



Frequently Asked Questions

How are we going to pay for this?

If passed, the *Healthy School Meals for All* ballot initiative will be funded by limiting state income tax deductions for the top 5% of Colorado income earners – people who make \$300,000 per year or more. If you do not make \$300,000 per year or more, your taxes will not be affected by this ballot measure.

This measure was also carefully crafted to maximize federal funding through Colorado's participation in federal programs like the Medicaid Direct Certification Pilot Project, which would allow Colorado to automatically qualify students for federal funding for free school meals if they receive Medicaid, as well as districts for the Community Eligibility Provision option, which currently provides limited federal funding for free school meals in some Colorado districts but is being underutilized. If passed, this initiative will ensure Colorado fully utilizes federal dollars for school meals and limits the amount of state revenue needed to ensure access to free, healthy school meals for all Colorado students.

How will my taxes change if this measure is passed?

If you do not make \$300,000 per year or more, your taxes will not be affected by this ballot measure. This ballot measure would fund the *Healthy School Meals for All* program by reducing the size of the standard and itemized deductions for state income taxes only for Colorado income earners with adjusted gross incomes of \$300,000 per year or more, capping them at \$12,000 for single filers and \$16,000 for joint filers from the top 5% of households in Colorado.

This ballot measure affects state income taxes only for the top 5% of income earners in Colorado. It does not affect federal taxes of any kind for any Colorado households, regardless of income.

Won't limiting tax deductions reduce charitable giving?

No, this ballot measure will not have an impact on charitable giving. The Colorado Legislative Council Staff (LCS), a nonpartisan research organization that provides fiscal impact estimates for all ballot measures, "have not assumed any change in taxpayer charitable contributions" as a result of the Healthy School Meals for All initiative.

This ballot measure affects state income taxes only for the top 5% of income earners in Colorado, meaning 95% of Colorado taxpayers can continue to deduct charitable contributions as they always have if this measure passes. The top 5% of income earners will still be able to deduct charitable contributions up to \$12,000 for single filers and \$16,000 for joint filers on their state income taxes if they so choose.

This ballot measure does not affect federal taxes of any kind for any Colorado households, regardless of income, so all Coloradans will still be able to deduct charitable contributions from their federal taxes.

Furthermore, independent studies have found that itemized deductions at the state level do not incentivize charitable giving. A [2020 study](#) of itemized deduction policies in all 50 states by the nonpartisan Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy found that these deductions are an ineffective means of incentivizing behavior such as charitable giving. The study also found that itemized deductions at the state level are regressive, and “offer the largest benefits to higher-income taxpayers and little if any benefit to low- and middle-income families.”

Finally, under our current laws, 60,000 Colorado kids are left out of our current school meals program and going hungry as a result. What little (if any) charitable giving is currently being incentivized by our current state level itemized deduction policy is clearly not enough to ensure all Colorado kids are getting enough to eat. Feeding hungry kids is an important cause all Coloradan can get behind, and passing this ballot measure would be a major step towards ending childhood hunger in our state.

Doesn't the federal government already pay for all school meals? Why is a state level program necessary?

The federal government provides enough funding to provide free school meals for some Colorado students, but not enough for the tens of thousands of additional kids who need them. During COVID, the federal government provided temporary waivers that provided funding for free school meals for all students, but they have expired.

Before the COVID pandemic, schools had to follow strict requirements to receive any federal reimbursement for their meal programs. Only children from some low-income families were eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and their parents had to apply for the program and qualify in order for their kids to receive school meal benefits.

Federal COVID-19 waivers temporarily changed this, but these waivers have since expired, impacting school breakfast and lunches and summer meal programs. Congress passed a limited bill called the Keep Kids Fed Act in June 2022, but failed to extend the waivers that helped schools provide universal free school meals during the pandemic.

As a result, Colorado schools are currently being forced to make difficult cuts to school meals programs, which will leave tens of thousands of kids hungry unless we act. We should not leave schools to struggle year to year to feed kids. We need to pass the *Healthy School Meals for All* ballot initiative to ensure long-term, sustainable funding to provide access to free, healthy school meals for every Colorado student.

Why should we provide free school meals “for all” when some of those meals could go to rich kids who can already afford them? Why not just expand the number of eligible families?

Limiting free school meals to “eligible” families is the status quo approach that currently results in tens of thousands of kids going hungry every year. These limitations may sound good in theory but lead to bureaucracy and red tape that excludes hungry kids in practice.

Because the economic realities facing Colorado families are constantly changing, eligibility restrictions for free school meals rarely make sense for long. That’s why under our current system, more than 60,000 Colorado kids can’t afford school meals, but are not eligible for free or reduced-price school meals either. For example, our current laws consider a family of three that makes more than \$42,606 per year “too rich” to qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. These restrictions do not account for Colorado’s rapidly rising cost of living and cannot be updated quickly enough to guarantee free school meals for tens of thousands of kids who need them.

