

COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP) 2026 TOOLKIT



children
atRisk

Acknowledgements

The *Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Toolkit* reflects the collaborative efforts of school nutrition professionals, education leaders, and community partners committed to expanding access to healthy school meals for Texas students. CHILDREN AT RISK is deeply grateful to the Episcopal Health Foundation for its generous support and partnership throughout the development of this toolkit. Their investment made it possible to engage directly with school districts, gather valuable stakeholder perspectives, and develop practical resources to help districts evaluate and implement CEP.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to the school nutrition directors, district leaders, Education Service Center staff, and community partners who generously shared their time, expertise, and experiences throughout this project. Their insights helped shape this toolkit into a practical resource grounded in the realities of school nutrition operations across Texas.

We hope this toolkit serves as a valuable resource for school districts, policymakers, education leaders, and community organizations working to strengthen school nutrition programs, expand access to healthy meals, and improve outcomes for children and families across Texas.

AUTHORS

Caroline Roberts, JD, General Counsel & Senior Director of Public Policy

Christine Thomas, Director of Center for Social Measurement & Evaluation

Jacob Westjohn, Assistant Director of Center for Social Measurement & Evaluation

Shannon Epner, Project Coordinator

Sarosh Nandwani, Project Coordinator

EDITORS

Mandi Kimball, Vice President & Chief Government Affairs Officer

Santrice Jones-Hare, Director of Strong Start

Sarosh Nandwani, Project Coordinator

DESIGN

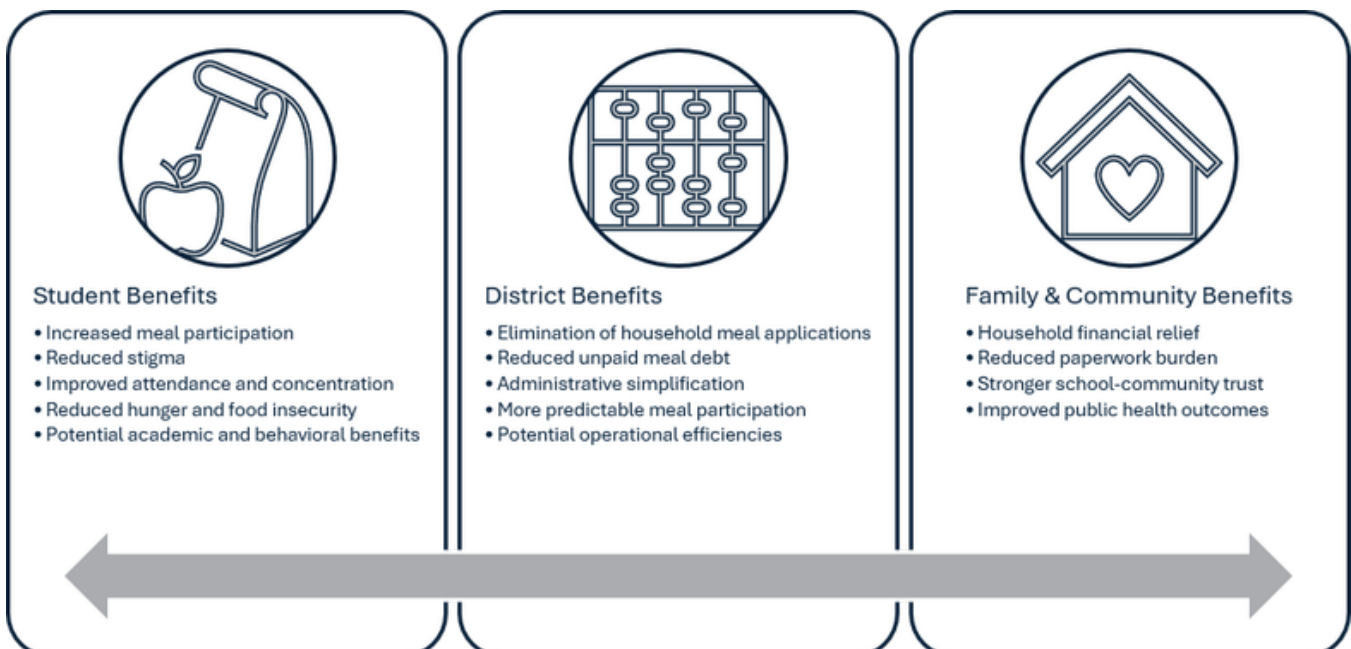
Shannon Epner, Project Coordinator



What is CEP

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that allows participating schools and districts to provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students, without requiring families to complete free or reduced-price meal applications. CEP was authorized through the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 and became available nationwide during the 2014–2015 school year as part of the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) efforts to expand access to school meals and reduce barriers for students from low-income households. Since its implementation, CEP has become a widely used strategy for improving student access to nutrition and addressing childhood food insecurity in high-need communities.

CEP operates within the larger framework of the USDA National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), which provide federally funded reimbursements to schools serving student meals. Under the traditional NSLP and SBP model, schools determine meal eligibility through household income applications, with students qualifying for free, reduced-price, or paid meals based on federal income guidelines. CEP replaces this application-based process by using direct certification data to identify students who are automatically eligible for free meals through participation in certain public assistance programs (i.e., SNAP, Medicaid) or identified risk categories (i.e., homelessness, foster care).



