



NATIONAL
FARM to SCHOOL
NETWORK

Who's At the Table?

COLORADO

A Case Study of Proposition FF

Building Community Power through
Healthy School Meals for All

July 2023

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SCHOOL NETWORK
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The School Meals Campaign: **Who's At the Table?**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency to move toward a more resilient local food supply that builds racial and social equity. The pandemic also radically shifted how child nutrition programs operate, with school nutrition professionals working tirelessly to feed kids under emergency conditions with limited resources. Even before the pandemic, school food was inaccessible to many students in need. While certain income-eligible students can receive free or reduced-price meals, many more families who do not qualify for this subsidy have difficulty affording full-price meals.

We need a system of school meals that serves all kids and values the people who get it to the table. That's why National Farm to School Network advocates for universal meals focused on equity for the most impacted stakeholders across the food system. We created the ***Who's At The Table?*** School Meals campaign to provide tools to communicate how our shared community values have the potential to radically transform our food system for the better. This deep dive into Colorado's Proposition FF is part of our effort to provide resources that support values-aligned universal meals advocacy. [Learn more about this campaign and find additional resources here.](#)

About National Farm to School Network

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy, and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing, school gardens, and food and agriculture education into schools and early care education settings. We provide vision, leadership, and support at the local, state, and national levels to connect and expand the farm to school movement, which has grown to reach approximately 67,300 schools in all 50 states as of 2019. Our network includes thousands of farm to school supporters, a national staff, an advisory board, and partner organizations in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. Territories. Our work is deeply rooted in equity, guided by our **Call to Action** that 100% of communities will hold power in a racially just food system.

COLORADO

HB 22-1414 & PROPOSITION FF **Healthy Meals For All Public School Students**

The Healthy School Meals for All Program policy was passed in 2022. It aims to ensure free, healthy meals to all public school students, regardless of their eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. The policy provides funding to reimburse schools for meals, offers local food purchasing grants, increases pay for food service employees, creates student and parent advisory committees, and provides technical assistance and education grants to support school meal quality and local food purchasing. Participating schools must maximize federal funding and report annual participation. Funding for the program is generated by capping state income tax deductions for taxpayers with a federal adjusted gross income of \$300,000 or more.

REFERRED TO BALLOT

June 6, 2022

APPROVED BY PUBLIC VOTE

November 8, 2022

EFFECTIVE

SY 2023-2024

STUDENTS BENEFITING

886,517

FISCAL NOTE

Approximately
\$100 million
annually.

BILL SPONSORS

Serena Gonzales-Gutierrez (D), Dafna Michaelson Jenet (D), Brittany Pettersen (D), Rhonda Fields (D)

POLICY CONTEXT

Universal meals had been a long-time goal of the anti-hunger community in the state. Before this bill, advocates had successfully lobbied for Colorado to cover the cost of reduced-price meal co-payments so that students eligible for reduced-price meals could receive them at no cost.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school meals were temporarily free for all students, leading to a significant increase in school lunch participation. Some Colorado districts witnessed a 20-40% rise in children eating school meals. Advocates framed the federal waivers as a "pilot program" for the Healthy School Meals for All campaign, which provided data and momentum for a permanent solution.

COALITION OVERVIEW



YES ON FF
HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL

KEY PARTNERS

The Healthy School Meals for All Colorado Students Coalition was led by statewide nonprofit organization, Hunger Free Colorado. The steering committee was represented by BIPOC organizations like Food to Power and Safe and Abundant Nutrition Alliance, rural-focused organizations like The Good Food Collective, statewide advocacy organizations like Nourish Colorado, and other grassroots groups and immigrant mothers working on the ground within their communities. A full list of supporters can be found on the [coalition's website here](#).

COALITION SUMMARY

Advocates adopted a formalized coalition structure with **two tiers of participation**:

- **Tier 1: Steering Committee**
Members: Act as leaders that drive the coalition vision and strategy
- **Tier 2: General Support Members**

This structure was created with the explicit intention to build a diverse, equitable coalition that represented different sectors, cultural backgrounds, geographic regions, and both urban and rural areas. Steering committee members supported grassroots organizing in their respective communities and elevated stories, successes, and other feedback from the ground during regularly scheduled coalition meetings. Translation services were provided at all coalition meetings to allow advocates to speak in the language of their heart.

