

June 8, 2018

ABOUT

Ensuring Every Child Has a Meal at the Lunch Table

More than 700 schools across Virginia are eligible to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a program where high-poverty schools provide a nutritious free breakfast and lunch to every student. CEP is federally funded, reimbursing schools for most or all of the cost of providing meals.

This school year, only 341 Virginia schools – 48.5 percent of those eligible – participated in the program. Schools have until June 30th to apply for participation in the provision for the 2018-2019 school year, ensuring that more students' education won't be impacted by an empty stomach.

CEP was established as a component of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Since the program launched in a handful of states in 2011, CEP has successfully increased participation in free lunch programs across the country. The program launched nationwide for the 2014-2015 school year and enrolled over 14,000 schools. By the 2016-2017 school year, the enrollment increased to over 20,000 schools serving 9.7 million children.

This means an increase in the number of children eating two nutritious meals at school – children that might otherwise go hungry.

CEP identifies eligible schools as those with high levels of poverty – at least 40 percent of the student body is already receiving aid through programs like Head Start, SNAP, or Medicaid. Homeless, migrant, or foster children are counted as well. By matching enrollment in these programs with student enrollment, high-poverty Virginia schools are deemed eligible to apply for participation CEP. Every student at participating schools is no longer charged for breakfast or lunch.



CEP offers a broad range of benefits for families and schools, making it a powerful opportunity to improve the quality of Virginia schools that serve low-income communities.



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This school year, over 155,000 Virginia kids got free meals at school, eliminating the stigma that it's only low-income students who participate in free lunch programs. Most importantly, children received essential nutrition, which studies suggest may improve their academic performance and economic trajectory. For example, economists found that children who participated in a free nutritious lunch program in Sweden during the 1950s and 60s had higher earnings as adult workers.

CEP also combats the steadily increasing lunch debt in schools across the country. In recent years, parents and families have become increasingly concerned with "lunch shaming," or how school personnel penalizes children for their unpaid lunch debt. This spring, the issue reached the General Assembly of Virginia, which passed a bill that the governor signed prohibiting school penalization of students with debt. The bill also requires that notification of lunch debt be communicated directly to parents or guardians.

Lunchroom staff and school administration reap the benefits of CEP, too. The data matching process eliminates the burden that school districts face when processing free lunch program applications for each individual student. Lunch room staff simply count the number of meals served.

CEP is highly flexible. Entire school districts can enroll in the program or individual schools that meet the eligibility requirements can opt in. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) requires each school division to submit a CEP Site Eligibility Report and the VDOE publishes a comprehensive report on the number of eligible, near eligible, and participating schools in every division each year.

Both schools and low-income Virginia households benefit from CEP, but less than half of eligible schools take advantage of the program. There are still 186,630 kids in Virginia attending eligible schools with a high concentration of low-income students, but these schools are choosing not to provide free breakfast and lunch to every student. Every child attending a low-income school can benefit from CEP. Eligible Virginia schools should enroll in the program to strengthen and streamline their student nutrition programs.

Eligible school divisions and individual schools can apply using the School Nutrition Programs Web-based (SNPWeb) system. More information about the 2018-2019 CEP application for Virginia schools can be found [here](#).

Increasing this year's participation in CEP is another step toward improving food security for children in Virginia and strengthening schools.

— *Faith Burns, Research Intern and Chris Duncombe, Senior Policy Analyst*

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