

July 13, 2020

Dear Members of the Baltimore County Board of Education,

I write today to urge you to take full advantage of a unique opportunity to reduce hunger in more than 50 of the system's schools. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a school meal funding option that enables schools to provide free meals to all students. While four schools in BCPS were enrolled in CEP for the past four years, there are currently no county schools enrolled for the coming 2020-2021 school year.

Rising unemployment and increased use of federal benefit programs due to COVID-19 means that more schools are now eligible to use CEP than ever before. Applications for assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in Maryland quadrupled in just the first month of the pandemic and the more students enrolled in SNAP, the higher the school's Identified Student Percentage (ISP). The ISP must be over 40% to be eligible to elect CEP and federal reimbursement for meals served in CEP schools is based on the ISP multiplied by 1.6. Therefore, the more students enrolled in SNAP, the higher the ISP, and the more federal reimbursement schools receive.

As we look ahead to an uncertain school year, CEP can also support the school nutrition department as they work to find new ways to feed students. CEP streamlines school meal operations and makes it easier to implement meals in the classroom. The program also eliminates any concerns of unpaid school meal debt, helping families make ends meet at a time that many are facing lost jobs and reduced wages. Additional important benefits of CEP:

- All students have universal access to school breakfast and lunch.
- CEP promotes equity by eliminating the out-of-pocket costs for families and by reducing stigma for students.
- No unpaid school meal debt or school lunch shaming.<sup>i</sup>
- No need to collect school meal benefit applications.
- Lower rates of food insecurity for students and their families.<sup>ii</sup>
- Improved student attendance.<sup>iii</sup>

Another important benefit of CEP, especially in communities like ours with a high cost of living, is that it provides access to school meals to students who do not qualify for free or reduced-priced school meals, though their families are not making enough to make ends meet. To qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, household income for a family of two must be below \$32,000 a year. However, the living wage for a single parent with one child in Maryland is nearly \$60,000.

Due to COVID-19, USDA extended the deadline to elect CEP to August 31, 2020 and also allowed schools to use post-pandemic ISP data from April, May, and June 2020 to set their poverty rate. Therefore, schools that elect CEP before August 31, 2020 can lock-in their current elevated poverty rate (ISP) for four years.

The coronavirus is a health crisis as well as a financial one for Maryland families, as thousands are facing unemployment. Across our state, nearly a million people may face hunger this year,

many for the first time. We know that the school meal programs are among the best ways to feed kids and ensure their families have sufficient resources to afford food. As families continue to feel the economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis, we urge BCPS to take full advantage of all federal resources, especially CEP, to ensure our students have access to the food they need.

Sincerely,  
Tam Lynne Kelley  
No Kid Hungry Maryland

*No child should go hungry in America. But millions don't know where their next meal is coming from. No Kid Hungry is ending childhood hunger by helping launch and improve programs that give all kids the healthy food they need to thrive. This is a problem we know how to solve. No Kid Hungry is a campaign by Share Our Strength, an organization working to end hunger and poverty.*

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<sup>i</sup> Hecht AA. Universal Free School Meals: Implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision and Impacts on Student Nutrition, Behavior, and Academic Performance. [Dissertation] Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318>

<sup>iii</sup> 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.