

The Pueblo Chieftain

Farm-to-school programs grow healthier kids

JAKE WILLIAMS GUEST COLUMNIST

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People often think of Colorado as a healthy state. Our adults are active and take advantage of all the opportunities for physical activity from skiing to biking to running.

But Colorado's kids don't fare as well.

Each year the Colorado Health Foundation releases the Colorado Health Report card, assessing Colorado's health. According to the most report card released this month, Colorado gets a "C" for children's health due in part to obesity rates and lack of physical activity.

That is one reason why we are supporting a new bill that will improve Colorado's childhood obesity rates and positively impact our rural economies.

Colorado House Bill 1088, sponsored by Rep. Faith Winter (D-Westminster), will provide grants to help farmers produce healthy, nutritious food for public school kids through farm to school programs.

Research shows that farm to school programs work for students. They provide kids with healthy food options and teach them about nutrition and food production.

When kids learn about how their food reaches their plates, they make healthier choices. Students who attend schools with farm to school programs are [28 percent more likely](#) to choose healthy meal options and students who attend schools that serve local fruits and vegetables have a [14 percent lower chance](#) of being overweight or obese.

I recently spoke with Dr. Mike Bartolo, Vegetable Crops Specialist at Colorado State University's Arkansas Valley Research Center and he says the bill would have a profound impact on growers and children in the region.

The growers in the Valley produce an amazing variety of high quality fruits and vegetables. In recent studies, Arkansas Valley Research Center found that some of the produce grown locally has significant health benefits, making it really important to connect the local agricultural industry with kids in the area. Hopefully, it will help our children realize that the Valley's soils and water are priceless resources to both our economy and our health.

Despite these benefits, it can be very difficult for school districts to start and grow farm to school programs, primarily because there aren't enough farmers in the market to support these programs.

Detailed food safety measures required by schools can be expensive to implement. Furthermore, investments in food transportation, cooling and infrastructure needed to lengthen the growing season are often necessary to sell to schools, but can be prohibitive for smaller agricultural operations. Large vendors who sell less healthy, processed food and/or ship in their food from afar have a distinct advantage.

That is where HB 1088 comes in.

This bill would create a grant program to help Colorado farmers cover the costs of labor, material and equipment needed to sell their products to Colorado schools. The program would last five years and cost about \$1 million per year.

We hope this bill will not only improve children's health, but also have big an impact on rural communities, which have lagged behind more urban areas in economic recovery.

Farmers who participate in farm to school programs see an average 5 percent increase in their total income. Each \$1 invested in farm to school programs produces \$2.16 of local economic activity. For every one job created by schools purchasing local food, 1.67 more jobs are created locally. Last year, Colorado schools spent \$180 million on school meals. Keeping more of those dollars here in Colorado can make a big impact.

At least 16 other state governments support farm to school programs, but Colorado does not. USDA data show that the number of school districts that have farm to school programs has increased 430 percent since 2006. That is 403 percent!

It's time that Colorado joined this movement. HB 15-1088 is a proven win-win for Colorado's kids and economy.

Let's put Coloradans to work for the benefit of Colorado's kids.

Jake Williams is the executive director of Healthier Colorado.