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Calif legislator wants free water on school menus

The Associated Press

Posted: 09/20/2010 09:56:40 AM PDT

Updated: 09/20/2010 12:45:18 PM PDT

SAN FRANCISCO—There's apparently a drought on California campuses.

Many school districts don't offer water with meals despite a statewide focus on healthy eating in recent years, said San Francisco state Sen. Mark Leno. To change that, Leno has proposed Senate Bill 1413, which has passed the Assembly and Senate and is awaiting the governor's signature, and calls for fresh water to be available in school eating areas by next July.

"As we all know, young people are constantly bombarded by advertisements and pressure from their peers to consume junk beverages that are high in calories and sugar," Leno said in ads promoting the bill. "Yet many students do not have access to free, fresh drinking water at lunchtime."

More than 40 percent of school districts that responded to an online survey said their students had no access to free drinking water where their meals are served, according to the California Food Policy Advocates.

Middle school students interviewed as part of a pilot program that provided water at a few schools—by setting up plastic dispensers with free chilled tap water and cups or giving students reusable bottles—told researchers they wanted water, and they drank it, said Dr. Mark Schuster, one of the researchers and a professor of pediatrics at Children's Hospital Boston and Harvard Medical School.

School officials think offering water is a good idea—but are afraid of the cost.

Most schools in the Los

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Angeles Unified School District don't have free water in eating areas, said David Binkle, deputy director of food services.

"We happen to think it's a great option," Binkle said. But he's not sure where school would find the money for equipment, filters or water testing. The bill provides no funding.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has until Sept. 30 to sign the bill.

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