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Making it Easier for Low-Income Children to Eat Free Meals at School

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We know that children who live in poverty are more likely to show up to school hungry, making it that much more difficult for them to learn. With child poverty higher than 50 percent in some DC neighborhoods, there are some schools where a majority of students are at risk of being hungry on this first day of school.

The good news is that it is now easier for families in high-poverty schools in the District to get access to school meals, thanks to a recent change in federal child nutrition programs.

This is the second school year that DC is taking advantage of the “community eligibility option,” which allows schools with very high percentages of low-income students to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students without collecting school meal applications. For the school year starting today, [75 \[of 112\] DCPS schools](#) will use this option. (Data on public charter schools was not readily available.)

The community eligibility option was passed in 2010 and is being implemented in DC and select states before becoming available nationwide next year. It benefits both schools and families. It increases participation in the school meal programs, so that more students will be able to eat nutritious meals and be better prepared for class. Eliminating the work of collecting paperwork gives schools a chance to devote more time and resources to other priorities. Universal access within a school also means that students won't have to face any stigma that may be associated with participation in the meals program.

It's worth noting that free and reduced-price meal eligibility is often used as a basis for targeting education funding or identifying low-income students so they can receive other services provided through schools. In fact, legislation now before the DC Council would provide supplemental funding to individual schools based on the number of low-income students. Since schools operating under the community eligibility option are *not allowed* to collect school meal applications, they will not have this data available. As the District moves to target more educational resources to high-poverty schools, it will be important to account for the community eligibility option in any new legislation's definition of low-income students.