

March 2021

# THE COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: WHEN IMPLEMENTED, HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY INCREASES

## WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP)?

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a funding option that allows schools to offer meals at no charge to all students—without requiring households to apply for meal benefits, and without requiring students to identify themselves as having qualified for the program.

## BACKGROUND

During the 2017-2018 school year, there were 242 schools participating in CEP in Maryland. Despite this promising level of participation, at least 82 more schools were found to be CEP-eligible, but chose not to participate in the program. The Baltimore City Public School system began implementing CEP—in all its schools—on June 1, 2015. This research compared a sample of Baltimore City schools that were participating in CEP to a sample of schools that were eligible (in another Maryland county) but chose not to participate. The goal of the study was to determine if CEP participation is an effective strategy to reduce food insecurity.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Families from CEP-eligible but not participating schools were significantly more likely to report food insecurity compared to families from CEP-participating schools—2.8 times greater.
- ▶ This study found higher reported rates of school breakfast participation among CEP-eligible school respondents compared with CEP-participating school respondents.
- ▶ The CEP-participating schools offered free breakfast in the cafeteria before the start of the school day and the CEP-eligible schools all had a universal free breakfast in the classroom program, Maryland Meals for Achievement. Maryland Meals for Achievement has been reported to significantly increase breakfast participation as compared to traditional breakfast service in the cafeteria.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ CEP implementation may be an effective method to ease some of the negative impacts of food insecurity on children and families, including the adverse impacts on children's health, growth, development, and academic achievement.
- ▶ A possible mechanism by which CEP could reduce household food insecurity is by increasing student participation in school meals.
- ▶ For schools that are CEP-eligible but not participating, changing the way meals are served (e.g., breakfast in classrooms) can have a positive effect on food insecurity.

## HOW DOES A SCHOOL QUALIFY FOR CEP?

The CEP is available for schools or districts where at least 40 percent of the students are deemed eligible for free school meals. To determine this minimum percentage, the provision uses data from programs such as foster care, Head Start, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance, as well as data that addresses migrant status, homelessness, households receiving Medicaid or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

## ABOUT CLF

The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future is an interdisciplinary academic center based within the Bloomberg School of Public Health's Department of Environmental Health and Engineering and is a leader in public health research, education, policy and advocacy that is dedicated to building a healthier, more equitable and resilient food system.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

**Title:** Household Food Security Status of Families with Children Attending Schools that Participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and Those with Children Attending Schools that are CEP-Eligible, but Not Participating

**Authors:** Susan Michelle Gross, Tam Lynne Kelley, Marycatherine Augustyn, Michael J Wilson, Karen Bassarab & Anne Palmer

**Publication:** Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition,

**DOI:** 10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318

**Online:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318>

## FAST FACTS ABOUT HUNGER AND CEP IN THE US

- ▶ In 2018, 13.9% of all US households with children less than 18 years were food insecure.
- ▶ Some studies have established that participation in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs improve student's nutrition, wellness, and academic achievement.
- ▶ In the 2016-2017 school year, only 55% of eligible schools in the US were participating in CEP.
- ▶ School districts in urban areas were more likely to participate in CEP than school districts in rural areas.
- ▶ School districts in the Southeast were more likely to participate in CEP than school districts in the Northeast.

## BENEFITS OF CEP

- ▶ Reduced administrative costs for the school (through elimination of the processing of meal benefit applications)
- ▶ A simplified reimbursement structure for the school
- ▶ Increased school meal participation
- ▶ Reduced stigma associated with receiving free/reduced-price meals
- ▶ A study from Tennessee found that CEP reduced suspensions by about 10%.
- ▶ Some studies have suggested that CEP is associated with reduced absences, improved test scores, and positive effects on healthy weight gain.
- ▶ CEP may reduce the worry and anxiety that accompanies food insecurity.