



## USDA Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics Study on the 2016–2017 School Year

In spring 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the *Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics Study*, which looks at the implementation and impact of community eligibility. [Community eligibility](#) allows high-need schools to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge and reduces administrative work for school districts.

### Key findings from the study include:

- Participation in community eligibility increased student school meal participation. National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participation increased by 6.8 percent and School Breakfast Program (SBP) participation increased by 12.1 percent, compared to similar eligible school districts<sup>1</sup> that did not adopt community eligibility.
- Participation in community eligibility increased the level of federal reimbursements due to more meals being claimed at the free rate. Federal reimbursements were 9 cents higher per NSLP lunch and 2 cents higher per SBP breakfast for districts in their first year of community eligibility, relative to similar school districts that did not adopt community eligibility.
- Participating school districts reported seeing multiple benefits of community eligibility. Over 70 percent of school districts reported increased meal participation, decreased financial burden on families, and eliminated unpaid meal charges. The majority of schools also reported reduced administrative burden, decreased stigma for students in need, and increased revenue.

### Community Eligibility Basics

To be eligible to participate in community eligibility, a school district, a group of schools in a district, or a school must have 40 percent or more “identified students”—children who are eligible for free school meals who are identified by means other than an individual household application. “Identified students” include children whose households participate in SNAP, TANF, or FDPIR, or in some states, Medicaid benefits or because they are homeless, migrant, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care.

Community eligibility schools are reimbursed for meals served by multiplying the identified student percentage by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals that will be reimbursed at the federal free rate. A school, group of schools, or a school district with an ISP of 40 percent would be reimbursed at the free rate for 64 percent of the meals served (50 multiplied by 1.6 = 80), and at the paid rate for 36 percent. Alternatively, 100 percent of the meals served would be reimbursed at the free rate.

<sup>1</sup> This summary uses the term “school district” to refer to a Local Education Agency (LEA). LEAs include large school districts with hundreds of schools, as well as LEAs with charter schools where the school is often the only one in that LEA.

- Participating school districts reported seeing improved attendance. Participating school districts were 16 percent more likely to report increased average daily attendance compared to non-participating school districts. Among participating school districts that reported an increase in average daily attendance, 58 percent said that community eligibility was a factor for the increase.
- Participating school districts reported that balancing food service revenues and costs was easier. Participating school districts were significantly more likely to report that it was easier for food service accounts to break even compared to non-participating school districts.
- More than half of participating school districts reported no problems implementing community eligibility.
- Seventy-six percent of school districts participating in community eligibility elected to participate district-wide. Twenty-four percent chose to operate community eligibility in some of their schools. Community eligibility was most appealing to districts and schools with high identified student percentages (ISPs): As ISPs increased, so did the percentage of eligible districts and schools that participated in community eligibility.
- District-wide ISPs was reported as the most important factor in adopting community eligibility.
- Eligible, non-participating school districts indicated that they would be more likely to adopt community eligibility if the multiplier used to determine meal reimbursement levels (currently 1.6) was increased.
- Financial concerns were the largest barrier to participation in community eligibility for school districts with lower ISPs.

The study highlights the need for additional investments to increase the number of school districts and schools adopting community eligibility. For example, increasing the multiplier from 1.6 to 2.5 would allow all eligible high-poverty school districts and schools to receive the free reimbursement rate for all breakfasts and lunches served. This would help eliminate the largest barrier to community eligibility that school districts identified in the study, and make community eligibility a financially viable option for more high-poverty schools. Additionally, by making more school districts and schools eligible, more students will have access to the healthy school meals they need to grow and thrive.

This study demonstrates the importance of community eligibility as a tool to ensure access to nutritious food for all students. With [90 percent of school nutrition departments](#) having offered meals to all students at no charge during the 2021–2022 school year through the Seamless Summer Option waiver made available through USDA’s pandemic child nutrition waiver authority, it is now more important than ever to expand and improve community eligibility, as millions of children will face a hunger cliff when they lose access to the free school meals that have been available to them during the pandemic.