

# *OSPI Child Nutrition Services Frequently Asked Questions*

## **School Meals Program Operation and Community Eligibility Provision**

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas. The CEP allows high poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without the burden of collecting household applications. This alternative saves Local Education Agencies (LEAs) time and money by streamlining paperwork and administrative requirements and facilitates children's access to nutritious school meals.

### **CEP Operational Steps**

1. Notify households about CEP operation and the availability of breakfast and lunch at no cost.
2. Ensure that an accurate meal counting system is in place that includes safeguards to prevent second meals from being counted and claimed.
3. Connect with the department in charge of distributing the Family Income Survey and share resources provided on the [Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\) and Provision 2 webpage](#) and [CEP and Title I, Part A webpage](#).
4. Serve all students at participating school(s) breakfast and lunch at no cost for the four-year cycle.

*Note:* The Family Income Survey is not a school meal application and the costs associated with collecting household income information in CEP schools may not be charged to the nonprofit school food service account (NSFSA).

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **1. What type of household notification is required when operating CEP?**

- a. LEAs participating in CEP should use their usual channels of communication with media and households to notify the community that school meals, both breakfast and lunch, will be available at no charge to all students enrolled at CEP schools.
- b. Clear, consistent communication is also very important in districts where some, but not all schools, operate CEP (e.g., the elementary school in the district operates CEP and the middle school does not). A combination of outreach strategies is typically best to ensure all households are aware of CEP and its many benefits. Successful communication strategies include:
  - i. Placing CEP notifications prominently on websites and in any "back-to-school" packets,
  - ii. Sending email notifications to households,



- iii. Holding information sessions for families,
- iv. Providing CEP information at school board meetings and “back-to-school” nights.

Resource: [Letter to Households in CEP Schools](#)

## 2. What are the requirements for meal counting and claiming when operating CEP?

- a. During meal service, schools are required to keep accurate meal counts and maintain a Point of Service (POS) system that ensures federal reimbursements are claimed only once for each student served a reimbursable meal [[7 CFR 220.9\(a\)](#)]. Schools may not claim reimbursement for additional meals served to students, or for meals that do not meet the meal pattern requirements. To meet these requirements:
  - i. Count reimbursable meals at the point at which a student receives a meal.
  - ii. Do not collect school meal applications from households.
  - iii. Have a system in place that accurately consolidates meal counts prior to submitting monthly reimbursement claims.
- b. Meals must be claimed at the site where the student is enrolled

Resource: [Point of Service Meal Counting Reference Sheet](#)

## 3. Are CEP sites required to conduct meal count edit checks?

Participation in CEP does not change the requirement to conduct meal count edit checks. CEP schools must compare their daily meal counts against the number of children in the school currently eligible times an attendance factor ([7 CFR 210.8\(a\)\(3\)](#)). Like non-CEP schools, schools must provide documentation to demonstrate why the edit check was exceeded (e.g., visiting students), or corrective action may be required.

## 4. How often does Direct Certification need to be run when operating CEP?

Participation in CEP does not change the requirement to conduct Direct Certification. Direct Certification is required to be conducted on a monthly basis per the Hunger-Free Students Bill of Rights, passed in the 2018 legislative session. [RCW 28A.235](#) and [RCW 28A.300](#) supersedes USDA requirements of conducting direct certification a minimum of three times per year per [7 CFR 245.6\(b\)](#).

Resources: [Direct Certification Reference Sheet](#); [Direct Certification-Medicaid Reference Sheet](#)

## 5. Is Verification conducted when operating CEP?

No. Because applications are not collected, LEAs are exempt from verification for the schools electing CEP. LEAs with some, but not all schools electing CEP must conduct verification in schools operating standard counting and claiming. All LEAs must complete and submit the annual Verification Summary Report to the State Agency by February 1.

Resource: [Verification Summary Report - CEP/Provision 2 District-Wide and RCCIs](#)

**6. How is October Building Data reported for CEP schools?**

Total enrollment as of the last operating day in October should be submitted. WINS will calculate the number of students eligible for free and paid meals using the school’s approved claiming percentages.

Resource: [October Building Data Reference Sheet](#)

**7. Is the Paid Lunch Equity Tool required for sites operating CEP?**

No, the PLE Tool is not required as all meals are served to students at no cost. However, in partial-CEP districts, CEP schools are not factored into the calculation for the average weighted price for the PLE requirement.

Resource: [SP 39-2011 \(Revised\) Child Nutrition Reauthorization 2010: Guidance on PLE and Revenue from Nonprogram Foods](#)

**8. Can CEP sites sell ala carte items or second meals?**

Yes. If a student selects a non-reimbursable meal (i.e., the student refuses to select the components required for a reimbursable meal) the school may charge the student for the food components a la carte. The school may not claim a non-reimbursable meal for reimbursement.

**9. How are “second meals” priced for ala carte sales?**

The price for a second meals should cover the cost of producing the meal. This can be calculated by determining the average cost of providing the meal or by charging at least the equivalent of the free meal reimbursement plus the performance-based reimbursement.

