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Meals Matter: The Community Eligibility Provision and Student Success in North Carolina

This brief describes the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and looks at differences in student outcomes between schools with similar income levels that do and don't participate in CEP. Key points from this brief:

- › The CEP allows schools with many low-income students to offer free meals for *all* students.
- › Offering free meals for all students reduces administrative burdens, increases the total number of meals served, and may change the dynamics of meals in schools.
- › Schools across the state participate in CEP. The highest rates of participation are among the schools with the most low-income students.
- › Many schools are eligible for CEP but don't participate in the program, often because it is too expensive for them to participate.
- › Schools participating in CEP in our sample are more likely to have met growth targets and to have a higher performance grade compared to schools with similar income levels that don't participate.
- › Schools participating in CEP in our sample have higher academic performance on average compared to schools with similar income levels that don't participate.

What is the Community Eligibility Provision?

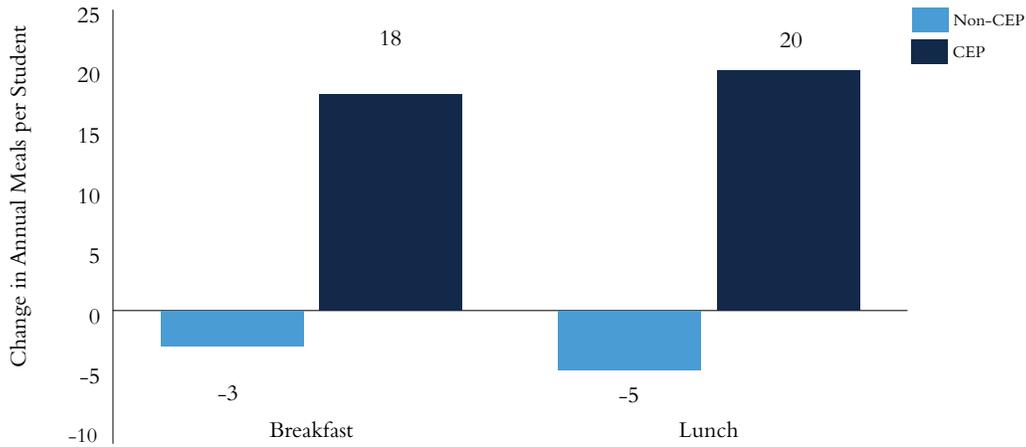
The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program have long provided free or reduced-price meals for students from low-income families. In both programs, subsidized meals are provided to children from low-income households based on annual applications to participate. Starting

in the 2014–15 school year in North Carolina, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows high-poverty schools to provide free meals to *all* students. School eligibility for CEP is determined by an Identified Student Percentage (ISP)¹ of 40% or higher which equates to at least 65 to 70% of students being eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under traditional rules. Schools may also participate in CEP as part of an eligible district or group of schools within a district.²

¹ ISP represents the percent of students who are automatically certified to receive subsidized meals through participation in other social welfare programs (e.g. the supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP) or temporary aid for needy families (TANF)), through foster care, or through a small number of other qualifications.

² District eligibility is also based on a 40% ISP threshold. Districts may choose to have a group of schools participate in CEP if the group overall meets the 40% ISP threshold.

Figure 1. Change in Meals per Student in CEP Eligible Schools in First Year of CEP in NC



Note: This figure shows the change in average number of meals served per student between 2013–14 and 2014–15 for schools that were eligible for and participated in CEP and schools that were eligible but did not participate.

School CEP participation provides an opportunity for more students to access nutritious meals, which may better equip them to learn and achieve academically. Figure 1 shows the change in the average number of meals per student in the first year that CEP was introduced in North Carolina. For schools that chose to participate in CEP, the number of breakfasts served during the school year rose by 18 per student and the number of lunches served during the school year rose by 20 per student on average. For schools that were eligible for CEP but chose not to participate, the average number of meals per student during the school year fell slightly for both breakfast and lunch.

In addition to making meals available to more students, CEP also eliminates the need for individual households to re-apply for yearly eligibility³, removing a barrier that prevents some students who are eligible from accessing free meals. CEP reduces administrative burdens for schools and districts as well, potentially freeing up resources for other uses. CEP may also

change school culture by allowing schools to try different meal service models (e.g. grab-and-go breakfast or breakfast in the classroom) and by removing stigma associated with receiving school meals.

Who participates in CEP?

