Strategies for Finding Success with CEP

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) ensures that all students can participate in school breakfast and lunch at no cost to them, and CEP can also benefit school nutrition finances. The following strategies are designed to help you maximize the benefits of CEP by increasing your Identified Student Percentage (ISP), generating revenue with savvy business practices, and improving meal participation rates.

Increase Your ISP

Increasing your Identified Student Percentage (ISP) can be one of the most effective ways to boost your school nutrition budget revenue because the percent of meals reimbursed at the free rate equals your ISP multiplied by 1.6. Below are several options to help you raise your ISP by capturing every eligible student in your district:

❑ **Find out what student data your state includes in their direct certification system.** Students are categorically eligible for free school meals and should be included in your ISP calculation if they are:
   - Enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), Medicaid[1], or if they live in a household where another student is enrolled in one of these programs (this is referred to as 'extended eligibility' or a 'sibling match' as outlined below).
   - Homeless, migrant, runaway, in foster care, or enrolled in Head Start or Early Head Start. (Note that these categories do **not** confer eligibility to other students in the household.)

❑ **Apply extended categorical eligibility.** Students living in households with students who have already been directly certified can be automatically added to the ISP. This is referred to as extended categorical eligibility. Locate the addresses of directly certified students on your student rosters, and then certify any additional students living at those same addresses.

❑ **Utilize connections with social workers and homeless liaisons.** Team up with your district's homeless liaison or social worker responsible for supporting homeless, migrant, runaway, and foster care students.

❑ **Examine all possible direct certification matches.** Simple errors between datasets can often prevent students from being directly certified, such as misspelled names, partial social security numbers, or incorrect birthdays. Add any students to your ISP that you can verify. Notify your state agency of the new directly certified students.

❑ **Conduct direct certification as often as possible.** Even if a student only receives certifiable benefits (e.g. SNAP, TANF, etc.) for one month, that student will remain directly certified all year if you keep records of their initial enrollment. Depending on the sophistication of your state's direct certification process, some districts can

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[1]The following states use Medicaid data to determine categorical eligibility for free school meals: Illinois, Kentucky, New York, and Pennsylvania. The following states use Medicaid data to determine categorical eligibility for both free and reduced-price school meals: California, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

conduct direct certification daily or weekly. Always use clean data noting transferred, new, and withdrawn students.

❑ **Promote SNAP outreach in your schools.** The more eligible families enrolled in SNAP, the higher your ISP. Consider adding a SNAP button on your website that links to your state's SNAP application. Another great way to conduct outreach is by having someone available to promote the application and assist families in applying at your school events. Your school's social worker or homelessness liaison may be able to support this. If not, consider reaching out to non-profits that might provide SNAP application services – your state's SNAP agency can provide contacts for SNAP outreach providers in your area. *Check out No Kid Hungry's SNAP in Schools webpage to learn more!*

Quick Tip: Even if you are mid-cycle, you can work with your state agency to start a new 4-year CEP cycle if you demonstrate an increase in ISP, establishing a higher reimbursement rate for another four years.

Manage Program Costs

Use the following best practices to leverage existing resources and explore creative ways to manage program costs:

❑ **Calculate a 'per plate' cost and compare it to food and labor costs.** To calculate 'per plate' costs, use the USDA's Federal Reimbursement Calculator. Compare the 'per plate' cost to food and labor costs and make adjustments as needed.

❑ **Monitor food waste.** Adjust purchasing and preparation accordingly to manage costs. Additionally, explore 'offer-versus-serve' (OVS). At lunchtime, in particular, schools that implement OVS often find that they can better manage costs, i.e., when students are not required to take all meal components, they throw less away. As a bonus, operating an OVS model allows you to assess which foods students like most so that you can include them on the menu more often.

❑ **Join a buying co-op.** School nutrition departments can achieve better prices on commonly purchased goods if they tap into larger economies of scale. Joining a buying co-op with other districts or institutions can help cut costs.

❑ **Leverage USDA Foods.** Districts should make full use of USDA Foods as a means to offset costs incurred through the traditional bidding process.

