

Reducing Food Insecurity in Colorado

Improving access to school lunch can reduce food insecurity
and improve kids' health



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society

Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

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pandemic.

While obesity rates in children have increased in recent years, food insecurity has also had an impact on children’s health. Additionally, malnutrition, which can manifest as obesity, has been impacting military readiness for decades. Nationwide, 71 percent of young people between the ages of 17 and 24 do not qualify for military service, and obesity disqualifies 31 percent of youth from serving if they so choose.¹ In 1945, Major General Lewis Hershey, the Director of the Selective Service System, testified to Congress that at least 40 percent of recruits during World War II were rejected for reasons related to poor nutrition. The following year, Congress established the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children” by ensuring they had access to nutritious meals.²

In Colorado, over 360,000 children participated in NSLP in FY2019. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 247,000 children in our state received school lunch in FY2020. This is potentially due to barriers in accessing meals at congregate meal sites, such as limited hours and requiring parents to travel to the sites to receive the meals.³ For children experiencing food insecurity, school lunch may be their only meal of the day. Ensuring access to school meals is vital to make sure all Colorado kids can grow up to be healthy, productive, and ready for any career they choose, including the military.

Hunger has far-reaching consequences for kids

Consistent access to healthy foods is essential to combating hunger, and preventing food insecurity and obesity. In 2019, 12 percent of Colorado children experienced food insecurity—a reduction in



the quality, variety, or desirability of diet, or a disruption in eating patterns and reduced food intake due to a lack of household resources, financial or otherwise, necessary to obtain adequate food. As a result of the pandemic, this number was projected to increase to 16 percent in 2020.⁴ A survey of over 500 Coloradans found that nearly a quarter of respondents had a difficult time paying for daily necessities, such as food, due to COVID-19. In December 2020, 52 percent of families with children reported not having enough food as a result of the pandemic.⁵

Food insecurity can negatively impact health

Children in food insecure households are less likely to meet the recommended dietary guidelines, and often consume more saturated fats, fried foods, and sweets.⁶ One study found that children who experienced poverty in early life were nearly twice as likely to be obese by the age of 15 than children who lived in

households with higher incomes.⁷ Children who experience food insecurity are also more at risk for chronic illness, asthma, and iron-deficiency anemia.⁸ Food insecurity can lead to cognitive issues such as decreased memory, decreased problem solving and reasoning skills, and decreased ability to understand concepts.⁹ Additionally, children and adolescents who are food insecure are more likely to be absent from school, and experience more behavior issues than their peers who are food secure.¹⁰

Food insecurity contributes to obesity

Estimates suggest that, due to significant increases in both the unemployment rate and child poverty, up to 18 million children will experience food insecurity as a result of COVID-19. This is a significant increase from 2018, when food insecurity impacted 11 million children in the United States. Children between ages 6 and 11 who experience food insecurity have been found to be at a significantly higher risk for obesity.¹¹ Teens between the ages of 12 and 17 who experience food insecurity have been found to be overweight at higher percentages and to have higher rates of obesity, compared to those who are food secure.¹²

Access to nutritious meals supports learning

School lunch is vital for the health of students, especially those living in food insecure households. Research shows that students who receive free or reduced-price lunch experience reduced rates of food insecurity and obesity. Additionally, the updated school meal nutrition standards have positively impacted the selection and consumption of fruits and vegetables for students who participate in NSLP.¹³

In Colorado, progress has been made in ensuring that kids have access to the nutritious foods they need to learn and stay healthy; however, challenges remain in preventing food insecurity and ensuring all students get the nutrition they need during the school day, and beyond.