In 2017–18, a total of 907 schools (charter and traditional) and 24 whole districts chose to participate in CEP. However, many additional schools were eligible to participate at the school level or were in eligible districts⁴ but did not participate. Table 1 shows the total number of eligible, participating, and eligible but not participating schools and whole districts in the 2017–18 school year. CEP eligibility is not limited to a small set of schools or districts. Of the state’s 115 districts, 110 had at least one CEP eligible school. However, 36 districts with eligible schools had no participating schools. This gap between eligibility and

Table 1. Number of CEP Eligible and Participating Districts and Schools in 2017–18

	ELIGIBLE	PARTICIPATING ⁵	ELIGIBLE BUT NOT PARTICIPATING
SCHOOL-LEVEL PARTICIPATION	1353	907	496
WHOLE DISTRICT PARTICIPATION	63	24	39

Note: This table includes eligibility and participation numbers for districts and schools in the 2017–18 school year. Participating schools may or may not be individually eligible to participate, thus the sum of participating and eligible but not participating is greater than the total number eligible.

³ Data on the student enrollment in subsidized meal programs is used for many applications, including administering other programs, accountability, and research. It is worth noting that CEP participation has affected the validity of this data and creates a need for other measures of student economic disadvantage.

⁴ CEP eligibility and participation numbers are drawn from the annual notification of eligibility report and include both charter and traditional public schools.

⁵ Includes schools that are participating through districtwide or group eligibility.

participation suggests that there are still opportunities for more schools to participate. Figure 2 shows how CEP participating schools were distributed across districts in the state in 2017–18. CEP participating schools were spread broadly across the state.

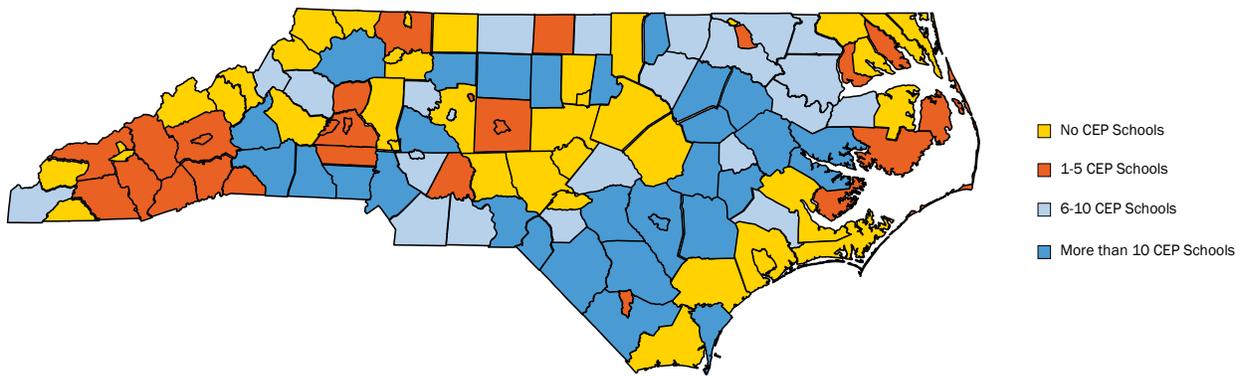
CEP participation is higher among schools where nearly all students are low-income and lower among schools with fewer low-income students, even among those schools that meet the eligibility threshold. This pattern is driven by the federal reimbursement formula which provides larger reimbursements for CEP participating schools with higher ISPs. Figure 3 shows the percent of schools participating in CEP by the percent of low-income students in the school.⁶ The percent of schools

participating rises as the percent of low-income students increases. Among schools with the most low-income students, nearly all participated in CEP during the 2017–18 school year. The vertical lines in Figure 3 mark the sample range (75 to 90% low-income students) that is used in the rest of this brief.

