



Meals Count Case Study



Expanding universal free meals with free, online tool for school districts

Making school meals free for all students – and an integral part of the learning environment – not only reduces paperwork and other administrative burdens for districts, it leads to better student health and academic outcomes, helps advance racial equity, and builds fiscally stronger school nutrition programs.

What is “CEP”?

The Community Eligibility Provision or “CEP” is one of the USDA’s alternative claiming provisions that makes it fiscally viable for districts to serve free meals to all students at eligible schools. To learn eligibility requirements and how to apply for CEP, please see [Appendix A](#).

What are the benefits of operating under CEP?

CEP benefits both schools and students. These benefits include:

- 🍎 Provide free breakfast and lunch to all students at eligible schools.
- 🍎 Elimination of school meal debt.
- 🍎 Significantly reduce collection of meal applications.
- 🍎 Streamlined administrative paperwork.
- 🍎 Shorter meal lines resulting in more time to eat.
- 🍎 Increased meal participation from decreased stigma.
- 🍎 Increase revenue and guaranteed reimbursement percentages for four years.
- 🍎 Students gain access to consistent nutrition and:
 - 🍊 Have better health!
 - 🍊 Perform better academically!
 - 🍊 Have higher attendance!

“The more schools that can get on CEP the better. There is a fear of the application process, but having the *Meals Count* tool is reassuring.”

-Amy Haessly
Director of Child Nutrition
Fallbrook Union Elementary
School District

Child Hunger and Racial Equity

Equal access to adequate nutrition is a critical strategy to advance racial equity in schools. While hunger affects students of all ages, races and ethnicities, nutrition insecurity disproportionately affects students of color. By offering universal free meals at more schools through expansion of CEP, districts can transform their students’ access to nutrition and ability to learn.

Eligibility for CEP

To be eligible to operate CEP, an individual school – or group of schools – must have an “Identified Student Percentage” (ISP) of 40% or higher of students who may be directly certified, meaning they automatically qualify for free school meals based on enrollment in another federally means-tested program or because of their current life situation.

- 🍎 To learn which students can be included in the ISP, see [Appendix B](#).
- 🍎 To learn how ISP is calculated, see [Appendix C](#).
- 🍎 To learn what school grouping is, see [Appendix D](#).

What is *Meals Count*?

Meals Count is a collaboration between [Open San Diego](#), [Nourish California](#), [San Diego Hunger Coalition](#), and [No Kid Hungry](#).

The [Meals Count](#) website features a free, interactive, and customizable online tool that enables school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education to maximize CEP eligibility and funding, making universal free meal programs both attainable and sustainable at more schools.

Meals Count






How does Meals Count work?

[Meals Count](#) is driven by an open-source software application that quickly calculates optimal groupings of schools – with CEP-eligible and nearly CEP-eligible sites – so that districts can easily explore different scenarios to identify which groupings will make CEP the most financially viable. Using data for each school, including total enrolled students, total identified student percentage, and average daily number of breakfasts and lunches served, the Meals Count tool will recommend groupings with the highest potential reimbursements. Users of the tool can adjust which schools are included in grouping scenarios and are able to customize their own groupings as well.

Before Meals Count, figuring out which schools to combine to maximize eligibility and reimbursement was a manual, complex and confusing process that prevented most school districts from fully leveraging the CEP program.

Where does the data in Meals Count come from?

The [Meals Count](#) tool calculates optimal school groupings using pre-loaded data from multiple, reliable sources:

-  **School Enrollment Data:** California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS)
-  **Estimated Identified Student Percentages (ISPs):** [Food Research & Action Center \(FRAC\)](#) state-level data on CalFresh/SNAP and CalWORKS/TANF participation
-  **Average Daily Meal Participation:** California Department of Education data analyzed by [Nourish California](#)

Case Study: Fallbrook Union Elementary School District, San Diego County

Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD) is a rural and diverse district located 40 miles north of the City of San Diego. The K-8 district serves the communities of Fallbrook, De Luz, Rainbow, some unincorporated areas of North County San Diego, and the U.S. Marine Corps Base at Camp Pendleton. The district is comprised of 10 schools, including two on Camp Pendleton.

Before Meals Count: 4 CEP Schools

Prior to using the Meals Count tool, Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD) operated universal free meals through CEP at four schools during the 2019-2020 school year and **had seen a 30-40% increase in meal participation at CEP schools** that offered free meals to all students.

Even so, FUESD's Director of Child Nutrition Amy Haessly was approaching the 2020-2021 school year with **more than \$49,000 in unpaid meal debt**. Amy had two goals in mind: 1) eliminate the \$49,000 meal debt, and 2) include the entire district in CEP. Amy spent a long time trying to determine the participation levels needed for the district's nutrition program to break-even but was having trouble including the two schools on the military base with very low ISPs (5.2% and 4.5%) in groupings with their "in-town" schools that had CEP-qualifying ISPs above 40%.











"We had a problem with negative balances, so it made sense to go all CEP, if possible, to increase participation district-wide and get rid of the bad debt."

Using Meals Count to Optimize CEP Grouping & Funding:

This first set of groupings returned by the [Meals Count](#) tool (see Table 1 on the next page) provided FUESD with the highest possible reimbursement rates across three groupings but left out the military base schools. As mentioned, FUESD's schools on Camp Pendleton (Mary Fay Pendleton Elementary & San Onofre Elementary) had the lowest Identified Student Percentages in the district, significantly reducing the average across all schools. However, these military base schools also held the largest debt balances from unpaid meals, so including the military base schools in a CEP grouping would ultimately outweigh the financial impact of a slightly lower ISP.





