are age 18 or older and are not eligible to participate in the programs.

The 46 charter schools that reported they provide an alternative meal program cited varying methods of providing meals, ranges of costs for those meals, and reasons for offering such meals. For example, most of these schools either have staff prepare and deliver the meals or hire contractors to do so. Some of these charter schools stated that they provide meals that meet or exceed the U.S. Department of Agriculture's nutritional standards. Generally, the charter schools that reported they provide meals to their students believe that the nutritional needs of their students, including their low-income students, are being met. The 39 charter schools that did not provide meals to their students cited various reasons including lack of a kitchen, cafeteria, or other facility to prepare and deliver meals to their students. Another reason commonly cited was a lack of funding and staffing to operate an alternative meal program or participate in the breakfast and lunch programs.

In the report, the California State Auditor (state auditor) made the following recommendations to Education. The state auditor's determination regarding the current status of recommendations is based on Education's response to the state auditor as of December 2011.

Recommendation 1.1.a—See pages 18 and 19 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To ensure the reliability of Education's Consolidated Application Data System (ConApp database) fields related to the number of students enrolled at the school level, the number of those enrolled students who are eligible to receive free meals, and the number of those students who are eligible to receive reduced-price meals, Education should modify its database instructions to require local educational agencies and direct-funded charter schools to retain their documentation supporting the three data fields for a specified period of time.

Education's Action: Fully implemented.

Education modified its ConApp instructions to require local educational agencies and direct-funded charter schools to retain documentation supporting reported data in accordance with state and federal records retention requirements. The clause requires each recipient of federal funds to maintain records that will facilitate an effective financial or programmatic audit for three years after the completion of the activity for which the funds are used.

Recommendation 1.1.b—See page 18 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To ensure the reliability of the ConApp database fields related to the number of students enrolled at the school level, the number of those enrolled students who are eligible to receive free meals, and the number of those students who are eligible to receive reduced-price meals, Education should establish an internal control process such as a systematic review of a sample of the local educational agencies' and direct-funded charter schools' supporting documentation.

Education's Action: No action taken.

Education stated that to strengthen existing internal control processes, it reviews a sample of the local educational agencies' and direct-funded charter schools' supporting documents as a part of its Coordinated Review Effort (CRE) process. However, Education's procedures for its CRE process specifically state it does not review information in the ConApp database. Therefore, Education has yet to adequately address our recommendation.

Recommendation 1.2.a—See page 20 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To ensure the accuracy of the Child Nutrition Information and Payment System (CNIPS) database, Education should direct the school food authorities to establish internal control procedures to ensure the accuracy of the application information they enter into the CNIPS database.

Education's Action: Fully implemented.

Education's CNIPS application includes a "certification" check box that school food authorities must check in order to submit the application. In addition, Education posted a notice on the first screen of the CNIPS advising sponsors of their responsibility to ensure that they report accurate information. Education also stated that beginning with the 2011–12 school year it will further ensure the accuracy of the application information by including a clause in the annual instructions to remind school food authorities of their responsibility to ensure that they report accurate CNIPS information, to clarify that charter schools be identified as such and not as public schools, and to suggest that a second person review the information for accuracy before the school food authorities submit the information to Education.

Recommendation 1.2.b—See page 23 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To ensure the accuracy of the CNIPS database, Education should direct nutrition services to modify the tool used to review a sample of the school food authorities' schools to include a procedure for verifying the accuracy of the county-district-school (CDS) code and site type reflected on the schools' applications.

Education's Action: Fully implemented.

Education's Nutrition Services Division, Data Management Unit, has a procedure in place to run a query every month that identifies charter schools and public schools that are not displaying CDS codes in the CNIPS database. In addition, the query ensures the name and address data in the CNIPS database matches the information on the Charter School Web site and in the online Public School Directory. Education's staff are to resolve any discrepancies.

Recommendation 1.3.a—See pages 23 and 24 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To ensure that it maximizes the benefits from the State's investment in the CNIPS database, Education should require the school food authorities to submit a monthly Claim for Reimbursement for each site under their jurisdiction in addition to their consolidated claims.

Education's Action: Partially implemented.

Education's Nutrition Services Division has updated its New Sponsor Applications desk manual to instruct analysts to set new agencies, schools, and Residential Child Care Institutions to site-level reporting. Education also requires these entities to submit their monthly claims for reimbursement at the site level. However, Education does not plan to require existing school food authorities to submit their monthly claims for reimbursement until July 1, 2012.

Recommendation 1.3.b—See page 24 of the audit report for information on the related finding.

To ensure that it maximizes the benefits from the State's investment in the CNIPS database, Education should establish a timeline for the school food authorities to comply with the requirement of submitting a monthly Claim for Reimbursement.

Education's Action: Partially implemented.

Education stated that site-level reporting will be mandatory for all school food authorities on July 1, 2012. Education stated it has communicated the transition to site-level reporting via personal discussions and mass e-mails when deemed necessary. In addition, Education stated it has announced the July 1, 2012, site-level reporting start during training presentations at various conferences. Further, Education stated it expects to send a Management Bulletin in December 2011 to inform school food authorities of the mandatory site-level reporting requirement.