

Community Eligibility



October 1, 2013

A Powerful Tool in the Fight Against Child Hunger

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“Community eligibility” is a powerful new tool that’s making it easier for low-income children in high-poverty schools to get free meals. Established in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the option allows schools that predominantly serve low-income children to offer nutritious meals to all students at no charge. Community eligibility schools have less paperwork to complete, which frees up resources to invest in improving meal quality and increases staff time for other educational priorities.

Access to free, healthy meals at school can reduce food insecurity for the nearly 16 million children living in households that have trouble affording enough nutritious food. In the first seven states that implemented community eligibility, more than 2,200 schools chose the option, resulting in nearly 1 million children attending a community eligibility school. Beginning with the 2014-2015 school year, all school districts nationwide that meet the criteria will be able to participate.

Community eligibility is making a profound difference for students and schools. In Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan, where school districts first implemented the option for the 2011-2012 school year, there was a striking increase in the number of students eating school breakfast and lunch. In schools that have been participating in community eligibility for two years, average daily lunch participation has risen by 13 percent. Average daily breakfast participation has increased by 25 percent.

Such participation increases underscore the impact of community eligibility and its ability to improve low-income children’s access to healthy meals at school. Community eligibility helps low-income families, high-poverty schools, and the school meals programs by:

- **Improving access to free school meals**, so parents can count on their children eating two healthy meals each day at school, helping to stretch families’ limited food budgets;
- **Eliminating school meal applications**, freeing up resources that schools can use to improve the quality of school meals and freeing up time that staff can devote to other important educational functions; and

- **Making school nutrition operations more efficient**, which strengthens school nutrition programs financially and enables schools to more easily implement alternative service models, such as breakfast in the classroom.

[Community Eligibility: Making High-Poverty Schools Hunger Free](#) provides detailed information on how community eligibility works, presents data on its impact, lists resources on best practices for implementing the option, and contains citations for the material in this piece.

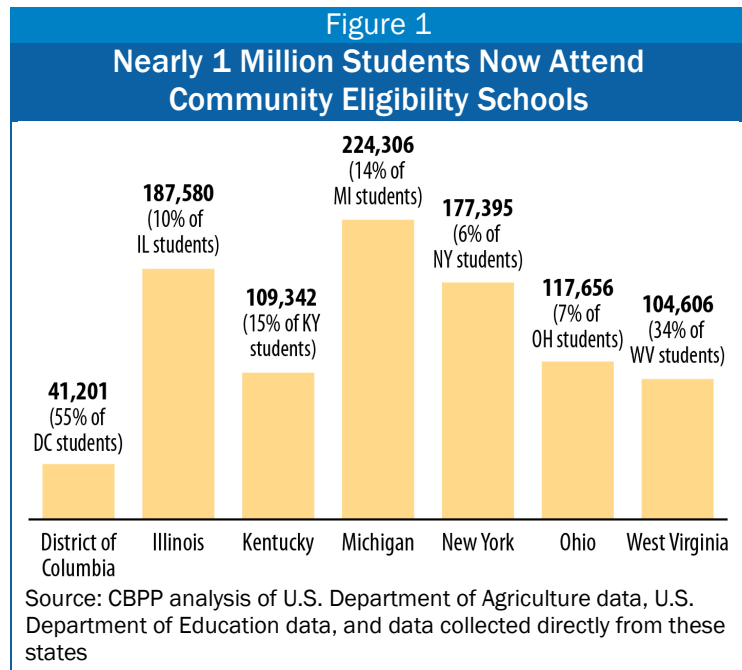
Community Eligibility Offers a Streamlined Alternative to the Typical School Meals Applications Process

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs are important education and health resources for schools, ensuring that students have access to healthy breakfasts to start the school day ready to learn and nutritious lunches to remain focused throughout the day. These programs are particularly important in schools that serve large numbers of children whose families are struggling to put food on the table.

Under the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, schools typically collect and process household applications to assign each child to one of the three income eligibility categories (free, reduced-price, and paid) that determine the federal reimbursement they receive for each meal served.

Community eligibility gives high-poverty schools a more sensible and streamlined alternative. Under the option, schools do not collect or process individual meal applications for each family or track children by income in the cafeteria. Instead, they serve all breakfasts and lunches at no charge and are reimbursed through a formula based on their number of students certified for free meals without an application because they have been identified as eligible for other need-based programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance.

Community eligibility is available to schools where 40 percent or more of the students are approved for free meals without an application. (Students approved without an application constitute only a portion of students certified for free or reduced-price meals because many certified students are approved based on an application.) In the year prior to implementing community eligibility, 82 percent of children at



participating schools in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan were approved for free or reduced-price meals.

