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Dustin Hare, Economic Security Policy Advisor

Kansas Action for Children

dustin@kac.org

Verbal Proponent Testimony on HB 2637 (Community Eligibility Provision Participation)

House Committee on Education

Chairperson Estes and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of HB 2637, which would require all Kansas school districts to consider participation in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Nearly 1 in 5 Kansas kids are food insecure, meaning they don't always know where their next meal will come from and sometimes must skip meals.¹ The one place where kids know they're going to have a meal waiting for them every single day is at school. However, school meals still cost money for many families, which takes away from their at-home food budget. **The CEP program allows qualifying school districts to make breakfast and lunch free for every student, putting more money back into families' pockets to help them provide food at home.**

CEP is a voluntary program, which means not every school district may have it on their radar. **This could explain why most eligible schools in Kansas are not participating in the program. In fact, Kansas has the fourth lowest CEP participation rate in the country, with only 32% of eligible schools participating.** This is half the national participation rate of 64.4%, and some states (New Mexico, Vermont, and West Virginia) have rates near 100%.²

During the 2024-2025 school year, around 59,000 Kansas kids were receiving free meals through CEP. If all eligible schools participated, an estimated 357,000 Kansas kids would receive free meals.³ This could be a huge financial benefit for many families, especially those who make just barely too much to qualify for free or reduced-price meals. For example, a family of four who makes \$62,000 per year and has two kids in the Shawnee Mission School District

¹ KIDS COUNT. (September 2025). *Children age 18 and below without health insurance in Kansas.*

<https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/33-children-age-18-and-below-without-health-insurance?loc=18&loct=2#detailed/2/18/false/1096,2545,1095,2048,1729,37,871,870,573,869/any/305,306>

² Hysom, E. K., & Bylander, A. (2025). *Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools.* Food and Research Action Council. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/CEP-Report-2025.pdf>

³ Kansas Appleseed. (2025). *A Pathway to Universal Free Meals for All Kansas Children: The State of School Meals in Kansas.* kansappleseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Kansas-Appleseed-Report-on-Universal-Free-Meals_.docx.pdf

would save \$1,636 on breakfast and lunch over the course of a 186-day school year.^{4,5} That's a significant amount of money that can be spent on food at home and other everyday necessities.

Beyond saving families money, CEP provides additional benefits that are worth considering.

First, it requires participating schools to serve breakfast. It has long been established that kids do better in school when they're not struggling with an empty stomach. Extending free lunches to more students would improve educational outcomes for many children. Second, it would eradicate the stigma historically associated with free and reduced lunches, since every kid in qualifying schools would receive free school meals. Third, it would wipe out lunch debt and eliminate the need for schools to have to track down payment. Finally, auto-enrolling every kid in qualifying schools in the free lunch program would also eliminate the need for applications. This would reduce the paperwork and administrative burden otherwise inherent to school nutrition programs.

Importantly, HB 2637 does not require school districts to adopt CEP; rather, it requires them to take a close look at the program to determine if it is feasible for them. Once they do a deep dive, several districts will likely find that they'll save money by adopting CEP, especially those with direct-certification rates above 60%. During the 2024-2025 school year, 21 schools with rates above 60% were not participating in the program despite the likelihood that they'll receive full reimbursement for every meal they provide. HB 2637 would ensure those schools are aware of the program by requiring them to consider whether CEP is right for them.

For all the reasons mentioned here, we believe it is important to get more schools enrolled in CEP, and we believe HB 2637 is a useful way to make that happen. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important topic. You can reach me at dustin@kac.org if you have any additional questions.

About Kansas Action for Children

Kansas Action for Children is a nonprofit policy organization working to make Kansas a place where every child has the opportunity to grow up healthy and thrive. We work across the political spectrum to improve the lives of Kansas children through bipartisan advocacy, partnership, and information-sharing on key issues, including early learning and education, health, and economic security for families.

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2026). *2026 Poverty Guidelines: 48 Contiguous States*. aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/b1bfa16b20ae9b89d525bc35de7c1643/detailed-guidelines-2026.pdf

⁵ Shawnee Mission School District. (2025). *2025-2026 Breakfast and Lunch Prices*. smsd.org/about/departments/sns/prices