Barriers to school lunch access in Colorado

Colorado utilizes NSLP to provide school meals and combat child hunger. However, providing meals during the school day is not enough to ensure kids have adequate nutrition; children also need sufficient time to eat in order to get the most benefit from NSLP.¹⁴

Scheduling adequate time for lunch can pose a challenge for schools, since hundreds of students must be served in a short timeframe. Thanks to updated nutrition standards for school meals, school cafeterias are serving more fresh produce to students, but these foods can often take more time to consume, further shortening an often inadequate lunchtime.¹⁵

Research shows that the amount of time that children are given to eat is an important factor in the benefits children receive from school meals. Twenty minutes of “seat time,” or the time children are seated and eating, is considered a best practice for school lunch.¹⁶ One study found that students who had less than 20 minutes for lunch consumed 13 percent less of their entrée, 12 percent fewer vegetables, and 10 percent less milk than their peers who had 25 minutes or more for lunch.¹⁷ In Colorado, one survey of school administrators found that most students had only between 10 and 20 minutes for lunch, and that often

“ To help kids grow up healthy and ready for any career they choose, we must ensure that all Colorado children have access to, and time to eat, school lunch.”



Brigadier General
Traci L. Kueker-Murphy
USAF

includes the time it takes to get through the lunch line and to a table.¹⁸

Improving statewide access to school lunch

Over 40 percent of students in Colorado’s public schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2018, Colorado passed legislation expanding state funding to cover the \$0.40 copay for students who receive reduced-price lunch at school, to include all children through eighth grade; previously, the legislation only covered students through fifth grade.¹⁹ In 2019, the Colorado legislature passed the Expanding Child Nutrition Lunch Protection Act, which requires the state to cover any costs associated with reduced-price lunch for all K-12 students.²⁰

While progress has been made to ensure kids have access to a nutritious meal at school, this is not the case for all Colorado

students. Students who are not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, but are still unable to pay for their lunch, may experience “lunch shaming.”²¹ Lunch shaming can occur in various ways: students who are unable to pay may be identified by having to wear a bracelet or hand stamp as they go through the lunch line, be given a different, and often less nutritious, meal than their peers, or be directed to sit at a different table. While lunch shaming is still occurring in schools across the country, there have been efforts to end the practice. In 2017, New Mexico passed the Hunger Free Students’ Bill of Rights Act, making it illegal for schools to stigmatize students who are unable to pay for their lunch, as well as requiring schools to provide assistance to parents when they are completing forms for free or reduced-price lunch.²² New Jersey signed a similar law in May 2020, and Michigan introduced a bill that would end lunch shaming practices in the state, and allow schools to utilize philanthropic funds to pay for school meals.²³

Colorado is also working to address school lunch debt. The Denver Public School District abolished this debt, with donations from the local community and nonprofits.²⁴ In Jefferson County, K-5 students are allowed to charge up to three lunch meals; charging lunch is not allowed for older students. Students with a negative account

balance can receive an alternate meal, consisting of a sandwich, a vegetable, fruit, and milk. Students may receive up to ten of these meals if their account lacks sufficient funds. The school district is working to prevent negative meal balances from occurring, through low balance letters, phone calls, and verbal reminders.²⁵ Despite these efforts, lunch shaming, as well as providing different (often less nutritious) meals for students unable to pay, still continues in other parts of the state.²⁶

What can Colorado do to improve access to nutritious food?

Colorado has made progress toward ensuring that all students have a healthy meal at school, but more must be done. The state can work to end lunch shaming and prohibit schools from singling out students who cannot pay for their lunch. Additionally, Colorado can require that schools communicate with parents or guardians directly about their child’s lunch account, instead of not allowing the child to receive their meal.

Colorado can also utilize best practices in regard to adequate lunchtime, by ensuring that children have at least 20 minutes of seat time, and that fruits and vegetables are pre-sliced to make them easier and faster to consume.²⁷

Conclusion

Ensuring that all children have access to, and adequate time to eat, school lunch will help kids stay healthy and engaged in the classroom. Colorado must continue to address the issues that exist with school lunch, to enable all children to enjoy a healthy meal during the school day. When kids have increased access to nutritious foods, they can grow up to be healthy and better prepared for any job they choose, including the military.

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