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BLOOMBERG SCHOOL
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Health in All
Policies Initiative

LEGISLATIVE HEALTH NOTE: SUMMARY

Colorado Propositions LL and MM: Healthy School Meals for All

BACKGROUND

In 2022, Colorado passed a universal free school meal program (UFSM; i.e., free breakfast and lunch for children) when Proposition FF created Colorado Healthy School Meals for All (HSMA). In May 2025, the Colorado General Assembly passed HB25-1274 to fully fund the HSMA program, which has been referred to two ballot measures in the November 2025 election (Proposition LL to retain current funding and Proposition MM to increase funding). If both ballot measures are approved, the state would raise revenue for HSMA by increasing state taxable income for households earning over $300,000 per year. This revenue would also secure wage increases for school food service employees and funding for schools to procure Colorado-produced ingredients.[i] This health note reviewed recent literature on the impacts of UFSM on school meal participation, child nutrition, food security, financial well-being, academic outcomes, and food waste.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

Shoring up state sources of funding for HSMA is timely and will bear short and long-term health benefits for Colorado residents. UFSM programs will become more critical in 2025 as many families stand to lose Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Medicaid benefits, increasing their likelihood of financial hardship and risk of food insecurity. Simultaneously, school meal programs will become more costly for states to operate as fewer meals will be reimbursed through federal programs.

The relationship between access to school meals and wellbeing is well established in the public health literature,[i]and evidence shows that healthy diets and food security are associated with improved cognitive function and better academic performance.[ii] Below is a summary of the health note's key findings:

- There is strong evidence that UFSM programs increase school meal participation, thereby expanding nutritional benefits to more children. They address key barriers such as stigma, cost, and administrative burden.
- There is strong evidence that school meals improve children's dietary intake, regardless of their food security status.
- Despite concerns that UFSM programs may encourage excess eating in children, a fair amount of evidence indicates that they are associated with a decrease in overweight or obesity, or have no effects on weight.
- Strong evidence demonstrates that universal school meals reduce childhood food insecurity and insufficiency and save families money.
- There is mixed evidence regarding the link between universal school meals and academic outcomes. Some studies examining UFSM and academic performance found improvements in test scores, while others did not identify any effects. However, links between food insecurity and academic and behavioral challenges are well-established. To the extent that these ballot measures prevent or alleviate childhood food insecurity, they may improve or prevent declines in academic performance for children at greatest risk of food insecurity.
- The evidence regarding links between UFSM and attendance is mixed. While several studies have identified a positive association between UFSM and attendance, others found no significant effects. Effects of UFSM on behavior are not well researched.
- A fair amount of evidence shows that the free and reduced-price meal programs fail to meet the needs of all households with children who experience food insecurity or insufficiency.
- This health note did not identify evidence regarding links between UFSM and food waste.

To read the complete health note, please visit bit.ly/COLLMM25.

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[i] Healthy School Meals for All Program, 2025 Regular Session, HB25-1274.
[ii] Jenny Jia et al., "Changes to dietary and health outcomes following implementation of the 2012 updated US Department of Agriculture school nutrition standards: analysis using National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2005–2016," Public Health Nutrition 23, no. 16 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980020001986, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/7E9CA529F4E64324736270F16F4B3FCF; J. F. W. Cohen et al., "Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review," Nutrients 13, no. 3 (Mar 11 2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911; M. K. Spill et al., "Universal Free School Meals and School and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review," JAMA Netw Open 7, no. 8 (Aug 1 2024),https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24082; Anna M. Localio et al., "School Provision of Universal Free Meals and Blood Pressure Outcomes Among Youths," JAMA Network Open 8, no. 9 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.33186, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.33186; Dania Orta-Aleman et al., "Statewide Universal School Meal Policies and Food Insecurity in Households with Children," American Journal of Preventive Medicine (2025/06/11/ 2025),https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2025.107942, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749379725004337.
[iii] Rachel Bleiweiss-Sande et al., "Associations between Food Group Intake, Cognition, and Academic Achievement in Elementary Schoolchildren," Nutrients 11, no. 11 (2019), https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/11/11/2722; A. Nyaradi et al., "The role of nutrition in children's neurocognitive development, from pregnancy through childhood," Front Hum Neurosci 7 (2013), https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00097.