

# Community Eligibility Works in Montana

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## What is Community Eligibility?

- The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows high need schools to serve both breakfast and lunch at no cost to the entire student population.
- Because all students can eat free of charge, CEP reduces stigma and makes meals more accessible to all students.
- The elimination of free and reduced price meal applications benefits both families and schools.
  - Families don't need to fill out yet another form, and children do not lose out if their families do not return the needed paperwork.
  - CEP greatly reduces administrative burden for schools, as they no longer need to print applications, ensure that they are provided to all families, process the completed applications, and track school meal balances throughout the school year.

## How Does Community Eligibility Work?

- To qualify for CEP, schools are required to have at least 40% of their student body enrolled in free or reduced price school meals through their participation in another means-tested program such as SNAP.
  - These students are enrolled in free school meals automatically (through direct certification) and are referred to as "Identified Students".
- Schools meeting this 40% or higher threshold have the option of participating in CEP.
- Schools meeting the 40% threshold are high need schools, and typically have a two-thirds or more of their student body approved for free or reduced price school meals.
- Schools receive reimbursements for meals based on their percentage of Identified Students.

## Community Eligibility Supports School Breakfast

- Research demonstrates that eating breakfast improves attendance, math and reading scores, student behavior, and student health.
  - Despite the importance of School Breakfast, just 1 in 3 students enrolled in free or reduced price meals in Montana participates.
- After implementing CEP for the first time in school year 14-15, School Breakfast participation increased by 7.2% in Montana.
  - Breakfast participation in non-CEP increased only 1.1%, while CEP schools increased by 25.4%.
- CEP makes it easier for schools to develop breakfast programs that meet kids' needs such as Breakfast in the Classroom or other after the bell models.

## House CNR Impact on Community Eligibility in Montana:

- Montana has led the nation in CEP enrollment among eligible schools, with over 80% of eligible school districts adopting the provision the first year.
- Montana currently has 127 schools participating in CEP, serving over 21,000 students.
  - Feedback from these schools has been overwhelmingly positive.
- Under the House CNR proposal, more than half of these schools would be forced to reinstate applications and monitor individual eligibility, a burden on both families and schools.
  - More than 15,000 Montana students are attending schools that would no longer be eligible for CEP under the House proposal.