

School Year 2025-26 Frequently Asked Questions for Districts That Participate in Michigan School Meals

School breakfast and lunch have been available to all public school students at no cost to families in Michigan starting in the 2023-24 school year. These meals are funded through a combination of the state program called Michigan School Meals (MSM) and the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The MSM program is funded yearly on the state fiscal year budget cycle which ends this year on Tuesday, September 30, 2025.

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) understands that as the 2025-26 school year begins, without a fiscal year 2026 state school aid budget passed by the legislature and signed by the governor, districts are faced with uncertainty around their school meal programs. MDE strongly recommends that local districts offer free meals at the beginning of this school year to take advantage of the student health, attendance, and performance benefits of school meals.

MDE wishes to caution districts from making too quick a decision regarding CEP or MSM participation.

The Michigan Department of Education reviewed the federal program regulations and identified some frequently asked questions for districts to continue to offer free meals at the beginning of the 2025-26 school year while maintaining federal program compliance.

My district is in CEP and will stay in CEP district-wide. Here is what that means for you.

No changes to current CEP status means:

- The district will continue the use of the federal CEP program for all buildings for SY 2025-2026.
- All students will continue to have the opportunity to eat free breakfast and free lunch.
- Reimbursement will be based on the approved Identified Student Percentage (ISP)¹ and claiming percentages.
- The district must continue to collect [Education Benefit Forms](#) and refresh [Direct Certification Reports](#).

My district is non-CEP (Traditional Claim) and plans to continue to participate in MSM. That's great news! Here is what you need to know to start the school year.

MDE encourages all districts to use MSM in August and September 2025. In this case, districts will need to do the following:

- Provide meals to all students at no charge to families to start SY 2025-26.
- Traditional 30-day carryover² applies for applications approved in SY 2024-2025.

- Count and claim meals based on free, reduced-price, and paid eligibility the entire school year.
- Collect and process [Education and Nutrition Benefit Applications](#) and refresh [Direct Certification Reports](#) through the entire school year.

My district is in CEP and qualifies at a low ISP. Here is what you need to know.

- Districts may choose to stop CEP mid-year and return to standard counting and claiming procedures. Districts that are considering stopping CEP in the middle of the school year **must** contact MDE to receive technical assistance.
- Provide meals to all students at no charge to families to start SY 2025-26.
- Continue to provide meals for all students at no charge in buildings continuing in CEP once the district determines it will stop CEP in some buildings.
- Traditional 30-day carryover² applies for [Education and Nutrition Benefit Applications](#) approved in SY 2024-25. This does not apply for [Education Benefit Forms](#).
- Collect and process Education and Nutrition Benefit Applications and refresh [Direct Certification Reports](#) through the entire school year in buildings that will not continue with CEP.
- Collect and process Education Benefit Forms and refresh Direct Certification Reports in buildings continuing with CEP.
- At least 30 operating days is required for the district to resume standard counting and claiming procedures.
- During this timeframe to resume standard procedures, students must continue to receive meals at no charge, so their meal service routine is not disrupted.
- Meals are claimed using the free/paid CEP claiming percentages until the transition to standard meal counting and claiming is complete.

Is there an option for districts to opt out of MSM or no longer participate in CEP before school starts in August/September 2025?

MDE does not encourage districts to opt out of MSM prior to the final fiscal year 2026 budget announcement. But, in a situation where a district decides to opt out of CEP, to be in compliance with federal regulation, the district must:

- Districts may choose to stop CEP mid-year and return to standard counting and claiming procedures. Districts that are considering stopping CEP in the middle of the school year **must** contact MDE to receive technical assistance.
- Let families know immediately of any changes to programming and how the meal program will work.
- Count and claim student meals based on the eligibility categories of free, reduced-price, or paid starting the first day of school meal operation.

- Collect and process [Education and Nutrition Benefit Applications](#) and refresh [Direct Certification Reports](#) through the entire school year.
- Note: 30-day carryover² doesn't apply if the district only collected Education Benefit Forms in SY 2024-25.

What happens if a district opts out of CEP and/or MSM prior to the state fiscal year 2026 budget being finalized and then wants to go back to offering free meals to all students during the 2025-2026 school year?

While any opportunity for students to have access to free meals is best, it is not recommended to opt out and then try to opt back in to free meals due to the confusion it causes for families. In the event a district chooses to do this, it is important for the district to understand:

- Opting back into CEP after opting out for SY 2025-26 is not permissible per USDA regulations. The earliest a district may opt back in would be SY 2026-27.
- Buildings not participating in CEP are categorized as Traditional Claim and must collect and process [Education and Nutrition Benefit Applications](#) and refresh [Direct Certification Reports](#) through the entire school year.
- Buildings not participating in CEP are not to collect Education Benefit Forms.
- Buildings not participating in CEP must count and claim all student meals based on the eligibility categories of free, reduced-price, or paid.

¹ The ISP is calculated by using April 1 data and taking the total number directly certified students plus the migrant, homeless, runaway, manual additions, and foster students, and dividing that number by the number of students with access to school lunch (in most cases, your enrollment). Districts can elect as the entire district, a single school, group(s) of schools or any combination of single schools and group(s) of schools. Districts elect CEP for four-year cycles. Participating districts and schools can end CEP participation at any time or can begin a new four-year cycle early if the ISP increases.

² Districts may carry over a child's eligibility status for the first 30 operating days or until the district makes a new eligibility determination for the current school year, whichever comes first. Carryover allows students to continue receiving school meal benefits while families complete and submit, and schools process applications.

Please contact the Office of Nutrition Services School Nutrition Programs unit at MDE-SchoolNutrition@Michigan.gov for more information.