



Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

CEP is a federal provision that allows high-poverty schools and districts to provide breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students. Schools use simplified processes to operate the programs: they do not process applications, track meals by fee category or collect fees; they simply count the total number of meals served.

Universal Free School Meals in New York

Beginning in the 2025-2026 school year, all New York schools participating in the federal school lunch or breakfast programs must provide school meals at no cost to all students.

The program ensures all meals are reimbursed at the free rate using a combination of federal and state funds.

Schools are required to operate CEP, if eligible. Schools not eligible for CEP must operate Provision 2. Both provisions simplify the administration of offering school meals at no cost to all.

Eligibility

Any school district, group of schools in a district, or individual school with 25 percent or more “identified students”—children eligible for free school meals who are identified by means other than a school meal application—can participate in CEP.

Identified students include:

- Children who are directly certified for free school meals because their household participates in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and in certain instances, Medicaid.
- Children who are certified for free school meals without an application because they are experiencing homelessness, are considered a runaway, certified as migrant, in foster care, or enrolled in Head Start.

CEP Benefits Students *and* Schools

- Reduces administrative burden: schools no longer collect fees or verify school meal applications
- Eliminates stigma: ends the perception that school breakfast and lunch are just for “poor kids”
- Boosts participation: allows more kids to experience the educational and health benefits linked to eating school meals
- Simplifies counting and claiming: helps schools reach more kids with Breakfast After the Bell
- Ensures efficiency of Universal Free School Meals: streamlines how meal programs run, making it easier to uphold program integrity



Increasing Identified Student Percentage (ISP)

Two strategies **required** under the Universal Free School Meals law can help schools boost their ISPs to qualify for and sustain CEP:

Implement Strong Direct Certification Practices

School districts are required to certify children eligible for free meals without an application at least three times per year. Accurately establishing economic need for students helps schools maximize their ISP. Learn about direct certification best practices from our **tip sheet**. (available at HungerSolutionsNY.org/CEP)

Connect Families to SNAP

Increasing the number of eligible families participating in SNAP increases schools' ISPs. As trusted messengers, schools can use our SNAP Outreach Toolkit to spread the word to families.

Applying for CEP

Eligible school districts must declare their intent to implement CEP in a school or group of schools for the upcoming school year by June 30. This requires applying to the New York State Education Department, Child Nutrition Program Administration.

Eligibility is based on the ISP calculated using April 1 enrollment and the current school year's direct certification data.

The application and instructions can be found at: cn.nysed.gov/content/CEP

We Can Help

Hunger Solutions New York works with schools, government leaders, and organizations to expand CEP and ensure strong program administration. We provide strategies, resources, data, and free, individualized assistance to help schools:

- Determine CEP eligibility and navigate the application and/or recertification process
- Understand CEP implementation and reimbursement
- Maximize the percentage of "Identified Students" with strategies like direct certification and SNAP outreach to families
- Connect with peers to share best practices and community partners to receive additional support
- Implement Breakfast After the Bell
- Promote the availability of Universal Free School Meals to students and families

For more information, visit HungerSolutionsNY.org/CEP or contact Francesca DiGiorgio at Francesca.DiGiorgio@HungerSolutionsNY.org

Our SNAP Outreach Toolkit for Schools



SNAP & School Meals
work together for families.

Sample language, graphics, and communication tools to help schools connect families to SNAP. →

