
Updated July 25, 2014

More Than 28,000 Schools Can Become Hunger Free

By Zoë Neuberger, Rebecca Segal, and Mona Hussein

The Community Eligibility Provision is a powerful new tool to ensure that low-income children in high-poverty neighborhoods have access to healthy meals at school. Established in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, next year community eligibility will allow more than 28,000 schools in high-poverty neighborhoods to offer nutritious meals through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs to all students at no charge.¹ By eliminating school meal applications and fees, community eligibility streamlines meal operations, reduces administrative burdens for schools and families, and reduces stigma that children, especially teens, sometimes face if they eat school meals.

School districts can offer community eligibility district-wide or in selected schools within a district if more than 40 percent of their students are “Identified Students” — that is, approved for free meals without an application based on data from other programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) that serve low-income children.

Community eligibility has been phased in over the last three years. Approximately 4,000 schools in 600 schools districts in low-income communities across 11 states now offer community eligibility.²

Because community eligibility is easy to adopt and simplifies program administration, districts of all kinds have successfully implemented it. Cities like Boston, Massachusetts; Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, and Lansing, Michigan; Buffalo and Rochester, New York; and Akron and Cleveland, Ohio, have successfully implemented community eligibility district-wide. Some large cities, including Atlanta, Chicago, and New York City, have implemented community eligibility for some but not all schools. Charter schools and much smaller districts also have successfully implemented community eligibility.

¹ See 42 U.S.C. 1759a(a)(1)(F) and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service Memorandum, *Community Eligibility Option: Guidance and Q&As*, USDA, February 25, 2014, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SP21-2014os.pdf>.

² See February 25, 2014 letter from U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan to Chief State School Officers, http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/CEP_jointletter.pdf. The District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia have already implemented the Community Eligibility Provision.

Community eligibility is making a profound difference for students and schools. In schools in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan that participated in community eligibility for two years, lunch participation rose by 13 percent, which resulted in more than 23,000 additional children eating lunch daily, and breakfast participation increased by 25 percent, which resulted in more than 29,000 additional children eating breakfast daily.³

Beginning with the 2014-2015 school year, high-poverty schools and school districts in *all states* will be eligible to adopt community eligibility to help reduce hunger and make school meal programs more efficient. States were required to publish lists of eligible schools and school districts for the 2014-2015 school year by May 1, 2014. School districts have until August 31, 2014 to opt in.

Most states have now published their lists of eligible schools and districts. Those lists show that more than 28,000 schools serving predominantly low-income students are eligible to offer community eligibility for the next school year. These schools represent more than one in five schools in the United States. More than 3,000 school districts — one in five U.S. school districts — could offer community eligibility district-wide.⁴

The table below summarizes how many schools and entire school districts in each state are eligible for community eligibility.⁵ School districts that are considering adopting community eligibility, as well as other stakeholders, can find resources and suggested steps to facilitate the transition to community eligibility in our implementation guide.⁶

³ See Madeleine Levin and Zoë Neuberger, “Community Eligibility: Making High-Poverty Schools Hunger Free,” Food Research and Action Center and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 1, 2013, <http://www.cbpp.org/files/10-1-13fa.pdf>.

⁴ There were 129,189 public and private schools and 13,567 school districts during the 2011-2012 school year. See U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 214.10, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_214.10.asp.

⁵ For state lists of eligible school districts and schools, see “School Districts and Schools That Are Eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, <http://www.cbpp.org/ceplists>.

⁶ See Madeleine Levin and Zoë Neuberger, “A Guide to Implementing Community Eligibility,” Food Research and Action Center and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 1, 2013, <http://www.cbpp.org/files/10-1-13fa-guide.pdf>. Additional resources related to the Community Eligibility Provision are available on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s website at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/community-eligibility-provision> and on the website of the Food Research and Action Center at <http://frac.org/federal-foodnutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program/community-eligibility/>.

Table 1		
The Number of Schools and Districts That Are Eligible to Provide Meals at No Charge to All Students		
	Number of Eligible Schools ¹	Number of School Districts Eligible District-Wide ²
Alabama	771	91
Alaska	122	19
Arizona	105 ⁴	146
Arkansas	401	83
California	948	70
Colorado	224	22
Connecticut	163	13
Delaware	113	25
District of Columbia ³	156	48
Florida ³	2,045	130
Georgia ³	746	158
Hawaii	82	0 ⁵
Idaho	164	11
Illinois ³	1,406	260
Indiana	389	44
Iowa	224	21
Kansas	257	14
Kentucky ³	877	137
Louisiana	858	Not yet published
Maine	6 ⁶	26
Maryland ³	374	7
Massachusetts ³	701	35
Michigan ³	822	Not yet published
Minnesota	351	Not yet published
Mississippi	507	53
Missouri	654	121
Montana	117	31
Nebraska	94	5
Nevada	158	1
New Hampshire	53	6
New Jersey	550	110
New Mexico ⁷	525	Not yet published
New York ³	3,461	65
North Carolina	1,186	74
North Dakota	34	15
Ohio ³	400	183
Oklahoma	Not available ⁸	94
Oregon	637	49
Pennsylvania	835	146
Rhode Island	98	18
South Carolina	557	42

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The Number of Schools and Districts That Are Eligible to Provide Meals at No Charge to All Students		
	Number of Eligible Schools ¹	Number of School Districts Eligible District-Wide ²
South Dakota	124	12
Tennessee	1,035	101
Texas	3,459	382
Utah	61	3
Vermont	49	Not yet published
Virginia	436	32
Washington	337	55
West Virginia ³	369	32
Wisconsin	659	107
Wyoming	8	4
Total	28,708	3,101

Source: "School Districts and Schools That Are Eligible for the School Meals Community Eligibility Provision," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, www.cbpp.org/ceplists.

Notes:

¹To the extent that we are able to ascertain, the figures in this column include only schools that are eligible to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision individually. Schools in districts that are eligible district-wide are included only if they would be eligible individually.

²Schools districts are also referred to as Local Educational Agencies or LEAs.

³These states have already implemented the Community Eligibility Provision. The figures in the table for these states generally include schools and LEAs that are already using the Community Eligibility Provision.

⁴This figure understates the number of eligible schools in Arizona because it omits *all schools* in districts that are eligible district-wide.

⁵All Hawaii public schools are part of a single school district that is not eligible district-wide.

⁶Maine published a list of schools that are interested in adopting the Community Eligibility Provision, but not a comprehensive list of eligible schools.

⁷New Mexico received an extension from USDA with regard to publishing lists by May 1.

⁸Oklahoma published a list of eligible schools but relied on data, as permitted by USDA, from early in the school year that does not capture schools that are now eligible.