



AB 958 – The California Organic-to-School Pilot Program

SUMMARY

AB 958 creates the “*California Organic-to-School Pilot Program*,” which will allow school districts to apply for up to fifteen cents of additional funding per meal to purchase certified organic, California-grown foods. The benefits of bringing locally-grown, organic foods into our schools stretch beyond protecting health and climate. Through this pilot, children will become more connected to what they eat, and farmers will have greater access to organic markets.

BACKGROUND

Organic farming avoids most synthetic chemicals, hormones, antibiotics, genetic engineering, and irradiation. To qualify as “organic,” crops must be produced on farms that have not used most synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers for 3 years and have a buffer zone to decrease contamination from adjacent lands. According to the California Certified Organic Farmers, organic standards also “enhance biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil fertility, and restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony.”

California farmers grow food for the whole nation, and grow more organic than any other state. Despite this, many low-income California communities do not have an adequate food supply, and many children lack access to fresh, healthy, sustainably grown food.

School meals provide a primary source of food and nutrition for millions of California public school students, and are a major support for low-income families struggling to make ends meet. While cost and availability issues prevent many of California’s communities from accessing organic food, meals provided in the school setting are a practical way to increase children’s nutrition.

THIS BILL

AB 958 creates the “*California Organic-to-School Pilot Program*” within the Office of Farm to Fork, at the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), to assist school districts in accessing organic foods for school meals. In addition to helping schools purchase organic food, the pilot will identify barriers that prevent schools from accessing organic, and facilitate activities necessary to make the shift towards serving more organic in our public schools.

The Secretary of CDFA will consult with the State Department of Education to develop guidelines related to the grants awarded under the pilot program and must award at least five grants of up to fifteen cents per school meal to purchase California organic food products.

A school district that receives an *Organic-to-School Pilot Program* grant will use the money to purchase foods that are certified organic, produced in California, and used in meals that are part of the federal National School Lunch Program or federal School Breakfast Program. Preference will be given to districts that serve the highest percentage of children who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, are located close to agricultural production, already offer universally free school meals, and/or participate in the federal Pilot for Procurement of Unprocessed Fruits and Vegetables.

AB 958 prohibits a school district from using grant money to replace purchases of food products with federal moneys. The grant funds may only be used to pay for the difference in cost between California organic food and the non-organic food they would have otherwise purchased. When procuring qualified organic foods, a school district is encouraged to purchase crops that are in-season from local farms, socially disadvantaged farmers, and producers who can offer educational opportunities for the students.

To determine the success of the pilot, a participating school district that receives a grant must report back to CDFA on the organic food products purchased, names of the farms that supplied the foods, and the amount paid for the organic foods. Using the data, the Secretary will then submit a report to the Legislature on the outcomes of the program, including the number of grants and the total funds awarded. The goal of this reporting is to learn how school districts used the grant funds and demonstrate that providing kids with healthy, organic local food is money well spent.

SUPPORT

Natural Resources Defense Council (sponsor)