

April 2022

# UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### THE ISSUE

The importance of school meals as a source of nutritional security for children and their families has never been clearer. During the months of the pandemic, one in ten Colorado households with children reported that in the past week they did not have enough food to eat in their homes, up from pre-pandemic levels of 7%.

When schools shutdown for the pandemic, household food insecurity skyrocketed. The temporary changes and increased funding to school food programs provided the opportunity to observe the positive impacts of providing universal school meals to Colorado children.

### IMPACTS ON STUDENTS

Evidence from existing research on the impacts of universal school meals indicate a number of potential positive benefits to Colorado K-12 students including:

#### Increasing participation in school meal programs

Studies show that universal school meals leads to increases of 35% and 20% among full and reduced priced student groups respectively. Participation is highest when meal provision is integrated into the school day (e.g. breakfast in the classroom).

#### Eliminating school meal stigma

Giving all children access to school meals eliminates stigma associated with being a “free meal kid”, which keeps eligible children from participating. While school meal stigma is present in schools with very high numbers of free-meal-eligible students, it appears even more acutely in schools with a smaller percentage of students eligible for free meals.

#### Improving student achievement

Universal school meal programs, and especially consumption of a healthy breakfast, are consistently correlated with higher academic achievement scores. These programs are associated with improved scores in math and reading by as much as 10-15%.

#### Bolstering student health and wellbeing

Participation in school meals is associated with lower student BMI and reduced rates of poor health. Universal school meals appear to be strongly associated with improved physical and mental health, as well as improved attendance and reduced occurrences of behavioral and/or developmental difficulties.

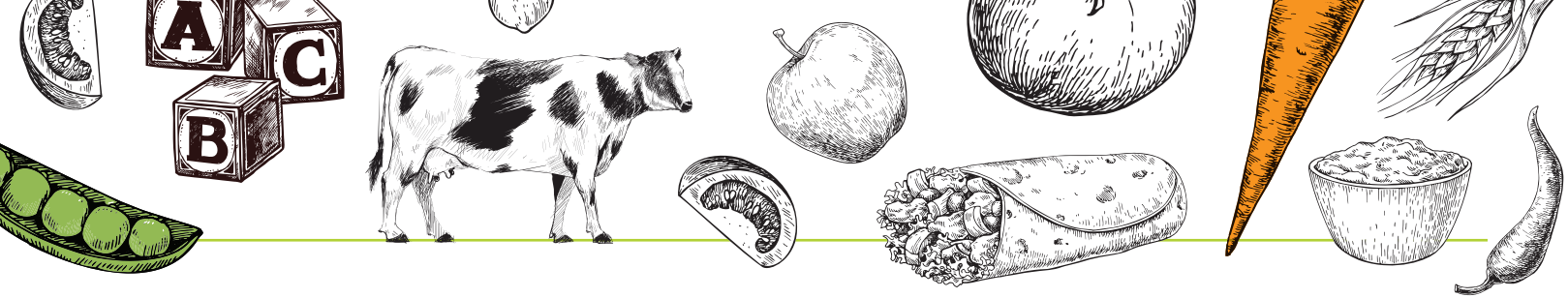
#### Improving racial equity and justice

Racialized inequality has been a constant predictor of food insecurity in the US, even when controlling for wealth. Black and Hispanic households are twice as likely to experience food insecurity as White households. For immigrant student populations, universal school meals avoids credible fear by immigrant families that participation in government benefit programs could jeopardize the family’s residency status.

#### Strengthening nutritional security for students and their families

Thanks to the updated nutrition standards of the Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, school meals often provide better nutrition quality than grocery stores and other food sources. Research shows that students who eat school meals regularly have healthier diets than those who don’t.





## IMPACTS ON SCHOOLS

### Reducing administrative costs per meal

Fueled by economies of scale and reduction of administrative burden, universal school meals participation is correlated with lower per student meal costs for medium and large schools, particularly for breakfast.

### Eliminating school lunch shaming

By definition, universal school meals would ensure that all students have access to the same food and that no student is negatively singled-out for their family's inability to pay. Currently in Colorado and across the US, there are no systemic protections that prevent shaming low-income students for not having the resources to buy lunch.

*"In previous years, I used to field phone calls all the time from parents saying 'Do not let my kid eat, we can't afford to pay for those meals'. [With universal meals] We don't get those phone calls anymore." – CO school nutrition director*

### Increasing solvency and flexibility of school food service budgets

Schools have historically operated at a deficit, as federal meal reimbursement rates do not adequately match the cost of serving meals. This often requires back-fill from limited school district budgets, or the selling of snack foods and beverages which are directly at odds with health and nutrition goals.

### Enabling critical investments in food sourcing, preparation, and kitchen workforce

With higher reimbursement rates and lowered administrative costs, universal school meals

would free-up funds for other critical investments in kitchen infrastructure and school kitchen professionals. Such investments could in turn facilitate sourcing of high quality and locally raised ingredients which support local economies, and scratch-cooked food that prioritize culturally relevant and nutrient dense meals.

## SUMMARY: POSITIVE IMPACTS OF IMPLEMENTING A UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM

Potential positive impacts on Colorado students:

- Eliminating school meal stigma
- Improving racial equity and justice
- Increasing participation in school meal programs
- Improving student achievement
- Bolstering student health and wellbeing
- Strengthening nutritional security for students and their families

Potential positive impacts on Colorado's K-12 school system:

- Improving meal quality and the nutritional value of school meals
- Reducing administrative costs per meal
- Increasing the solvency and flexibility of school food service budgets
- Enabling critical investments in food sourcing, preparation, and the school kitchen workforce

