



CALIFORNIA STATE AUDITOR

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FACT SHEET

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The California State Auditor released the following report today:

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

BACKGROUND

Although part of the public school system and serving students in kindergarten through grade 12, California's 815 active charter schools operate independently from the existing school district structure. For example, charter schools are not subject to the law that provides for needy students to receive one nutritionally adequate free or reduced-price meal during each school day. Similar to school districts, participation by charter schools in the federal School Breakfast Program (breakfast program) and the National School Lunch Program (lunch program) is voluntary. The California Department of Education (Education) maintains several databases that provide various levels of information regarding traditional and charter schools.

KEY FINDINGS

Our review of the California charter schools' child nutrition programs, revealed the following:

- Although Education maintains numerous databases with varying information relating to schools, students, applications, and child nutrition, we could not rely on the databases to determine the exact number of charter schools and their students participating in the breakfast and lunch programs.
 - ✓ Its paperless application database system lacks an internal control process to ensure the accuracy of certain data.
 - ✓ It does not verify certain information on the schools' site applications—such as the site type—and we found errors related to certain codes and site types.
 - ✓ It allows school food authorities to combine information for their sites before entering it into the database and thus, it cannot differentiate between charter school students and students from traditional schools who participate in the programs.
- Despite the data limitations, we identified 815 active charter schools—over half (451) that appear to participate in the breakfast and lunch programs and 151 that appear to provide instruction outside the classroom and thus would not participate in the programs.
- Of the remaining 213 charter schools, 133 responded to our survey. Of those, 39 did not provide meals because they lack resources such as funding, staff, and facilities to prepare and deliver meals, while 46 do offer an alternative meal program. The remaining schools state that they do participate in the programs, do not provide meals due to the structure of the school, or their students' ages made them ineligible to participate in the programs.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We made several recommendations to Education regarding the charter schools' child nutrition programs, including the following:

- Establish internal control processes within its electronic application system to ensure the reliability of certain information such as the number of students enrolled and students' eligibility for receiving free and reduced-price meals.
- Ensure the accuracy of the child nutrition information and payment system by discontinuing allowing school food authorities to combine information from more than one school site, modifying its review tools to verify information on schools' applications, and requiring school food authorities to establish review procedures for data they enter into one of its systems.

