

School Meals Policy Division
Food and Nutrition Service
P.O. Box 9233
Reston, Virginia 20195

Re: Proposed Rule — Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision — Increasing Options for Schools

May 5, 2023

Dear School Meals Policy Division,

The Consortium of State School Boards Associations (COSSBA) is a non-partisan, national alliance dedicated to sharing resources and information to support, promote, and strengthen state school boards associations as they serve their local school districts and board members. We advocate for federal education policies impacting local school boards and public education aligned with our core values – including support for child nutrition and school meal programs. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Proposed Rule on Community Eligibility Provisions – Increasing Options for Schools.

Since first taking effect, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) has been instrumental in ensuring all students in eligible schools and school districts have access to the nutritious meals needed to grow and thrive. CEP increases school meal participation, helps eliminate and minimize stigma, reduces paperwork and administrative burdens, and streamlines food service operations, making it a win for students, families, and districts. More so, CEP is a proven strategy for reducing household food insecurity and combatting child hunger.

This new rule proposes to expand access to CEP by lowering the minimum identified student percentage participation threshold for program eligibility from 40 percent to 25 percent. In addition to the benefits mentioned above, this lower threshold would also give state governments and school districts greater flexibility to choose to invest non-Federal funds to offer no-cost meals to all enrolled students. Studies have shown that CEP schools experience significant student participation growth in their school meal programs. A USDA published CEP Characteristics Study from March 2022 found that CEP participation resulted in sustained increases in student participation in both the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

According to estimates from the Food Research Action Council, lowering the threshold could create an opportunity for an additional 9 million students to have access to free school meals and increase

operational efficiencies for 20,000 more schools. As such, COSSBA urges USDA to give states the option to implement the 25 percent threshold even if the new rule is finalized after the June 30th election deadline for annual CEP determinations. This will allow school districts to take advantage of the change in the upcoming 2023-2024 school year.

As our members know from experience and the USDA's own data shows, school districts spend more to produce a school meal than they receive in reimbursements. Any administrative savings generated by CEP allows school nutrition departments to combat rising food prices, improve the nutritional quality of meals served, expand nutrition education, and invest in operations that ensure long term financial viability.

COSSBA encourages the USDA to continue to explore every opportunity to make CEP financially viable for school districts, including the possibility of allowing states to operate CEP statewide. Thank you for your consideration of these comments during your deliberations.

Sincerely,

Ege Cordell
COSSBA Board President