Table 1: Meals Count Grouping Recommendation #1

	Meals Count Group 1	Meals Count Group 2	Meals Count Group 3	Schools Not Included in Groupings
Schools in Grouping	 La Paloma Elementary	 Santa Margarita Academy  Maie Ellis Elementary  James E. Potter Intermediate	 Fallbrook STEM Academy  Live Oak Elementary  William H. Frazier Elem  Mike Choate	 Mary Fay Pendleton Elementary  San Onofre Elementary
Identified Student Percentage (ISP)	52.64%	62.32%	61.49%	Mary Fay: 5.2% San Onofre: 4.5%
Reimbursement Rate	84.22%	99.71%	98.38%	Mary Fay: 7.2% San Onofre: 8.3%

Amy reached out to the team at Open San Diego who worked with her to expand the [Meals Count](#) tool to incorporate lower ISP schools and create grouping recommendations that included the entire district. As shown in Table 3, the Director of Child Nutrition combined all 10 schools in the district into one CEP grouping. This not only resulted in the highest overall reimbursement rate across all schools, but it also eliminated their entire \$49,000 meal debt.






Table 2: Meals Count Grouping Recommendation #2

	Meals Count - Final Grouping Selected	Schools Not Included in Groupings
Schools in Grouping	 Entire district (10 schools) in one CEP grouping. 	No schools left out.
ISP	44.9%	
Reimbursement	71.84%	

After Meals Count: All 10 schools on CEP!

Thanks to the Meals Count tool, FUESD’s Director of Child Nutrition identified a way to sustainably operate CEP and serve universal free meals at every school in the district, ensuring that all FUESD students will eat for free for the next four school years. Meals Count validated Amy’s preliminary estimates and gave her confidence when presenting her recommendations to the School Board.

Outcomes:

-  6 more schools added; entire district (10 schools) now CEP.
-  Eliminated unpaid meal debt of \$49,000.
-  FUESD can serve free breakfast and lunch to over 5,000 students each day.
-  Less paperwork and administration.
-  Quicker serving lines so students have longer to eat.

“Meals Count was helpful because trying to figure out school groupings is basically a big puzzle and a confusing strategy game.”

Due to COVID and distance learning, Amy has not yet seen the full impact of CEP across her entire district. Given the results she saw with a 30-40% increase in meal participation at her four existing CEP schools, Amy stated, “The more people that can get on CEP, the better.” Amy plans to continue using the Meals Count tool to recalculate FUESD’s ISP on an annual basis to ensure the district continues to optimize its CEP funding. She explained how, with CEP, the United States is moving in the right direction towards equitable child nutrition and said, “I think there is a fear of the application process, but having the Meals Count tool is reassuring.”

San Diego Hunger Coalition thanks Amy Haessly and Fallbrook Union Elementary School District for their time and feedback about Meals Count and for sharing their data for this case study.



APPENDIX

A. How to Apply for CEP

Schools with identified student percentages of 40% or higher are eligible to apply for CEP. Complete the CEP Application Checklist found in the Download Forms section: [Child Nutrition Information and Payment System \(CNIPS\)](#).

- 🍎 Form SNP-71 & SNP-19, mail together to Nutrition Services Division
- 🍎 Form SNP-55, upload to the CNIPS as attachment
- 🍎 Upload all source documents to CNIPS:
 - CALPADS extracts
 - Local county direct certification lists
 - Foster, homeless/runaway, migrant, Head Start student lists

B. What is an Identified Student?

Identified students are automatically eligible and directly certified for free school meals without a paper application. Identified students are categorically eligible and identified based on their participation (or a household member's participation) in one or more of the following means-tested programs:

- 🍎 CalFresh (California's name for SNAP)
- 🍎 CalWORKS (California's name for TANF)
- 🍎 Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)
- 🍎 Medi-Cal (California's name for Medicaid)

Students are also directly certified for free meals and considered "identified students" if they are:

- 🍎 In foster care
- 🍎 In Head Start/Early Head Start
- 🍎 Experiencing homelessness
- 🍎 Migrant

Students are directly certified through a data-matching process conducted by school districts using data from their county's department of social or welfare services and using the California Department of Education's California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS).

C. How is ISP Calculated?

The identified student percentage (ISP) is the percentage of a school's total enrolled students who are directly certified to receive free school meals. **To operate CEP, an individual school or group of schools must have an ISP of 40%.** ISP is calculated by:

$$ISP = \frac{\text{number of directly certified or "identified" students}}{\text{total enrollment}}$$

D. What is CEP Grouping?

The USDA allows local educational agencies (LEAs), such as school districts and county offices of education, to group schools together to expand CEP eligibility to more schools and/or to maximize reimbursements. Grouping also allows an LEA to include schools in CEP that have an ISP lower than 40% if, when grouped together, all schools combined meet the 40% minimum ISP.

Calculating ISP for group of schools:

1. Sum the total number of identified students across a group.
2. Sum the total enrollment across a group.
3. Determine the group's ISP by dividing total identified students by total group enrollment.

	Identified Students	Total School Enrollment	ISP
School A	60	120	50%
School B	38	100	38%
School C	150	200	75%
GROUPING OF SCHOOLS	60+38+150= 248	120+100+200= 420	248/420= 59%

Note that this is a **weighted average**, which is different from averaging the ISPs of all schools in a group.