"Our work campaigning for Prop FF was a rallying cry to get people to the polls who are otherwise scared to. We provided ways for people, even undocumented people who can't vote, to show up and get involved. This entire campaign was a really beautiful local way to build greater community power."

*- Rachel Landis,
Good Food Collective*



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UNIQUE POLICY FEATURES



It was voted in by the public.

In May 2022, the Colorado Legislature enacted HB 22-1414, but it would only become effective if voters approved Proposition FF in the November 2022 election. Prop FF allowed the state to create income tax deductions to fund the universal meals program. Proposition FF passed with 56.75% of the vote, received over 1.3 million votes.

Advocates previously proposed funding the program through general funds. However, due to budget concerns and constitutional limitations in Colorado, the original bill ultimately did not pass. Advocates decided that the best approach was to let voters decide through a public ballot. Voters approved a new tax code structure to create a revenue source for the program.



It incorporates a local food purchasing incentive program.

The legislation established a grant program that supports local school food purchasing, technical assistance, and education. This grant program is optional for schools participating in the universal meals program (see page 10 for more details).



It's participatory, requiring student-parent advisory committees.

To be eligible for the local food purchasing grant, a school must create an advisory committee consisting of students and parents who reflect the demographics of the student population. The committee must advise on food selection to ensure meals are culturally relevant, healthy, and appealing.

"What I'm most excited for is establishing those **parent advisory councils that can serve as a direct voice to districts and also act as a lever of accountability**... Many people think this is just about the quality of meals, and that's certainly key, but **this is a way to make sure that folks are being heard and their needs are met**. I'm excited to organize their voice and make sure it's at the table."

- **Nicholas Marquez**,
Hunger Free Colorado



It increases wages for cafeteria staff.

Under this bill, schools participating in the program can receive a wage increase or stipend for those who prepare and serve school meals. The amount received is either a fixed \$3,000 or calculated as 12 cents multiplied by the number of eligible meals served in the previous budget year. To qualify, the food authority must provide necessary documentation to the department and allocate 100% of the funds towards increasing wages or stipends. This provision aims to improve staff recruitment and retention while enhancing the quality of school meals.



It's optional.

Unlike other states with universal meals programs, Colorado's bill makes it optional for public schools to participate in the program. In order to qualify, schools must:

- Tell the Department of Education they are participating in the program annually,
- Participate in the National School Lunch Program,
- Maximize the amount of federal reimbursement they receive by participating in federal programs like the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) if they are eligible. Maximizing federal funding reduces the overall cost to the state for the universal meals program.

While allowing schools to choose whether to participate in this program may allow for more local control and freedom, some advocates are concerned that schools with low capacity or schools in more conservative districts may not participate. Continued public advocacy can demonstrate the benefits of participation so no student loses access.



It changed the tax code to pay for the program.

The state tax code was changed to fully fund the universal meals program by lowering the limit of state income tax deductions for taxpayers with a federal adjusted gross income of \$300,000 or more to \$12,000 for single filers and \$16,000 for joint filers.

FARM TO SCHOOL AND UNIVERSAL MEALS

The Healthy School Meals for All bill adapted, expanded, and permanently codified Colorado's existing local food purchasing incentive program and Local School Food Purchasing Technical Assistance and Education Grant Program that were initially introduced in 2019. The state halted implementation of the program due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was eventually piloted in 2021. Eligible schools participating in the National School Lunch Program could apply for up to \$0.05 per lunch meal they served in the prior school year, which is given in one lump sum to schools to spend on local foods for that current school year. The Healthy School Meals for All bill increased the incentive amount to \$0.25 per lunch, mandated a student-parent advisory board, and increased funding for training and technical assistance, among other changes.

