Dear Superintendent xx,

I appreciate the effort you make every day to ensure that the children in [state] receive an outstanding education. Some of our students face many challenges that can interfere with learning. I am writing to bring your attention to the Community Eligibility Provision, a new option for high poverty schools and school districts that can help you address one of those challenges — hunger — by ensuring that low-income children have access to healthy meals at school so they are fueled up and ready to learn. I encourage you to explore whether it makes sense for your district.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 created community eligibility, which is offered through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. Community eligibility is a voluntary program at the district level that allows schools to forgo the administrative hassles of collecting school meal program applications and focus on the nutrition needs of students by providing breakfast and lunches at no charge to all students.

In the 2015-2016 school year, more than 18,000 schools were using community eligibility, reaching 8.5 million low-income children. Just over half of the schools eligible to implement community eligibility adopted the provision. This is a great start, but many more schools can still benefit from community eligibility and help students achieve their educational goals. According to a 2016 report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Food Research and Action Center entitled, “Community Eligibility Adoption Rises for the 2015-2016 School Year, Increasing Access to School Meals,” community eligibility not only reduces redundant paperwork, but also makes substantial gains in meeting vulnerable children’s nutritional needs through providing free, healthy breakfast and lunch meals at school each day. Schools that have already adopted community eligibility have witnessed how reliable access to healthy meals better prepares students to learn at school.

Being able to offer meals at no charge facilitates implementation of innovative service models, like breakfast after the bell — where students eat breakfast in the classroom at the start of the school day — which further increase school meal participation. Increased participation in the school meal programs brings down the cost per meal and creates savings for schools. These savings can be re-directed to improve service and the quality of school meals. For example, Floyd County, Kentucky took the opportunity to adopt breakfast in the classroom when it implemented community eligibility, offering all students a free meal in the first ten minutes of class time, and was able to invest in new equipment to enhance food service, staff safety, and nutrition quality. [OR LOCAL EXAMPLE]

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Education have made resources available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/community-eligibility-provision> to help you successfully implement community eligibility, including identifying alternatives to the income data traditionally collected on school meal applications, which is often used to allocate Title I and other education funds to your schools.

When children receive nutritious meals at school, they are better prepared to learn. Community eligibility is a valuable initiative that can play an important role in improving school attendance and behavior by increasing participation in the breakfast and lunch programs. I urge you to consider and promote community eligibility as an option that can make it easier for schools serving low-income children in [state] to provide meals to all students.

Sincerely,

Member of Congress