Resource: [OSPI CNS Claims and Fiscal Information webpage](#)

**10. Is a “Consent to Share Meal Eligibility” form required when operating CEP?**

“Consent to Share” forms are required to share eligibility information. Any student that has been Directly Certified for free or reduced-price school meals or has a Family Income Survey on file that meets the income guidelines of the free and reduced-price meal application are considered eligible for these fee removals.

Resource: [Implementing HB 1660 \(2020\): Consent to Share Information Reference Sheet](#)

**11. How does CEP operation affect Title I Funding?**

Participating in CEP will not affect the total amount of Title I funds that a state or district receives. Title I, Part A funds are primarily allocated based on Census Bureau poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state. However, CEP participation can affect how Title I, Part A funds are allocated to each Title I, Part A *school building*, as districts typically use Child Nutrition Programs free and reduced-price meal percentages to distribute Title I, Part A funds among schools.

## 12. How does CEP operation affect E-Rate?

The federal E-Rate program provides discounts for telecommunication and information services to school districts. In general, the E-Rate program uses Free and Reduced-Price percentage data to determine a district's discount. CEP schools use their Identified Student Percentage (ISP) multiplied by the CEP multiplier (1.6) for purposes of determining the number of free and reduced-price students.

Additionally, E-Rate discounts remain valid for the entire four-year CEP cycle. If a school's ISP decreases in subsequent years, the school may continue to use the original ISP for the remainder of the four-year period. OSPI calculates this automatically and publishes the results on [OSPI's E-Rate webpage](#).

## 13. How does CEP operations affect LAP Funding?

The Learning Assistance Program (LAP) provides supplemental state funding for instruction and services to students who are not yet meeting academic standards in basic skills areas. There are two parts to LAP; LAP Base which provides funding to districts and LAP High Poverty which provides funding directly to high-needs schools.

House Bill 2660 (2022) introduced alternative calculations for LAP funding for schools and districts operating CEP. LAP funding for standard schools (non-CEP) is calculated based on prior-year percentage of students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price meals. As CEP schools don't collect meal applications the Family Income Survey is used in place for this data collection.

For CEP schools, [RCW 28A.150.260\(10\)\(a\)](#) now allows an alternative calculation where OSPI will use the greater Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Percentage (F/RP%) from two data sources. Either:

1. The District F/RP% from the previous year (standard method), or
2. The District F/RP% from the year immediately preceding the district's enrollment, in whole or in part, in CEP.

HB 2660 (2020) modified calculations similarly for LAP High Poverty. Schools that were eligible for LAP High Poverty in the year immediately before CEP now maintain this eligibility as long as the school remains on CEP even if their annual F/RP% drops below the threshold.

## 14. What is the Family Income Survey?

Since schools participating in CEP are no longer required to collect the free and reduced-price USDA applications for income data, OSPI provides a Family Income Survey, translated into multiple languages, for you to use in order to collect this data for other purposes. These surveys have been updated with 2022–23 USDA income guidelines. Without this income data, the loss of E-rate, Learning Assistance Program (LAP), and other state funding could be significant.

Resources: [Family Income Survey](#) ; [Family Income Survey – Tools; Letter Templates and Promotion Best Practices](#)

### **15. Is household notification required to share the results of the Family Income Survey?**

No, it is a local level decision whether to notify households of the results of the Family Income Survey (FIS). With the potential for households to receive reduced fees through HB 1660, it may be beneficial to provide households with a notification of the results. If a district chooses to draft a letter template for this purpose, the letter should not reference the USDA Child Nutrition Programs as the FIS is not used for CNP programs. Please note that households are still required to be notified of their eligibility through Direct Certification or Direct Certification-Medicaid.

Resources: [Notice of Eligibility for Reduced Fees – Family Income Survey Template Letter](#); [Notice of Eligibility for Reduced Fees – Direct Certification Template Letter](#)

### **16. What district department is responsible for distributing and approving the Family Income Survey?**

The family income survey must be funded by non-school meal program funds. [7 CFR 245.9 \(f\)\(4\)\(iv\)](#)

Resources: [Family Income Survey – Instructions and Best Practices](#) ; [Family Income Survey Timeline](#)

### **17. How long should CEP documentation be retained?**

LEAs and schools must maintain source documentation used to develop the Identified Student Percentage (ISP) for the entire period they are operating under CEP and for three years after submission of the final Claim for Reimbursement for the last fiscal year of the CEP period. Source documentation includes direct certification lists and/or other lists certifying students are categorically eligible for free school meals, such as lists of students who are designated as homeless or migrant.

## Reference

- ✓ [Final Rule: NSLP and SBP - Eliminating Applications Through Community Eligibility as Required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#)
- ✓ [SP 54- 2016: Community Eligibility Provision: Guidance and Updated Q&As](#)
- ✓ [USDA Community Eligibility webpage](#)

## Resources

- ✓ [B036-22: SY 2022–23 State Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\) Requirements](#)
- ✓ [OSPI CNS Community Eligibility Provision webpage](#)
- ✓ [OSPI Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\) and Title I, Part A webpage](#)