

Food Research and Action Center

Community Eligibility Helps Low-Income Students and Schools

Community Eligibility is the newest, and in many ways best option for offering meals at no charge to all students in schools with high percentages of low-income students. Community eligibility allows schools to feed many more children, and to realize administrative cost savings, thereby making it cost-effective to provide all meals at no charge. Under community eligibility, paper applications are completely eliminated. Instead, schools are reimbursed through a formula based on the number of "Identified Students" - those certified for free school meals without paper applications.

Identified Students are those supposed to be found automatically eligible for free school meals, without a paper application, because they are in foster care or Head Start, are homeless, are migrant, or are living in households that receive SNAP/Food Stamps, TANF cash assistance or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations benefits. Community Eligibility is available in all schools where 40 percent or more of the students meet this definition.

Community eligibility has been available in Illinois, Kentucky and Michigan since the start of the 2011-2012 school year. Washington DC, New York, Ohio and West Virginia began offering the option in the 2012-2013 school year. Florida, Georgia, Maryland and Massachusetts were selected to begin in the 2013-2014 school year. Beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, all schools nationwide that meet the 40 percent identified student threshold will be able to participate.

Benefits for Schools and Students

Schools using community eligibility realize the following benefits:

Helps low-income students and families

- Parents are assured that students are getting two healthy, nutrient-dense meals a day at school.
- Families' financial burden is eased when students eat school meals.
- Families don't face language, literacy or other issues with access due to application barriers
- Students that have access to better nutrition tend to perform better academically.

Increases efficiency and school meal participation

- Lunch lines move more quickly because students no longer have to enter codes or swipe school ID cards, which results in more students eating, overcoming challenges caused by short lunch periods.
- More students eating school meals reduces stigma experienced by low-income students, encouraging others to participate.
- Increased convenience of alternative service models, such as breakfast in the classroom, enables more students to participate.

Reduces administrative costs

- Staff no longer collect, certify or verify applications.
- Fewer staff are needed in the cafeteria to track who qualifies for free meals or collect meal charges.
- Counting and claiming is simplified because staff no longer have to categorize each meal served as paid, reduced-price, or free.
- Staff no longer need to handle payments or track uncollected fees when students can't afford to pay meal fees.

Community Eligibility and Alternative Breakfast Service Methods

With community eligibility, the universal free meals and simplified meal counting and claiming make it easier to offer breakfast in the classroom and other alternative breakfast service methods that encourage participation. A wide body of research shows that implementing an alternative breakfast model is the most effective means to increase participation and achieve the gains in academic success linked to school breakfast consumption. Schools can use a variety of methods, including breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go,” and breakfast after first period. Allowing students to eat in the classroom makes it convenient and accessible to all, and incorporating breakfast into the school day helps families whose early morning schedules make it difficult to fit in breakfast at home. Also, it alleviates the problem of students missing breakfast in the cafeteria for any number of reasons, including school bus schedules or long school security lines.

Alternative Breakfast Service Methods

Breakfast in the Classroom: Students eat breakfast in their classrooms, either at the beginning of the school day or early during the day. Typically, breakfast is brought to classrooms from the cafeteria in containers or served from carts in the hallways by food service staff.

“Grab and Go”: All the components of school breakfast are conveniently packaged so students can easily grab a reimbursable meal quickly from the cafeteria line or from carts elsewhere on school grounds. Depending on the school’s rules, students can eat in the classroom, or somewhere else on campus.

Breakfast after First Period or “Second Chance Breakfast”: Usually implemented in middle and high schools, this method allows students time after their first period to obtain breakfast from the cafeteria or carts in the hallway, or to eat in the classroom or cafeteria. Computerized systems ensure that children receive only one breakfast each day.

How Community Eligibility Impacts School Meal Revenue

School districts considering adopting community eligibility will want to calculate its impact on their federal reimbursements and food service revenue. Districts have the flexibility to implement community eligibility district-wide, in individual schools, or in groups of schools. Additionally, the identified student rate (which determines the reimbursement) may be calculated school-by-school, for a cluster of schools, or in the aggregate for an entire school district. School districts may want to run different estimates using various models of implementation.

