



Community Eligibility Option (CEO) in Maryland

What is CEO?

The Community Eligibility Option (CEO) is the newest tool for schools with high percentages of low-income students to provide meals at no charge to all students. Schools that take advantage of the Community Eligibility Option do not collect school meal benefit applications. Instead, the school's reimbursement is calculated from a formula that is based on the number of students that are directly certified; meaning they are certified for free school meals because they live in a household that receives SNAP/Food Stamps, TANF cash assistance, are in foster care, Head Start, are migrants, or are experiencing homelessness. Community Eligibility is available in all schools or in groups of schools where 40 percent or more of the students meet this definition. The federal reimbursements are determined by multiplying the percentage of directly certified students (referred to as Identified Students), by a 1.6 multiplier. The resulting number is the percentage of meals reimbursed at the "free" reimbursement rate, with the remainder of the meals being reimbursed at the "paid" rate.

Maryland and CEO

Maryland was selected by the USDA to pilot CEO in the 2013-2014 school year (along with Florida, Georgia and Massachusetts). Maryland's application included Baltimore City Public Schools, Washington County Public Schools, and The Seed School of Maryland as eligible local education agencies (LEAs) for the 2013-2014 pilot year. Maryland and the three other states join Kentucky, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, New York and Washington DC who have already implemented CEO in many of their school districts. During the 2014-2015 school year, the option to implement CEO will be open nationwide to any school or group of schools that meet(s) the 40 percent Identified Student threshold.

Benefits of CEO

- All students may receive breakfast and lunch at no charge to their households.
- The stigma associated with participation in the "free meal program" is eliminated.
- CEO participating pilot schools have seen significant increases in breakfast and lunch participation.
- Paperwork for schools and families is drastically reduced. Families no longer need to complete applications for free and reduced-price meals, and schools no longer have to certify or keep an accounting of individual student eligibility.
- School meal service is streamlined. Food Service staff members do not collect payments or do individual student counting and claiming. They simply count total meals served and assure that each student only receives one reimbursable meal at the point of service.
- Universal (free) meals make it easier for schools to implement alternative meal service such as "grab and go", breakfast in the classroom, and second chance breakfast.
- CEO can bring in more funding, particularly for local education agencies and schools with high percentages of identified students, as all meals are reimbursed at the full "free" federal reimbursement level.
- As more students participate, CEO helps reduce hunger and food insecurity and improve the nutrition of students. Several districts that have implemented CEO have also reported being able to improve the nutritional quality of school meals and buy healthier foods – such as more fresh fruits and vegetables – due to the increase in federal funding.