

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) has allowed tens of thousands of 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. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) final rule, [Community Eligibility Provision: Increasing Options for Schools](#), lowers CEP’s eligibility threshold — providing 3,000 additional school districts the opportunity to offer all students school meals at no cost. Because of this increase in eligibility, more schools can consider participating in community eligibility than ever before.

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; eliminates unpaid school meal fees; and makes it easier to implement innovative school breakfast service models that increase participation, such as breakfast in the classroom. The child nutrition waivers available during the pandemic further highlighted the value of offering meals at no charge to all students and the importance of schools being able to better meet their students’ nutritional needs.



Eligible School Districts and Schools

In September 2023, the USDA released the final CEP rule, which will allow any district, group of schools in a district, or individual school with 25 percent or more “identified students,” i.e., children eligible for free school meals without a household application due to participation in other means-tested benefit programs, to choose to participate in CEP.¹ Furthermore, [USDA’s Direct Certification with Medicaid Demonstration Project](#) allows school districts in participating states to include in their identified student percentage, or ISP, some students who receive Medicaid benefits. Certifying students as eligible for free school meals via participation in Medicaid increases a school’s ISP and reduces burdens on families and districts.

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.

¹ The final CEP rule became available to districts in select states starting in October 2023. The lower eligibility threshold is available to all schools nationwide starting during the 2024–2025 school year.

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, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, or in some states and areas, Medicaid benefits; and
- 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 Food Research & Action Center's [Updated Guide to Direct Certification](#) and [School District Strategies for Improving Direct Certification](#). Also, if your state is not currently doing Medicaid direct certification, encourage your state agency to **apply** by the deadline.

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.

For more information and additional resources to help determine if community eligibility is a possibility for your school district, go to Food Research & Action Center's community eligibility webpage: <http://www.frac.org/community-eligibility>.