Federal reimbursements for both lunch and breakfast are determined by multiplying the percent of students certified without paper application (Identified Students) by a 1.6 multiplier. The resulting number is the percentage of meals reimbursed at the “free” reimbursement rate, with the rest being reimbursed at the “paid” rate (see Table below). The Identified Student percentage for a group of schools within a district is calculated by taking the sum of the Identified Students for the group of schools, divided by the sum of student enrollment for the group of schools. Districts should use their most recent Identified Student percentage, and for the following school year must use Identified Student and enrollment data calculated on or before April 1.

Resources and calculators are available to assist schools with estimating reimbursements under community eligibility. When districts estimate their expected revenue, they should include an estimated growth in breakfast and lunch participation. The first three states that implemented community eligibility experienced an average of an 8 percent increase in lunch participation and a 17 percent increase in breakfast participation. For USDA’s most recent calculator go to FRAC’s school meal eligibility page <http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/school-breakfast-and-lunch/eligibility/>

Meal Reimbursements with Community Eligibility

Percentage of Identified Students	Percentage Reimbursed at Free Rate	Percentage Reimbursed at Paid Rate
40%	64%	36%
45%	72%	28%
50%	80%	20%
55%	88%	12%
60%	96%	4%

Concerns and Solutions

Concerns	Solutions
Will schools lose Title I funding?	No, the U.S. Department of Education has clarified that schools can use their community eligibility claiming percentage to determine funding, just as schools do that use the similar analogous and longstanding “Provision 2” to offer meals free to all students. To view a copy of the letter : http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/school-breakfast-and-lunch/eligibility/
Will schools lose food service revenue?	No, schools that choose to implement the option will either break even or do better. Many school districts that have implemented community eligibility report a net increase in revenue. Increases in participation, coupled with administrative and labor savings, help make up for any lost revenue from paid meals. Because of simplified counting and claiming, and the elimination of charges to students, the line moves more quickly with less staff oversight. Additional administrative savings are realized as schools no longer have to expend time trying to recoup uncollected meal fees.
How can schools determine income eligibility for other programs, such as reductions in fees for text books, sports or college preparatory testing?	States can develop a household income summary form that districts can distribute to all households in community eligibility schools. This information can be used to determine eligibility for all other school programs, but has no effect on school meal eligibility.
Is there a long application process to implement community eligibility?	No, generally the process is very simple and does not require a lengthy application. While it does takes some work to initially set up the program, there are less costs and administrative work in the long run, because school food services no longer has to collect applications or fees from students.

What States and Districts with Community Eligibility are Saying about It

FRAC surveyed school districts in spring 2012 on their experience using community eligibility. Every district recommends this option, and many report increased participation by students and positive feedback from staff and parents. States and districts continue to report positive outcomes in interviews conducted during the 2012-2013 school year.

“Our department’s main goal is to feed students healthy meals so that they are ready to learn. Providing breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students through community eligibility has boosted participation by removing barriers like household applications and collecting fees from students. By feeding more children we are benefiting our school, our students, and our community.”

– Leslie Fowler, Executive Director of Nutrition Support Services, Chicago Public Schools, Illinois

“Community eligibility has strengthened our school nutrition program financially by expanding participation and increasing revenue. We now have children eating who never ate school meals before, with an increase of approximately 1 million additional meals served over the school year. We have been able to use the increased revenue to improve school nutrition infrastructure and the quality of the food served to our children.”

– Brenda Fish, Director of School Nutrition, Floyd County Schools, Kentucky

“Community eligibility has been an unqualified success in Michigan since we first started it in the fall of 2011. Schools have reported increased student participation in school meals along with higher food service revenues, and quicker, streamlined service in the cafeteria. The overwhelmingly positive experiences of the schools that implemented community eligibility in the first two years have demonstrated what a great opportunity this is and have encouraged more and more schools to take advantage of this option.”

–Howard Leikert, School Nutrition Programs, Michigan Department of Education