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Community Eligibility Contributing to More Low-Income Children Eating Healthy School Meals

Washington, D.C. – October 1, 2013 – Community Eligibility, a successful new federal option that allows schools in high-poverty areas to serve meals at no charge to help reduce hunger and streamline their school meal programs, is resulting in more children eating school meals in participating states, according to *Community Eligibility: Making High-Poverty Schools Hunger Free*, a new report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).

Community Eligibility was established in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, and has been phased in a few states at a time over the past three school years. The first three states to adopt Community Eligibility – Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan – have seen striking success since they started offering this option for the 2011-2012 school year. In those three states, average daily lunch participation rose by 13 percent, resulting in more than 23,000 additional children eating lunch, and average daily breakfast participation has increased by 25 percent in schools that participated for two years, resulting in more than 29,000 additional children eating breakfast. Overall, school meal participation is far higher in schools that offer Community Eligibility.

“Community Eligibility is an exciting new opportunity for schools and states to create hunger-free environments for learning, and it is working. Higher participation in school meals means children can concentrate on their lessons and not on their empty bellies,” said Madeleine Levin, Senior Policy Analyst at the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). “Particularly noteworthy is Community Eligibility’s ability to increase the number of children eating breakfast, an underutilized program that many schools are seeking to expand.”

Community Eligibility leads to more children participating in school meals programs, and also reaps benefits for high-poverty schools. With less paperwork to complete, schools can operate more efficient school meal programs. It also frees up resources to invest in improving meal quality and increases staff time available for other educational priorities.

“The success of Community Eligibility in helping feed children in need is a model for others to follow,” stated Zoë Neuberger, Senior Policy Analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. “High-poverty schools around the country will soon be able to use Community Eligibility to make sure that all children have access to nutritious food to help them learn and thrive.”

The 2014-2015 school year will mark the first year that eligible schools in every state can participate in Community Eligibility. Eleven states currently can operate Community Eligibility: the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia. The experiences of these states, notes the report, offer some valuable

lessons and best practices that can help additional schools and states plan for a successful implementation of Community Eligibility.

First and foremost is making sure school districts are aware of Community Eligibility and its benefits. School districts also can start looking at the implications of eliminating paper school meal applications, identify ways to substitute for such family income data that is used by other programs, and start improving procedures to identify children who are automatically eligible for free school meals, the number of whom is the basis for reimbursements under Community Eligibility.

The report notes that it's not too early for states and schools to start getting ready for Community Eligibility. By taking important steps now, noted FRAC and CBPP, states can make Community Eligibility a success for high poverty schools and start developing strong programs that ensure more low-income children have the healthy breakfasts and lunches they need to succeed in school every day.

Community Eligibility: Making High-Poverty Schools Hunger Free is available online.

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The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization and policy institute that conducts research and analysis on a range of government policies and programs. It is supported primarily by foundation grants.

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) is the lead advocacy organization working to end hunger in America through stronger public policies. For more information, visit www.frac.org. Find us on Facebook at facebook.com/foodresearchandactioncenter or follow us on Twitter at twitter.com/fractweets.