How CEP Works

Student Information

Students qualify for free meals through direct certification instead of household applications. Identified students include those participating in SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid, as well as students identified as homeless, migrant, runaway, foster youth, or enrolled in Head Start.

Determining ISP

Identified Student Percentage (ISP) determines CEP eligibility and reimbursement levels. Schools, groups of schools, or districts must have an ISP of at least 25 percent to participate. Districts may participate campus-by-campus, districtwide, or through grouped campuses.

Reimbursement Formula

CEP reimbursement is calculated by multiplying a district, grouping, or school's ISP by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals reimbursed at the federal free rate, capped at 100 percent. Any remaining meals are reimbursed at the lower paid rate. The formula is designed to estimate the number of students who would otherwise qualify for free meals under the traditional application-based system while reducing administrative burden for districts and families.

Access Benefits

CEP is designed to reduce administrative burden, increase student access to meals, reduce stigma tied to free and reduced-price meals, and improve food access for children and families. By eliminating meal applications and unpaid meal debt, districts can simplify operations while increasing student participation in school meal programs.

Impacts

CEP has been associated with broader educational and student wellness benefits, including improved attendance, reduced disciplinary issues, increased classroom readiness, and stronger overall student well-being. Providing meals at no cost to all students creates a more inclusive meal environment and helps ensure consistent access to nutritious food throughout the school day.

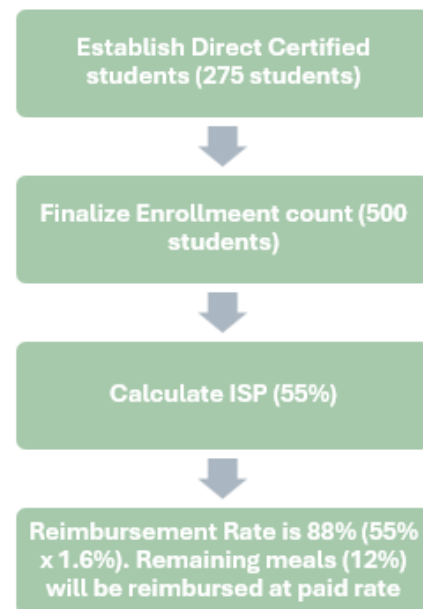
CEP Formula

The CEP reimbursement formula is built around a district or school's Identified Student Percentage (ISP). Under the formula, the ISP is multiplied by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals reimbursed at the federal free reimbursement rate. Any remaining meals are reimbursed at the lower paid reimbursement rate.

The multiplier is intended to estimate the number of additional students who would traditionally qualify for free or reduced-price meals but are not directly certified through programs like SNAP or Medicaid.

The 1.6 multiplier was established in 2010 and reaffirmed in 2016 based on historical national data showing the relationship between directly certified students and students qualifying through household applications. Districts noted concerns that the multiplier may no longer fully reflect current student need, particularly as direct certification rates fluctuate because of changes in SNAP and Medicaid participation. As a result, districts with moderate ISPs often experience a gap between federal reimbursement and the actual cost of providing meals at no charge to all students. This has led to ongoing conversations around whether the multiplier should be updated to better align reimbursement with current economic conditions and student eligibility patterns.

