

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a USDA provision that allows an eligible school, groups of schools, or school district to provide all students free breakfast and lunch without the requirement of free/reduced-price meal applications.

Eligibility Requirements

In order to be eligible for CEP there are several criteria that must be met, including:

- At least 40% of student enrollment must be considered “identified students.” Identified students are students that utilize SNAP, TANF, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or are homeless.
- Must serve free breakfast AND lunch to all students.
- Must agree to cover, with non-federal funds, any costs incurred above the federal reimbursement amount received.

Benefits and Limitations

There are many benefits for schools and districts that choose to implement CEP, including:

- Eliminates the need to distribute, collect, and process free/reduced-price lunch applications, saving both costs and staff time.
- Eliminates stigma for students since all students are now eating for free.
- Can make it easier to breakeven or at least have no impact on foodservice budget bottom line.
- Does not require an increase of staff, the time spent on meal counting and claims are not a concern.
- Once approved as a CEP site the approval lasts for four years, regardless of changes in the percentage of eligible students.

There are some limitations with CEP implementation, but they can be overcome with thoughtful planning. Limitations include:

- Finding other ways to obtain data needed for Title I fund distribution.
- Modifying systems to count and claim reimbursable meals.

Important Considerations for Implementation

If your school has been identified individually or by the district to start operating under the Community Eligibility Provision there are a few things to think about. You want to ensure your Identified Student Percentage (ISP) is high enough to make the program financially viable. If your school’s ISP is over 50% your reimbursement will cover a high percentage of meals; if your ISP is 62.5% or higher you will be reimbursed 100%.

A second consideration is the importance of education and outreach. This is likely a significant change to your school meal programs and students and their families need to be informed. It will enable students to take advantage of free meals that may not have been available to them before. With this information parents can adjust how they plan for student meals, no longer needing to pay for lunch or pack a bag lunch. Here are some suggestions for promoting CEP.

- Send a letter to parents as part of back to school paperwork.
- Include an attention grabbing notice in the school newsletter- especially the first few newsletters after the change to CEP.
- Have teachers tell parents about free meals for all students at meet the teacher nights and conferences. .
- Have a table promoting free meals at back to school events.
- Stickers with reminders for younger students.

Examples for promotion and additional resources about CEP can be found on the CEP page of the Food + You program portal.