



Characteristics of School Districts Offering Free School Meals to All Students Through the Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Lunch Program

Stephanie Rogus, Joanne Guthrie, Katherine Ralston

What Is the Issue?

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the National School Lunch Program was established to increase access to school meals for children in low-income areas while reducing the burden associated with collecting household applications. The provision allows eligible schools to provide USDA school meals at no charge to all students in high-poverty schools. Eligibility to participate in the CEP is based on the percentage of students receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps) or other specific means-tested assistance—this is known as the Identified Student Percentage, or ISP. Schools are eligible to participate in CEP if the ISP for the school, group of schools, or district is at least 40 percent.

In schools that adopt CEP, USDA reimburses meals according to a formula based on the ISP. Any costs for serving these meals in excess of the Federal reimbursement must be paid by the district from non-Federal sources. The decision as to whether an eligible school participates in CEP is made at the district level. The share of participating districts has increased steadily from the first year of national implementation in 2014-15, with 47 percent of eligible districts and 55 percent of eligible schools participating in 2016-17. Examining the characteristics of districts nationwide that have chosen to participate in CEP will inform policymakers regarding program acceptance.

What Did the Study Find?

This report examined the characteristics of school districts electing to implement the CEP option in the second year of nationwide availability, school year 2015-16, by estimating unadjusted participation rates by school district characteristic and a multivariate logit model. Characteristics included the highest school-level ISP in the district; whether the district was urban, rural, suburban, or in a town; district size; region; and the year that CEP became available in the State during the phase-in period before school year 2014-15.

After adjusting for other factors, school districts were more likely to adopt CEP in at least one school if at least one school in the district had an ISP between 60 and 90 percent. This is consistent with incentives faced by districts under the meal reimbursement formula, since all school meals served would be reimbursed at the free rate if the ISP were 62.5 percent or more.

- This pattern was reversed for smaller districts with at least one school at 90 percent ISP or above. Districts under 20,000 students were significantly less likely to adopt CEP at this highest ISP category after accounting for other factors. Smaller, high-ISP districts

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may have less incentive to adopt CEP since almost all students are already directly certified and the remainder could be easily certified via application.

- The year CEP became available in the State was also a significant factor. School districts in States where CEP was available in 2011-12 or 2012-13 were significantly more likely to adopt CEP in at least one school, compared to districts in States where CEP was available in 2014-15, other factors equal.
- Districts in the Southeast were more likely to adopt the CEP (compared to the Northeast reference region) while suburban districts were less likely (compared to the rural reference category), after accounting for other factors.

How Was the Study Conducted?

The study estimated unadjusted CEP participation rates and a multivariate logit model to identify characteristics associated with the probability that at least one school in the district participated in the CEP option. The multivariate model included interactions between district size and ISP category to explore differences in associations with ISP for districts of different sizes. The sample included 5,148 school districts comprising the universe of districts that were eligible to participate in CEP from 47 States for which data were available.

Participation at the district level was defined as participation by at least one school in the district. Data on the participation decision for each district were obtained from district election data for September 2015 from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. Data on the highest school-level ISP for each school were obtained from reports posted (as required by law) by each State in May 2015. For seven States, ISP data were not available for 2015 and data for 2014 were used as an approximation for the 2015 value. Data on locale type and district size were matched from the Common Core of Data Public School Universe Survey for 2013 from the National Center for Education Statistics.