Small differences in ISP can have a significant impact on financial outcomes under CEP. For example, a district with an ISP of 25 percent would have 40 percent of meals reimbursed at the free rate and 60 percent reimbursed at the paid rate. At an ISP of 40 percent, 64 percent of meals would be reimbursed at the free rate. At an ISP of 62.5 percent or higher, all meals would effectively be reimbursed at the free rate because the multiplier calculation reaches or exceeds 100 percent. These differences are why districts frequently describe "tipping points" when discussing CEP viability. Even modest increases in ISP through direct certification improvements or school grouping strategies can substantially change reimbursement levels and overall financial sustainability.



Strategies & Modeling

Grouping Strategies

Districts can strategically combine higher-ISP and lower-ISP campuses to create a blended ISP that increases the share of meals reimbursed at the federal free rate. In practice, this allows some campuses that may not be financially viable on their own to participate as part of a larger group. Operationally, grouping can also affect meal service consistency, communication with families, and administrative processes, especially in districts where some schools participate in CEP while others do not.

Financial Modeling & Sustainability

Determining financial sustainability requires districts to carefully evaluate reimbursement levels, participation trends, labor costs, food costs, staffing trends, transportation logistics, and operational capacity. Understanding the “financial tipping point,” or the ISP level at which reimbursement can reasonably cover operational costs is key. Increased participation under CEP can improve revenue since more meals are served and reimbursed, particularly for breakfast, but higher participation may create additional operational pressures tied to staffing, kitchen capacity, equipment, delivery systems, and administrative support.

Maintaining ISP

Noticeable declines in ISP rates have occurred following the pandemic, driven by changes in SNAP and Medicaid participation, disruptions in benefit renewal processes, and the end of continuous Medicaid coverage protections. Even when families remain eligible for benefits, renewal interruptions and communication gaps result in students no longer being directly certified. Even small changes in ISP can significantly affect reimbursement and have a direct impact on CEP stability.

Increasing ISP

Outreach efforts tied to SNAP and Medicaid enrollment are tools, and partnering with community organizations or benefits navigators, improving data matching systems, and ensuring student information is accurate and updated can increase the students captured through direct certification. Family communication strategies are an approach for building trust with families and increasing awareness of how participation in benefit programs can support school meal access. While districts cannot control state or federal eligibility policies, these strategies can reduce gaps and improve long term viability.

Cost Saving Strategies

Operational Efficiency Strategies

Maintaining financially sustainable school nutrition programs increasingly depends on districts' ability to operate efficiently while managing rising food, labor, and operational costs. Districts described labor optimization as one of the largest focus areas, including adjusting staffing models, cross-training employees, and streamlining meal service operations to improve flexibility across campuses. Menu engineering also plays an important role, with districts balancing student preferences, nutritional requirements, product availability, and food costs when designing menus. Procurement collaboration and cooperative purchasing allow districts to increase purchasing power, stabilize pricing, and improve access to products through shared vendor contracts and regional cooperatives. At the same time, districts are increasingly focused on reducing food waste and improving inventory management practices to better control costs and avoid unnecessary losses. Staffing retention strategies also remain a major priority, as maintaining experienced nutrition staff is essential for operational consistency, compliance, and sustaining meal quality over time.

Maximizing Federal Reimbursement

Long-term financial sustainability for school nutrition programs is closely tied to districts' ability to fully capture available federal reimbursement while continuing to grow meal participation. Accurate meal counting and claiming practices help ensure districts receive reimbursement for every eligible meal served while reducing administrative errors that can lead to missed funding. Districts also emphasized the importance of regularly reviewing claiming systems, training staff, and monitoring compliance to avoid reimbursement losses.

