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The Community Eligibility Provision and Student Outcomes

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Summary

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) was introduced in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 and was designed to address ongoing food insecurity while reducing the administrative burden on schools. It allows schools and districts to provide breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students if over 40 percent of students are enrolled in other means-tested food assistance programs. The CEP was first piloted in 2011-12 and rolled out nationwide in the 2014-15 school year. In 2019-20, 69 percent of eligible schools nationwide and 61 percent of approximately 700 eligible schools in Missouri participated in the CEP (FRAC 2020). More schools in Missouri and nationwide are eligible to participate in 2020-21 than in the previous year because of increased enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) due to the COVID-19 pandemic (FRAC 2020; USDA 2020c). For the 2020-21 school year, the USDA extended the deadline for CEP adoption to August 31, giving districts the opportunity to consider eligibility data from this summer when deciding whether to opt in to the program (USDA 2020b).

This Evidence PRiMER first explains the CEP and then describes the existing research on the effect of CEP adoption on test scores, attendance, and behavior. While the primary goal of the program is to serve more meals and to do so more efficiently, increasing student participation in school meal programs could also conceivably have a positive effect on outcomes that are related to child nutrition. A small but growing literature examines the relationship between CEP adoption and achievement-related outcomes. At the time of this publication there were seven studies publicly available: two peer-reviewed journal articles, three working papers, one doctoral dissertation, and one master's thesis (see Tables 3 through 6). Some of these studies report null findings overall or for particular grade ranges, and some effects only apply to subgroups of students or schools. However, CEP adoption is associated with reduced suspensions across grade levels, increased elementary and possibly middle school attendance, and increased elementary school math scores.

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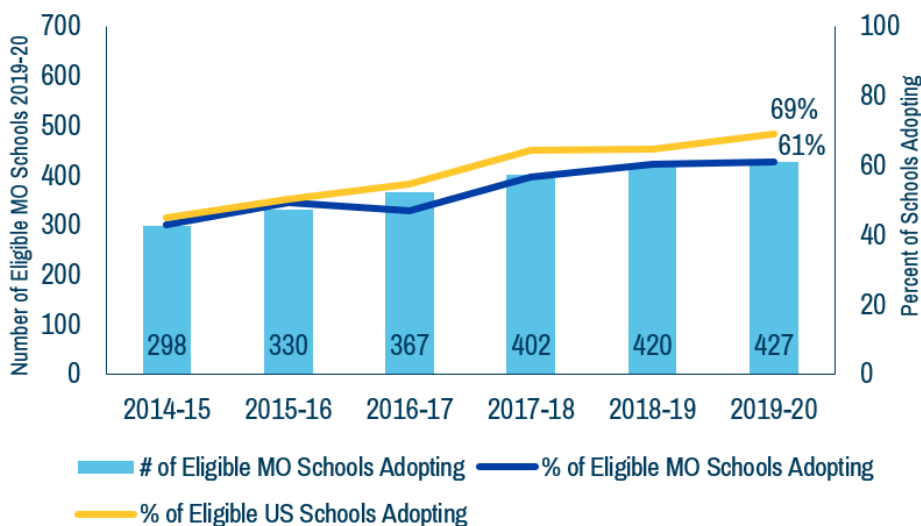


Introduction to the CEP

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was established in 1946 to address food insecurity, and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) was added in 1966. Students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) and breakfast based on family income, and 74 percent of school lunches served in 2019-20 were free or reduced-price (USDA 2020a). However, about 13 percent of income-eligible students do not participate in school meal programs (Gordanier et al. 2019). The CEP was introduced in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 and was designed to address ongoing food insecurity while reducing the administrative burden on schools (Levin & Neuberger 2013).

The CEP allows schools and districts to provide breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students if over 40 percent of students are directly certified through participation in other means-tested food assistance programs. CEP schools can also serve free afterschool snacks during enrichment programs and provide free summer meals for students. The program addresses food insecurity by expanding access to school meals for students who 1) were previously income-eligible but not participating due to choice, lack of information, or application processing errors; and 2) students who were not previously income-eligible yet may still live in food-insecure households. The CEP was piloted in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan in 2011-12; expanded to DC, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia in 2012-13; and further expanded to Georgia, Florida, Maryland, and Massachusetts in 2013-14. It was then rolled out nationwide in 2014-15, the first year Missouri schools and districts were able to adopt the CEP. In the 2019-20 school year, 30,667 schools in 5,133 districts serving more than 14.9 million children participated in the CEP nationwide (FRAC, 2020). Sixty-nine percent of eligible schools in the nation and 61 percent of approximately 700 eligible schools in Missouri participated (FRAC 2020). In 2019-20, CEP schools served approximately 144,000 Missouri students (DESE 2020a). More schools in Missouri and nationwide are eligible to participate in 2020-21 than in the previous year because of increased enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) due to the COVID-19 pandemic (FRAC 2020; USDA 2020c).

