



**T**he Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows high-poverty schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students while eliminating the traditional school meal application process. Tens of thousands of schools across the country have successfully implemented this option and are seeing the many benefits of ensuring that all their students have access to healthy school meals. Community eligibility was phased in a few states at a time beginning in the 2011–2012 school year, and became available to eligible schools nationwide in the 2014–2015 school year.

## Benefits of the Community Eligibility Provision

- **Lessens administrative work** — Schools no longer have to collect and verify school meal applications and can focus on feeding children.
- **Increases participation** — Participating schools increased breakfast participation by 12.1 percent and lunch participation by 6.8 percent in a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study.<sup>1</sup>
- **Facilitates implementation of alternative breakfast service models** — When schools don't have to collect fees or count each meal served by fee category, it simplifies implementation of breakfast in the classroom and “grab and go” service models that can boost participation further.
- **Improves the financial viability of school nutrition programs** — When participation increases, school districts can take advantage of economies of scale, and reinvest additional revenue to improve nutritional quality and provide staff training.

- **Eliminates unpaid meal fees** — When all children eat at no charge, the school district does not have to collect unpaid fees from families.

## An Unequivocal Success in the First Nine Years of Nationwide Availability

In its nine years of nationwide availability, the Community Eligibility Provision proved to be a very popular and effective tool for increasing participation in the school meal programs.

In the 2022–2023 school year:

- More than 40,000 schools — 82 percent of all eligible schools — offered free breakfast and lunch to all students through community eligibility, an increase of over 6,900 schools from the 2021–2022 school year.
- Over 6,400 school districts are participating in community eligibility in all or some of their schools, an increase of over 870, or 15.8 percent, from the year before.
- As a result, 19.9 million children in these schools have access to two healthy meals at school each day.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Murdoch, J., Nisar, H., Wallace-Williams, D., Vachon, M., Enver, A., Logan, C. W., Villarreal, M. (2022). Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics Study. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Available online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-cep-characteristics-study-sy-2016-17>. Accessed on September 29, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (2023). *Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools, School Year 2022–2023*. Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/cep-report-2023.pdf>. Accessed on September 29, 2023.

## Who Can Participate?

Any district, group of schools in a district, or individual school with 25 percent<sup>3</sup> or more “identified students”—children eligible for free school meals who already are identified by other means than an individual household application — can choose to participate.

### Identified students include:

- children directly certified for free meals through data matching because their households receive 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, and
- children who are certified for free meals without an application because they are homeless, migrant, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care.

Reimbursements are calculated by multiplying the percentage of identified students 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.

## Community Eligibility Increases School Meal Participation



In the USDA Community Eligibility Characteristics Study for the 2016–2017 school year, community eligibility was proven to increase school meal participation:

- School lunch participation increased by 6.8 percent over comparable non-community eligibility schools.
- School breakfast participation increased by 12.1 percent over comparable non-community eligibility schools.<sup>4</sup>

## Improves the Financial Viability of School Breakfast and Lunch Programs

As a result of expanded student participation and reductions in administrative work, many community eligibility schools have reported increased revenues, resulting in stronger school nutrition programs overall.

- “Our mission is to support the achievement of all students by expanding access to healthy, tasty meals. By inviting all students to eat at no cost through community eligibility, we are removing barriers to school meal participation and fostering an environment where students eat together. Community eligibility benefits everyone — our school, our community, and most importantly, our students.”

— *Anneliese Tanner, Former Executive Director of Food Services and Warehouse Operations, Austin Independent School District, Texas*

- “Our mission and vision at Ballard County Schools is to ‘prepare every student to be a successful individual,’ and we know this starts by meeting their basic core needs. Community eligibility is a key tool in preparing our students to achieve their goals by furnishing adequate and sustainable nutrition at no cost to the student or household. Every student, every decision, every day — we make it count.”

— *Amber Hayes, Student Nutrition Director, Ballard County Schools, Kentucky*

## Eliminating Unpaid Meal Fees

Offering meals at no charge to all students means that schools no longer have to go about collecting unpaid meal fees from families or foot the bill for meals served when children do not have money to pay. Removing this dynamic between families and schools allows school nutrition staff to focus on preparing and serving healthy meals to children and eliminates a significant financial burden for school districts and families.

**For more resources, visit FRAC’s Community Eligibility page:** [www.frac.org/community-eligibility](http://www.frac.org/community-eligibility)

<sup>3</sup> In September 2023, USDA released the final rule, [Community Eligibility: Increasing Options for Schools](#), which lowered CEP’s participation threshold from 40 percent to 25 percent.

<sup>4</sup> Murdoch, J., Nisar, H., Wallace-Williams, D., Vachon, M., Enver, A., Logan, C. W., Villarreal, M. (2022). Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics Study. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Available online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-cep-characteristics-study-sy-2016-17>. Accessed on September 29, 2023.