



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. Thousands of schools across the country have successfully implemented this option and are seeing the many benefits of ensuring that all of 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 in the initial pilot states increased breakfast participation by 9.4 percent and lunch participation by 5.2 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.
- **Eliminates unpaid meal fees** — when all children eat at no charge, the school district does not have to collect unpaid fees from families.

Community Eligibility Continues to Grow

In its first five 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 2019–2020 school year:

- More than 30,600 schools — 69 percent of all eligible schools — offered free breakfast and lunch to all students through community eligibility, an increase of 1,910 schools from the 2018–2019 school year.
- More than 5,100 school districts are participating in community eligibility in all or some of their schools, an increase of 435, or 9.3 percent, from the year before.
- As a result, nearly 14.9 million children in these schools have access to two healthy meals at school each day.²

Who Can Participate?

Any district, group of schools in a district, or individual school with 40 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.

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2013). *Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation Final Report*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/CEPEvaluation.pdf>. Accessed on May 21, 2020.

² Food Research & Action Center. (2019). *Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools, School Year 2019–2020*. Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/CEP-Report-2020.pdf>. Accessed on May 27, 2020.

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.
- 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 a USDA evaluation of school districts participating in the seven pilot states in the 2012–2013 school year, community eligibility boosted school meal participation:

- School lunch participation increased by 5.2 percent over comparable non-community eligibility schools; and
- School breakfast participation increased by 9.4 percent over comparable non-community eligibility schools.³



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, 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

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2013). *Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation Final Report*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/CEPEvaluation.pdf>. Accessed on May 21, 2020.