

H.R. 1—the harmful megabill President Trump signed into law on July 4, 2025—includes cuts to critical programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid. Those cuts may impact student eligibility for free school meals and schools’ ability to offer meals to all students at no cost.

SNAP Defined

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) serves as the nation’s first line of defense against hunger, helping to decrease the number of households dealing with food insecurity. The program provides monthly food benefits (via an EBT card) to help eligible households buy groceries.

The Impact of SNAP and Medicaid Cuts on Students and Schools

Many students are automatically eligible for free school meals because their families participate in SNAP and, in some cases, Medicaid. If families lose those benefits, students can lose their automatic eligibility for free school meals.

When this happens, families likely will be required to fill out a school meal application. There are many reasons why some families may not apply, like language barriers, paperwork challenges, fear of negative consequences, stigma, or simply being overwhelmed, and this is where students tend to fall through the cracks. The result is that these students who should receive free meals won’t get them—at home or at school.

“But my school offers free meals to all students through CEP.” Schools that participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) can offer free meals to all students without collecting individual meal applications. However, CEP eligibility is based on an Identified Student Percentage (ISP)—which is the share of students who are identified through participation in critical programs, like SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and, in some cases, Medicaid. When students lose these benefits, a school’s ISP can drop, putting its CEP eligibility at risk. Those schools that no longer qualify for CEP may not be able to provide free meals to all students.

Losing CEP also can strain school budgets that rely on federal CEP-related funding to purchase healthier food, maintain kitchen equipment, and pay staff.

What this means for . . .

Educators

When students are hungry, they may have trouble concentrating and regulating their emotions and behavior. Educators will need to spend more time managing disruptions and keeping students on task, which takes time away from instruction and affects the learning environment for the whole class.

Foodservice Professionals

Foodservice staff, whose priority is to prepare and serve meals, may be pulled away to process applications, manage meal charges, and follow up on unpaid meal debt. In the worst cases, staff may face the impossible task of denying a child the same meal their classmates are eating.

What You Can Do

Share Your Story! Every conversation builds support. Speak to families, community members, and your elected officials about how hunger shows up in schools and how free school meals benefit students and educators. Strategic storytelling and clear communication can help families understand the value of school meals and inspire them to speak up. Consider also sharing your story with us at NEAFoodies@nea.org.

Help Your School Participate in CEP. Check your school's [eligibility for the Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\)](#). If your school qualifies, encourage school administrators to apply so that all students can receive meals at no cost. Every new school that joins the program strengthens the case for expanded access nationwide and makes it more difficult to dismantle.

Lock in Your School's CEP Eligibility. CEP is on a four-year cycle. Schools and districts must reelect/reapply at the end of each cycle. If your school's ISP has increased and is set to renew in the next year, advocate for your school to reapply during the annual CEP election period to restart the cycle at the higher ISP.

Work the State Lever (Often Faster Than Congress). Advocate for state-funded universal school meals, which provide all students with meals at no cost even if CEP eligibility or reimbursement weakens. To check out the states that offer or are close to offering universal school meals, visit nea.org/nutrition.

Push Congress for a "Schools + Child Hunger" Fix.

Reverse Harmful Cuts to SNAP: [Visit the NEA Action Center](#) and send a letter to your representative.

Prevent CEP Losses: Call your representatives and ask them to sponsor or support legislation that helps schools keep CEP when students temporarily lose SNAP/Medicaid. Recommended reforms include extending the CEP cycle from four to six years and allowing schools to renew using a prior higher ISP when declines are clearly due to benefit eligibility changes rather than actual changes in family income. This helps schools maintain eligibility longer and protects access to free meals.

Support Universal School Meals: [Visit the NEA Action Center](#) and email your senators and representative to support universal school meals.

Talking Points

Share what you know with others and move them to take action. Here are some key messages you can use in your conversations.

State the Problem.

When politicians cut SNAP (and Medicaid), students can lose automatic access to free school meals. Families get pushed into paperwork, and students fall through the cracks—even when they still qualify.

Explain Why This Matters.

Hungry students can't learn. When they are worried about food, students can't focus and regulate emotions—and educators lose instructional time managing disruptions.

Identify the Goal.

Every student—no matter their race, zip code, or family income—should be able to count on a free, healthy meal at school so that they can learn.

Take Action.

Tell Congress to reverse harmful SNAP cuts and protect free school meals. Share what hunger looks like in your school/community to build pressure for action.