

# Expanding Access to Affordable School Lunches

**HB19-1171**

**Rep. Michaelson Jenet  
Sens. Fields & Priola**

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 economic and societal barriers. In fact, just last year 14 percent of high school students reported going hungry because there wasn't food at home. Eliminating the reduced-price lunch copay for working families increases access to healthy food and adequate nutrition, and reduces inequities experienced by kids who qualify for reduced-price meals.

Legislators have an opportunity to ensure that **all** students can access affordable lunches by extending copay support for reduced-price meals to high 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.
- Adolescence is a period of nutritional vulnerability, and children in high school require sufficient calories and a well-balanced diet for developmental growth. Between early and middle adolescence, the caloric needs of girls increase by 14 percent while the caloric needs of boys increase by 38 percent.
- Improving access to nutritional school meals can improve academic performance and behavior.
- 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 report that it affects their performance in school and activities.

## **Challenges:**

- The state currently covers copays for students receiving reduced price lunches in preschool through eighth grade, but not higher grades (HB14-1156, SB18-013).
- Families who qualify for reduced-price lunch do not experience a change in their economic circumstances just because their child has become a high schooler. 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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