

SNAP and School Meals

The nutritious breakfasts and lunches that low-income children receive at school help combat childhood hunger, while playing an important role in improving academic achievement and test scores and reducing absenteeism, tardiness, and discipline referrals. Children who live in households that receive SNAP benefits are eligible to receive free school meals. Linking children in SNAP households to school meals is so important that Congress required all school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program to directly certify their students for free school meals (conducting data matching with SNAP) through the 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization (P.L. 110-246).

Categorical Eligibility and Free School Meals

Broad based categorical eligibility is an option that allows states to screen families with gross incomes slightly above 130 percent of the poverty line to determine if they have net low incomes that would make them eligible for a SNAP benefit. Families only receive SNAP benefits if their income falls to 100 percent of the poverty line or below once shelter, child care, and other deductions are taken into account. Alternatively, the school meal application does not take into account any of the deductions used to determine a household's eligibility for SNAP benefits, making it easier for families and for school districts. Regardless of housing costs, child care costs, utility costs, etc., a household's gross income reported on a school meal application must be 130 percent or below the poverty line in order for the children in the household to be certified for free school meals and gross income between 130 and 185 percent for reduced-price school meals.

Twenty-eight states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Virgin Islands¹ have increased the gross income test to determine SNAP eligibility. Within these states, categorical eligibility is making it possible for our most vulnerable children to receive free school meals. Children from struggling families who would have missed out on free school meals are able to be directly certified for free school meals. Proposals to cut SNAP categorical eligibility would result in fewer children from working families being directly certified for free school meals. In other words, fewer children who

State	Gross Income Limit
Arizona	185%
California	200%
Connecticut	185%
Delaware	200%
District of Columbia	200%
Florida	200%
Guam	165%
Hawaii	200%
Illinois	165%
Iowa	160%
Maine	185%
Maryland	200%
Massachusetts	200%
Michigan	200%
Minnesota	165%
Montana	200%
Nevada	200%
New Hampshire	185%
New Mexico	165%
New Jersey	185%
New York	200%
North Carolina	200%
North Dakota	200%
Oregon	185%
Pennsylvania	160%
Rhode Island	185%
Texas	165%
Vermont	185%
Virgin Islands	175%
Washington	200%
Wisconsin	200%

¹ Source for state information and table: U.S. Department of Agriculture <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/BBCE.pdf>

need school meals to stave off hunger and focus in school in the 28 states that have implemented categorical eligibility will get them.

Categorical Eligibility and Community Eligibility

Direct Certification for SNAP also provides the foundation for the Community Eligibility Provision, a hugely successful option that allows over 20,000 high poverty schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to their students. The provision eliminates the need for schools to collect and process school meal applications, which allows schools to focus on providing healthy and appealing meals instead of processing paperwork. Schools are eligible to implement community eligibility if at least 40 percent of their students are certified to receive free school meals without submitting an application, called identified students. Community eligibility schools are reimbursed based on the poverty within the school. The percentage of identified students is multiplied by 1.6 to account for additional students who would have been certified for free or reduced-price school meal applications. For example a school with an identified student percentage of 50 percent would be reimbursed for 80 percent of its meals at the free rate and 20 percent at the paid rate.

Reducing the number of students who are directly certified by changing the rules for categorical eligibility means that fewer schools will be eligible to implement community eligibility, and many schools that are eligible will find that it is no longer financially viable, because fewer of their meals would be reimbursed at the free rate.

Conclusion

The proposed changes in H.R. 2 to categorical eligibility, estimated by the Congressional Budget Office to cut \$5 billion over 10 years,² will result in working families losing much needed food benefits. It also means that their children will lose free school meals, amplifying the negative impact of the cut. It will mean more children go hungry at home as well as at school.

² Congressional Budget Office, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/costestimate/hr2.pdf>.