Number and Percent of Eligible Schools Adopting the CEP



(Food Research & Action Center)



Key Findings

- The CEP addresses food insecurity by allowing schools and districts to serve free school meals to all students if the “identified student percentage” (ISP) is over 40 percent.
- In 2019-20, 69 percent of eligible schools nationwide and 61 percent of eligible schools in Missouri participated in the CEP. CEP schools served approximately 144,000 Missouri students.
- More schools are eligible to participate in 2020-21 than in the previous year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- For the 2020-21 school year, the USDA extended the deadline for CEP adoption to August 31.
- Schools and districts with an ISP of 62.5 percent or above receive 100 percent reimbursement. Eighty-three percent of Missouri schools with an ISP of 60 percent or above participated in 2019-20.
- Adopting the CEP does seem to lead to increased breakfast and lunch participation.
- Increasing student participation in school meals could conceivably have a positive effect on outcomes that are related to child nutrition.
- CEP adoption is associated with reduced suspensions across grade levels, increased elementary and possibly middle school attendance, and increased elementary school math scores.

Which Schools and Districts Can Participate in the CEP?

Individual schools or entire districts are eligible to participate in the CEP if over 40 percent of students are directly certified (DC). The direct certification process matches school enrollment data with enrollment data from SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. This reduces the administrative burden on schools by eliminating the need to collect household income forms to determine FRL eligibility. Missouri and many other states also recognize students as eligible for free meals if they have a disadvantaged status: they are experiencing homelessness, living in foster care, have migrant status, are enrolled in Head Start, or receive services for runaways. The total share of students in a school or district who are directly certified for free meals is referred to as the “identified student percentage” (ISP), and the ISP must be 40 percent or higher for a school or district to be eligible for the CEP. Schools can also participate as part of a subgroup of district schools if the ISP for the group is over 40 percent. In a typical year, districts must notify their state department of education by June 30 of their intent to implement the CEP during the following school year. For the 2020-21 school year, the USDA extended the deadline for CEP adoption to August 31, giving districts the opportunity to consider eligibility data from this summer when deciding whether to opt in to the program (USDA 2020b). Once a school, district, or group enrolls in the CEP, they can remain in the program for four consecutive years without reapplying.

Table 1: Selected Characteristics of CEP Schools in Missouri by Identified Student Percentage (ISP) (2018-19)

ISP %	ELA % Prof / Adv	Math % Prof / Adv	% Black	% Hispanic	% White
40 to <50	40	29	31	9	52
50 to <60	37	32	37	11	44
60 or above	21	17	76	8	12

(Based on data publicly available from DESE. Weighted averages calculated by author.)

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) highlights many benefits of the program:

- Students receive free, healthy meals with no stigma attached and spend less time in cashier lines.
- Parents no longer have to fill out a household income application or worry about meal accounts.
- Schools have less paperwork and can streamline cafeteria service.

Testimonials from school staff in Missouri highlighted another possible benefit. Adopting the CEP may improve student

learning because streamlining cafeteria service maximizes instructional time and because well-fed children are better able to focus and learn and are more likely to behave well in class (DESE 2020a).

Why Not Adopt the CEP if Eligible?

CEP schools serve breakfast and lunch free of charge to all students but may not be fully reimbursed for all meals served. The ISP is multiplied by 1.6 to calculate the percentage of meals that are fully reimbursed through federal funding. The remainder of meals are only partially reimbursed, and the balance must be funded through non-federal sources. Schools and districts with an ISP of 62.5 percent or above will receive 100 percent reimbursement ($62.5 \times 1.6 = 100$) and may have more incentive to adopt the CEP. Eighty-three percent of Missouri schools with an ISP of 60 percent or above participated in the CEP in 2019-20 (FRAC, 2020).