Increasing breakfast participation remains one of the strongest opportunities to improve reimbursement, particularly through models such as Breakfast in the Classroom, grab-and-go breakfast, and second chance breakfast. Districts also discussed the value of integrating summer meal programs and afterschool meal or snack programs into broader nutrition strategies to expand access to meals outside of the traditional school day while increasing federal reimbursement opportunities. Together, these approaches highlight that maximizing reimbursement depends not only on eligibility formulas, but also on participation, operational systems, and districts' ability to fully utilize available federal nutrition programs.

Cost Saving Strategies Example: Scratch Cooking

Scratch cooking is a strategy that can improve meal quality, lower food costs, increase student participation, and strengthen the overall perception of school meals. Districts described students responding positively to fresher meals, more customizable options, and menu items that feel more culturally relevant to local communities. Scratch cooking can improve nutritional quality by allowing districts more control over ingredients, sodium levels, and preparation methods. In some districts, the shift toward more scratch-prepared meals was directly connected to increased meal participation, particularly when students felt meals were more comparable to food options available outside of school. Scratch cooking creates more flexibility to adapt menus to student preferences and changing nutrition requirements.

Districts emphasized that scratch cooking requires significant operational and infrastructure investments. Equipment costs are often one of the largest barriers, particularly for districts with older kitchen facilities that were not designed for large-scale fresh meal preparation. Staffing and training needs were also identified as major challenges, as scratch cooking is more labor-intensive and requires employees with different skill sets than traditional heat-and-serve meal models. Procurement complexity increases as well, particularly when districts are sourcing fresh ingredients, managing fluctuating food prices, and navigating Buy American requirements.

Districts described taking phased implementation approaches to expand scratch cooking over time. In many cases, districts started by introducing a limited number of scratch-prepared items, piloting menu changes at select campuses, or prioritizing meals with high student interest. Equipment investments were also phased strategically, prioritizing purchases that have the greatest operational impact, such as refrigeration upgrades, preparation tables, or additional storage capacity. These phased approaches allowed districts to gradually build staffing capacity, improve kitchen workflows, and evaluate student response before scaling changes districtwide. Both high and low poverty districts noted significant decreases in food costs when they reoriented toward purchasing individual baseline ingredients.

Districts highlighted that there is not a single model for successful implementation. Some focused on introducing culturally relevant menu items, while others used a hybrid approach that balanced scratch-prepared foods with pre-prepared products. Districts consistently emphasized that scratch cooking is not simply a menu change. It requires long-term planning, infrastructure investment, staffing support, and operational flexibility to be sustainable at scale. Scratch cooking represents an opportunity for capital investments to sustain long-term payoffs in improving nutrition quality and decreasing cost.

MEAL PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES



Breakfast In Classroom (BIC)

- Successful implementation requires coordination between teachers, campus administrators, nutrition staff, and custodial teams.
- Districts reported increased meal participation across grade levels when Breakfast in the Classroom models were implemented.



Grab-and-Go Breakfast / Mobile Carts

- Allows students to quickly pick up breakfast from kiosks, hallways, or high-traffic campus locations, reducing barriers related to time, transportation, or cafeteria access.
- Can increase breakfast participation rates, particularly at middle and high school campuses where traditional cafeteria breakfast models may not align with student schedules.



Second Chance Breakfast

- Provides students with an additional opportunity to eat breakfast later in the morning, typically between first and second periods, after the traditional breakfast service window has ended.
- Can increase breakfast participation among middle and high school students who may not arrive on campus early enough to access breakfast before school starts.



Student Engagement Strategies

- Student surveys can help districts better understand meal preferences, participation barriers, and feedback on menu quality, allowing nutrition departments to make more informed adjustments.
- Taste-testing events give students the opportunity to try new menu items before implementation, helping districts identify popular options and increase buy-in for healthier or unfamiliar foods.



Staff Participation

- Encouraging teachers and campus staff to participate in school meal programs can help normalize school meals and increase student comfort and participation.
- Staff engagement can also strengthen campus-wide support for nutrition initiatives and improve coordination around meal service models such as Breakfast in the Classroom or breakfast after the bell.



School Schedules

- Breakfast service should be considered when developing bell schedules, student drop-off procedures, and campus traffic flow to improve accessibility and participation.
- Staggered lunch schedules can help reduce long cafeteria lines, improve meal service efficiency, and provide students with adequate time to eat.



