

# Expanding Access to Affordable School Lunches

## **SB18-013: Expand Child Nutrition School Lunch Protection Act**

**Sponsors: Sens. Gardner & Fields / Rep. Michaelson Jenet**

Students who eat healthy meals at school are better able to learn. Many children across our state face food insecurities on a daily basis due to systemic racial and economic barriers. Eliminating the reduced-price lunch copay for working families increases access to healthy food and adequate nutrition, and reduces inequities experienced by kids who are eating reduced-price meals.

Legislators have an opportunity to ensure that older students can access affordable lunches by extending copay support for reduced-price meals for middle school students.

**Solution: Provide a modest state investment to expand lunch protection for students receiving reduced-price lunch. This policy will improve access to nutritious school lunches for thousands of students statewide and help ensure they are ready to learn.**

### **Background:**

- Schools provide *free lunches* to students in families earning 130 percent of the federal poverty level or lower (about \$31,980 a year or less for a family of four).
- Schools provide *reduced-price lunches* to students in families earning between 130 percent and 185 percent of the federal poverty level (about \$31,980 to \$45,510 for a family of four).
- The State of Colorado pays for 40 cents of each reduced-price meal served to eligible students, while the federal government pays at least \$2.89. This is a 7:1 return on the state's investment.
- Pre-adolescence is a period of nutritional vulnerability; children in middle school require sufficient calories and a well-balanced diet for developmental growth.
- Improving access to school meals improves academic performance.
- Teens who experience hunger are more likely to have been suspended from school and have difficulty getting along with other children.
- Teens who skip meals know that it affects their performance in school and activities.

### **Challenges:**

- The state currently covers copays for students receiving reduced price lunches in preschool through fifth grade, but not higher grades (HB14-1156). Some schools and districts see students who received a reduced-price lunch stop eating when they enter sixth grade. In fact, one district with a high number of kids accessing reduced-priced meals saw a 20 percent drop in participation in sixth grade.
- Families who qualify for reduced-price lunch do not experience a change in their economic circumstances just because their child has become a sixth grader. These families have challenges affording the reduced-price lunch copay, resulting in some children not having access to a nutritious hot lunch.

**Supporters:**

Action for Healthy Kids  
American Academy of Pediatrics, Colorado Chapter  
American Diabetes Association  
American Heart Association  
Center for Health Progress  
Children's Hospital Colorado  
Colorado Alternate Defense Council  
Colorado Association of School Nurses  
Colorado Center on Law and Policy  
Colorado Children's Campaign  
Colorado Cross Disability Coalition  
Colorado Latino Leadership, Advocacy & Research Organization (CLLARO)  
Colorado Parent Teacher Association (PTA)  
Colorado Rural Health Center  
Colorado School Nutrition Association  
Denver Public Health  
Denver Public Schools  
Education Reform Now  
Healthier Colorado  
Hunger Free Colorado  
Junior League of Denver  
Kaiser Permanente  
LiveWell Colorado  
Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-Colorado  
Mile High United Way  
Mission Readiness/Council for a Strong America  
Padres & Jóvenes Unidos  
Stahlman Consulting  
Tri County Health Department  
Women's Lobby of Colorado  
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