Table 2: CEP Participation in Missouri by Identified Student Percentage (ISP) (2019-20)

ISP %	Number of CEP-Eligible Schools	Number of CEP-Adopting Schools	% of Eligible Schools Adopting
40 to <50	248	83	33.5
50 to <60	160	102	63.8
60 or above	289	240	83
Total	697	425	61

(FRAC, 2020)

Schools and districts with an ISP below 62.5 percent must decide whether it is worthwhile and financially feasible to adopt the CEP. Even schools and districts with an ISP over 62.5 do not always choose to participate. For high-poverty schools and districts where all or nearly all students are FRL-eligible, there may be little financial incentive to make the change. About 80 percent of students who attend CEP schools and districts in Missouri would be eligible for free and reduced-price meals even if the policy was not in place (Koedel & Parsons 2020). Additionally, in the earliest years of the program, there was a lack of clarity about how CEP adoption (which eliminates the need to collect household income forms) would affect funding and programs that use FRL data, such as Title I. While Title I funding is distributed to districts based on U.S. Census data rather than FRL data, districts often use FRL data when allocating Title I funds to individual schools (USDA 2016).

Logan et al. (2014) conducted a formal evaluation of the CEP in the first seven pilot states to examine incentives for and barriers to CEP adoption, implementation successes and challenges, and the impacts of the program on finances and operations. In the 2012-13 school year, 29 percent of eligible schools and 32 percent of eligible districts in the pilot states were participating in the CEP. The biggest barriers for those choosing not to

participate were uncertainty about how the CEP would affect school and district finances and concerns about equity and operational issues for districts that would have both CEP and non-CEP schools. The evaluation of CEP-adopting schools found that a higher proportion of meals were reimbursed as free meals than had been previously, with reimbursements per meal for lunches and breakfasts increasing by 6 and 2 percent, respectively. Participating districts indicated that they were satisfied with the program and were likely to continue using it, citing many benefits such as a reduced burden for families, increased meal participation, reduced stigma for participating students, improved school performance, increased reimbursements, and reduced administrative burden. States cited many of these same benefits but faced challenges in understanding and addressing the implications of the CEP for programs like Title I, state funding formulas, and accountability for student outcomes by subgroups under No Child Left Behind. As a result, some states still required CEP districts to collect household income forms.

Implications for Funding and Accountability: Missouri

In Missouri, as in many states, school funding is weighted based on a host of student characteristics including the percentage who are FRL-eligible. CEP adopting schools and districts are typically coded as 100 percent FRL and could conceivably draw more funds through the state formula. The Missouri legislature, anticipating this impact of the CEP, passed legislation in 2013 requiring funding for CEP schools to be based on the percentage of FRL-eligible students from the year prior to CEP adoption. However, this cannot be a permanent solution, as the applicability of pre-CEP data diminishes with time (Koedel & Preis 2019).

Districts and schools in Missouri are held accountable for overall achievement and growth and also for the achievement and growth of a “super subgroup” of disadvantaged students. This super subgroup includes FRL-eligible students, Black and Hispanic students, English language learners, and students on an individualized education plan (IEP). For CEP schools and districts, all students are considered FRL-eligible and thus the entire population is considered part of the super subgroup. This nullifies the value of the super subgroup portion of the accountability system for these schools and districts.

In August of 2015, the U.S. Department of Education and the USDA issued a joint letter to clarify that states have discretion on what measures of poverty to use for CEP schools (USDOE 2015). Many states are now using DC data for policy purposes, though this has its own limitations (Koedel & Parsons 2020). Notably, the poverty threshold for direct certification (SNAP and TANF eligibility) is 130 percent of the poverty line. This is equivalent to the threshold for free meal eligibility but is more stringent than the threshold for reduced-price meal eligibility (185 percent of the poverty line). The percentage of students in a school or district who are directly certified may be much lower than the percentage who are FRL-eligible. Some states are

addressing this issue by multiplying the DC percentage by a multiplier such as 1.6. Another option would be to increase the amount of aid for each DC student (Koedel & Preis 2019). It is important to note, however, that certain student populations such as Hispanic students are less likely to participate in means-tested safety net programs such as SNAP, and so states with a high proportion of these students may see a significant change when switching from FRL to DC-based metrics (Zedlewski & Martinez-Schiferl 2010).

