



PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY WITH THE COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP)

- Food insecurity occurs when a household lacks consistent and reliable access to the healthy food they need.
- People of color are more likely to be food insecure as a result of structural racism.
- Increasing access to food is an important step towards eliminating these disparities.
- The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) enables eligible schools to serve healthy school meals to all students, at no cost to them.

CEP **removes the application barrier** to receiving free or reduced-price school meals. This benefits all families, especially those who fear completing an application because of their immigration status. Families who speak languages other than the languages in which meals applications are written, or who lack reading and writing skills, also benefit from CEP.



CEP **reduces the stigma around participating in the school meals program**. School breakfast and lunch become a universal benefit for all students, just like desks and textbooks. No child should feel stigma for meeting their basic needs at school.

CEP **eliminates unpaid school meal debt** and **supports families who struggle to make ends meet**, but have incomes above the cut-off for free and reduced-price meals. Especially in areas with a high cost of living, many families do not qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, yet still experience food insecurity.



Food is an essential school supply and CEP promises all students access to healthy school meals. When students have the fuel they need to learn, they have **higher attendance rates, fewer disciplinary referrals, and improved test scores**.

RESEARCH SUMMARY ON THE BENEFITS OF CEP



CEP Improves Food Security and Nutrition

- In Georgia, CEP adoption led to a decrease in BMI averaged across grade levels.¹
- In Boston, universal free breakfast programs decreased rates of student hunger.²
- In Maryland, families in CEP schools had lower rates of food insecurity than families at eligible, nonparticipating schools.³
- CEP improves food security by increasing household purchasing power.⁴

CEP Improves Student Academic and Behavioral Outcomes

- Studies show that CEP is associated with higher student math scores.^{5,6}
- In Tennessee, students at CEP schools were more likely to be promoted to the next grade on time, and disciplinary referrals decreased across grade levels, with the greatest reductions among high school students.⁷
- In CEP elementary schools in Wisconsin, attendance improved, particularly among economically disadvantaged children.⁸

CEP Benefits School Staff and Budgets

- School nutrition staff in CEP schools report greater job satisfaction because they do not have to track meal debt or provide alternative meals.⁹
- CEP significantly increases school meal participation across grade levels.¹⁰⁻¹⁴

¹Davis W & Musaddiq T. Estimating the Effects of Universal Free School Meal Enrollment on Child Health: Evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision in Georgia Schools. 2018. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3155354>.

²Kleinman RE, Hall S, Green H, et al. Diet, breakfast, and academic performance in children. *Ann Nutr Metab.* 2002; 46(suppl 1):24–30.

³Gross SM, Kelley TL, Augustyn M, Wilson MJ, Bassarab K, Palmer A. 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. *J Hunger Environ Nutr.* 2019;0(0):1–16.

⁴Poblacion A, Cook J, de Cuba SE, et al. Can food insecurity be reduced in the United States by improving SNAP, WIC, and the Community Eligibility Provision? *World Med Health Policy.* 2017; 9(4):435–455.

⁵Gordani J, Ozturk OD, Williams B, Zhan C. Free lunch for all! The effect of the Community Eligibility Provision on academic outcomes. February 2019. Available at: <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3333530>.

⁶Ruffini K. Universal access to free school meals and student achievement: evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision. IRLE Working Paper No. 102-18. Available at: <https://irle.berkeley.edu/files/2018/10/UniversalAccess-to-Free-School-Meals-and-Student-Achievement.pdf>.

⁷Kho A. Three Essays on School Reform [dissertation]. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University; August 2018.

⁸Bartfeld JS, Berger L, Men F. Universal access to free school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision is associated with better attendance for low income elementary school students in Wisconsin. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2020;120(2): 210–218.

⁹Hecht AA. Universal Free School Meals: Implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision and Impacts on Student Nutrition, Behavior, and Academic Performance. [Dissertation] Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; 2020.

¹⁰Logan CW, Connor P, Harvill EL, et al. Community eligibility provision evaluation. US Dept of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. 2014. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/CEPEvaluation.pdf>.

¹¹Turner L, Guthrie JF, Ralston K. Community eligibility and other provisions for universal free meals at school: impact on student breakfast and lunch participation in California public schools. *Transl Behav Med.* 2019;9(5):931–941.

¹²Ruffini K. Universal access to free school meals and student achievement: evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision. IRLE Working Paper No. 102-18. Available at: <https://irle.berkeley.edu/files/2018/10/UniversalAccess-to-Free-School-Meals-and-Student-Achievement.pdf>.

¹³Pokorney PE, Chandran A, Long MW. Impact of the Community Eligibility Provision on meal counts and participation in Pennsylvania and Maryland National School Lunch Programs. *Public Health Nutr.* 2019;22(17):3281–3287.

¹⁴Tan, ML, Lارايا, B, Madsen, KA, Johnson, RC, Ritchie, L. Community Eligibility Provision and School Meal Participation among Student Subgroups. *J School Health.* 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12942>.