Prince Edward Schools Extends Community Eligibility Program

Middle school now participates in the program while high school waits

Nick Lewis

Prince Edward County public schools announced on the first of August that students in the middle school will be eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). High school students will have to fill out an application to be eligible for reduced or free lunches, but next year will also take part in CEP. The distract extended CEP for the elementary school this year after success last year. “We felt that at the elementary school level especially there where our identified students (number) was so high that we felt like this would benefit everybody,” said Supervisor of Food Service Bruce Davis.

The CEP is a program used in school districts where there is a large area of low-income families. Students who are eligible for this program will be served free breakfast and lunch. The CEP then reimburses the school based on a formula that depends on the percentage of students using the program and what other programs the school uses.

The prices of the breakfast and lunches vary depending on the district, with some districts in the state of Virginia serving free lunch and other districts making the lunches as high as $4 according to the 2017-18 paid lunch report on the Virginia Department of Education website. In Prince Edward County last school year, elementary school students who were eligible for CEP paid nothing for breakfast or lunch, while middle school and high school students paid $2.30 for lunch according to the 2017-18 paid lunch report.

Of the total students in the Prince Edward school district, 1,521 of the 2,072 or 73.41 percent of the students that attend are eligible for a free lunch. While 44 (2.12 percent) of students in the Prince Edward country school district are eligible for a reduced lunch.

According to the CEP Monthly Federal Estimator Worksheet, Prince Edward County gets $3.00 reimbursed for every student that would get a free meal in a school that doesn’t use CEP. They get reimbursed $.30 for students who would typically pay full price. Depending on how severe the need is for breakfast, depends on the amount of reimbursement they get. A non-severe need district would get $1.62 in reimbursement and the severe need districts would get $1.93 in reimbursement. The rates for the CEP reimbursement starts at less than 60 percent of student eligible, then moves to 60 percent of more, and ends with the maximum rate which would be 100 percent.

The reimbursement money goes directly back into food services, not the district itself. “Food Service is its own entity. We’re under the umbrella of the school system we follow the same rules, we are governed by the school, but we get no county money. So, none of the budget the superintendent makes every year for the school system includes food service,” said Davis.

Davis explained that once the CEP was implemented district wide he would like to look into starting to serve dinner for those students who stay after late for extra-curriculars. “I think the dinner program is going to be the next project, because that’s where a lot of our students are missing out also,” said Davis.

Besides the CEP, Prince Edward County schools works with FACES and their backpack program to help get food to kids who might not have any at home. “FACES works with the school to identify students who are uncertain of getting regular meals during weekends,” said President of FACES Ellery Sedgewick. The backpack program serves about 40 students at the elementary and middle school level and inside the backpacks, the student is given food to cover 2 of each meal for the weekend.

After the first year of the program, Davis believes that some improvements can be made among the community regarding attitude towards the CEP. “I think we need to communicate to our parents a little more that it’s not something to be ashamed about or to feel like their taking away from others,” said Davis. He explained the program is not about taking away from others, but “it’s about a community bringing them all together (the students) to eat together, I think it takes away that stigma of cafeteria food and it brings more of a community-based lunch together that we can all sit down and have the same thing.”

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