

# **IMPACTS OF HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL (HSMA) ON STUDENTS ATTENDING RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS IN COLORADO**

A Study Conducted by  
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# INTRODUCTION

## Healthy School Meals for All in Colorado

Healthy School Meals for All (HSMA) is a state-level program that enables participating public school food authorities in Colorado to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of family income (Colorado Department of Education, 2023). “The purpose of HSMA is to ensure all students have access to a healthy meal during the school day, to promote equity and reduce the stigma associated with participating in school meal programs, and to support the nourishment students need to achieve academic success” (Herman, 2024, p. 5). HSMA went into effect in the 2023-24 school year after voters passed Proposition FF in November 2022. That measure authorized the creation of HSMA by limiting certain income tax deductions for those with high incomes in order to fund universal free meals (Urban Institute, 2025). The law requires that participating authorities maximize federal reimbursements, such as the Community Eligibility Provision, as a condition for participation in HSMA. Then the state covers the cost of the remaining meals not federally reimbursed.

After launch, however, the program quickly exceeded original cost projections due to higher-than-anticipated meal participation, creating a budget shortfall. “In the 2023–24 school year, all 190 eligible SFAs participated in HSMA. But the increase in student participation rates were higher than anticipated (37 percent for breakfast and 30 percent for lunch)” (Urban Institute, 2025, p. 2). The state estimated a 25% participation rate. The State Education Fund has been used to fill the gap; however, this is not sustainable (Chalkbeat Colorado, 2025). In response to this budget shortfall, lawmakers proposed ballot measures in 2025 to allow the state to retain additional revenue and raise additional funds to sustain the program. If the referendums pass, the state would collect enough money to continue HSMA statewide. If HSMA is not fully funded, only schools that participate in the Community Eligibility Program and other eligible sites, as determined by the department, will qualify for universal free meals (Colorado General Assembly, 2025).

## Review of Related Literature:

### Benefits of Universal Free Meals

Universal School Meals for All (USM) is a policy approach in which all students, regardless of income, receive school breakfast and lunch at no cost. This policy aims to address food insecurity, reduce stigma associated with free and reduced-price meal programs, and improve student outcomes. Following nationwide implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent state-level expansions, multiple studies have evaluated its effects on factors such as participation, attendance, behavior, and academic outcomes.



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#### Participation and Access

The most consistent finding across research is that universal meals lead to substantial increases in student participation in meals. Studies show higher uptake among historically underserved groups, including lower-income students and students of color. Removing financial and administrative barriers increases participation and normalizes meal-taking (Spill et al., 2024; Ramponi et al., 2025).

#### Food Security

State-level universal meal policies correlate with lower rates of household food insufficiency among families with school-aged children. Families in states with USM programs during the 2022–2023 school year reported significantly lower food hardship compared to those in states without such policies (USDA ERS, 2024). Universal meals reduce the economic burden on families and provide reliable daily nutrition.

## **Attendance and Engagement**

Evidence indicates modest improvements in attendance following universal meal adoption. Some studies report increased attendance rates and fewer tardies, while others find stable but high attendance levels. While effects vary, the direction is generally positive and may reflect improved student readiness to learn and fewer missed school days due to food insecurity (Hecht et al., 2020; Gordanier et al., 2020).

## **Behavior and School Climate**

Multiple studies and reviews link USM to improvements in student behavior and school climate. Schools often report calmer classrooms, fewer behavioral disruptions, and reductions in suspensions and discipline referrals. While not all findings are causal, qualitative and quantitative evidence point to improved student regulation and classroom engagement following meal access expansion (Spill et al., 2024).

## **Academic Outcomes**

Research on academic impacts is mixed but generally neutral to positive. Some quasi-experimental studies show improvements in grade progression and early literacy, while others find no statistically significant changes in standardized test performance. A small number of studies report slight declines, likely due to shifting student demographics and participation patterns rather than the program itself. Overall, the literature suggests no harm and potential modest gains (Hecht et al., 2020; EPIC, 2021).

This research concludes that Universal School Meals (USM) provide meaningful benefits to students and families that extend well beyond nutrition. While direct causal links to outcomes such as academic performance are difficult to isolate, the evidence consistently shows no adverse effects and notable gains in participation, attendance, behavior, and food security. Ultimately, universal meal programs represent a low-risk, high-impact investment in student well-being and educational equity.

