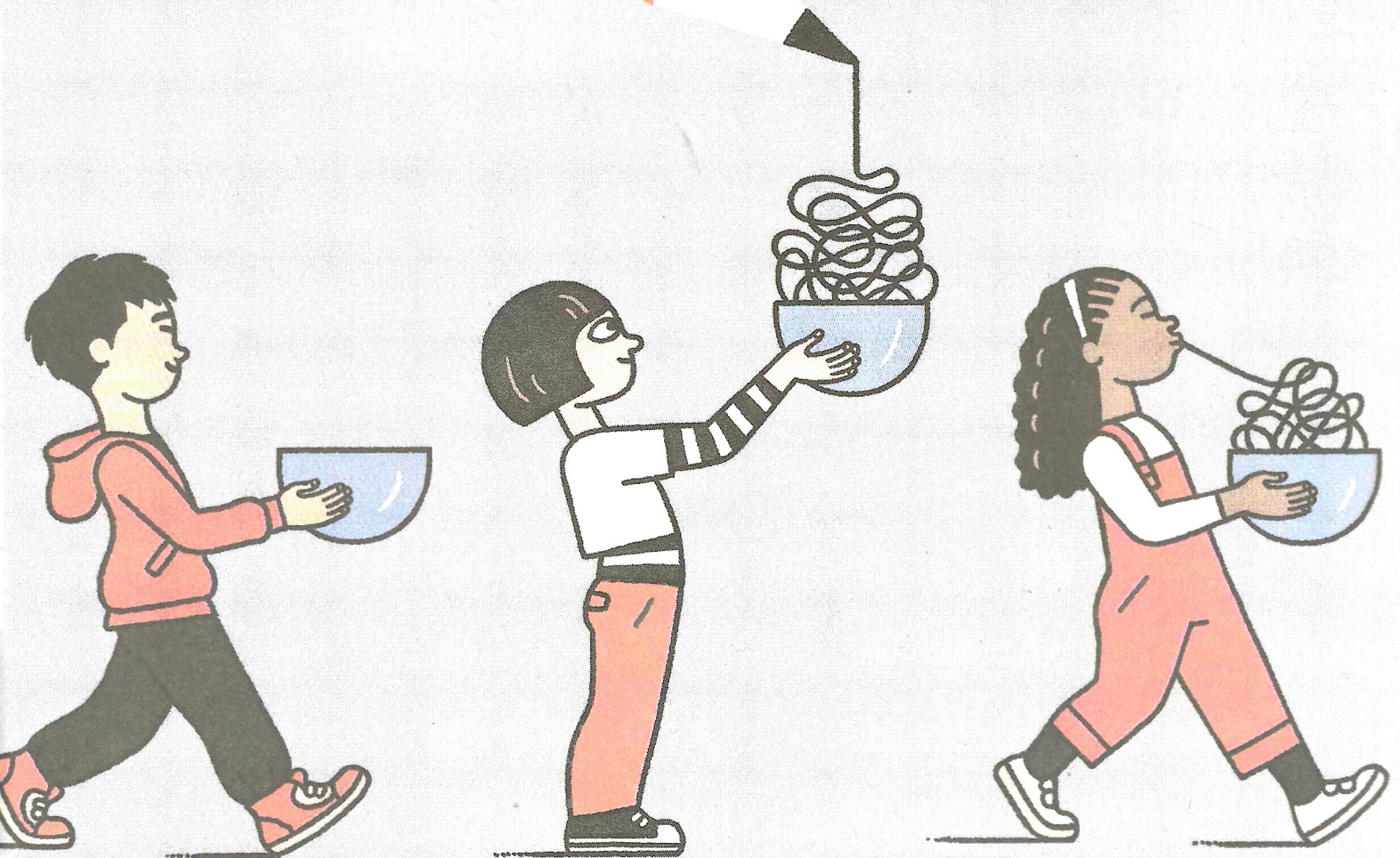




WHAT IF EVERY KID GOT A FREE LUNCH?

BY KATHERINE CUSUMANO · ILLUSTRATION BY LUCI GUTIÉRREZ



**IN
OCTOBER,**

PEDRO CRUZ, 13, traveled all around Denver with his mom, knocking on doors. His mission was to talk to as many people as he could about ... school lunch. Colorado was considering a program that would make school meals free for all students, and the issue went to a public vote. Pedro's mom is a staff member at an organization that works on school lunch issues, and to him, it made sense. He had seen kids being bullied for not having lunch money. Making it free would "make people at school happier," he says. In November, Coloradoans agreed. In November, they voted to provide funding to make school lunch free for everybody. That makes Colorado the third state, after California and New York, to do so. And people in other states are pushing their lawmakers to do the same. What's all the sudden interest? Part of it has to do with Covid. When the pandemic hit, Congress and the Agriculture Department temporarily helped make school lunch free for all students. That has ended, but it made many people wonder why it's not a permanent thing, says Janet Poppendieck, the author of "Free for All: Fixing School Food

in America." Here's the thinking: There are lots of school resources that families don't pay for, like bus rides or textbooks. So why do they have to pay for lunch? After all, regular meals are just as necessary for learning. Hungry kids are more likely to be absent and to get sick, says Monica Daniela Zuercher, a researcher at the University of California.

If your family makes below a certain amount of money, you can already apply to get a free or reduced-price lunch, and millions of kids do. That's one reason some people are against making lunch free for everyone. But some families that don't meet the qualifications still can't actually afford lunch. According to a recent survey of 847 school districts, students in those districts owed a total of more than \$19 million in meal debt.

Plus, researchers have found that singling kids out for free lunch can create a negative attitude toward them. Lillian Soper, 13, saw this at her elementary school in Bucksport, Maine. "There was kind of that division" between kids who got free lunch and kids who didn't, she says. But since her state made lunch free for everyone, things have changed. "It's a lot easier for everyone to feel included and find common ground," she says. ♦

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Other Coloradans agreed. In November, they voted to provide funding to make school lunch free for everybody. That makes make theirs the third state, after California and Maine, to do so. And people in other states are pushing their lawmakers to do the same.

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6 THINGS TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2023

BY CHARLEY LOCKE · ILLUSTRATION BY NADA HAYEK