How Might the CEP Lead to Better Academic Outcomes?

There is a small but growing literature on the relationship between CEP adoption and achievement-related outcomes, such as test scores, attendance, and behavior (Bartfeld et al. 2020; Fuller & Comperatore 2020; Gordanier et al. 2019; Gordon & Ruffini 2019; Gruber 2017; Kho 2018; Ruffini 2020). The findings of these studies are summarized in Tables 3 through 6.

While the primary goal of the CEP is to address food insecurity, increasing student participation in school meals could also conceivably have a positive effect on outcomes that are related to child nutrition. A systematic review conducted by Shanker et al. (2017) found many negative child outcomes related to food insecurity (FI):

In school-aged children, an association is found between FI and impaired academic performance, increased hyperactivity, inattention, aggressive behavior, missing school, borderline emotional problems, less adaptive interpersonal relations, self-control and approaches to learning, more internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and greater likelihood of having seen a psychologist. (146)

While inadequate nutrition is related to negative outcomes, most of the students who are receiving free meals under the CEP were previously FRL-eligible and thus may not have a change in school meal participation under the program. For this reason it is not clear that the CEP would have an impact on test scores, attendance, or behavior. Ruffini (2020) posits several reasons the CEP may affect achievement-related outcomes. First, food-insecure students who were not participating in school meal programs may experience positive effects related to better nutrition. An estimated 13 percent of income-eligible students do not participate in the NSLP because of lack of information, bureaucratic hurdles, and/or social stigma (Gordanier et al. 2019). Second, low-income families who were paying for meals may have additional resources available to support their children’s education in other ways. Third, universal meal programs may improve school climate by eliminating a perceived or actual stigma associated with free and reduced-price lunch participation (Kho 2018). Finally, if access to breakfast and lunch improves student behavior (Fuller & Comperatore 2020; Gordon & Ruffini 2019; Kho 2018), this may create a more optimal learning environment even for students who were not directly

affected by CEP adoption. Surveys of administrators and staff in all CEP-adopting schools in Vermont support these theories. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that after implementation students were more ready to learn, financial stress on students and families was reduced, differences in family income were less visible, and school climate was improved (Taylor et al. 2020).

Does CEP Adoption Increase Participation in School Meal Programs?

Logan et al. (2014) found that the CEP increased breakfast participation by 9.4 percent and lunch participation by 5.2 percent in the first seven pilot states. Henry (2015) examined school meal take-up after the first year of CEP implementation in Kansas and found increases in breakfast and lunch participation of 6.5 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively. Turner et al. (2019) found that adoption of universal meal provisions in California led to a 3.5 percentage point increase in breakfast participation and a 5.8 percentage point increase in lunch participation. Ruffini (2020) estimated that breakfast and lunch participation in CEP schools nationwide increased by 38 percent and 12 percent, respectively. Pokorney et al. (2019) found an 8 percent increase in lunch participation in Maryland and Pennsylvania, driven by an increase in meal take-up by students who would have previously paid for lunches. This is consistent with Hong (2015), who notes that while overall participation in the NSLP has declined since 2010, the number of free meals served and the proportion of free and reduced-price meals have both increased (also see USDA 2020a).

A study by Gross et al. (2019) in Maryland found that students attending a school that was CEP-eligible but not participating had twice the odds of being food insecure as similar students attending CEP schools. In addition, Davis and Musaddiq (2018) estimated the effects of CEP adoption on child health in Georgia and found an increase in the percentage of students in a healthy weight range.

In the next section we turn our attention to research on achievement-related outcomes. We first summarize the findings of research on other universal breakfast and lunch programs and then examine research that is specific to the CEP.



Research on Universal Meal Programs, the CEP, and Student Outcomes

Research on the relationship between CEP adoption and achievement-related student outcomes is limited, due in part to the recent introduction of the program. Research that has been done builds upon previous research on other universal breakfast and lunch programs.

