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Universal free school lunches ended, but some Kansas schools see a way to keep food coming



By Rafael Garcia

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After the end of a pandemic waiver that allowed all children in the U.S. to eat free school lunches, many Kansas schools are finding a way to keep feeding all of their students — all for free.

For years, relatively few Kansas schools had used a special provision under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program that allows them to

recoup most or all of the cost of offering free meals at their schools.

Obstacles in fully funding those programs and meeting high enough poverty rates kept many schools from using the provision.

But following the widespread popularity and difference that two years of universally free school meals made during the pandemic, Kansas will see a nearly five-fold increase in the number of school sites using the provision to keep universally free lunches for their students.

Nearly 150 Kansas school sites across 35 sponsoring districts and organizations will use the USDA's Community Eligibility Provision this coming school year, compared to just 33 sites across six sponsors this past year, according to data shared by the Kansas State Department of Education.

"One in seven Kansas kids currently faces food insecurity, so this will make a huge difference in their lives," said Haley Kottler, campaign director at Kansas Appleseed. The nonpartisan nonprofit works to help communities thrive, including by supporting anti-hunger initiatives, which Kottler oversees.

How Kansas schools use Community Eligibility Provision to provide free lunches

Under the USDA's Community Eligibility Provision, schools with high percentages of low-income students can choose to apply just once for CEP status, allowing them to receive reimbursement for most, if not all, of the cost to feed the schools' students.

Schools track their Identified Student Percentage, or the portion of students who come from low-income families.

Crucially, schools can calculate this number using other measures of poverty — such as family participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families — and not just the number of free and reduced-price lunch students.

Once a school has an Identified Student Percentage above 40%, they can apply for and receive CEP status, which allows them to receive meal reimbursement at a rate of their ISP multiplied by 1.6.

Kansas had been close to last in free universal school lunch participation

Although hundreds of Kansas schools had been eligible for CEP status before the pandemic, only a handful had their ISP at or above 62.5% — the point at which schools could be reimbursed for 100% of meal costs, using the multiplier.

That likely kept most of them from applying for status, Kottler said, since otherwise, school leaders would have had to subsidize universal free meals at their sites with other education dollars.

“Kansas, historically, has been close to last in CEP participation, due to a lot of factors,” Kottler said.

“There’s not been a lot of awareness of the program, and there have also been a lot of barriers for schools to make it happen — a lot of hoops for them to jump through,” she said. “Additionally, a lot of financial restraints have been a barrier.”

After the pandemic, though, those barriers must have seemed less imposing as districts saw growing need and hunger in their communities, Kottler said.

“Folks are struggling, and I think school districts are seeing that food insecurity is a large and pervasive issue in their districts,” Kottler said. “If kids are hungry, they can’t learn, they can’t succeed, and they can’t thrive. This has really been an effort to combat hunger in communities.”

Direct certification through Medicaid helped Kansas schools identify food insecurity levels

Combined with a measure that [allows districts to use Medicaid participation](#) in determining their eligibility rates, more Kansas schools saw their ISPs rise to rates that made sense for CEP participation.

“You look at Kansas, and there hadn’t been a lot of schools that had been at that level until this year, when they were able to add direct certification with Medicare,” said Cheryl Johnson, director of child nutrition at the Kansas State Department of Education. “We’ve reached more families with direct certification, and those numbers have increased. That’s why the Identified Student Percentage is up, and it’s why we have more school districts considering CEP.”

Additionally, many school districts likely shied away from using a program that could discourage families from completing either the free- and reduced-price lunch applications, or any similar substitute application asking about families' household income.

Kansas' school funding formula heavily relies on that data, and drops in families' response rates could lead to drops in school funding.

"Even though a household economic survey can be used to gather that information for CEP, school districts have found that families are not as excited or willing to fill that in when there isn't a free meal tied to it," Johnson said. "That can result, in those cases, school districts losing funding for those at-risk students."

At any rate, for the new wave of schools applying for and receiving CEP status, they are able to lock in free meals for four years.

"It's not a one-and-done deal," Johnson said. "They know they can tell their families to expect these benefits for four years."

Rafael Garcia is an education reporter for the Topeka Capital-Journal. He can be reached at rgarcia@cjonline.com or by phone at 785-289-5325.

Follow him on Twitter at @byRafaelGarcia.

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