Recess Before Lunch Models

- Models can improve student behavior and focus by allowing students to release energy before eating rather than rushing through meals to get outside.

Additional Funding Streams & Partnership Opportunities

Federal Funding Opportunities

NSLP and SBP provide reimbursement for meals served during the school day, while additional federal programs can help districts expand access to meals outside of traditional meal periods. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), summer feeding programs, and afterschool meal and snack programs provide opportunities for districts to increase food access. Additional federal grant opportunities can help districts address infrastructure and operational meal service expansion. USDA equipment grants have supported districts in upgrading kitchen equipment and serving infrastructure. Districts also use the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, particularly for elementary campuses, as a way to increase student exposure to fresh produce and support healthier eating habits.

State & Local Funding Opportunities

Supplemental funding helps sustain nutrition programs and close reimbursement gaps. Potential funding sources include local wellness grants, public health partnerships, community benefit funding, philanthropic support, and city/county health initiatives.

Local partnerships can provide flexibility that federal reimbursement structures may not. Districts can leverage local public health or community health funding to support staffing, physical activity programming, or student wellness campaigns connected to school nutrition programs.

Community Partnerships

Districts use partnerships with food banks, health systems, nonprofits, universities, sports organizations, and benefits navigation partners as valuable tools for expanding services, improving outreach, and strengthening community trust. Food banks and nonprofit organizations provide supplemental food assistance, weekend backpack programs, or support for summer meal outreach efforts that complement school meal programs. Benefits navigation partnerships are important in helping families enroll in SNAP or Medicaid, which can improve direct certification rates and strengthen CEP financial sustainability over time. These partnerships highlight that school nutrition programs are increasingly connected to broader community health efforts rather than functioning solely as stand-alone meal programs.

Braided Funding Approaches

In practice, districts are layering federal reimbursement, grant funding, local wellness initiatives, community partnerships, and capital improvement funding to support both operations and infrastructure needs. This approach allows districts to address gaps that cannot be fully covered through NSLP or SBP reimbursement alone. Districts use grants and partnership funding to support kitchen upgrades, nutrition education, fresh food initiatives, and expanded meal service models while relying on federal reimbursement for core meal operations.

Implementation Supports & Resources

Successful CEP implementation requires ongoing planning, coordination, and operational support before, during, and after adoption. Districts should approach CEP as both a financial and operational decision that affects staffing, meal participation, communication strategies, reimbursement processes, and long-term sustainability planning. The below tools and resources are intended to help districts organize implementation efforts, evaluate operational readiness, support stakeholder communication, and monitor program sustainability over time. These materials can also assist districts in identifying potential challenges early and developing more structured approaches to CEP planning and decision-making.

- [ISP Calculator](#)
- [Food Research & Action Center Toolkit](#)
- [CEP Application Timelines](#)
- [USDA Guidance Summaries](#)
- [Texas-Specific Resource Directory](#)
- [Improving Direct Certification Rate](#)
- [Superintendent & Board Talking Points](#)
- [Staff Communication Tools](#)
- [Community Messaging Tools](#)
- [CEP Planning Checklist](#)
- [Family FAQs](#)

Alternative & Complementary Models

Provision 2

Provision 2 is another federal option under the NSLP and SBP that allows schools to reduce the administrative burden with collecting household meal applications. Schools complete a “base year” during which student eligibility is determined through traditional free and reduced-price meal applications. The percentages established during that base year are then used for future reimbursement and claiming purposes over a multi-year cycle, allowing schools to avoid collecting applications annually. Unlike CEP, Provision 2 still relies on household application data during the base year and reimburses meals based on free, reduced-price, and paid claiming percentages rather than using the ISP multiplier.

Provision 2 is a potential alternative for schools whose benefits enrollment is especially low and not reflective of economic realities, or where CEP is not financially viable under the current reimbursement structure but free and reduced meal percentages are high. For example, at some schools or districts families may be willing to share income data with the school but unwilling to enroll in federal benefits.

