

Seize the Moment: Adopting the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) during the Pandemic

The **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)** allows schools in high-poverty areas to serve universal free breakfast and lunch. Schools are CEP-eligible if their identified student percentage (ISP), the percent of students directly certified for free meals, is at least 40%.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more schools are now CEP-eligible.

Take a Closer Look at CEP – The Deadline to Elect CEP is now August 31, 2020

Due to pandemic-related job losses and decreased incomes, ISPs began increasing in the spring of 2020. As a result, your school may be newly eligible for CEP, or your reimbursement rate may have increased, making CEP more financially favorable since federal meal reimbursement in CEP schools is calculated using a formula based on a school's ISP.

If your school is already participating in CEP, you may also be able to recertify for a new four-year CEP cycle and lock in a higher reimbursement level.

Check with your state's school meal administering agency for your school's most recent ISP.

"I had parents stop me in the grocery store and be like, "Hey, thanks for getting free lunch for my kid,"...The parents loved it; the students love it. Administration really liked it. It's just made life easier for everyone. Community, administration, teachers, my staff and I."

– Cafeteria manager at a CEP school

CEP Benefits Students, Schools, and Communities by...

- ▶ **Reducing administrative burdens for schools.** CEP eliminates the need to collect and process household free and reduced-price meal applications.¹
- ▶ **Improving student behavior and academic performance.** Promising emerging evidence shows that CEP leads to improvements in school test scores and attendance and fewer disciplinary referrals.²
- ▶ **Reducing hunger.** There is promising evidence that universal free meals are linked to decreased hunger and food insecurity.²

"It was a no-brainer. It was a very positive thing to do for children [and] it was great to eliminate a cumbersome application process that distracts so much time from schools at the beginning of the year."

– Food service director in a CEP district



- ▶ **Decreasing stress for parents.** Parents no longer have to complete household meal applications or worry about paying school meal charges.¹
- ▶ **Increasing school meal participation.** Reports show that average daily participation in breakfast increases between 4-38 percentage points and average daily participation in lunch increases between 4-12 percentage points at CEP-participating schools.²
- ▶ **Improving school meal service operations.** Many cafeteria managers report faster lunch lines and no changes in wasted food.¹ In addition, CEP schools save, on average, \$14 per student each year due to increases in federal reimbursement and decreased per meal production costs.³
- ▶ **Boosting cafeteria staff morale.** Cafeteria staff no longer have to track student meal debt or provide alternative meals to student with unpaid meal debt, resulting in greater job satisfaction.¹
- ▶ **Reducing stigma.** Cafeteria managers report that students experience less stigma and bullying because all students are now eligible for free meals.¹

“I think it has been positive for [cafeteria staff]. I think that no one likes to be put in a position when you're taking meals away from students. I think that's pretty demoralizing as a worker.”

– Food service director in a CEP participating district

CEP Best Practices

- ▶ **Adopt CEP district-wide, if possible.** Groups of schools or entire districts can opt into CEP together if their combined ISP is at least 40%. Districts can take advantage of greater economies of scale and savings in administrative overhead through district-wide adoption.
- ▶ **Try new approaches to promote meal participation.** Experiment with new strategies to increase participation, like taste tests with students and alternative delivery models like grab-n-go meals.
- ▶ **Communicate early and often with parents and administrators.** Clear, frequent communication with school administrators and parents about the benefits of CEP and how it works can help reduce confusion and generate buy-in.

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¹ Hecht AA, Neff R, Kelley TL, Pollack Porter KM. (In progress) Universal free meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland school food service provider perspectives on implementation and impact.

² Hecht AA, Turner L, Pollack Porter KM. (In press) Impact of the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 on student nutrition, behavior, and academic outcomes (2011-2019). *Am. J Pub Health*.

³ Rothbart M, Schwartz AE, Gutierrez E. Paying for Free Lunch: The Impact of CEP Universal Free Meals on Revenues, Spending, and Student Health. Maxwell School Center for Policy Research; 2020. https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/cpr/publications/working_papers2/wp227.pdf