

Community Eligibility Provision Talking Points

Why does this Rule Change Matter?

It will expand CEP to reach an additional 9 million students in 20,000 more schools that would now be eligible for the program, according to the Food Research and Action Center. Some states even require schools to participate in all federal food assistance programs in which they qualify, which ensures more schools will benefit from CEP.

It will make statewide universal meal policies more appealing to state governments.

- It will support states that have implemented universal meals by allowing for a streamlined paperwork process for federal reimbursement.
- It will make universal meals policies more appealing to state governments looking to establish universal meals because it would:
 - Allow **more schools to participate** in CEP
 - Create a more **streamlined paperwork process** for eligible schools in these states
 - **Reduce the overall cost** of the program by increasing federal reimbursement for school meals

The Community Eligibility Provision helps fight the urgent problem of childhood food insecurity and gets us closer to the true potential of school meal programs to foster lifelong health

- **One in seven US children lives in a food-insecure household**, which means they either don't have enough food or don't know where their next meal will come from.
- **Food insecurity negatively impacts children's health**, including physical health, psychosocial health, cognitive function, and academic performance.
- While **nearly half of all US public school children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, 10% of food-insecure students still do not qualify for free or reduced-price meals** because their household income is over the eligibility threshold.
- **Many students that are eligible for free or reduced-price meals still don't eat them because of stigma**, lack of outreach to eligible students, and confusion among parents regarding eligibility. In 2015, **57% of students eligible for**

subsidized breakfast and 19% eligible for subsidized lunch did not eat school meals.

- **School meal participation increases** across all grade levels when schools adopt universal free meals. Meal participation has been shown to increase by 3.5-37.8 percentage points during breakfast and 3.5-11.8 percentage points for lunch.

Access to meals benefits children and the whole school community

- Food security and regular school attendance during childhood **leads to better health and productivity outcomes in adulthood.**
- CEP eliminates the need for students to purchase lunch. Without paying at the register, there are shorter lunch lines and **more time to eat lunch.**
- CEP **reduces stigma associated with eating school meals.**
- CEP can **improve student behavioral outcomes:**
 - CEP has been shown to **reduce suspension rates** among particular student groups by 1 percentage point.
 - CEP has been shown to **decrease disciplinary referrals by 2.3 percentage points** across grade levels after three years.
 - In Vermont, Eighty-three percent of school staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that **universal school meals make students more ready to learn.**

Administrative streamlining supports school nutrition professionals

- When schools participate in CEP, they experience **less administrative burden** because they no longer have to process school meal applications each year.
- With CEP, there are **fewer reporting requirements for schools**, which previously had to track each meal by payment category (such as free, reduced-price, or paid meals).
- **Schools no longer have to act as debt collectors**, as they no longer need to call parents to make up for unpaid meals. **School meal debt has become a growing problem,** especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The lunch line is faster, without the need to collect payment from students. This **reduces the number of staff needed to run registers.**

- Reduced administrative burden means that **more time can be spent on scratch cooking** and purchasing local ingredients.

CEP school meals support families in instilling healthy habits

- Comprehensive research on the nationwide implementation of CEP found that **participating students were more likely to consume fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and minimize processed foods, than those who did not.**
- Opinion polling from Pew found that **most American parents and voters support strong nutrition standards** for school meals and snacks, and believe the **availability of healthy food in schools is important to students' well-being and ability to learn.**
- Opinion polling on universal meals has found that **the majority of adults support universal free school meals;** support was even higher among parents living with school age children at 76 percent.

A community commitment to school meals can have positive effects in the food system

- Meals are part of health support and education – kids having access to them like other programs targeted at strengthening schools reinforces the potential as a health promoting tool with community buy-in, not just a tool of last resort.
- Stable revenue and administrative streamlining allows for investment in ingredients, equipment, and personnel that are necessary for a transition to greater farm to school sourcing and scratch cooking. In Vermont, 64% of school professionals agree that **CEP allows more schools to purchase local ingredients and** 49% report being able to **cook more meals from scratch.**

Information for this resource was inspired by the narrative and research from the peer-reviewed journal article:

Hecht, A. A., Pollack Porter, K. M., & Turner, L. (2020). [Impact of the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on student nutrition, behavior, and academic outcomes: 2011–2019](#). *American journal of public health*, 110(9), 1405-1410.

Our gratitude goes to the authors and we encourage anyone interested in learning more about CEP to review this article.