



THE COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP)

What is CEP?

CEP is a federal reimbursement option for schools participating in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. It was permanently authorized nationwide by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.

Key Features

- Schools that elect CEP serve meals to all students at no cost to them.
- CEP eliminates the need to gather household income information or claim meal reimbursements according to student eligibility status.
- Participating schools receive per-meal funding based on a formula that uses data from other public benefit programs.

How Does CEP Work?

Eligibility - A school is eligible for CEP if at least 40 percent of enrolled students participate in certain public benefit programs like the Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or are identified as being automatically eligible for free school meals, such as children experiencing homelessness. This percentage – known as the identified student percentage or ISP – is determined largely through a data matching process called direct certification, which schools are required to do for other purposes. Schools can operate under CEP for four years before redetermining their eligibility.

Funding – The ISP is multiplied by 1.6 to approximate the total percentage of students eligible for free school meals had applications been collected. Schools are reimbursed at the highest level, the “free” rate, for that percentage of meals served and receive the lower “paid” rate for the remaining meals. For example, a school with a 62.5 percent ISP would receive the free rate for 100 percent of meals served, while a 55 percent ISP would receive the free rate for 88 percent of meals served and the paid rate for the other 12 percent of meals served.

Election - A district could elect CEP for a single eligible school, multiple eligible schools, or the entire district. The district may also group schools together to optimize the ISP across schools. The grouping can include schools with an individual ISP below 40 percent as long as the group’s ISP is at least 40 percent.

Why CEP?

Benefits for Students & Families

- Promotes equity by ensuring all children have equal access to nutritious meals, like they do for desks and textbooks.
- Removes the requirement to complete an application to receive free or reduced-price school meals, which may be challenging due to language or literacy barriers or fear related to immigration status.
- Eliminates out-of-pocket meal costs for all families, benefiting families struggling to make ends meet but just above the cut-off for free and reduced-price meals.
- Reduces stigma around school meals.
- Improves student attendance and test scores, and reduces disciplinary referrals across all grade levels.

Benefits for Schools & School Districts

- Eliminates school meal debt – no more alternative meals, debt collecting or negative press.
- Significantly reduces administrative burden.
- Can generate revenue for school nutrition budgets.
- Makes it easier to serve meals in the classroom.
- Does **not** negatively impact the amount of federal Title I education funds a district receives.