



The 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.

Benefits of the Community Eligibility Provision

- **Lessens administrative work** — School nutrition departments 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.¹
- **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.

- **Increases Food Security** — CEP reduces food insecurity by ensuring that all children have access to nutritious meals and are ready to get the most out of their school day.

Community Eligibility is a Success

In the 2023–2024 school year:

- More than 47,700 schools — 84 percent of all eligible schools — offered free breakfast and lunch to all students through community eligibility, an increase of over 7,500 schools from the 2022–2023 school year.
- Over 7,700 school districts participated in community eligibility in all or some of their schools, an increase of over 1,200, or 20.2 percent, from the year before.
- As a result, 23.6 million children in these schools had access to two healthy meals at school each day.²

¹ 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.

² Food Research & Action Center. (2024). *Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools, School Year 2023–2024*. Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/CEP-Report-2024.pdf>. Accessed on February 19, 2025.

Who Can Participate?

Any school district, group of schools in a district, or individual school with 25 percent 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 most states, 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.

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 collect 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.