

Support the School Hunger Elimination Act of 2019

The School Hunger Elimination Act of 2019 ([S. 2752](#)), introduced by Senator Bob Casey (D-PA), would make a number of improvements to the School Nutrition Programs, including increasing the number of low-income children who are directly certified to receive free school meals and bolstering community eligibility.

Direct certification is an electronic data matching process that identifies students who are categorically eligible for free school meals and automatically certifies them for free school meals without a school meals application. Any child living in a household that participates in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or Medicaid (available in some states¹), or children who are migrant, homeless, runaways, in foster care, or in Head Start, is categorically eligible to receive free school meals. States are required to directly certify at least 95 percent of children who participate in SNAP, but are not required to directly certify children who are otherwise categorically eligible for free school meals. By increasing the number of students who are directly certified, our most vulnerable children will be automatically linked to free school meals, and schools will have fewer school meals applications to process.

Community eligibility is a federal option that allows high-poverty schools to offer school meals at no cost to all students. The option increases participation in school meals, allowing more students to experience the academic and health benefits linked to participation; reduces administrative work for schools; and eliminates school meals debt. Both a school's eligibility for community eligibility and its level of

reimbursement are based on the number of students who are certified for free school meals without an application. Improving direct certification so that it more accurately reflects the poverty in the school allows more high-poverty schools to experience the benefits of community eligibility.

What Does the Act Propose?

■ **Expand Medicaid direct certification to all states.**

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 first authorized demonstration projects to examine the use of Medicaid data for direct certification. The Act builds on the success of that demonstration by expanding Medicaid direct certification to all states.

■ **Require schools to automatically certify children for free school meals if they live in a household receiving TANF cash assistance, are migrant, homeless, runaways, in foster care, or attend Head Start.**

Currently, this is an option for schools. If enacted, children who already are categorically eligible for free school meals under the current law would be ensured access to free school meals.

■ **Increase the community eligibility reimbursement.**

Schools, groups of schools, and school districts with at least 40 percent of enrolled students who are certified for free school meals without an application can implement community eligibility. The reimbursement is based on the percentage of enrolled students who are directly certified for free school meals. The school's percentage of such students, called the Identified Student Percentage, is multiplied by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals reimbursed at the free rate, and the rest are reimbursed

¹ The following states use Medicaid data, along with an income test, to determine categorical eligibility for free school meals: Illinois, Kentucky, New York, and Pennsylvania. The following states use Medicaid data to determine categorical eligibility for both free and reduced-price school meals: California, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

at the significantly lower paid rate. Increasing the percentage to 1.8 percent would make it financially viable for more high-poverty schools to participate, and would compound the numerous rewards of participation in school meals and reduced administrative costs.

■ **Establish statewide free universal school meals demonstration projects.** The Act would allow schools within a state to participate in community eligibility as a group or in multiple groups. Allowing demonstrations to develop different statewide approaches for implementing community eligibility would enable children in those states to benefit from being able to fully participate in school meals, and schools to benefit from the maximum administrative and financial savings. An evaluation of this approach would provide important data to guide future investments in school meals.

■ **Allow school districts to retroactively claim and receive reimbursements back to the first day of the school year for school meals that were served to low-income students who became certified for free**

or reduced-price school meals later in the school year. This provision of the Act would help the school district overcome unpaid school meals fees accrued by families who are determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals during the school year.

How Would the Act Benefit Communities?

The Act would significantly expand and improve access to free school meals among low-income children so that children are well-nourished at school and ready to learn. It would reduce administrative work for school districts, allowing them to focus their resources on offering nutritious and appealing meals instead of processing paperwork. It also would help address unpaid school meals debt by ensuring that more families who are struggling are being linked to free school meals, that more schools are implementing community eligibility instead of dealing with unpaid school meals fees, and that schools are not carrying the debt of families who become eligible for free or reduced-price school meals later in the school year.