

SCHOOL MEALS SUPPORT CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND LEARNING

Proposed Cuts to School Meals Would Worsen Childhood Hunger, Hurt Struggling Families, and Create Unnecessary Burdens for **75** Schools in **MONTANA**

House Budget Committee Chair Jodey Arrington (R-TX) has proposed \$12 billion in cuts to school meals programs for the 2025 budget reconciliation. The proposals would substantially decrease the number of schools eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and make it harder for eligible families to apply for free or reduced-price school meals at non-CEP schools. Combined, these proposals would reduce students' access to school meals and raise families' grocery bills, while imposing unnecessary and burdensome paperwork requirements on schools in **MONTANA**.

What Is Community Eligibility?

CEP allows schools serving large numbers of children from families with low incomes to offer school meals at no charge to all students. Rather than relying on school meal applications to determine a school's federal reimbursements, CEP schools are reimbursed based on the share of students from families with low incomes, as determined through a data-matching process that identifies students' participation in other means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Currently, schools can adopt CEP if at least 25 percent of students receive these benefits.

CONGRESS MUST REJECT ANY PROPOSAL TO WEAKEN CEP

Chair Arrington's proposal would increase the CEP eligibility threshold for schools from **25** percent to **60** percent of students identified as receiving benefits. This would cut over 24,000 schools nationwide from participating in CEP and undermine the health and learning of more than **12 million children**.

Community Eligibility Supports Students, Families, and Schools

CEP is a win for students, families, and schools. CEP gives all students access to the nutritious school breakfasts and lunches they need to be well-nourished and ready to learn, while reducing the stigma often present in school cafeterias when schools have to track students' eligibility for free, reduced-price, and paid meals. **When students have access to free meals at school, families have lower grocery bills and more money in their household budgets to help make ends meet.**

CEP has grown in popularity since first becoming available nationwide over a decade ago. In the 2023–2024 school year, one out of every two schools that operated the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participated in CEP. CEP makes school meal operations more efficient and effective: It eliminates the administrative burden associated with school meal applications, strengthens program integrity, and supports school nutrition finances by eliminating school meal debt and increasing participation in school breakfast and lunch, which allows for economies of scale.



IN 2023–2024 SCHOOL YEAR

163 SCHOOLS

in **MONTANA** — which represents **22** percent of schools that participate in the school lunch program — adopted CEP, reaching **25,897** children each school day.

The proposed cuts to school meals would **increase hardships** for children and families across **MONTANA**:



75 schools in **MONTANA** would no longer be able to provide free school meals through CEP and would have to reinstate meal applications.



27 school districts in **MONTANA**, listed on the reverse page, would be affected.



10,142 **MONTANA** children attend schools that would no longer be able to offer meals at no charge to all students through CEP.¹

Rather than reducing access to school meals, **CONGRESS SHOULD INVEST IN CEP** and reduce barriers to applying for free or reduced-price school meals, so families can afford groceries and children have access to the nutritious meals they need to thrive in school and beyond.

The following table identifies the school districts in **MONTANA**, and the number of schools and children within each district that would lose access to CEP if Congress increases the eligibility threshold to 60 percent of students identified as receiving benefits.

School District	Schools Impacted	Children Impacted
ALBERTON K-12 SCHOOLS	3	136
ANACONDA PUBLIC SCHOOLS	4	1047
ARLEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS	3	412
BUTTE PUBLIC SCHOOLS	3	1258
DARBY K-12 SCHOOLS	3	339
DESMET ELEMENTARY	2	114
DODSON K-12	3	86
EVERGREEN ELEMENTARY	2	711
FROMBERG K-12	3	114
FRONTIER ELEMENTARY	2	114
HARLEM PUBLIC SCHOOLS	3	645
HAVRE PUBLIC SCHOOLS	3	818
HELENA PUBLIC SCHOOLS	3	835
HOT SPRINGS K-12	3	170

School District	Schools Impacted	Children Impacted
JUDITH GAP PUBLIC SCHOOLS	3	22
KALISPELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS	5	1167
LINCOLN K-12 SCHOOLS	3	125
MARION ELEMENTARY	2	156
NKWUSM SCHOOL	1	38
NOXON PUBLIC SCHOOLS	1	87
ST LABRE SCHOOLS	5	462
ST REGIS K-12 SCHOOLS	3	185
SUPERIOR K-12 SCHOOLS	3	343
TREGO ELEMENTARY	1	27
TROUT CREEK ELEMENTARY	2	72
TROY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	3	405
VICTOR K-12 SCHOOLS	3	254