

2.3M NY kids may lose free school meal access



Under a proposal before Congress to cut \$12 billion in school meal programs, over 12 million children across the country, including 2.3 million in New York, could lose access to free school meals, according to a study by the Food Research & Action Center and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

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Proposal before Congress seeks \$12 billion in cuts

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Over 12 million children across the country, including 2.3 million in New York, could lose access to free school meals if a proposal to tighten school meal program funding is passed by Congress, according to a recently released study by the Food Research & Action Center and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

House Budget Committee Chair Jodey Arrington has proposed \$12 billion in cuts to school meal programs, which would endanger the USDA's Community Eligibility Program and cause financial strain on families throughout the U.S., the analysis states.

Here's what to know about the program and which New York schools would be affected.

What is the Community Eligibility Program?

Authorized by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the Community Eligibility Program, or CEP, is a federal assistance program “that allows highpoverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students,” Hunger Solutions New York says.

Currently, any school, group of schools or district that has 25% or more students directly certified for free school meals will receive free meals, which includes children whose household participates in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations and, in certain circumstances, Medicaid, as well as children who are homeless, runaways, migrants, in foster care or participating in Head Start.

The minimum identified student percentage was lowered from 40% to 25% by the Biden administration in 2023, according to the USDA.

However, Arrington’s recent proposal would increase the CEP eligibility threshold to 60%, cutting over 24,000 schools nationwide from participating in the program, the study states.

“CEP is a win for students, families and schools,” the analysis says. “CEP gives all students access to the nutritious school breakfasts and lunches they need to be well-nourished and ready to learn, while reducing the stigma often present in school cafeterias when schools have to track students’ eligibility for free, reduced-price and paid meals. When students have access to free meals at school, families have lower grocery bills and more money in their household budgets to help make ends meet.”

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How many New York schools would be affected?

In the 2023-2024 school year, 4,200 schools adopted the CEP in New York, reaching 2,356,379 students each school day, according to the analysis. Under the proposed cuts, 1,784 schools within 550 school districts would no longer be able to provide free school meals through the CEP with 908,567 children losing access to free programs.

Emily Barnes reports on consumer-related issues for the USA TODAY Network’s New York Connect Team, focusing on scam and recall-related topics. Follow her on X and Instagram @byemilybarnes. Get in touch at ebarnes@gannett.com.

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The Food Research & Action Center and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

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