Data in this brief

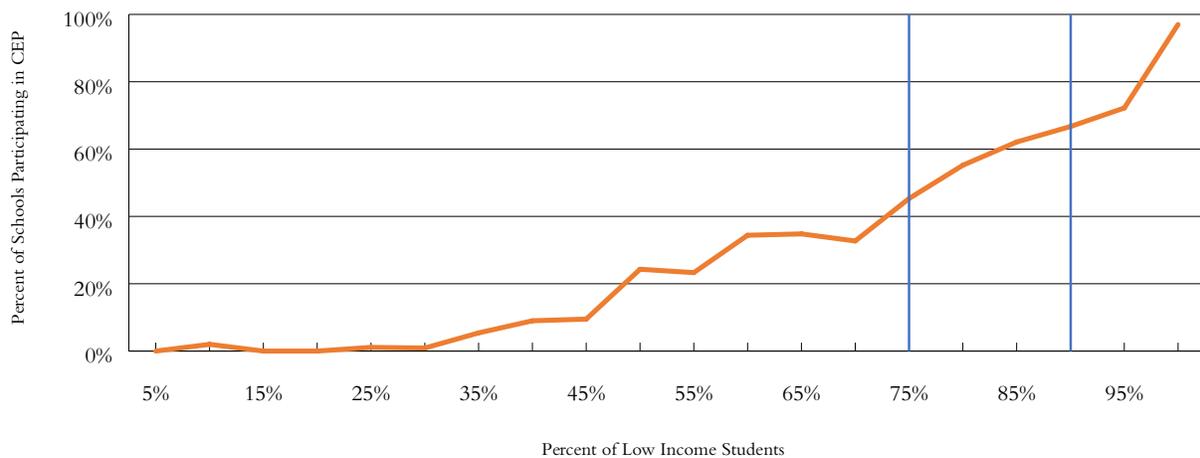
This brief uses a subsample of CEP eligible schools in the 2017–18 school year with 75 to 90% of students designated as low-income. This sample was chosen because schools with greater than 90% of students who are low-income participate

Figure 2. Number of CEP Participating Schools by District in 2017–18



Note: This map displays the number of CEP participating schools in each district in the 2017–18 school year.

Figure 3. Rate of Schools Participating in CEP by Percent of Low-Income Students



Note: This figure shows the percent of schools participating in CEP by the percent of low-income students in the school as reported in state Title 1 Reports.

⁶ Data on the percent of low-income students in each school is drawn from state Title 1 reporting data. For CEP participating schools, this statistic is generated using a 1.6 multiplier to adjust the percent of students automatically certified.

in CEP at such high rates that there are not enough non-participating schools to provide useful comparisons. Table 2 shows the numbers and demographics of CEP participating and non-participating schools within the sample. CEP participating schools were slightly smaller on average and had fewer students of color than non-participating schools. CEP participating schools had more low-income students on average than non-participating schools within the sample.

In the rest of this brief, we look descriptively at how CEP and non-CEP participating schools in our sample compare on student outcomes including performance grades, growth targets, continuous performance score, continuous growth score, attendance rate, and suspensions per 1000 students in the 2017–18 school year. We perform statistical tests to examine whether the differences between CEP and non-CEP participating schools are statistically significant, but the results should be viewed as associational not causal.

CEP schools were more likely to have high performance grades and to meet growth targets.

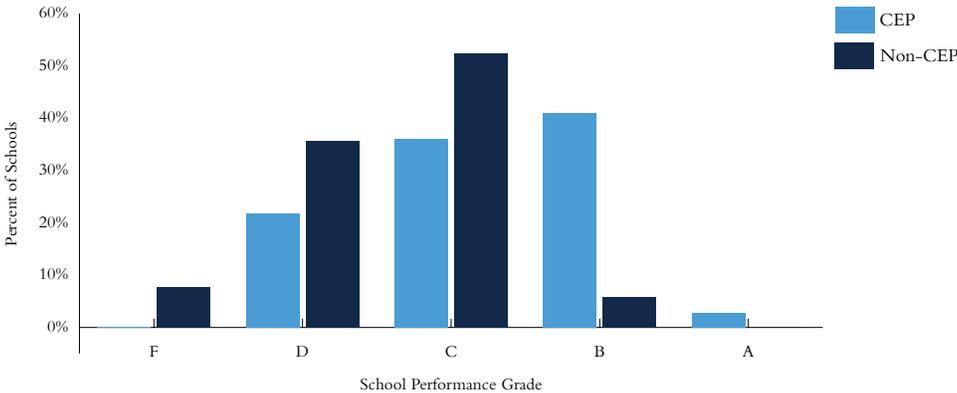
Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the school performance grades and academic growth levels of CEP participating and non-CEP participating schools in the sample. Considering school performance grades, CEP participating schools are more likely than non-CEP participating schools to have an A or B performance grade. When looking at academic growth level, CEP schools are less likely than non-CEP participating schools in the sample to have not met academic growth, although no more likely to have exceeded growth. These results suggest that CEP schools in our sample perform better than non-CEP schools academically.