The current eligibility restrictions for federally-reimbursed meals divide children into tiers – some kids pay full price and some kids receive free meals. This segregates children by family income and food security, creating a damaging social stigma that leads many kids to go hungry rather than be seen standing in the free or reduced meal line. This stigma is a major issue that can cause long-term damage to students, and only gets worse as kids get older. Many high school students skip meals entirely rather than face the stigma that comes with taking free school meals under our current system.

Providing free school meals for all eliminates this stigma, and leads to tens of thousands of additional kids getting the meals they need. When temporary pandemic aid made all school meals free last year, school districts across Colorado saw 20% to 40% more students participating in school meal programs – proving that eligibility restrictions were keeping free school meals from tens of thousands of kids who needed them.

Eligibility restrictions for free school meals don’t work. Many kids are going hungry while trying to learn as a result of how they are structured. We know there is a better way that doesn’t leave kids behind and provides free school meals to every kid who needs them without meal debt or stigma.

How would *Healthy School Meals for All* improve equity?

Healthy school meals for all makes sure that no children – particularly our most vulnerable children and children who are on the line of eligibility in application based programs – fall through the cracks. Given the current unstable economy, the eligibility status of families may fluctuate and we don't want any child to go without food for any reason, especially senseless government paperwork. Eligibility is currently determined through complex applications that can be difficult for families who do not speak English as their first language to complete correctly.

Healthy school meals for all also decreases lunch shaming and stigma in the cafeteria. This helps to keep kids fed in our state even as many families and communities continue to struggle. We know that school meals are a critical source of nutrition for many children, helping them learn and be active in the short term, and thrive academically, physically, and emotionally in the long term. For many students, the meals they get in school may be their only real meals each day. School meals also establish lifelong healthy eating habits that can reduce the cases and severity of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, along with the costs associated with these diseases.

While food insecurity issues affect Coloradans from all walks of life, we also know that they disproportionately impact communities of color due to compounding, systemic discrimination. A 2021 survey by Hunger Free Colorado found that 43% of non white / latino respondents experienced food insecurity that year compared to 29% of white respondents.

Our public school already gets free school meals through the CEP. Why do we need a *Healthy School Meals for All* program?

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a meal service option that allows some Colorado schools and school districts in low-income areas to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to enrolled students, without collecting household income applications. However, it is significantly more limited than what would be available to all Colorado schools if we pass *Healthy School Meals for All*.

CEP is not available to most school districts, even though we know there are kids and families facing food insecurity in every single community in our state. Unlike *Healthy School Meals for All*, CEP does not permanently guarantee funding to keep kids fed from year to year. Schools can lose CEP eligibility if their demographics change, even if they still have hundreds of students who still need free school meals. CEP reimbursements also depend on complex formulas that only provide partial reimbursements for most participating districts, leaving schools on the hook for a substantial portion of the cost of school meals – straining their already limited resources.

By contrast, *Healthy School Meals for All* comes with a sustainable, long-term source of funding that permanently guarantees a 100% reimbursement rate for every Colorado school district to provide free school meals to every student who needs them. It also goes above and beyond limited CEP resources by funding a broad range of vital policies such as millions of additional dollars to purchase fresh ingredients from local farmers and ranchers and funding for schools to acquire the equipment, training, and staff necessary to support healthy, from-scratch cooking when preparing school meals.

How would *Healthy School Meals for All* improve student nutrition?

An April 2021 survey by Hunger Free Colorado found that 44% of Colorado households with children are unable to consistently put healthy food on the table. Healthy food is expensive and difficult to access for many communities across our states.

The *Healthy School Meals for All* initiative would be a major step toward ending childhood hunger and improving student health by providing nutritious breakfasts and lunches for all public school students in Colorado. For countless families struggling to put healthy food on the table, that is two meals per day that they no longer have to worry about.

In order to be reimbursable under the *Healthy School Meals for All* program, school meals must meet federal nutrition standards including providing whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, *providing one-third or more of the recommended levels for key nutrients, and no more than 30 percent of calories from fat and less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat.*

The *Healthy School Meals for All* program will also provide the resources, equipment, and staff training our schools need to prepare healthy school meals from scratch ingredients. It would also create a new grant program that will provide millions of additional dollars to help our schools purchase healthy ingredients directly from Colorado farmers and ranchers, supporting local agriculture and giving our schools much better opportunities to use fresh and nutritious local ingredients when preparing school meals.

Our schools are already dealing with staffing shortages as is. How will cafeteria workers keep up with all this new demand for school meals?

The *Healthy School Meals for All* initiative also contains measures to ensure we can help schools have not only the people power, but also the training and equipment to effectively implement this program. It includes grants for participating schools to raise wages for front-line workers who prepare and serve school meals to address staffing shortages and fairly compensate the folks

working hard to keep kids fed. There are also grants to purchase equipment and provide the training needed for cafeteria workers to prepare healthy school meals from scratch.

Paid for by Healthy School Meals for All Colorado Students. Marc Jacobson, Registered Agent.