

**Testimony in support of Senate Bill 22-087 – Healthy Meals for All Public School Students**

Leslie Colwell – Senate Education – March 2, 2022

- Members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 22-087. I'm Leslie Colwell and I lead Colorado Children's Campaign's work on K-12 issues, including the important intersection between school nutrition and children's physical and mental well-being and ability to learn.
- We enthusiastically support SB-087 for all of the reasons you'll hear today – especially for the health benefits that will be available to all kids in the state when we unlock access to free school meals and the removal of low-income stigma and administrative burden for schools to keep track of student lunch debt.
- Our 2021 KIDS COUNT in Colorado! Report highlighted data showing that households with children were the hardest hit by food insecurity during the disruptions of COVID-19. As of early 2022, nearly 2 in 5 Colorado households with kids reported their children were not eating enough because food was unaffordable.
- Today I want to focus on the fact that FRL forms no longer produce an accurate count of students who are eligible for school meals, and it is time we take a different and complementary approach to both feeding and funding our students.
- There is an important intersection between school meals and school finance. Colorado's school funding formula includes an "at-risk" factor, which sends additional funds to districts serving students in poverty, based singularly on the submission of FRL forms. Unfortunately, our reliance on FRL forms no longer produces an accurate count of students experiencing economic hardship, which was made clear during the pandemic. With students learning from home and receiving universal free meals due to a federal two-year waiver, as we saw at-risk student counts decline dramatically.
- Luckily, the General Assembly has been proactive about solving this growing problem. Members of the School Finance Interim Committee, which includes many of you, have introduced House Bill 1202, which establishes a process for creating a new measure of students experiencing poverty and will allow our state to better direct resources to those kids through the school funding formula. Starting as soon as the 2023 school year, this would shift Colorado away from relying on the submission of FRL forms as the state's only proxy for poverty in school finance.
- Specifically, the new measure would include the percentage of students certified as eligible for the federal school lunch program based on eligibility for other public benefit programs, supplemented by enrollment in Medicaid/CHP+. This measure is dependent on Colorado's approval for the federal Medicaid Demonstration Pilot – the same pilot that forms the basis of SB-087.

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- Because of Colorado's high enrollment rate in Medicaid and CHP+, using Identified Student Percentage (ISP) supplemented with Medicaid could have the effect of automatically capturing a larger number of students who qualify for means-tested social services and reduce the need for schools to collect forms or verify eligibility to receive additional resources to serve these students.
- Shifting to this approach, and away from reliance on FRL forms for schools to receive additional funding, would be complementary to the process laid out in this bill, ensuring that public schools are able to participate in universal free meals programs, have a more accurate count of the students in need of additional resources to support their learning and achievement, *and* face a lower paperwork and administrative burden.
- We urge you to vote yes on Senate Bill 22-087. Thank you for your consideration.