

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



FIGHTING *for* PENNSYLVANIA FAMILIES

School Modernization and Efficient Access to Lunches for Students (MEALS) Act, School MEALS Act of 2019

School meals play a critical role in the fight against hunger for children across the Nation. **Direct certification** and **community eligibility** are two critical school meal simplification tools that work to ensure the most vulnerable children have access to free school meals. Through direct certification, a simplified enrollment process, school districts use data matching procedures to approve eligible students for free school meals without families completing a school meals application. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows high-need school districts to offer meals at no charge to all students and eliminates the need for school meal applications.

Both direct certification and CEP have transformed school nutrition programs, increasing access to school breakfast and lunch for more students, reducing administrative work and eliminating unpaid meal debt.

Still, too often, many school districts have not been able to adopt CEP, and many others have ineffective direct certification processes. To make sure school districts have access to these critical simplification tools and to make these programs more efficient, the School MEALS Act contains a number of provisions to strengthen direct certification and community eligibility.

To ensure all eligible children benefit from direct certification, the School MEALS Act

- **Provides \$25 million for Direct Certification Improvements**
The MEAL Act provides \$22 million in grant funding to support states in improving their direct certification processes and \$3 million to support USDA technical assistance activities.
- **Designates \$2 million to Support the Direct Certification of Native American Children**
The MEAL Act sets aside \$2 million of the funds provided for improvement grants to assist tribal organizations establish mechanisms for direct certification.
- **Expedites Performance Progress**
If states do not directly certify at least 95 percent of children living in households receiving SNAP benefits, they must develop a continuous improvement plan (CIP). The MEAL Act would require states to implement their improvement measures within three years, encouraging states to act promptly on their proposed changes.

To strengthen CEP adoption and implementation, the School MEALS Act

- **Eliminates the June 30 CEP Application Deadline**
The MEAL Act would eliminate the June 30 deadline for school districts to elect CEP for the upcoming school year. Creating an artificial deadline creates an undue administrative burden and limits the ability of high-poverty school districts to adopt the provision.
- **Expands the Eligibility Data Timeframe**
Data used to determine eligibility for CEP must come from April 1 of the school year prior to implementing CEP. The MEAL Act would expand this timeframe to the end of the prior school year. This change will give school districts more time to conduct data matching and gather additional documentation to ensure all identified students are accurately counted.