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About a third of Jeffco students qualify for subsidized meals. There are fears many can't access them during coronavirus.

The district of more than 79,000 students is taking steps to improve access, including creating a pilot program to bus meals to high poverty neighborhoods.

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Feeding families struggling to make ends meet during the pandemic has risen as a top priority for many school districts across Colorado, but a band of community organizations is calling on Jeffco Public Schools to do more to make sure its students have enough food.

Led by **Coloradans for the Common Good**, the organizations convened

virtually last week, concerned primarily about the roadblocks that stand in the

way of families being able to fully access the meals that Jeffco Public Schools has been distributing this fall. Problems with scheduling and transportation mean some kids and their family members may be going hungry.

“Our schools, for better or worse, have become a central part of our social safety net, and our social safety net is already deeply frayed in our country,” said Reagan Humber, a member of the group’s steering committee and pastor at House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver. “And so kids are depending even more on that food.”

Members of Coloradans for the Common Good worry that the district doesn’t operate enough distribution sites across communities so that all families in need can pick up food nearby, including those who are limited by transportation. They’re just as concerned that the sites don’t offer the kind of flexible hours that cater to families’ schedules.



“I just don’t think this is the time for us to imagine or hope that we’re doing the best job that we can be,” said Humber, who is eager to collaborate with the district to ensure it connects with families throughout communities.

Jeffco Public Schools, which is educating 79,150 students this school year, is taking steps to increase access. A pilot program launches on Monday in which school buses will deliver meals to neighborhoods, said Beth Wallace, the district’s executive director for food and nutrition services. The project is still in planning, and Wallace isn’t certain what neighborhoods will be served. But it will largely focus on neighborhoods containing a lot of students who attend Title 1 schools — a federal designation indicating a high rate of poverty.

The project aligns with one of the visions laid out by Coloradans for the Common Good. Humber would like to see Jeffco Public Schools bus food across the community, noting that drivers have agreed to transport meals to students so that they don’t have to walk miles to pick up food. He is also urging the district to ensure a school in every town it serves offers meal distribution and that every neighborhood serving a population of students who attend a Title I school has nearby access to school meals. Humber learned about the plan on Monday. He said Coloradans for the Common Good would prefer to see the plan implemented sooner but would be happy to see school buses used to deliver meals to families during the holidays.

About 30% of students in the district qualify for free and reduced price lunch — a federal benchmark to measure poverty in schools.

Last week, ahead of the meeting among community organizations, the district added four more sites to its food distribution program. Jeffco Public Schools now provides meals at 19 schools while also offering meals at 80 locations that educate preschools students, kids with special needs and students enrolled in after-school care, Wallace said.

That was a step in the right direction, Humber said, but it’s still not enough to ensure that all students and families in the district can readily access meals. Many kids get the bulk of their nutrition through the meals provided at school, he said.

School meal programs have become even more critical this year as churches and other programs that traditionally offer hot meal options to the community are not open because of safety issues.

This fall, when all Jeffco schools were open, food was distributed from 138 sites. As schools transitioned to remote learning at the end of November, Wallace said, the

district scaled back to 15 sites, plus the 80 locations serving the district's youngest learners, those with special needs and those being cared for after school hours.

Part of that decision was driven by a lack of enough food service staff as many had to quarantine due to COVID-19 exposure, Wallace said.

"We were running out of staff and could not keep all of our facilities open," she said.

And while Jeffco Public Schools offered students grab-and-go meals from late morning to early afternoon at the start of the fall semester, it has shifted pickup hours to later in the day after students are done learning — from 2 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Wallace said the district received pushback for distributing meals when many students were in the process of learning.

The challenge, she noted, is serving different schools with different plans. The district's food service department tries to run on a model of consistency for the sake of efficiency, but that isn't easy when schools abide by their own schedules.

"We evaluate the community needs regularly," Wallace said, as the district also makes adjustments based on feedback it receives.

"I do think we're doing the best that we can in our current environment to reach those families," she said.

On Tuesdays, each student can pick up three breakfasts and three lunches while on Thursdays, they can take home four of each meal. Numbers of students served throughout the fall have fluctuated, but at its highest volume, the district was serving about 20,000 meals a day, Wallace said. That's down from the 30,000 meals a day the district typically provides students. Wallace attributes that difference to the decisions of some families in remote learning to fix their own meals as well as a drop in enrollment in the district.

Jeffco Public Schools' enrollment has decreased by more than 3,700 students from the 2019-20 school year, according to figures provided by district spokeswoman Cameron Bell.

A community responsibility beyond schools

Communication is another area of concern for Humber, who is pushing Jeffco Public Schools to use its texting system and post fliers in neighborhoods to make families aware of the meals available to them.

Humber's frustrations with the district's communication extend beyond what its outreach to families looks like. On behalf of Coloradans for the Common Good and Jeffco Education Support Professionals Association, he has asked Interim Superintendent Kristopher Schuh to meet and talk through solutions. Schuh initially directed him to talk with a couple district department leaders. Schuh's office recently offered Humber the chance to meet with the interim superintendent this week, but Humber said that after accepting that opportunity, he has yet to hear back from the office on a scheduled time.

Even as the district has expanded the number of food distribution sites in the last week, Humber isn't convinced the new locations are targeted to areas with high concentrations of kids who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, or that the afternoon hours fit the schedules of all families.

Humber said that from talking to families, it's clear those limited hours two days of the week present a barrier for some working parents.

He also worries about children and families suffering without more access to school meals, particularly as the pandemic continues and protections for families, including unemployment protections, are running out

But Wallace sees the district as one component of a broader community network responsible for making sure families are fed day after day — a network that relies just as much on other community staples like food banks.

“It is not just one operation that has that responsibility,” she said. “We all do. People are critical, but it's a partnership between many entities to cover that.”



Reagan Humber, pastor at House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver and part of Coloradans for the Common Good, is concerned that not all students and families in Jeffco Public Schools have had access to school meals during the pandemic. He's especially worried about students and families living in high-poverty neighborhoods. (Brandan Robertson, Special to The Colorado Sun)