Research on Universal Meal Programs

Two studies find that universal, in-classroom breakfast programs may have a modest, positive effect on math and reading scores, particularly in schools with the largest increases in participation and for students who were previously lower-achieving (Dotter 2013; Imberman & Kugler 2014). However, other studies find that universal breakfast programs, particularly those that serve free meals before school, increase participation and possibly attendance but have no effect on test scores (Huang et al. 2006; Leos-Urbel et al. 2013; Schanzenbach & Zaki 2014). Schwartz and Rothbart (2020) examined student-level data and found that the introduction of universal free lunch in New York City middle schools increased test scores in math and reading. One consistent finding in these studies is that universal school meal programs increase participation for all students, with larger increases for students previously ineligible for subsidized meals. However, while Imberman and Kugler (2014) find greater test score effects for FRL-eligible students, Schwartz and Rothbart (2020) find test score effects are greater for students who were previously-ineligible. Frisvold (2015) finds that simply attending a school with a breakfast program, even if not universal, increases math achievement.

Research on the CEP and Student Outcomes

A search of academic databases yielded seven studies on the relationship between CEP adoption and achievement-related outcomes: two peer-reviewed journal articles (Bartfeld et al. 2020; Gordon & Ruffini 2019); three working papers (Fuller & Comporatore 2020; Gordanier et al. 2019; Ruffini 2020); one doctoral dissertation (Kho 2018); and one master's thesis (Gruber 2017) (see Tables 3 through 6). One study focused exclusively on test scores, one on attendance, and one on behavior, while the other four examined multiple outcomes. Four studies focused on a single state, one examined numerous pilot states, and two utilized data from all CEP schools and districts nationwide.

All but one of the studies included in Tables 3 through 6 use a method of analysis called difference-in-difference (DD) to estimate the effect of the CEP on student outcomes. DD assumes there would be a parallel trend in outcomes for the

treatment group (e.g. students attending CEP schools) and the comparison group (e.g. students attending eligible non-CEP schools) in the absence of the treatment (CEP). Any change in the trend for CEP schools is attributed to the effect of CEP adoption. The two nationwide studies (Gordon & Ruffini 2019; Ruffini 2020) compare changes in early and late-adopting schools and districts rather than changes in CEP and eligible non-CEP schools, noting that there are baseline differences between adopters and non-adopters. The final study (Kho 2018) uses a comparative interrupted time series design. Some of these studies report null findings overall or for particular grade ranges, and some effects only apply to subgroups of students or schools. However, CEP adoption is associated with reduced suspensions across grade levels, increased elementary and possibly middle school attendance, and increased elementary school math scores.

Test Scores

Five of seven studies examined the effects of the CEP on test scores. Gordanier et al. (2019) found an overall effect in math for elementary students, with the largest effect for poor elementary students in poor schools. This study found no overall effects in reading but did find effects for poor elementary students and non-poor middle school students in non-poor schools. Fuller and Comperatore (2020) found a possible effect in math for elementary students (in their student fixed effects model) and an effect in reading for middle school students but a negative effect in reading for high school students. Gruber (2017) found no effects on elementary student test scores in seven pilot states. A study in Tennessee (Kho 2018) also found no overall effects on test scores, though Kho (2018) notes that he lacked test score data for years 2 and 3. Ruffini's (2020) nationwide study found no overall effects in math or reading for elementary students or pooled middle/high school students but found a modest effect in math for the "exposed" subsample of districts that had an ISP below the median and thus saw the greatest increase in access to school meals after CEP adoption. Ruffini found greater effects in math for the subgroup of Hispanic students and for Black and Hispanic elementary students in the exposed subsample.

Table 3: Summary of Findings on Test Scores*

	ES	MS	HS	Pooled
Fuller & Comperatore (2020)	(+) 0	0 +	0 -	
Gordanier et al. (2019)	+	(+)		
Gruber (2017)	0	0		
Kho (2018)	0	0	0	0
Ruffini (2020)	(+) 0	0	0	(+) 0

*+ = positive; 0 = null; - = negative; () = finding is for a subgroup or depends on model specification (see Table 6 for details); the first column under each grade range is for math and the second column is for reading.

Attendance

Three of four studies that examined the effects of the CEP on student attendance found positive results. A study in Wisconsin (Bartfeld et al. 2020) found an overall decrease in the percent of elementary school students with low attendance at CEP schools in year two, with a larger effect on attendance for students who were previously FRL-eligible. Fuller and Comperatore (2020) found CEP adoption was strongly related to reduced absences for elementary school students and also had an effect on middle school attendance. Studies in South Carolina (Gordanier et al. 2019) and Tennessee (Kho 2018) found no overall effects on attendance, though Gordanier et al. (2019) did find decreased absences for elementary students in non-poor or urban schools and for FRL-eligible middle school students.

