USDA Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Research Summary March 2022

USDA Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics Study, School Year 2016-2017 (Summary)

Background

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) was authorized by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. CEP allows high-poverty schools to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the Identified Student Percentage (ISP). The ISP is the percentage of students eligible for free meals through direct certification based on participation in another assistance program, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The ISP is multiplied by a prescribed factor to calculate the percent of meals claimed at the Federal-free reimbursement rate and the remaining meals are reimbursed at the Federal-paid reimbursement rate. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must cover any remaining costs outside of the Federal reimbursements with non-Federal funds. The ISP eligibility threshold was 40 percent and the factor was 1.6 in school year 2016-2017.

The initial Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation study was conducted in February 2014[1] with States that implemented CEP during the phase-in period. This Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics study is the first comprehensive study since CEP became available nationwide in SY 2014-2015. The study was designed to provide the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) with information about the impact of CEP. The study included both an implementation and impact component. The implementation study component described the characteristics of eligible, participating, and non-participating LEAs and collected information from State Agencies (SAs) and LEAs on challenges and barriers to CEP participation. The impact study component assessed the impact of CEP on student participation in and Federal reimbursements for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP).

Key Findings

- CEP participation increased both student school meal participation and level of Federal reimbursements.
- Seventy-six percent of LEAs participating in CEP elected to participate LEA-wide.
- The LEA-wide ISP was the most important perceived factor in CEP election.
- Eligible, non-participating LEAs indicated that CEP would be more appealing if the factor used to determine meal reimbursement levels were increased.
- Financial concerns were the largest barrier to CEP participation for LEAs with lower ISPs.

Methods

The study design included implementation and impact study components. The implementation study used nationwide administrative data to examine the characteristics of eligible and participating LEAs and schools in SY 2016-2017. Additionally, information on CEP implementation was collected from web-based surveys with representative samples of participating and non-participating LEAs and a census of SAs.

The impact study collected and analyzed State administrative data on outcomes for a matched comparison sample of participating and non-participating but eligible LEAs from 12 States. The perceived impact data were collected from web-based surveys administered to participating and non-participating LEAs.

[1] Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation | Food and Nutrition Service (usda.gov)

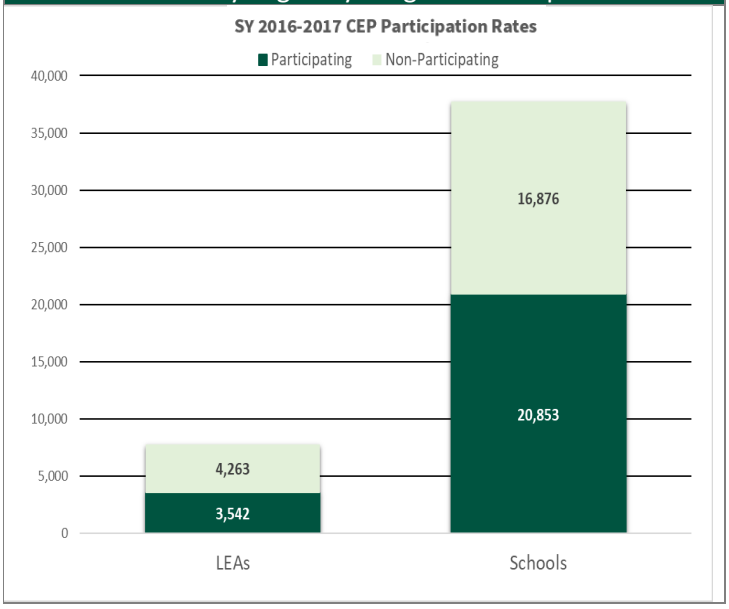
Characteristics, Eligibility, and Participation Findings

Almost 60 percent of LEAs located in urban areas participated in CEP compared to 42 percent of LEAs in rural areas. LEAs with only one school participated at higher rates, as did very large LEAs with at least 25,000 students enrolled, compared to medium and large LEAs. Seventy-six percent of LEAs with at least one eligible school participated in CEP LEA-wide.

The most important factor in explaining differences in LEA participation rates was the LEA-wide ISP. A 10-percentage point increase in the ISP (e.g., increasing from 45 percent to 55 percent) was associated with an increase in CEP participation rate of 17 percentage points when all other LEA characteristics were held constant.

CEP participation for eligible LEAs and schools steadily increased from SY 2014-2015 to SY 2016-2017; the number of LEAs with at least one school participating increased by 10 percentage points, to 45 percent. School participation increased by 9 percentage points during this period; 55 percent of all eligible schools participated in CEP during SY 2016-2017.

Community Eligibility Program Participation



SY=School Year; LEA= Local Education Agencies

Implementation Study Results

Participating LEAs reported multiple perceived benefits of CEP participation. The most frequently reported benefits of CEP participation included increased student participation, decreased financial burden on families, elimination of unpaid meal charges, reduced administrative burden, decrease in stigma for students in need, and increased revenue.

Fifty-two percent of participating LEAs reported no challenges to CEP implementation. Of the LEAs reporting CEP implementation issues, increased meal participation strained the meal service capacity and a negative impact on funding for education programs were two of the most reported challenges.

Fifty-one percent of eligible, non-participating LEAs indicated that CEP would be more appealing if the factor used for meal reimbursement levels increased. Financial concerns about Federal reimbursement levels and other Federal funding streams were the largest expected barriers to CEP participation.

Impact Study Findings

CEP increased NSLP participation rates by 6.8 percent and increased SBP participation rates by 12.1 percent, compared to similar eligible LEAs that did not adopt CEP. Similar to the findings in the first program evaluation, CEP implementation significantly increased the number of students participating in school meal programs. These participation increases were sustained beyond the first year of CEP implementation.

CEP increased the Federal reimbursement level received by LEAs for both NSLP and SBP due to a higher percentage of meals claimed at the Federal free rate. Federal reimbursements per NSLP lunch and SBP breakfast were 9 cents and 2 cents higher, respectively, in the first year of CEP implementation relative to similar LEAs that did not adopt CEP.

Impacts Perceived by Participating LEAs

Average daily attendance increased. Food Service Directors for CEP participating LEAs were 16 percent more likely to report an increase in average daily school meal attendance relative to non-participating LEAs. Fifty-eight percent reported CEP was a factor in the change in school meal attendance.

Balancing food service revenues and costs was easier. LEAs participating in CEP were significantly more likely to report it was easier for the food service accounts to break even than non-participating LEAs (43 percent versus 12 percent). Breaking even was defined as having revenues, from all sources, at least equal to costs. Seventy-nine percent of participating LEAs cited the increase in revenues from Federal reimbursements as the primary factor in making it easier to break even.

For More Information:

For More Information: Murdoch, J., Nisar, H., Wallace-Williams, D., Vachon, M., Enver, A., Logan, C. W., Villarreal, M. (2022). Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics Study. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.

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