# RESEARCH METHOD

The Colorado League of Charter Schools (the League), in partnership with funding from the Colorado Trust, conducted a research project investigating the impacts of Healthy School Meals for All (HSMA) in six rural charter schools. The League sought to investigate the following hypothesis:

*The implementation of Healthy School Meals for All (HSMA) in rural Colorado schools is expected to be associated with improved student outcomes, extending beyond nutrition, including higher attendance rates, stronger academic performance, and fewer behavioral issues, as measured through quantitative school data and qualitative stakeholder feedback.*

## List of Participating Schools

| School Name                 | Location (City)   | Number of Students (SY 24/25) |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Animas High School          | Durango           | 260                           |
| Georgetown Community School | Georgetown        | 78                            |
| Steamboat Montessori        | Steamboat Springs | 140                           |
| The Juniper School          | Durango           | 171                           |
| Vision Charter Academy      | Delta             | 430                           |
| Vista Charter School        | Montrose          | 188                           |

Schools completed a survey that combined qualitative and quantitative data collection. The League collected information related to school context, nutrition, attendance, academic performance, student behavior, equity & access, implementation & operations, and looking ahead. The League then analyzed the survey results for unique school-level findings and common themes.

## Survey Questions:

### School Context

- Are there any unique circumstances or context related to school meals at your school that we should be aware of? For example, did your school only recently begin participating in the National School Lunch Program or HSMA?

### Nutrition

- Quantitative: Approximately how many students ate school lunch before HSMA?
- Quantitative: Approximately how many students eat school lunch now, with HSMA in place?
- Qualitative: How has HSMA affected hunger in your school community? Are participation rates more or less than expected? Please share examples or observations.
- Qualitative: Does your school participate in the free breakfast program? If yes, please share stories, anecdotes, or quotes about its impact.

### Attendance

- Quantitative: What was your school's average attendance rate before HSMA?
- Quantitative: What is your school's average attendance rate after HSMA?
- Qualitative: Have you noticed any changes in attendance since students have had consistent access to meals? Please share stories, anecdotes, or quotes.

### Academic Performance

- Please select the academic measure(s) that best represent your school's performance (e.g., SPF rating, CMAS scores, local assessments such as MAP or iReady, SAT, graduation rates).
- Quantitative: What did your selected measure(s) show before HSMA?
- Quantitative: What do your selected measure(s) show after HSMA?
- Qualitative: How has student performance been influenced by access to school meals? Please share stories, anecdotes, or quotes.

## Survey Questions: (cont.)

### Student Behavior

- Quantitative: What were your student suspensions or discipline referrals before HSMA?
- Quantitative: What are your student suspensions or discipline referrals after HSMA?
- Qualitative: How has student behavior changed as a result of school meals? Please share stories, anecdotes, or quotes.

### Equity & Access

- Qualitative: Are there particular student groups (e.g., low-income, multilingual learners, students with disabilities) for whom HSMA has made the most noticeable difference?
- Qualitative: Some schools report less 'stigma' around taking school meals since HSMA. Have you found this to be true at your school? Please share stories, anecdotes, or quotes.
- Qualitative: Have families shared feedback with you about HSMA? Please include stories, quotes, or themes.

### Implementation & Operations

- Qualitative: What challenges has your school faced in implementing HSMA (e.g., staffing, kitchen limitations, vendor access, etc.)?
- Qualitative: What has worked well in making HSMA successful at your school?

### Looking Ahead

- If HSMA were discontinued, what impact would this have on your students?
- If HSMA were discontinued, what impact would this have on your families?
- If HSMA were discontinued, what financial impact would this have on your school?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

# RESULTS

## Participation and Access

Before HSMA, most rural schools in the study reported low to moderate daily participation in school lunch programs. After implementation, five of the six schools surveyed reported significant increases in student meal participation. Several schools that previously did not offer a meal program reported daily participation increases from 0 to 50, 100, and 110 students. One school with an existing program increased average daily lunch counts from 100 to 130 meals, while another saw participation rise from 33% to 58% of students.

These upward trends reflect the removal of financial barriers, enabling more students to access nutritious meals regularly. Beyond the qualitative data, school leaders described growing enthusiasm and engagement around school meals. Some schools introduced healthier and more appealing options, such as a new salad bar or a school-to-table program, where students grow produce that is incorporated into their lunches. This shift not only increased participation but also helped build a stronger culture around healthy eating in rural schools.

*“Since HSMA, we’ve normalized taking a school lunch—it’s just part of the day now.”* —  
**Head of School**



Source: Unsplash

## Academic Performance

Among the schools surveyed, only one reported a measurable academic gain following the implementation of HSMA, with its Colorado School Performance Framework (SPF) score increasing by 10 points. Four schools indicated that their academic performance remained stable before and after implementation, and one school did not provide academic data.

While quantitative academic outcomes were limited, qualitative feedback from school leaders suggested that students were more engaged and focused during afternoon classes. Several leaders attributed this to the fact that more students are eating consistent, nutritious meals, which likely reduces hunger and fatigue and improves concentration throughout the day.

*“I love lunch now. It’s warm and cozy and feels like everyone is together.” – 4th Grade Student*

## Student Attendance

Several schools indicated improved attendance following consistent access to meals.