Table 4: Summary of Findings on Attendance*

	ES	MS	HS	Pooled
Barteld et al. (2020)	+			
Fuller & Comperatore (2020)	+	+	0	
Gordanier et al. (2019)	(+)	(+)		
Kho (2018)	0	0	0	0

*+ = positive; 0 = null; - = negative; () = finding is for a subgroup or depends on model specification (see Table 6 for details).

Behavior

The three studies that examined the effects of the CEP on behavior used suspensions as a key outcome measure. Fuller and Comperatore (2020) found reduced suspensions for middle and high school students. Gordon and Ruffini (2019) found an effect for white male elementary students, with a larger effect for white male elementary students in poor schools. Kho (2018) found an overall effect on suspensions, with larger effects in years 2 and 3 and for high school students.

Table 5: Summary of Findings on Behavior*

	ES	MS	HS	Pooled
Fuller & Comperatore (2020)	0	+	+	
Gordon & Ruffini (2019)	(+)			0
Kho (2018)	0	0	+	+

*+ = positive; 0 = null; - = negative; () = finding is for a subgroup or depends on model specification (see Table 6 for details).



Table 6: Summary of Research on the CEP and Student Outcomes, by Research Study

Author(s)	Data Years	Location / Grades*	Methods	Findings**
Bartfeld et al. (2020)	2013-2016	Wisconsin ES	DD; compares changes in CEP and eligible non-CEP schools	Attendance Rate (percentage of school days attended): no effect. Low Attendance (attending fewer than 95 percent of school days): overall 3.5 percentage point reduction in low attendance for ES students in year 2; larger effect (4.2 pp reduction) in year 2 for FRL-eligible ES students.
Fuller & Comperatore (2020)	2011-2016	North Carolina ES, MS, HS	DD; compares changes in CEP and eligible non-CEP schools	Test scores: large effect in science for ES students (0.06 SDs); possible effect in math for ES students (student fixed effects model); no effect in math for MS or HS students; no effect in reading for ES students; effect in reading for MS students (0.03 SDs); negative effect in reading for HS students (-0.04 SDs). Attendance (reduced absences): large effect for ES students (-0.5 SDs); effect for MS students (-0.3 SDs); no effect for HS students. Behavior (decreased suspensions): no effect for ES students; effects for MS students (-0.01 SDs) and HS students (-0.02 SDs).
Gordanier et al. (2019)	2013-2016	South Carolina ES, MS	DD; compares changes in CEP and non-CEP schools	Test scores: overall effect in math for ES students (0.034 SDs); no overall effect in math for MS students or in reading for either grade level; effects in math (0.072 SDs) and reading (0.025 SDs) for poor ES students; greater effect in math (0.081 SDs) for poor ES students in poor schools; effect in reading for non-poor MS students in non-poor schools (0.054 SDs); effect in math in rural ESs (0.054 SDs); greatest effect in math for poor ES students in rural schools (0.091 SDs). Attendance: no overall effects for ES or MS students; effects for ES students in non-poor schools and in urban schools; effect for FRL-eligible MS students; effect for non-poor MS students in near-poor schools.
Gordon & Ruffini (2019)	2012-2017	All 50 states, DC ES, MS/HS	DD; compares changes in early and late-adopting CEP schools	Behavior (decreased suspensions): no overall effects for ES or MS/HS students; 1 pp reduction for white male ES students, with a larger effect (1.3 pp reduction) for white male ES students in high-poverty schools. The effects for white male ES students are greater in rural than in urban schools, but these differences are not statistically significant.
Gruber (2017)	2010-2015	Seven pilot states ES	DD; compares changes in CEP and eligible non-CEP schools	Test scores: no overall effects in math, reading, or science for ES students; no difference in outcomes between FRL-eligible and non-eligible students; effect in math only when controlling for change in student outcomes over time.
Kho (2018)	2009-2017	Tennessee ES, MS, HS	Comparative Interrupted Time Series (CITS); compares changes in CEP and eligible non-CEP schools	Test Scores: no overall effects in math or reading in year 1 (no data for years 2, 3). Attendance: no overall effect. Behavior (decreased suspensions/expulsions): modest overall effect (1.2 pp reduction), with larger effects in year 2 (1.5 pp) and year 3 (2.3 pp); largest effect (4.6 pp) for HS students.
Ruffini (2020)	2012-2017	All 50 states, DC ES, MS	DD; compares changes in early and late-adopting CEP districts	Test scores: no overall effects in math or reading; modest effect in math (0.02 SDs) for the “exposed” subsample of CEP districts with baseline ISP below the median (57.9 percent); effects in math for all Hispanic students (0.03 SDs) and in math for Black and Hispanic ES students (0.05 SDs) in the exposed subsample.

