



Take a Fresh Look at Community Eligibility

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows more than 30,000 high-poverty schools across the country to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students while eliminating the traditional school meal application process. As COVID-19 impacts millions across the country, driving unemployment and lost wages, more students than ever will need access to free school meals. The economic crisis will make more school districts and schools eligible to implement community eligibility for the 2020–2021 school year. Because of this increase in eligibility, more schools can reexamine community eligibility for being a more financially viable option than before the COVID-19 crisis. With community eligibility, schools and school districts are better able to meet students’ nutritional needs.

Community eligibility is often a smart choice for eligible schools. It reduces administrative paperwork for schools so they can focus on providing healthy meals to help students learn and thrive; increases school meal participation by removing stigma; maximizes federal reimbursement; eliminates unpaid school meal fees; and makes it easier to implement innovative service models, such as breakfast in the classroom, recommended by the CDC to avoid students mixing in common areas.

Community Eligibility Deadlines for the 2020–2021 School Year

As part of its COVID-19 response, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (UDA) has issued a [waiver](#) extending annual CEP deadlines.

CEP Requirement	Annual Deadline	Extended Deadline
Data Used to Calculate ISP	April 1	Anytime between April 1–June 30, 2020
Local Education Agency Notification	April 15	June 15, 2020
State Agency Notification	April 15	June 15, 2020
State Agency Publication	May 1	June 30, 2020
Elect CEP for Following School Year	June 30	August 31, 2020

Eligible School Districts and Schools

Any district, group of schools in a district, or individual school with 40 percent or more “identified students,” i.e., children eligible for free school meals who already are identified by other means than an individual household application, can choose to participate. USDA’s extension of the community eligibility deadlines will allow school districts (when they calculate their identified student percentage, or ISP) to include the additional students who are now eligible outside of the application, particularly families who are applying for SNAP benefits.

Calculating the Reimbursements

The school breakfast and lunch reimbursements are calculated by multiplying the ISP by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals that will be reimbursed at the free rate. For example, a school with 50 percent identified students would be reimbursed for 80 percent of the breakfasts and lunches served at the free reimbursement rate and the remaining 20 percent at the paid rate. Identified students include

- children directly certified for free meals through data matching, because their household receives benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and, in some states and areas, Medicaid benefits.
- children who are certified for free school meals without an application because they are homeless, migrant, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care.

Increasing the ISP

School districts should implement direct certification best practices in May and June to increase the district's ISP, so that it will accurately reflect the poverty within the school in the upcoming school year. Below is a list of best practices:

- perform direct certification matches as often as possible;
- when possible, extend eligibility to students living in households with other students who are directly certified;
- connect with the homeless liaison/school counselor to identify any students who are newly homeless or have come into foster care; and
- partner with community organizations to do SNAP outreach to families within the school district.

For more information on direct certification best practices, see [*Direct Certification Improves Low-Income Student Access to School Meals: An Updated Guide to Direct Certification*](#).

Additional Resources

- [*CEP Financial Calculators*](#) — School districts and other stakeholders should use these tools to group schools strategically and to maximize the federal funding received.
- [*Community Eligibility: Making it Work with Lower ISPs*](#)

For more information and additional resources to help determine if community eligibility is a possibility for your school district, go to FRAC's Community Eligibility webpage:

<http://www.frac.org/community-eligibility>.