- One school increased its average attendance from 89% to 90–95%.
- Another reported a notable rise from 60% to 72% average attendance.
- The other four schools surveyed reported no noticeable changes in attendance seen before and after the implementation of HSMA.

While not every school experienced a significant shift, those that did are qualitatively attributing steady or increased attendance to the fact that students are not missing school due to a lack of food at home.

*“Attendance has improved—we have fewer late arrivals, and more students are present for the full day.” – School Principal*

## **Student Behavior**

Of the six schools surveyed, one reported a measurable decline in discipline referrals, dropping from 3–5 incidents to one following HSMA implementation. Most schools maintained consistently low levels of suspensions and discipline referrals, reporting “0 to 0” incidents or “very few to still very few.” One outlier reported an increase from two to 17 incidents, but the school leader noted that behavior data had not been accurately tracked prior to HSMA, making direct comparisons unreliable.

Although quantitative behavior data did not show a strong correlation with the implementation of HSMA, qualitative feedback from school leaders described students as calmer, more focused, and less disruptive during the school day.

*“Our classroom teachers report that children are calmer and more ready to learn after lunch.”* — **Assistant Principal**

*“We’ve seen an increased connection among our students since we started providing consistent meals.”* — **Executive Director**



Source: CDC on Unsplash

## **Equity and Access**

A central goal of adopting universal free meals is to advance equity and expand access to nutritious food. In the survey, many school leaders reported positive family feedback, often highlighting both economic relief and greater ease of access to meals.

*“Families are very grateful for the opportunity to not have to worry about lunch.”* — **Executive Director**

Several schools also noted a reduction in stigma associated with receiving school meals. This shift is particularly meaningful in small rural communities, where visibility can heighten the sense of difference for students experiencing food insecurity. By ensuring that every child receives a meal, HSMA fosters a more inclusive and dignified school environment, where participation in school meals is normalized for all students.

*“It is more normalized to take school lunch now.”* — **Assistant Principal**

*“Before HSMA, we had families quietly struggling. Now kids just eat together.”* — **Head of School**

## **Implementation & Operations**

Many of the participating schools, especially those without preexisting food service programs, faced logistical and operational challenges implementing HSMA. Kitchen limitations were the most frequently cited barrier, including restricted vendor options, insufficient equipment, or a complete lack of kitchen facilities. Several schools also reported staffing shortages and concerns about food quality when relying on external service providers. In rural settings, these challenges are compounded by limited vendor access and supply chain constraints due to geographic isolation.

*“Food delivery and quality from the SFA has been a challenge.”* — **Assistant Principal**

Despite these barriers, schools identified several factors that contributed to successful implementation. All schools surveyed are participating in a kitchen infrastructure grant program through the Colorado League of Charter Schools, supported by the Colorado Trust. This grant has allowed schools to purchase equipment and strengthen their meal service capacity. Additionally, three schools cited strong partnerships with districts, authorizers, and School Food Authorities as critical to overcoming operational hurdles and ensuring program success.

*“The rural food grant—we would not be where we are without it.”* — **Assistant Principal**

*“Our partnership with the district has been critical to making this work.”* — **Executive Director**

### **Looking Ahead**

Across participating schools, leaders expressed deep concern about the potential consequences if HSMA were discontinued. They emphasized that students would lose reliable daily access to meals, which would disproportionately impact low-income families who depend on the program to meet basic nutritional needs. Families would likely face increased financial strain, and schools could once again experience operational burdens such as managing unpaid lunch debt, processing meal applications, and addressing inequities in access.

In addition to the immediate impacts on students and families, leaders noted that discontinuing HSMA could erode progress in participation, engagement, and school climate achieved since the program’s implementation. Maintaining stable funding and program infrastructure was widely seen as essential to sustaining these gains.

*“It would be devastating for our students and families.”* — **Executive Director**

# CONCLUSION

The survey findings indicate that HSMA has led to clear increases in school meal participation, modest but meaningful improvements in attendance, and generally positive behavioral outcomes for students in rural Colorado schools. The program has also helped to reduce stigma around school meals, ease economic pressures on families, and foster a stronger sense of community among students.

Despite these benefits, implementation challenges, particularly related to infrastructure and staffing, remain pressing issues for rural schools, highlighting the need for continued investment and targeted support. This study was limited in scope, involving only six participating schools, and relied on self-reported data from school leaders. As such, the findings should not be generalized to all rural schools. However, the results are consistent with prior research on the impacts of universal school meal programs nationwide.

Future research should involve more rigorous and controlled studies to better understand HSMA's impacts across Colorado's rural charter schools. Expanding the dataset would provide greater clarity about the program's effectiveness and its ability to meet its intended goals beyond feeding students, strengthening the evidence base for policy and funding decisions.

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