*ES = elementary school; MS = middle school; HS = high school. **All effects statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, unless otherwise noted; “modest” effects statistically significant at the $p < 0.1$ level; pp = percentage point; FRL-eligible students = students previously eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or receiving SNAP/TANF; Gordanier et al. define a non-poor school as $ISP < 40\%$, near-poor as $ISP = 40 - < 62.5\%$, and poor as $ISP \geq 62.5\%$; they define poor students as those eligible for SNAP/TANF or free (not reduced-price) lunch and non-poor students as those who are not FRL-eligible.

Conclusion

The Community Eligibility Provision was designed to address ongoing food insecurity while reducing the administrative burden on schools. Adopting the CEP does seem to increase school breakfast and lunch participation. CEP schools and districts also report a reduced burden for families, reduced stigma for participating students, and improved school performance (Logan et al. 2014). While the primary goal of the CEP is to serve more school meals and to do so more efficiently, participation in school meal programs could also conceivably have a positive effect on outcomes that are related to child nutrition.

At the time of this publication, there have been just seven studies made publicly available examining the relationship between the CEP and achievement-related outcomes. Many of these studies report null findings overall or for particular grade ranges. However, some important themes emerge. Perhaps the most compelling findings are in the area of student behavior. All three studies that examined suspensions as an outcome measure found statistically significant effects, and these effects are spread across grade ranges (Fuller & Comperatore 2020; Gordon & Ruffini 2019; Kho 2018). Participation in the CEP has shown to have a positive effect on elementary school attendance and possibly an effect on middle school attendance (Bartfeld et al. 2020; Fuller & Comperatore 2020; Gordanier et al. 2019), but neither study examining high school attendance found an effect (Fuller & Comperatore 2020; Kho 2018). Whether a meaningful relationship exists between CEP adoption and test scores is less clear, as many of the effects reported applied only to specific subgroups of students or schools. Several studies reported null findings, although one of these studies lacked test score data for years two and three (Kho 2018). This null finding should be interpreted cautiously considering that the effects of CEP adoption may increase over time (Bartfeld et al. 2020; Kho 2018). In addition, the two studies that reported no effects on test scores were a doctoral dissertation (Kho 2018) and a master's thesis (Gruber 2017). The other three studies examining test scores found some effect on elementary school math scores (Fuller & Comperatore 2020; Gordanier et al. 2019; Ruffini 2020).

As mentioned above, some reported effects are greater for particular subgroups of students or schools. For example, two studies point to greater effects for poor students (Bartfeld et al. 2020; Gordanier et al. 2019). Sometimes subgroup findings seem to point in different directions, even within the same study. Two studies observe greater effects on test scores and behavior in high-poverty schools (Gordanier et al. 2019; Gordon & Ruffini 2019), while two studies report greater effects on test scores and elementary attendance in relatively low-poverty schools (Gordanier et al. 2019; Ruffini 2020). Gordanier et al. (2019) finds greater effects on test scores and behavior in rural schools but also reports that the effect on elementary attendance is greater in urban schools.

Given how recent the CEP is in terms of design and implementation, the available research base is still quite small. Research on the CEP and nutrition-based interventions is likely to increase in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on schools. As more families qualify for means-tested programs such as SNAP, schools that were previously ineligible for the CEP may now be eligible. As CEP expansion occurs, it will be vital for more evaluation of whether these programs have an effect on student outcomes and general well-being. Importantly, the key goal of addressing food insecurity can be met regardless of whether there is an additional effect on test scores, attendance, or behavior. However, schools and districts are held accountable for achievement-related outcomes and are often interested in understanding which programs affect these outcome measures. Research on a possible relationship between CEP participation and student outcomes should continue to be made available for schools and districts that are considering adoption of the CEP.

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