

Community Eligibility Continues to Grow in the 2016–2017 School Year

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About FRAC

The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national organization working for more effective public and private policies to eradicate domestic hunger and undernutrition. For more information about FRAC, or to sign up for FRAC's *Weekly News Digest* and monthly *Meals Matter: School Breakfast Newsletter*, visit frac.org.



Introduction

In the 2016–2017 school year, the third year of nationwide availability, the number of high-needs schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision continues to grow. More than 9.7 million children in 20,721 schools and 3,538 school districts are participating and have access to breakfast and lunch at no charge each school day through community eligibility.¹ This represents an increase of 2,500 schools and 1.2 million children over the 2015–2016 school year.

The Community Eligibility Provision allows high-needs schools and districts with high concentrations of low-income students to offer free meals to all students and eliminates the need for household school meal applications. A key piece of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010, community eligibility was phased in a few states at a time before it was made available to schools nationwide in the 2014–2015 school year. Schools that participate in the program often see increased participation in school meals programs and reduced paperwork burden, allowing school nutrition staff to focus more directly on offering healthy, appealing meals.² Moreover, offering meals at no charge to all students eliminates stigma that school meal programs are only for low-income children and facilitates implementation of “breakfast after the bell” service models, such as breakfast in the classroom, that further boost participation.

Since its introduction, community eligibility has been a popular option for high-needs schools due to the many benefits for the school nutrition program and the entire school community. In just three years, the program has reached more than half — or 55 percent — of all eligible schools. As more school districts learn about the program, an increasing number have been adopting community eligibility each year. In the 2014–2015 school year, the first year of national scope, more than 14,000 schools participated, with 4,000 more schools signing on in the 2015–2016 school year, and 2,500 more in the 2016–2017 school year.

Still, there are many eligible schools that are not participating, even though they stand to benefit from this option. Take-up rates vary substantially across the states. Several factors, including challenges associated with the loss of traditional school meal application data and low rates of direct certification, which is the foundation of community eligibility, have hindered widespread adoption in some states and school districts. However, the more than 20,000 schools currently participating validate that the provision is working and initial barriers can be overcome with strong state, district, and school-level leadership, hands-on technical assistance from national, state, and local stakeholders, and peer-to-peer learning among districts.

This report provides a status report on community eligibility implementation nationally and across the states and the District of Columbia in the 2016–2017 school year based on three measures. FRAC has analyzed data provided by each state, via the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to determine the number of eligible and participating school districts and schools and the share of eligible districts and schools adopting community eligibility. FRAC also has looked at the number and share of schools participating based on their poverty level. As a companion to this report, FRAC has compiled all data collected in a [database of eligible and participating schools](#) that can be searched by state and school district, which can be found on FRAC’s website.

¹This report uses the term school district to refer to Local Education Agencies (LEA). LEAs include both large school districts with hundreds of schools as well as charter schools, which are often their own LEAs of one school.

² Logan, C. W., Connor, P., Harvill, E. L., Harkness, J., Nisar, H., Checkoway, A., Peck, L. R., Shivji, A., Bein, E., Levin, M., & Enver, A. (2014). *Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/CEPEvaluation.pdf>. Accessed on March 15, 2017.

How Community Eligibility Works:

Community eligibility schools are high-needs schools that offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge and use significant administrative savings to offset any additional costs of serving free meals. Instead of collecting school meal applications, community eligibility schools are reimbursed for a percentage of the meals served using a formula based on the percentage of students participating in specific means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Among the many benefits for schools and families are:

- Schools no longer collect, process or verify school meal applications, saving significant time and administrative burden.
- Schools do not need to track each meal served by fee category (free, reduced-price, paid), and instead provide total meal counts.
- School nutrition staff do not need to collect fees from students, allowing students to move through the line faster and more children to be served.
- Offering meals at no charge to all students eliminates stigma from any perception that the school meal programs are “just for the low-income children,” increasing participation among all students.
- Schools no longer have to deal with unpaid meal debt for reduced price and paid students at the end of the school year or follow up with families when students do not have money to pay for lunch.

How Schools can Participate:

Any district, group of schools in a district, or school with 40 percent or more “identified students” can choose to participate. Schools that cross this threshold to qualify for community eligibility typically have free and reduced-price percentages under traditional rules of 65–70 percent or higher.

Identified students are a subset of those eligible for free and reduced-price school meals based on poverty shown by participation in other programs. This is a smaller group than the total of children who would be certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals through a school meal application. Identified students are comprised of students certified for free school meals without an application. This includes:

- children directly certified for free school meals through data matching because their households receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits, and in some states, Medicaid benefits; and
- children who are certified for free meals without an application because they are homeless, migrant, runaway, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care.

How Schools are Reimbursed:

In community eligibility schools, although all meals are offered at no charge to all students, federal reimbursements are based on the proportion of low-income children in the school. The identified student percentage is multiplied by 1.6 to calculate the percentage of meals reimbursed at the federal free rate, and the remainder are reimbursed at the lower paid rate. The 1.6 multiplier was determined by Congress to reflect the ratio of six students certified for free or reduced-price meals with an application for every 10 students certified for free meals without an application. This serves as a proxy for the percentage of students that would be eligible for free and reduced-price meals if the school districts had collected school meal applications. For example, a school with 50 percent identified students would be reimbursed for 80 percent of the meals eaten at the free reimbursement rate ($50 \times 1.6 = 80$), and 20 percent at the paid rate.