❑ **Adhere to conservative hiring practices.** Avoid immediately hiring new staff to support CEP. Wait a few weeks after implementing CEP to determine staff needs. Because CEP requires less paperwork, school nutrition staff can use that extra time to support increased meal participation. However, temporary cafeteria staff may be necessary for the initial implementation of CEP.

❑ **Employ students to work in the school nutrition program.** Employing students can save costs, increase student engagement, and provide student leadership opportunities.

Explore Additional Avenues for Revenue Generation

Get creative and provide meals outside of breakfast and lunch. Below are several successful options districts have used across the country:

❑ **Provide afterschool meals or snacks.** Operate the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Meals Program or the National School Lunch Program Afterschool Snack Program to feed students an additional meal or snack after the end of the school day and to bring in additional revenue. *Check out No Kid Hungry's afterschool meals resources for more.*

❑ **Provide summer meals.** Operate the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) or the National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO) to ensure students have access to healthy meals while school is out and to bring in additional revenue. *Check out No Kid Hungry's summer meals programs resources for more.*

- ❑ **Consider starting or stopping a la carte sales.** A la carte sales may generate revenue, but they also could take away from students participating in reimbursable meals. Every school is different. Know your school's context, and decide whether a la carte sales would help your program finances.
- ❑ **Consider catering.** Schools can generate additional revenue by catering school functions, such as school board meetings, community programs, and events.
- ❑ **Disallow outside vendors/caterers in school.** Do not allow outside vendors/caterers to sell food at school during the official school day. This removes the competition and can boost sales by the school nutrition department.
- ❑ **Prepare student meals for field trips.** Serving meals on field trips can ensure that students have access to meals and that school nutrition departments can fully operate each day of the school year.

Increase Participation in School Meals

Increasing participation in school meals is the key to generating more revenue for your program and making CEP financially viable at any ISP. Districts have found success employing the following strategies:

- ❑ **Implement Breakfast After the Bell (BAB).** BAB, where breakfast is served as part of the school day using models such as Breakfast in the Classroom and Grab and Go, effectively addresses access barriers students encounter with school breakfast. The combination of CEP and BAB creates the most opportunity for students to participate in the school breakfast program, thereby increasing revenue. For additional support, visit No Kid Hungry's BAB resources webpage.
- ❑ **Promote your program.** Advertise breakfast and lunch on banners, posters, and scrolling marquees around the school. Include information about the program on your school nutrition website, district website, and student manuals. Engage local press through news articles, radio shows, and local TV news stations. Don't forget to involve principals and superintendents in promotion to families through letters and social media.
- ❑ **Engage students.** Regular student engagement can improve menus, create buzz around school meals, and boost participation rates. Consider doing surveys, taste tests, posting on social media, and connecting students to local farmers. *Check out Partners for Breakfast in the Classroom's toolkit to help craft your survey.*
- ❑ **Incorporate scratch cooking.** Students report a preference for hot, freshly prepared meals over pre-packaged meals. Where possible, doing more scratch cooking can enhance participation. If meals can be cooked on-site, students are drawn to the cafeteria by the aroma of freshly cooked food and participate more often. *For full-scratch and semi-scratch recipes, visit the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Smart Food Planner.*
- ❑ **Add more points of service.** Increased participation could result in congestion. To ensure that students can move quickly through lines and have enough time to eat, consider adding more points of service in your cafeteria at lunchtime or in your hallways if you are operating Grab and Go breakfast.
- ❑ **Tally reimbursable meals served to speed up lunch lines.** Under CEP, you only have to track the total number of meals served (as opposed to meals served by fee category). Many schools favor tallying – on paper or with a clicker – over swiping student IDs or punching in student numbers. Tallying is a faster solution for schools concerned about how increased participation may slow down lunch lines.
- ❑ **Require students to eat in the cafeteria as opposed to offsite.** This requirement incentivizes participation in the school meals programs and typically makes for safer school campuses.

Questions? Need additional support?
Check out bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/CEP for more resources, or reach out to
bestpractices@strength.org to get in touch.
Don't forget to share this resource with a friend or co-worker!