Because reimbursement is still tied to free, reduced-price, and paid claiming percentages, Provision 2 may not generate the same reimbursement benefits as CEP. Districts view Provision 2 as a useful alternative option, especially for campuses with moderate ISPs or districts trying to balance meal access with accountability and data collection requirements.

Standard NSLP/SBP

Traditional participation in the NSLP and SBP remains the preferred option for some districts, particularly when CEP or Provision 2 are not financially sustainable. Under the standard model, families complete meal applications annually and students are categorized as free, reduced-price, or paid eligible. Districts noted that continuing with traditional applications may be preferable when ISP rates are too low to support CEP reimbursement or when districts rely heavily on household application data for other programmatic purposes.

Hybrid Approaches

Districts are using hybrid implementation models based on local financial and operational realities. Examples include districts implementing CEP at some campuses while maintaining traditional NSLP/SBP participation at others. This approach is often used when elementary campuses have higher ISPs than middle or high schools,

Districts described phased implementation strategies, where CEP is introduced gradually over multiple years rather than districtwide all at once, to evaluate long-term sustainability. Districts use hybrid approaches to pilot operational changes, participation strategies, or staffing adjustments before expanding implementation. Models can improve flexibility, but mixed implementation can also create challenges for families and staff, particularly when meal access differs between campuses within the same district.

Technical Assistance Resources

Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA)

Administers federal school meal programs in Texas & serves as the primary source for CEP eligibility guidance, reimbursement information, compliance requirements, and district training opportunities.

State Nutrition Associations

School Nutrition Association (SNA) and Texas Association for School Nutrition (TASN), provide professional development, advocacy, policy updates, conferences, webinars, and operational training to support districts with CEP implementation and long-term financial sustainability.

Education Service Centers (ESCs)

ESCs often assist districts with CEP calculations, financial modeling, operational planning, training, and best practices related to school nutrition program administration. Many districts also rely on ESCs for peer networking opportunities and technical support during CEP implementation.

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Guidance and technical assistance resources including CEP calculators, reimbursement tools, policy memoranda, eligibility guidance, and implementation manuals.

Comparing Meal Options

	CEP	Partial CEP	Provision 2	Traditional
Administrative Burden	No household applications	Some campuses in <u>a district</u> still have household applications	Reduced applications after base year but still require periodic recalculation	Annual applications, verification, and meal eligibility processing required
Financial Predictability	Stable when ISP is high enough to support reimbursement rates	Varies depending on campus grouping and reimbursement balance	Can be stable but may create financial risk if percentages change over time	Less predictable due to changing food and labor costs, meal participation, and unpaid meal balances
Data Collection	<u>Relies</u> on direct certification lists and limits school intake opportunities	Mixed; some campuses will have direct certified lists and others can collect family level data	Limited, Only uses base year application data	Districts collect annual family income applications and <u>can do</u> intake on a rolling basis
Participation Trends	Typically associated with increased breakfast and lunch participation	Participation often increases at CEP campuses while remaining mixed districtwide	<u>Generally increases participation</u> by reducing meal fees and paperwork	Participation may be lower due to meal costs, application barriers, and/or stigma
Equity Implications	Strong equity benefits by providing free meals to all students and reducing stigma	Improves access <u>at</u> participating <u>campuses</u> but may create inconsistencies across a district	Reduces stigma and improves access <u>at</u> participating schools	Greater risk of stigma and unequal access due to income-based meal eligibility and unpaid meal charges

Considerations & Future Directions

Emerging Policy Issues

Policy conversations continue around whether the current 1.6 CEP multiplier still reflects present-day student need and operational realities. As SNAP and Medicaid participation fluctuate, many districts are finding that reimbursement does not always keep pace with the cost of providing meals at no cost to all students. Discussions around adjusting the multiplier are increasingly tied to broader conversations about universal school meals and long-term school nutrition funding.

Changes in SNAP and Medicaid policy also directly affect CEP eligibility and reimbursement because direct certification relies heavily on participation in these programs. Disruptions in benefit renewals or reduced enrollment can lower ISP rates and reimbursement levels. Expanding Medicaid direct certification and implementing state reimbursement supplements are increasingly viewed as important strategies to help districts address rising food, labor, and operational costs.

