



Investing In School Meals For All By Maximizing CEP

What is the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)?

The Community Eligibility Provision is a federally authorized option for schools to provide breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students without collecting school meal applications from families. CEP utilizes existing data and a set formula to determine the amount of federal funding schools receive for the meals served to students.

CEP is an effective approach to fight childhood hunger, mitigate stigma and shaming, prevent school meal debt, reduce burdens on families, and streamline program operation and administration. By increasing access to nutritious meals for children in under-resourced communities, CEP supports equitable access to health, well being, and opportunity.

Why should the State invest in maximizing CEP?

- At least 1 in 3 California schools that are eligible to operate CEP haven't implemented the option. Why? For many schools, the federal CEP funding formula — which does not account for California's high cost of living and high cost of program operation — makes CEP fiscally unattainable. A strategic investment of state dollars would allow more schools to offer meals free of charge to all students.
- Maximizing CEP for California public schools would draw up to \$1.1 billion in federal funding into our state to nourish students and support school meal programs.
- For every state dollar spent to maximize CEP, the federal government would contribute eight.

- Combining a state investment with available federal funding will help stabilize budgets for school nutrition programs, increasing the number of schools that operate CEP and preserving the progress that other schools have already made in serving meals free of charge to all students.
- Maximizing CEP is an equitable, scalable investment of state dollars. By targeting state funding to the schools and students who need it most, an investment in CEP will help more children in under-resourced communities get the nutritious meals they need to learn, grow, and achieve at their fullest potential.

Why does the State need to invest in CEP this year?

- The federal CEP funding formula is tied to enrollment in Medi-Cal and CalFresh. The pandemic has increased enrollment in both programs. Investing in CEP this year means schools can “lock in” federal funding rates that are based on currently elevated Medi-Cal and CalFresh enrollment. Those “locked in” rates would be applicable for up to four years of CEP operation.
- Since the spring of 2020, in response to the pandemic, time-limited federal waivers have allowed schools to offer meals free of charge to all children in their communities. While those waivers will continue through June 2022, schools can apply for CEP now to prepare for the inevitable expiration of COVID-driven program flexibilities.
- If California does not act now — well before the federal waivers expire — thousands of students in the state's hardest hit communities may suddenly be cut off from the nutritious meals they need to support health and learning. As state leaders craft decisions about an equitable recovery, they must address equitable access to nutrition programs.

Does maximizing CEP mean that only some kids will get meals free of charge?

- Maximizing CEP means more meals and more funding for the children and schools who need it the most.
- Maximizing CEP leverages an existing federal option and any future improvements to that option, such as those proposed in the American Families Plan.
- Maximizing CEP also increases the positive impacts of future federal programs modeled on Pandemic EBT, such as the Summer EBT program proposed in the American Families Plan. All children in schools operating CEP are eligible for federally funded P-EBT benefits.
- State leaders can invest in maximizing CEP and other strategies to reach California children with free school meals. Maximizing CEP is an equitable, scalable investment of state dollars to take the next step in ending childhood hunger in CA.

Additional Background

Schools should be a safe harbor where all children are nourished and able to thrive.

- Many schools in California want to serve meals free of charge to all students but find it financially impossible under the current funding framework.
- Unlike so many federally funded resources, school meal programs can serve children regardless of immigration status.
- School meals are a vital source of nutrition for children, and an important resource for families working to meet their most basic needs.
- Throughout the pandemic, children across our state have accessed meals free of charge from schools in their communities. Maximizing CEP would allow more students to continue benefiting from free meals at school.

True Poverty and Need in California

- Poverty levels look different in California than they do in other states. California's high cost of living — and a lack of sufficient wages — mean nationwide income criteria for free & reduced-price school meals do not accurately capture the level of need in our state. As a result of this “eligibility gap,” many students who would benefit from free meals at school can't access them.

- Children in a family of four that makes as little as \$34,450 a year (\$663 per week) don't qualify for free meals but may need them all the same.

Food Insecurity & Educational Equity

- No child in California should go hungry. Offering school meals free of charge to all students helps ensure that every child has the nutritious food they need to learn, grow, and achieve at their fullest potential.
- Nearly one in five California children live in poverty.¹
- California's child poverty rate would be even worse without essential public programs, including school nutrition programs.²
- When accounting for the cost of living and resources from several public programs, California has the worst child poverty rate in the nation.³
- Before COVID-19, at least two million California kids lived in households that struggled with food insecurity (limited, uncertain, or inconsistent access to the quality and quantity of food that is necessary to live a healthy life).⁴
- Pandemic-era data show nearly 75% of California parents with low and middle income have worried about running out of food before they could afford to buy more. The same research shows more than three in five California parents with low and middle income have actually run out of food before their families could afford to buy more.⁵
- The pandemic has exacerbated persistent inequities throughout California. Black and Latinx families and chronically under-resourced communities have borne the brunt of COVID's devastating health and economic consequences. To give all California kids a fair shot at living the lives they deserve, we must meet children's basic needs. We won't close gaps in opportunity, achievement, and health until every child is well nourished.⁶

¹ Annie E. Casey Foundation. Kids Count Data Center. Children in poverty according to the supplemental poverty measure in the United States. 2017-2019.

² Public Policy Institute of California. Poverty in California. July 2020.

³ Annie E. Casey Foundation. Kids Count Data Center. Children in poverty according to the supplemental poverty measure in the United States. 2017-2019.

⁴ Nourish California. Struggling to Make Ends Meet: Food Insecurity in California.

⁵ Fairbank, Maslin, Mullin, Metz & Associates. The Lives of Californians in 2020. Assets, Challenges, and the Effects of COVID-19.