New Changes to the Incentive:



Made it **permanent**



Increased the **rate** from 5 to 25 cents per lunch



Increased funding for **training and technical assistance**



Mandated **student-parent advisory board**



Colorado's universal meals bill directly includes specific provisions that support local food and values-based purchasing

In the text of HB 22-1414, the Colorado Legislature agreed:

- No Colorado child should experience hunger, and every public school student should benefit from access to healthy, **locally procured**, and freshly prepared meals during the school day;
- Colorado's healthy school meals program **should support Colorado's food systems**, including local farmers and ranchers;
- Colorado's healthy school meals program **must support students' nutrition** and provide quality meals to boost the health and well-being of Colorado students.

Colorado's universal meals bill directly included specific provisions that support local food and values-based purchasing. This is important for several reasons:

- It helps to **increase access to healthy, nutritious meals for all students**, regardless of their socio-economic status. Providing children nutrient-dense whole foods in school increases their capacity to learn.
- It **supports local farmers and food producers** by creating a reliable market for their products, which can have positive economic impacts on the community.
- It promotes the consumption of healthy, locally sourced meals in schools, which in turn helps to **establish healthy eating habits in children**. These habits can have long-lasting health benefits.
- The Parent-Student Advisory Committee creates a mechanism wherein **families can advocate for culturally-relevant food** on the menu.

Schools that participate in the universal meals program are also eligible for three other programs established under HB 22-1414:

1. A Local Food Purchasing Grant

At the beginning of each budget year, the Department of Education will distribute money to eligible schools. This grant award amount will be based on the number of eligible meals that the school served in the previous year. Schools must use this money to buy Colorado-grown, raised, or processed products, and they cannot spend more than 25% of the money on processed products. They can spend up to 10% of the money to pay for costs related to complying with this program. School food authorities (SFAs) can also spend up to 12% of their allotment to support the student-parent advisory councils.

There are two options to determine the award amount that each participating SFA receives: either a flat rate of \$5,000 or an amount calculated by multiplying 25 cents by the number of lunches served by the school in the previous school year. The SFA receives whichever amount is greater.

For example, if a participating SFA served 10,000 eligible meals in the preceding school year, the calculated award amount would be \$2,500 (10,000 meals x \$0.25 per meal). However, since the calculated amount is less than \$5,000, the school food authority will receive \$5,000 instead.

At the beginning of each budget year, each school must estimate how much money it will spend on buying Colorado-grown, raised, or processed products, what items it will buy, and from which suppliers it will buy them. If a school is unlikely to spend the full amount of the grant, the Department of Education will reduce the grant accordingly.

Any money that is not used will be distributed to other eligible schools with a preference for schools with higher identified student percentages.

Which ingredients qualify?

In order for food to qualify for reimbursement, ingredients must be “Colorado grown, raised, or processed products.” This means that all fruits, vegetables, grains, meats, and dairy products, except liquid milk, must be grown, raised, or produced in Colorado. Minimally processed products or value-added processed products must meet the standards for the “Colorado Proud” designation, which is established by the Colorado Department of Agriculture, though products that are not Colorado Proud but meet its definition of local will also qualify for reimbursement.

2. Food Nutrition Professional Support

This bill increases wages or provides a stipend to individuals who work for a school food authority and prepare and serve food for school meals. In addition to the money schools may already receive through other programs in this bill, schools may receive an extra amount of money that is either \$3,000 or 12 cents multiplied by the number of reimbursable meals served in the previous budget year. The school must use this extra money solely to increase wages or provide a stipend for those individuals.

3. Local School Food Purchasing Technical Assistance and Education Grant Program:

The program establishes a contract with a statewide nonprofit organization. This organization then provides sub-grants to participating SFAs, grower associations, and aggregators. These grants can be used for various purposes such as purchasing equipment, covering food safety certification costs, making infrastructure improvements, developing minimally-processed and value-added products, receiving marketing support, conducting education and outreach activities, and providing food preparation training.

The Student-Parent Advisory Board

To be eligible for the local food purchasing grant (mentioned on the previous page), a school must create an advisory committee consisting of students and parents who reflect the demographics of the student population. The committee advises on food selection to ensure meals are culturally relevant, healthy, and appealing to all ages. A school can use up to 12% of grant funds to support the implementation of this advisory board.