Thousands of Schools Have Successfully Implemented Community Eligibility

Community eligibility has been available in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan since the start of the 2011-2012 school year. The District of Columbia, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia began offering the option for the 2012-2013 school year. Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and Massachusetts began offering the option in the 2013-2014 school year.

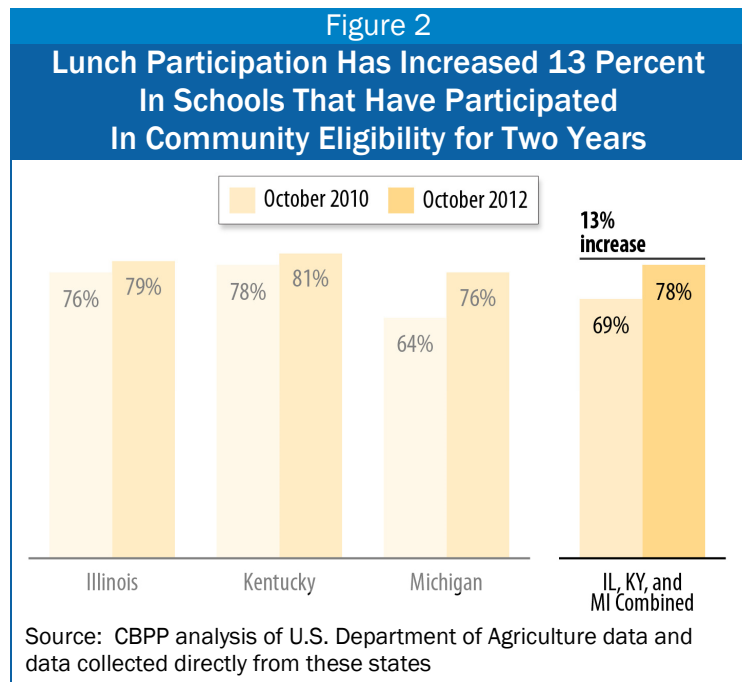
For the 2012-2013 school year, 2,273 schools in the seven implementing states, with enrollment of more than 960,000 students, served all meals free through community eligibility. About 10 percent of all students in these seven states attended community eligibility schools. (See Figure 1.)

In Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan, participation in community eligibility nearly doubled between the first and second years of implementation, from 665 schools serving approximately 285,000 students in the 2011-2012 school year to 1,240 schools serving about 520,000 students in the 2012-2013 school year. Across these three states, about two in five eligible schools now participate in community eligibility.

The share of students in these states participating in community eligibility jumped from about 7 percent to about 12 percent between the first and second years. The rapid growth likely resulted from school districts learning about the benefits of community eligibility from schools that had already implemented the option.

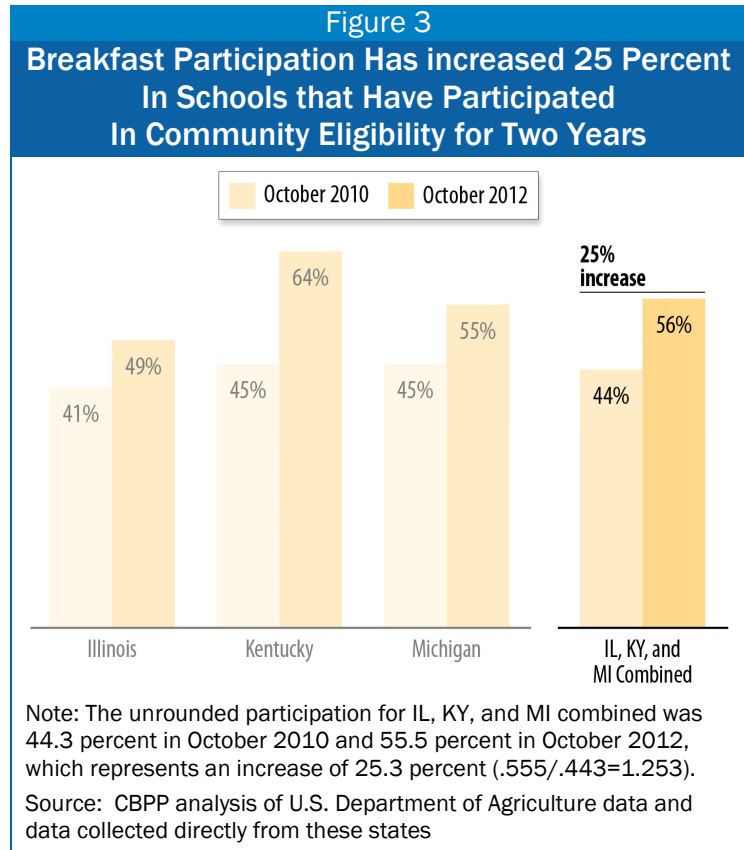
Community Eligibility Schools See Big Jumps in School Meal Participation

School meal participation in October 2012 was substantially higher in community eligibility schools than in other schools across Illinois, Kentucky and Michigan. Schools that implemented community eligibility had higher participation than other schools even before they implemented the option, but community eligibility expanded the difference. Lunch participation was 78 percent in community eligibility schools, compared to 53 percent participation in other schools. The contrast was even more striking for breakfast, where participation was nearly three times higher in community eligibility schools — 56 percent versus 20 percent in other schools.