Key Lessons

Financial sustainability was the primary factor shaping CEP participation decisions across districts. Districts described benefits tied to student access, reduced stigma, increased participation, and operational simplicity, and long-term financial viability ultimately determined whether implementation was feasible. Districts emphasized the importance of understanding reimbursement levels, labor costs, staffing capacity, participation trends, and operational impacts before adopting or continuing CEP.

Administrative simplicity also emerged as one of the strongest perceived benefits of CEP. Districts described reductions in paperwork, unpaid meal debt, and administrative processing tied to annual meal applications. Leadership support from superintendents, school boards, principals, and district business offices was consistently identified as critical to successful implementation.

Future Research

While existing research highlights important benefits associated with CEP participation, several areas would benefit from additional study. Future research could examine connections between CEP participation, academic performance, attendance, chronic absenteeism, and long-term student wellness outcomes. Additional analysis is also needed on rural versus urban implementation differences, including infrastructure, staffing, procurement, and vendor access challenges. Finally, cost-benefit analyses of universal school meals and expanded CEP participation could help policymakers better understand the financial, educational, and public health impacts of broader no-cost meal access policies.

Superintendent & Board Talking Points

- CEP allows schools to provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students while reducing barriers to meal access.
- Increased meal access can support student readiness, attendance, concentration, and overall well-being.
- CEP can reduce stigma associated with free and reduced-price meal programs by providing meals to all students at no cost.
- Participation decisions should balance student access goals with long-term financial sustainability.
- Districts should carefully evaluate labor costs, food costs, staffing capacity, and meal participation impacts before implementation.
- Increased participation may improve reimbursement revenue, but may also increase staffing, equipment, and operational demands.
- CEP eliminates annual household meal applications, reducing administrative burden for schools and families.
- Districts may also see reductions in unpaid meal debt and administrative processing tied to collections.
- Strong communication around CEP implementation may also strengthen districtwide communication systems and improve engagement strategies that support other district initiatives.
- CEP implementation may occur districtwide, through grouped campuses, or through hybrid participation models.
- Grouping strategies can help districts improve reimbursement and expand access across campuses.
- Ongoing financial monitoring, reimbursement forecasting, and ISP tracking are essential for long-term sustainability.
- State reimbursement supplements, grants, and community partnerships may help districts address funding gaps.
- Districts can continue collecting alternative income forms or socioeconomic surveys to support accountability requirements, funding allocations, grants, and other programs that rely on household economic data.

Staff Communication Tools

Key Communication Messages

- CEP allows participating schools to provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students.
- Staff play an important role in supporting student participation and answering family questions.
- Teachers, principals, cafeteria staff, custodial teams, and front office staff all play a role in successful implementation.
- Clear and consistent communication helps reduce confusion around meal service changes and operational procedures.

Topics to Cover with Staff

- What CEP is and why the district is participating
- Changes to breakfast and lunch service procedures
- Meal service models (Breakfast in the Classroom, grab-and-go, second chance breakfast)
- Food allergy and dietary accommodation procedures
- Frequently asked family questions
- Student participation and engagement goals

Communication Strategies

- Share implementation updates before the school year begins
- Use staff meetings, newsletters, and email updates for ongoing communication
- Provide FAQ sheets for teachers and front office staff
- Identify clear district or campus points of contact for questions
- Reinforce communication throughout the school year, not just during rollout

Implementation Support

- Train staff on operational changes before implementation
- Coordinate with cafeteria, custodial, transportation, and campus teams
- Gather staff feedback during implementation to identify challenges early
- Ensure substitute staff understand meal service expectations

Long-Term Benefits

- Increased coordination between departments may support future wellness and student engagement initiatives
- CEP communication can support collaboration across campuses and departments

Community Messaging Tools

Key Community Messaging Themes

- CEP provides breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students at participating schools.
- The goal of CEP is to improve student access to meals while reducing paperwork for families.
- Meals continue to meet federal and state nutrition standards.
- CEP can support student readiness, attendance, concentration, and overall well-being.
- Participation in school meal programs does not affect immigration status.