Table 2. Characteristics of CEP Participating and Non-CEP Participating Schools in the Sample

	CEP PARTICIPATING	NON-CEP PARTICIPATING
NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	40	54
AVERAGE DAILY MEMBERSHIP	415.4	458.7
STUDENTS OF COLOR	39.6%	69.6%
75-80% LOW-INCOME	38.1%	57.4%
80-85% LOW-INCOME	50.0%	38.9%
85-90% LOW-INCOME	11.9%	3.7%

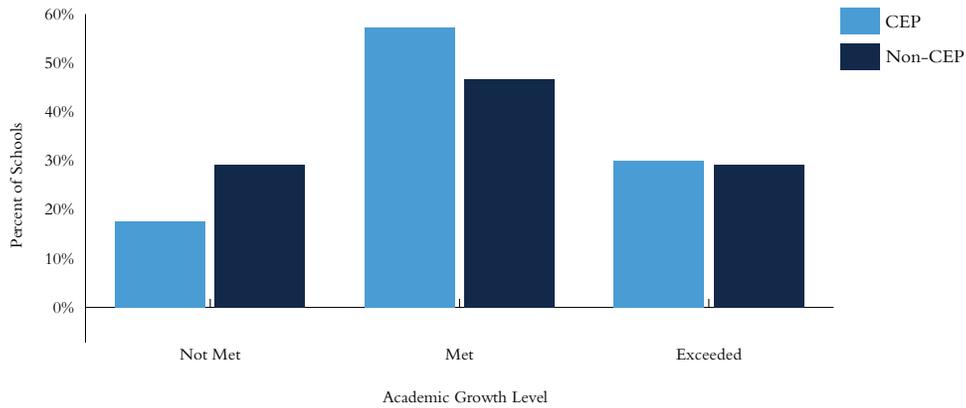
Note: Characteristics of schools are drawn from publicly available reports from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Figure 4. Distribution of CEP and Non-CEP Schools across School Performance Grade



Note: This figure displays the percent of CEP and non-CEP participating schools that fell into each school performance grade category in the 2017–18 school year. These data are drawn from state accountability data.

Figure 5. Distribution of CEP and Non-CEP Schools across Academic Growth Level



Note: This figure displays the percent of CEP and non-CEP participating schools that fell into each academic growth level in the 2017–18 school year. These data are drawn from state accountability data.

Table 3. Other Outcome Measures for CEP Participating and Non-CEP Participating Schools in 2017–18

	CEP AVERAGE	NON-CEP AVERAGE	SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE?
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE SCORE	64.69	55.69	YES
ACADEMIC GROWTH SCORE	77.53	76.87	NO
ATTENDANCE RATE	94.55	95.19	NO
SUSPENSION RATE	118.63	134.60	NO

Note: The four outcomes shown in this table are academic performance score, academic growth score, attendance rate, and suspensions per 1000 students. This table shows the CEP and non-CEP average for schools in the sample for each outcome. T-tests are used to test for significant differences between groups. The statistical test for suspension rate was performed on logged suspension rate to adjust the distribution to be appropriate for statistical testing.

CEP participating schools have higher academic performance scores but are similar to non-participating schools on other outcomes.

Table 3 shows the results of statistical tests comparing the average academic performance score, academic growth score, attendance rate, and suspension rate per 1000 students between CEP participating and non-CEP participating schools in our sample. On academic performance scores, CEP schools are an average of 9 points higher than non-CEP participating schools, and this result is statistically significant. CEP schools also have similar academic growth scores to non-CEP schools in the sample, although as shown in the previous section, there were fewer CEP schools who failed to meet expected growth. CEP schools have slightly lower attendance rates and somewhat lower suspension rates than non-CEP schools in the sample, but neither of these results is statistically significant. These results

show that CEP schools perform the same or better than non-CEP schools on all outcomes we examined.

Conclusion

CEP participation enables schools and districts to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost to the student. By eliminating the need for individual households to re-apply for yearly eligibility, CEP reduces barriers to participation and supports schools in efficiently providing more students with the nutrition they need to learn and thrive. Community Eligibility contributes to a more equitable school culture that reduces the adverse effects of food-insecurity, removing the stigma associated with receiving subsidized school meals and further expanding program reach. In addition, the data in this brief shows that schools participating in CEP have better academic performance than non-participating schools, suggesting that CEP may also be beneficial for learning and academic outcomes.



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Our work is ultimately driven by a vision of high quality and equitable education experiences for all students, and particularly students in North Carolina.

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