“Students deserve internet access and books and water. It's about time we put healthy food in the same category. We also know that the public food dollar can circulate more times in local Colorado economies. It shouldn't disappear into corporate coffers. We're talking about a radical paradigm shift in our food and farming ecosystem. **Access to fresh healthy food is a basic human right.** Now, we can look at farmers as stewards offering a public service. We're not just a farm enterprise operation... This bill is an innovative solution that helps us mitigate hunger within a highly precarious US economy.”

- *Roberto Meza, CEO of East Denver Food Hub*



TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES IN MESSAGING

Research impactful messaging.

Hunger Free Colorado hired a media and communications group that conducted polling on impactful messaging and attitudes toward healthy school meals for all. The findings of two rounds of polling shaped campaign communications by helping advocates avoid wonky messaging and provided them with data that demonstrated a baseline of public support for their policy.

Customize messaging for diverse audiences.

Though there are several dense, urban areas within the state, nearly half of Colorado is working farmland. Nearly half of all school districts (48 percent) have an enrollment of fewer than 500 students. Advocates in rural and more conservative districts understood that some messaging (such as “free meals”) may not resonate with their audience, whereas other messaging (such as “supports local farmers”) resonated more among rural voters.

Keep the conversation on food justice.

The most effective messaging in Colorado revolved around hunger. General audiences may not resonate with more specific components of the bill, but they all agreed that no child should be hungry when they are trying to learn at school. Coalition members partnered with food justice groups, who then shared information with and uplifted Proposition FF as part of their organizing.

Advocates also discussed the “hunger cliff” (also known as a food cliff) that resonated with many residents. While many families may have an income above the federal threshold for subsidized school lunches, Colorado is an increasingly unaffordable place to live. Housing, the rising cost of food, and other expenses impacted by inflation create difficult conditions for families, even those with higher incomes on paper, to make ends meet.



TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES IN A COALITION

Build capacity and support coalition members.

The Coalition was committed to equitable participation. One powerful way they supported this was through providing funds to support steering committee member efforts. The Coalition also organized trainings to cover essential skills and knowledge, such as overviews of the legislative process and training on how to canvass. Their success was ultimately facilitated by building capacity and engaging paid organizers within their own communities.

Partnering with national organizations has its benefits.

The American Heart Association, a leading organization focused on heart and brain health, joined the Coalition as a steering committee member. Through their partnership, they brought additional fundraising power and capacity. Having a nationally-focused, respected ally was a true benefit to the campaign and allowed the Coalition to reach more stakeholders in the health sector.

Language access is key for an equitable coalition.

More than 20% of Colorado's population identify as Latinx, and 12% of state residents are Spanish speakers. To prioritize equity and representation in campaign development, the Coalition ensured language access within coalition meetings and in external-facing communications. They did this by having interpretation services available during meetings, by providing external-facing communications in multiple languages, and by developing culturally-aligned outreach strategies.



ON LANGUAGE ACCESS

“Our coalition provided interpretation for the entire campaign, and the main reason is empowerment. **If you are asked to come to a meeting and do not speak English fluently, how can you tell your story** with all the details and passion of what goes on in your family when you send your kids to school and you don't have food? Our Latinx population in particular has a very strong voice in their children's education and the food that they eat. **We needed to include them.**”

- Tomas German-Palacios,
Good Food Collective

[TRANSLATED] “Language justice allows us to treat people whose primary language is not English - which in most cases dominates these meetings - **with dignity and respect.** It is also a step to close the gap for community collaborators whose first language is neither English or Spanish. **How can we continue to expand these service to more groups?**”

- Maria Judith Alvarez Quiroz,
Safe and Abundant Nutrition Alliance



TOP TIPS FROM ADVOCATES IN ADVOCACY

Be prepared for the moment.

The pandemic exposed disparities in access to nutritious meals for low-income students. The COVID-19 pandemic provided valuable data supporting universal meals, and the Coalition seized this opportunity to garner support for the bill. It passed just as federal assistance for school meals ended in June 2022. After witnessing the detrimental effects of paid school meals in the fall of 2022, residents voted to enact the bill into law.

Create a big tent policy.

