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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**June 16, 2014**

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**Governor, First Lady, Superintendent Encourage Montana Schools to Take Advantage of Childhood Hunger Resources**

HELENA - Governor Steve Bullock, First Lady Lisa Bullock, and Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau are encouraging eligible Montana schools to take advantage of a new school meals option called the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP makes it easier for eligible schools to serve universal free meals to all students, decrease childhood hunger, and improve student performance, all while decreasing administrative burdens on the schools.

"If we want to give our kids every opportunity to succeed, then we need to ensure they're able to focus on their studies, instead of their hunger." Governor Bullock said. "How can we expect our kids to concentrate on learning, when they don't know where their next meal is coming from?"

CEP was launched in 10 states as a pilot program during the 2013-14 school year. In schools that participated, lunch participation increased by 13 percent and breakfast participation increased by 25 percent. Districts reported positive feedback from parents and school staff, as well as an increased capacity to feed more children. One-hundred percent of participating districts recommended CEP.

Studies have shown that many students who qualify for free or reduced lunch don't take advantage of it because of stigma. Universal free breakfast and lunch, as provided by CEP, helps overcome this stigma. In addition, it helps schools cut through red tape, by reducing paperwork that schools must complete to track which students qualify for free or reduced lunch and which do not.

In Montana, one in five children struggles with food insecurity. Childhood hunger can have dramatic impacts on the health and academic performance of students. Hungry kids have lower math and reading scores, are more likely to repeat a grade, visit the school nurse more often, are at an increased risk of dropping out of school, and have poor cognitive development.

"Childhood hunger is a challenge that many Montana communities face, but it is also a problem with a solution that can make a huge difference for kids in our state," First Lady Lisa Bullock said. "Schools that qualify for CEP have a great opportunity to help ensure that no kid is hungry in Montana."

Schools are eligible for CEP if over 40% of their students have been identified as likely to be eligible for free and reduced priced lunch. Under CEP, schools with over 62.5 percent of eligible students will receive 100

percent reimbursement from the USDA for universal free breakfast and lunch, regardless of individual students' eligibility.

"Healthy meals play a critical role in student achievement and behavior," said Superintendent Juneau. "Access to nutritious meals helps students succeed in school, graduate and go on to create a better life for their families in the future. Improving access to school meals for eligible children and decreasing paperwork for schools is a win-win situation."

More than 100 Montana schools qualify to take advantage of full or partial reimbursement for meals through the CEP. All schools that qualify for the CEP received a letter from the Governor, Lt. Governor, First Lady and Superintendent last month encouraging them to take advantage of this program. August 31st is the deadline for schools to express their intent to take part in the program. Schools with questions can contact the Office of Public Instruction at 406-444-2501.

More information about CEP can be found [HERE](#).