



May 1, 2023

Submitted via <http://www.regulations.gov>

Food and Nutrition Service, United States Department of Agriculture
School Meals Policy Division
Food and Nutrition Service
P.O. Box 9233
Reston, Virginia 20195

Re: Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision - Increasing Options for Schools, 88 FR 17406

Dear School Meals Policy Division:

On behalf of Maryland Hunger Solutions, I write today in support of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed rule for lowering the minimum identified student percentage (ISP) participation threshold for the Community Eligibility Provision from 40 percent to 25 percent.

As a statewide, non-partisan, nonprofit working to end hunger in Maryland, Maryland Hunger Solutions strives to overcome existing barriers to state and federal nutrition assistance programs and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods. Among these nutrition programs, the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program play the most critical role as the nation's first line of defense against childhood food insecurity.

Unfortunately, too many students miss out on the benefit of school meals because of longstanding barriers, such as cost and stigma. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) helps to eliminate both of these barriers and increase participation by providing school meals at no cost to all students regardless of income. Not only does CEP help to increase program participation, but research shows that it also helps to reduce food insecurity at home leading to healthier and stronger communities. A study conducted by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that students who attend CEP schools are over two times less likely to be food insecure than their counterparts attending CEP eligible schools that don't participate in the program.¹

Additionally, CEP helps school nutrition departments by streamlining food service operations and reducing administrative burdens. The administrative savings generated by CEP allow for important investments in operations that ensure long term program viability, such as improving the nutritional quality of meals served, and expanding nutrition education and farm to school initiatives.

Prior to the pandemic, 235 Maryland schools used CEP, including three districts that used CEP districtwide. During the height of the pandemic, schools across the country utilized federal waivers to provide universal school meals, which has led to an increased uptake of CEP in Maryland during the 2022-2023 school year. Currently, 351 Maryland schools have opted into CEP with several additional districts that have expressed an interest in districtwide CEP for the 2023-2024 school year, demonstrating a clear desire to continue providing school meals at no cost to all students.

¹ Gross, S.M., Kelley, T.L., Augustyn, M., Wilson, M.J., Bassarab, K., and Palmer, A. (2019). Household food security status of families with children attending schools that participate in the community eligibility provision (CEP) and those with children attending schools that are CEP-eligible, but not participating. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. 2019 October; doi: 10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318.



However, there are still many near eligible schools that are currently unable to opt into CEP. Lowering the eligibility threshold from a 40% ISP to 25% would allow 6 additional districts in Maryland to use districtwide CEP and create hundreds of additional individually eligible schools.

In addition to the nearly eligible schools that are currently unable to adopt CEP, there are also many currently eligible schools that struggle to make CEP work due to inadequate reimbursement rates using the current 1.6 multiplier. While lowering the ISP threshold is a critical first step in strengthening CEP, I encourage USDA to consider additional measures to make CEP more financially viable for schools. Additional support is needed, including an increased multiplier and an option for statewide adoption to allow more schools to take advantage of this vital program and encourage states to contribute additional financial support.

Finally, I urge USDA to extend the CEP election deadlines to give school districts the option to implement the 25% threshold for the 2023-2024 school year even if the new rule is finalized after the June 30th election deadline.

Thank you for this opportunity to share comments on the proposed revisions to the Community Eligibility Provision. I urge USDA to move quickly to a final rule. The proposed lowered eligibility threshold will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of children in Maryland and across the United States.

Sincerely,

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