



Virginia Poverty Law Center

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Over 400 Schools Eligible to Use Successful New Tool to Combat Child Hunger by Increasing School Meal Participation

More than 400 high poverty schools in Virginia will be eligible to use a powerful new tool, known as community eligibility, to offer both breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students while reducing administrative work for school districts this upcoming school year. The Virginia Department of Education released a list of qualifying schools this week. Community eligibility helps ensure that low-income children, whose families often are struggling to put food on the table, have access to healthy meals at school.

In the eleven states that offered the community eligibility provision as part of the initial roll-out, over 4,000 high-poverty schools participated. This coming school year, the community eligibility option will be available to qualifying schools in every state.

Initial results show that community eligibility is leading to more children participating in school meals, and particularly increasing the number of children eating breakfast, an underutilized program that many schools are seeking to bolster.

“We have seen the success of community eligibility in reaching at-risk children in the states where it has already been implemented,” said LaTonya Reed, Director of Virginia Hunger Solutions – an initiative of the Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC) and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). “It is very exciting that schools in our state will be able to participate this year, especially when you consider that 12.4 percent of households with children in Virginia lack access to adequate food. Community eligibility will help us deliver nutritious breakfast and lunch to more children in need, helping them succeed in the classroom and improve their health and long-term well-being.”

In addition to helping reduce hunger for greater numbers of low-income students, community eligibility also helps schools and school districts streamline their operations and reduce paperwork. When more children eat, the per-meal cost of serving meals decreases. These economies of scale, combined with administrative simplifications, help to cover the cost of providing meals to students who might otherwise pay. And, less paperwork frees up resources to invest in improving meal quality and increases staff time available for other educational priorities.

Community eligibility is available to schools where 40 percent or more of the students are approved for free meals without an application because they have been identified as eligible by another program with a rigorous eligibility determination process, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamp program). Since

many additional students in these high-poverty schools are approved with an application, in the year prior to implementing community eligibility, 82 percent of children in participating schools in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan (the first three states to offer community eligibility) were approved for free or reduced price meals.

Following this week's announcement, eligible schools will have until June 30th to decide whether they will participate in community eligibility this upcoming school year.

"This is an exciting opportunity that schools in our state should seize. Adopting community eligibility can provide significant benefits not only to Virginia's high-poverty schools, but to the many students that they serve who might otherwise struggle to get enough food to eat each day," Reed said.

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The Virginia Poverty Law Center is a nonprofit corporation that provides advocacy, education and litigation support for civil justice issues that affect low-income Virginians. www.vplc.org

The Food Research and Action Center is the leading national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the United States. www.frac.org