



Support increased access to free school meals for Tennessee students.

Quick Facts

Food Insecurity

In 2024, approximately

22.0%

of Tennessee children were food insecure, representing

346,790

children.¹

Financial Burden

Among Tennessee parents who paid for school meals

25%

reported that paying for children to eat at school made it difficult to pay for other household expenses. Among those making \$35,000-\$49,000 it increased to ²

45%.

Public Support

85%

of Tennessee parents support free school lunch for all, while only 5% oppose the idea.³

How we can fix it

Of the 198 Schools/LEAs listed in Tennessee Department of Education's Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Annual Notification of Local Education Agencies (LEA), 147 have implemented the Community Eligibility Provision district-wide during the 2024-25 school year.⁶ Additionally, there are schools who participate as an individual site. Across the state, there are 247 schools who, based on their own ISP, are eligible to participate in CEP but have not.⁶

To support increased access to free school lunches for children, the state should invest dollars into:

- Encouraging and incentivizing eligible schools or LEAs to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision and offering financial support to participating schools, LEAs or school groups with an ISP between 25%-62.5%.
- Using state-funds, after federal funds have been exhausted, remove the reduced-price meal category allowing all children with incomes below 185% federal poverty level to access free meals.
- Pursue a stable funding stream for free school lunch for all students.

The Problem

Children struggle to learn when they are hungry. In 2024, 22% of Tennessee children were food insecure. Across Tennessee, more than a third of Tennessee counties have at least one in four children who are food insecure.¹ Among Tennessee parents who did not receive free school meals, 25% reported that paying for children to eat at school makes it difficult to pay for other household expenses. When asking those making between \$35,000-\$49,000, the percent increased to 45%.² Local budgets are tight, and while there are options for federal reimbursement, some districts cannot afford to pick up the remaining tab.

Why this Matters

Access to school meals can improve diet, food security and physical and mental health. In many instances school meals may be the most nutritional or only meal a child has in a day.⁴ The impact of school meals goes beyond physical benefits and supports positive educational outcomes. A Tennessee specific study on Community Eligibility Provision implementation found a statistically significant improvement in suspension/expulsion rates and on-time grade promotion.⁵ This is reflected in broad public support as well: 85% of Tennessee parents support free school lunch for all, while just 5% oppose the idea.³

About the Community Eligibility Provision:⁷

From USDA Food & Nutrition Administration:
The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas. CEP allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Instead, schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students categorically eligible for free meals based on their participation in other specific means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

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5. Kho, A., & Hunter, S. (2026). Free meals for all: the effects of Tennessee’s community eligibility provision on student non-academic outcomes. *Educational Studies*, 52(2), 129-147.
6. Tennessee Department of Education. Districts and Schools Eligible to Participate in CEP School Year 2024-25. Retrieved on August 31, 2026 from: <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/health-and-safety/school-nutrition/community-eligibility-provision-cep.html>
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