

May 24, 2019

ABOUT

Room for Improvement: Opportunities Remain to Increase Access to Free Meals for Kids in Virginia

In Virginia, 1 out of 7 children live in families that struggle with food insecurity, meaning they lack consistent access to enough food for a healthy, active life. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a crucial federal program to combat this problem of childhood hunger by providing students attending high-poverty schools and school districts with a free and nutritious breakfast and lunch. Unfortunately, this program has been underutilized here in Virginia, leaving thousands of students still at risk of childhood hunger. With a month until the application deadline for the program, schools can make sure that every student in need of a nutritious meal can get one.

Virginia has participated in CEP since 2014, and this past school year marks the first time that more than half of eligible schools participated, as reported by the Virginia Department of Education. For the 2018-2019 school year, 420 schools – 58 percent of those eligible – participated in CEP, up from 48 percent the year before. On an individual student basis, slightly over 200,000 students benefited from access to free breakfast and lunch from their school's or school division's participation.

While the improvement in the CEP participation rate is a positive sign, free and nutritious meals provided through this program continue to be inaccessible for over 150,000 students in more than 300 schools across the commonwealth. These schools were eligible to participate in CEP in the 2018-2019 school year, but did not apply.

CEP is a largely federally funded program which provides breakfast and lunch at no cost to students within schools and school districts where at least 40 percent of the student body participates in assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Head Start, and Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), in addition to children within foster care, or with homeless, runaway, or migratory status.

This provision is not only for individual schools. School districts may also participate in CEP if the percentage of their student body eligible is no less than 40 percent. Districts may also group schools that fall short of the 40 percent requirement with schools that have greater than the 40 percent benchmark to implement CEP and provide free meals to all students within a group of schools or district wide.

In addition to the nutritional and financial benefits to students and families within eligible school and school districts, CEP participation also reduces the level of stigma faced by students who receive free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). Without



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CEP implementation, students on FRPL or those who are unable to buy lunch because of lack of funds may be stigmatized by having to work for their meal, receiving a hand stamp signaling their inability to pay full price, an alternative meal, or no meal at all. Adopting CEP eliminates this distinction between students participating in FRPL and those who are not, helping to reduce the stigma against students receiving meal assistance.

Furthermore, CEP implementation reduces the amount of time and effort required to administer free and nutritious meals for students. Prior to CEP adoption, administrators must keep record to make sure that only students eligible for FRPL participate and use the program. However, by adopting the CEP, school administrators would no longer have to collect and verify individual applications regarding FRPL, which would allow them to devote greater attention to providing all students with at least two daily meals.

Currently, schools and districts must opt in to participate in CEP. The over 300 eligible schools not participating in CEP have until June 30 to apply for the upcoming school year. The superintendent's memo from May 10, 2019, includes directions to apply, and Virginia Hunger Solutions has also prepared a toolkit detailing CEP and the application process.

The rate of food insecurity among children presents a threat to the health and well-being of thousands of children within Virginia. It's vital that eligible schools participate in CEP to help make sure children facing hunger have access to regular, nutritious meals in their schools.

– *Michael Johnson, Research Intern, and Chris Duncombe, Policy Director*

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