[Date]

School Meals Policy Division

Food and Nutrition Service

P.O. Box 9233

Reston, Virginia 20195

**Re: Proposed Rule — Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision — Increasing Options for Schools**

Dear School Meals Policy Division:

On behalf of [fill in organization if applicable], I/we appreciate the opportunity to comment on USDA’s Proposed Rule on Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision – Increasing Options for Schools.

[1) Provide information about you, your school, city, or your organization’s mission related to decreasing hunger and expanding the reach of school meals]

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) has been instrumental in ensuring all students in eligible schools have access to the nutritious meals needed to grow and thrive. CEP increases school meal participation, helps eliminate stigma, reduces administrative burdens, and streamlines food service operations, making it a win for students, families, and districts. More so, CEP is a proven strategy for reducing household food insecurity and combatting child hunger.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the country reported a myriad of benefits of offering free meals to all students: reduction in student hunger, supporting household finances, improvements in student behavior and academic achievement, and easing administration and operations.[[1]](#footnote-2) Conversely, the return to a tiered-eligibility system has been challenging for students, families, and schools, with many districts reporting an increase in school meal debt.

[1) Insert information about the need within your school, community, or state for healthy school meals for all; and/or 2) Insert information about the positive impacts that CEP or universal free school meals has had on the health and well-being of children and families in your community.]

The proposed rule lowering CEP’s eligibility threshold to 25% Individual Student Percentage (ISP) will have a positive impact on schools and communities, creating the opportunity for an additional 9 million students to have access to free school meals, and increasing operational efficiencies for 20,000 more schools. As such, I/we urge USDA to give states the option to implement the 25% threshold even if the new rule is finalized after the June 30th election deadline. This will allow states and schools to benefit from the change in the upcoming 2023-2024 school year.

[1) Insert information about your school/the schools you support and the impact that lowering the CEP eligibility threshold will have on your schools and communities.]

While expanded CEP eligibility is imperative in the fight against child hunger, districts must ensure CEP is a financially viable option for school food services. Despite an abundance of technical assistance, many schools struggle to adopt CEP at lower ISP levels with the current 1.6 multiplier.

Over the last year, states have enacted legislation ensuring all students have access to healthy school meals. Currently five states, California, Maine, Colorado, Minnesota, and New Mexico, passed policies supporting schools' efforts to offer free meals to all students. State funding will encourage schools with lower ISPs to adopt CEP; however, concern remains for newly eligible schools that lack financial support. In order to further support states that have taken this important step, USDA should approve waivers from states to operate CEP statewide and explore creating statewide CEP demonstration projects to evaluate the approach.

[IF APPLICABLE: Add information about your state’s legislative efforts regarding healthy school meals for all.]

[IF APPLICABLE: indicate the financial viability of your school/schools that you support operating CEP at lower ISPs. **Specifically,** **USDA is interested in receiving comments on the following points:**

* To what extent are schools and districts that would be newly eligible under this proposed rule expected to elect CEP?
* What sources of non-federal funds are available to support schools and districts electing CEP at lower ISPs?]

USDA’s 2019 *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study* shows that districts spend more to produce a school meal than they are reimbursed.[[2]](#footnote-3) Any administrative savings generated by CEP allows school nutrition departments to combat rising food prices, improve the nutritional quality of meals served, expand nutrition education and farm to school initiatives, and invest in operations that ensure long term program viability.

[IF APPLICABLE: Add information about your school/the schools you support and operational costs. Identify initiatives your school/the schools you support have or could implement with the administrative cost savings provided by CEP. **Specifically,** **USDA is interested in receiving comments on the following points:**

* In a typical year, how much time do schools and districts spend on administrative duties that may be eliminated by electing CEP? What administrative activities are included in that estimate?
* To what extent are administrative cost savings a factor in determining whether to elect CEP?]

I/We commend USDA for its continued work to increase participation in CEP, ensuring that all students have access to nutritious school meals, and I/we encourage USDA to explore every opportunity to make CEP financially viable for all eligible schools. Thank you for your consideration of these comments during your deliberations.

Sincerely,

1. Bylander, A., FitzSimons, C., and O’Connor, G. (2022) *Large School District Report Operating School Nutrition Programs During the* Pandemic. Food Research and Action Center. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/large-school-district-report-2022.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Food and Nutrition Service and Mathematica Policy Research. (2019). *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study Summary of Findings*. United States Department of Agriculture. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS_Summary-Findings.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)