Recommended Communication Materials

- Family FAQ documents
- District website updates
- Social media posts
- Campus flyers and posters
- Email and text message templates
- Translated outreach materials
- Menu and meal service information sheets

Outreach Strategies

- Use clear, family-friendly language that avoids technical policy terminology
- Provide communication in multiple languages commonly spoken in your community
- Share information before implementation and throughout the school year
- Coordinate messaging across campuses to ensure consistency
- Use multiple communication channels, including websites, social media, newsletters, and community events

Long-Term Communication Benefits

- Strong community messaging can increase meal participation and improve family engagement
- Consistent communication may strengthen trust between districts and families
- CEP outreach efforts can also support future wellness, attendance, and student support initiatives

CEP Planning Checklist

Pre-Implementation Phase

- ☐ Conduct a financial feasibility assessment, including ISP analysis, reimbursement projections, and operational cost review
- ☐ Review direct certification and enrollment data for accuracy and completeness
- ☐ Evaluate grouping strategies for schools or campuses, if applicable
- ☐ Engage key stakeholders, including nutrition staff, district leadership, principals, and business offices
- ☐ Develop communication materials for school boards and district leadership
- ☐ Create a community messaging plan for families and staff regarding CEP implementation and meal access
- ☐ Assess kitchen infrastructure, staffing capacity, and meal service models
- ☐ Review vendor contracts, procurement systems, and food supply needs

Implementation Year

- ☐ Finalize operational plans for meal service, staffing, and logistics
- ☐ Implement staffing adjustments or cross-training strategies as needed
- ☐ Launch family and community communication campaigns explaining CEP participation
- ☐ Train campus staff on meal service procedures and compliance requirements
- ☐ Monitor breakfast and lunch participation trends across campuses
- ☐ Evaluate meal quality, student engagement, and menu preferences
- ☐ Track reimbursement claims and operational costs throughout the school year
- ☐ Identify and address implementation challenges in real time

Ongoing Sustainability

- ☐ Monitor ISP rates regularly and review direct certification data updates
- ☐ Conduct ongoing financial monitoring, including reimbursement and cost trends
- ☐ Analyze participation rates by campus, grade level, and meal service model
- ☐ Review operational efficiency strategies related to labor, procurement, and inventory management
- ☐ Continue student and family engagement efforts to support participation
- ☐ Evaluate opportunities for summer meals, afterschool meals, or additional federal reimbursement programs
- ☐ Update long-term equipment and kitchen infrastructure plans as needed
- ☐ Develop continuous improvement strategies based on participation, financial performance, and operational outcomes

Family FAQs

What is the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)?

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that allows participating schools to provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students.

Why is our school/district participating in CEP?

CEP helps increase student access to school meals and providing meals at no cost can help ensure students are ready to learn and have consistent access to nutritious food throughout the school day.

Which students can receive free meals?

All students enrolled at participating CEP schools can receive breakfast and lunch at no cost, regardless of household income.

Do families still need to complete a meal application?

[District Answer]

Are all schools in the district participating in CEP?

[District Answer]

What meals are included?

Students may receive one breakfast and one lunch each school day at no cost. Additional items, extra entrees, snacks, or a la carte purchases may still have a charge.

Can my child still bring lunch from home?

Yes. Students may still bring meals from home if families choose to do so.

Will meal quality change under CEP?

Schools participating in CEP must continue following all federal and state nutrition standards. Many districts report that CEP can actually increase participation and support investments in meal quality, fresh foods, and additional menu options.

Will my child still receive accommodations for food allergies or special diets?

Yes. Schools will continue to provide accommodations for students with documented dietary needs or medical conditions according to district procedures.

Who can families contact with questions?

For questions about CEP, menus, meal accommodations, or campus participation, families should contact: [District Answer]

Additional Information

Participation in CEP does not prevent students from participating in other school activities or programs. Schools will continue working to provide nutritious meals that support student health, learning, and well-being.

children **atRisk**

Speaking Out + Driving Change for Children



EPISCOPAL HEALTH
FOUNDATION

4450 Harrisburg Blvd., Suite 400

Houston, TX 77011

(713) 869-7740

info@childrenatrisk.org

www.childrenatrisk.org