



# 2025 Position Paper:

## *Protect CEP; Expand Access to School Meals*

School meals are [proven](#) to support academic achievement, reduce absenteeism and improve students' attention and behavior in the classroom. Since school meals are the [healthiest meals](#) America's children eat, these programs are also critical asset in chronic disease prevention. **Ensuring every student has access to free, nutritious school meals as part of their education is a smart investment in the health and future of our nation's children.**

The federal Community Eligibility Provision ([CEP](#)) allows schools in high-poverty areas to offer free school breakfast and lunch to all students without cumbersome applications. CEP ensures *every* student is nourished and ready to learn and **eliminates stigma** and **student lunch debt**. School nutrition professionals have more time to focus on nourishing students, without having to worry about verifying which child is [eligible](#) for a free meal and which child must pay. SNA is urging Congress to reject [proposed cuts](#) to CEP which would push more than 24,000 schools serving 12 million students off the program.

A recent [SNA survey](#) found that **school districts that must charge for meals report a wide range of challenges:**

- unpaid school meal charges/debt (cited by 96.8%)
- families in need not receiving free or reduced-price meals (89.3%)
- paperwork/administrative burden (88.7%)
- students going hungry/choosing not to eat (73.5%)

*Protecting CEP and expanding access to healthy school meals for all students will address these challenges and support millions of America's working families burdened by high food prices and inflation.* SNA supports federal and state proposals to advance this goal, including:

- **Increase the CEP multiplier:** Under [CEP's funding formula](#), the program is only financially viable for schools with high percentages of students who automatically qualify for free meals because their families participate in federal income-based programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Increasing the multiplier will enable more schools to participate, allowing more students to benefit from healthy school meals.
- **Eliminate the reduced-price category:** Many families [eligible](#) for reduced-price meals struggle to afford the co-pay. Allowing these families to receive free meals will ensure at-risk students can receive healthy school meals, without incurring unpaid meal debt.
- **Raise the free meal eligibility threshold:** In School Year 2024/25, a family of four earning a dollar more than \$57,720 is ineligible for any meal assistance. Since free and reduced-price meal applications only collect income data, even those struggling with high health care costs, rent increases or emergency expenses would not qualify.

**[SNA's 2025 Position Paper](#) urges Congress to protect CEP and expand access to healthy school meals for all students.**