And within schools that have adopted community eligibility, school meal participation has risen substantially since the start of the program. In schools that have been participating in community eligibility for two years, average daily lunch participation has risen by 13 percent, from 69 percent in October 2010 to 78 percent in October 2012. (See Figure 2.) Average daily breakfast participation is up by 25 percent, from 44 percent to 56 percent over the same period. (See Figure 3.)

Detroit Public Schools implemented community eligibility in the 2011-2012 school year, and the results show how the option can increase participation in both breakfast and lunch. Between October 2010 and October 2012, the number of students eating lunch rose by nearly 14,000 or 30 percent (from 55 percent to 71 percent). Breakfast participation rose by 7,400 students or 15 percent (from 49 percent, which is already unusually high for breakfast, to 56 percent). The district had implemented a district-wide “breakfast in the classroom” program in the 2009-2010 school year, so a high percentage of students already were participating in breakfast when community eligibility was introduced.



Community Eligibility Has Especially Boosted School Breakfast Participation

Many fewer students eat school breakfast each day than school lunch. The implementation of community eligibility goes a long way to address this shortfall. Offering breakfast free to all students, as well as eliminating the need to track each child’s participation by eligibility category, makes it easier for schools to implement strategies that are proven to increase participation, such as breakfast in the classroom, and “grab and go” kiosks in school hallways. Allowing students to eat in the classroom during the first ten minutes of class makes it convenient and accessible while helping families whose early morning schedules make it difficult to fit in breakfast at home. Also, it alleviates the problem of students missing breakfast in the cafeteria for any number of reasons, including school bus schedules or long school security lines.

For example, Floyd County, Kentucky, adopted breakfast in the classroom when it implemented community eligibility, offering all students a free meal in the first ten minutes of class time. The district chose breakfast in the classroom because community eligibility made it possible to offer that model district-wide, and officials knew that it would increase participation. As a result, breakfast participation doubled, with many students participating for the first time. The district achieved its highest attendance rate ever (95 percent), which staff attribute at least in part to the breakfast program. Moreover, community eligibility – coupled with breakfast in the classroom – has improved

the district's finances, enabling Floyd County to purchase new equipment to enhance food service, staff safety, and nutrition quality.

Community Eligibility in West Virginia

West Virginia implemented community eligibility under the leadership of the State Superintendent of Education, who prioritized child nutrition promotion as an important tool to improve both academic achievement and children's health. Department of Education staff and the Child Nutrition Director worked closely together to promote smooth implementation and widespread participation.

Out of 352 eligible schools, 282 adopted the option, with 35 out of the 54 eligible districts participating; 12 districts implemented community eligibility district-wide. More than 100,000 students – more than one in three students statewide – now attend community eligibility schools. According to the state's Child Nutrition Director, the challenges were minor compared to the significant benefits of community eligibility – higher school meal participation, reduced paperwork, improved administration, and elimination of identification of low-income students that can lead to stigma.

To improve student access, participation, and service, the state requires all community eligibility schools to implement at least one innovative breakfast strategy – breakfast after the bell, breakfast in the classroom, or “grab and go” breakfast. To child nutrition staff, providing breakfast after the start of the school day makes much more sense than trying to squeeze it in during the hectic time when students get off buses and try to get to class. Breakfast participation rose by 10 percent (from 47 percent to 52 percent daily) in schools that introduced community eligibility and the associated changes in meal delivery.

Conclusion

Community eligibility has been implemented successfully by thousands of high-poverty schools that have seized the opportunity to create hunger-free schools in low-income communities. The first two years of implementation show that community eligibility schools provide healthy meals to more children, with especially strong impacts on breakfast participation. This is a significant accomplishment as schools across the country are working to give students a healthy start to the day that helps children learn.

Community eligibility gives schools a cost-effective way to serve all breakfasts and lunches at no charge by allowing for economies of scale and simplifying program administration. When the option becomes available nationwide in the 2014-2015 school year, thousands more high-poverty schools will be able to take a concrete step toward reducing child hunger.