



## Eliminate the Reduced Price category (ERP)

Research shows school meals support academic achievement, obesity prevention and overall student health and well-being by improving children's diets and combatting hunger. In an effort to ensure all students have access to the nutrition they need to succeed, Congress provides free or reduced price school meals to income eligible families.

Students [qualify](#) for reduced price school meals if their families earn between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level (between \$33,475 and \$47,638 for a family of four in School Year 2019/20).

*Unfortunately, many of these students go hungry during the school day when their families cannot afford the reduced price co-pay.*

**More than 936,000 students approved for reduced price school lunches did not receive them on the average school day in Fiscal Year 2019, according to an analysis using USDA administrative data.** <sup>1</sup>

These children already face an increased risk of food insecurity, when "access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources." Among U.S. households with children, 31 percent of those earning less than 185 percent of the poverty level (the threshold for reduced price meal eligibility) were food insecure ([Household Food Security in the United States in 2018](#)).

For families with multiple school-aged children who are struggling to make ends meet, the 30 cents per breakfast and 40 cents per lunch reduced price co-pay can quickly add up, forcing parents to make tough decisions about whether their children will receive nutritious school meals. By providing free meals to reduced price eligible students, Congress can ensure vulnerable students in these food insecure homes do not go hungry during the school day. Eliminating the Reduced Price category (ERP) will bring the free school meal income eligibility limits in line with those of the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, ensuring needy children have consistent access to well-balanced school meals.

ERP will also reduce growing unpaid meal debt for schools that serve students who are unable to pay for their meals. SNA's [2019 School Nutrition Trends Report](#) found that 75% of responding school districts had unpaid student meal debt at the end of the 2017/18 school year and the median amount of debt reported by districts has increased substantially.

Instead of investing time and resources into collecting co-payments from reduced price eligible students and ensuring delinquent accounts are repaid, school nutrition staff can focus on serving students and improving school menus. Furthermore, ERP will help streamline administrative counting, claiming and meal eligibility procedures for overburdened school nutrition staff.

<sup>1</sup> This figure does not include students attending schools that participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP schools serve meals at no charge to all students without an application. Meals served are claimed in either the free or paid categories; CEP schools do not track reduced price eligibility.