Part of the reason why Colorado's bill is so comprehensive is that it was created iteratively with ample stakeholder input. The Coalition worked with stakeholders throughout multiple sectors and listened to families facing food insecurity. By incorporating the needs of so many residents, the Coalition was able to create a bill that reflected the needs of the entire community. This "big tent" approach allows many different types of stakeholders, such as farmers, processors, parents, students, teachers, and cafeteria staff, to get excited about universal meals. While this tactical decision may not work in every state, the policy garnered greater support than if this bill was more limited in scope.

There is strength in a public ballot.

Colorado's State Constitution stands out due to its Taxpayer Bill of Rights, which limits the traditional authority of the Governor and Legislature in making tax and budget decisions. Consequently, significant budget-related issues often require approval from voters through ballot initiatives. Advocates discovered that they can depend on public support for influential policies aligned with the public's vision for their communities. Public ballot initiatives could be employed by advocates in future policy initiatives.



LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

The Healthy School Meals for All bill was designed to be implemented in two phases by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE):

1. **School Year 2023-24** - Schools will be reimbursed for qualifying meals
2. **School Year 2024-25** - Additional programs in the bill will be implemented, such as the local food incentive grant and the cafeteria staff wage increase program.

The reason for the second phase is based around the necessity of having enough funds collected to be able to sustain this aspect of the program. Advocates also view this multi-phase design as helpful, as it allows the CDE to resolve issues that arise once implementation begins without being overwhelmed by too many new programs at once.

In the following months after Proposition FF passed in November 2022, the CDE released more specific rules on how the program will operate based on the ballot initiative language. In March 2023, those rules were sent to the state Board of Education. The CDE will continue to release more specific guidance for schools on participating in this program.



THE ADVOCACY DOES NOT STOP!

Especially in Colorado, advocates needed to continue outreach efforts after the universal school meals bill was enacted. This is because the program was optional for districts. Advocates are continuing to campaign, but this time to assure schools that the program is worthwhile and that the benefits that come from eliminating student hunger outweigh any perceived negatives.

While advocates are hearing that most districts are going to participate, there are still many questions and confusion from districts. The main question is whether participating in universal meals will change their “At-Risk” funding, which is a metric used to determine other school funding in addition to child nutrition. School administrators are nervous that parents will not complete income forms that were previously necessary for their child to receive free or reduced-priced meals. With no additional incentive to complete these forms, parents may not share their income needs with schools, which would decrease vital federal funding that would support universal meals and other school programs. Advocates are going to work with schools to minimize this issue. One possible solution is that Colorado is participating in USDA's Medicaid Direct Certification pilot, which will allow students enrolled in Medicaid to automatically qualify for either free or reduced-price meals.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Healthy School Meals for All Colorado Kids Coalition website](#)
- [Healthy School Meals for All Frequently Asked Questions Guide](#) updated February 2023 by the Colorado Department of Education
- [NFSN Webinar Series] *Uniting for a Just Local Food System Through Healthy School Meals for All* hosted by NFSN from June-July 2023:
 - [Part 1: Colorado's Policy Pathway and Overview \(English\)](#)
 - [Part 2: Creating Colorado's Coalition and Organizing for Change \(English\) \(En Español\)](#)
- [Video & Article] [Update: Colorado voters approve free school lunches for all](#). Written in November 2022 by Sonia Gutierrez of Rocky Mountain PBS
- [Webinar] [Healthy School Meals for All: Policies Passed and How to Start Your Own State Campaign](#). A November 2022 panel discussion hosted by Food Research & Action Center
- [Interview] [A Win in Colorado! A Conversation with Hunger Free Colorado on Prop FF Passing](#).
- A December 2022 coffee chat Interview hosted by National Farm to School Network
- [Toolkit] [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) by R. Gonzalez, Facilitating Power
- [Interview] [The West Steps: What you need to know about Healthy School Meals for All](#). A March 2023 interview with Ashley Wheeland of Hunger Free Colorado by the Colorado Children's Campaign
- [Article] [An August 2022 overview of SW Colorado's efforts and perspectives around HSMA](#)

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- **Roberto Meza**, CEO of East Denver Food Hub, for sharing how Colorado's policy will impact small farmers on [NFSN's blog](#).

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