

COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROGRAM



Good nutrition is the most essential school supply for Kansas students. Students who participate in school meals experience improved health outcomes, stronger academic performance, fewer absences, and fewer behavioral referrals. Children cannot learn on an empty stomach.

What is the Community Eligibility Provision?

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal option within the National School Lunch Program that allows high-poverty schools to serve breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge. CEP ensures every student has consistent access to nutritious meals so they can focus, learn, and thrive.

How CEP Works

Under the traditional model, families must complete free and reduced-price meal applications. CEP eliminates applications entirely.

Instead, eligibility is based on a school's Identified Student Percentage (ISP), which reflects the share of students who are directly certified for free meals through participation in programs such as SNAP, TANF, or Medicaid, or through categorical eligibility including foster care, homelessness, migrant status, or Head Start.

Direct certification is more accurate than paper applications and produces significantly lower error rates. School meal programs already operate with strong integrity, and CEP strengthens integrity further by relying on verified data.

Schools with an ISP of 25 percent or higher are to participate. Because ISP also determines the federal reimbursement formula, some eligible schools may determine participation is not financially feasible unless their ISP approaches 62.5 percent. CEP participation remains a local decision.

Benefits of CEP for Students and Schools

By reducing barriers to participation and stigma, CEP helps ensure students arrive at school ready to learn, supporting attendance, focus, and classroom engagement. Additional benefits include:

- Increases participation in school meal programs
- Reduces stigma by offering meals to all students regardless of income
- Strengthens program integrity through direct certification
- Eliminates most unpaid school meal debt
- Preserves local authority and flexibility
- Maximizes available federal reimbursements
- Provides budget stability for districts and families

CEP in Kansas Today

For the 2025–2026 school year:

- 192 school buildings across 53 school districts have adopted CEP
- Over 63,000 students are being served
- Participating communities include Independence, Parsons, Iola, Derby, Arkansas City, Atchison, Leavenworth, Manhattan, Pittsburg, Topeka, and Kansas City, Kansas

For more information, contact Haley Kottler, Senior Campaign Director, at hkottler@kansasappleseed.org.

CEP can be adopted at either the district level or individual school building level, allowing districts to choose what works best for their communities.

A Kansas-Specific Barrier to CEP Adoption

Kansas ties at-risk funding in the school finance formula closely to free and reduced-price meal eligibility, using meal application data as a proxy for student need. Because CEP eliminates traditional meal applications and instead relies on direct certification data, some districts worry that adopting CEP could complicate how student need is reflected in state funding calculations.

This creates a structural barrier that makes CEP harder to adopt in Kansas than in many other states, even when the program is a good fit for students and schools. As a result, some eligible districts delay or avoid CEP due to funding uncertainty, not because the program is ineffective.

Aligning state funding practices with direct certification data would remove this barrier and allow more Kansas schools to take advantage of CEP without fear of unintended consequences.

How HB 2637 Helps Kansas Students and Schools

HB 2637 strengthens access to the Community Eligibility Provision while preserving local decision-making. This legislation does not alter eligibility standards, verification requirements, or school finance formulas, and does not address audit findings related to free or reduced-price meal data; it focuses solely on ensuring eligible school boards consider CEP participation with transparency and local discretion.

HB 2637 includes:

- Requires school boards that are eligible for CEP to formally consider participation, ensuring districts do not miss a proven opportunity to support students
- Directs the Kansas State Department of Education to assist districts interested in CEP with technical guidance and implementation support
- Includes a financial hardship exception, recognizing that CEP may not be feasible for every eligible district
- Maintains local authority, allowing districts to decide what works best for their community

HB 2637 does not mandate CEP participation. It ensures eligible districts have the information, support, and transparency needed to make an informed decision that prioritizes student success.