

# 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.

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**Supporters:**

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American Heart Association  
Center for Health Progress  
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