

Cuts to USDA Funding Causing Concerns for Athens-Clarke County School Lunch Program

By Lauren Chapman

A college student with a single, non-working mom. The father of two foster kids. A mother recovering from the 2008 financial collapse. These are some of the many people who were able to benefit from the Free School Lunch program, which could be on the chopping block. These potential cuts could affect hundreds of children in Athens-Clarke County schools.

Since 2010, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) has guaranteed millions of students across America free breakfast and lunch while at school. This program, which is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), allows any schools with an identified student percentage (the number of low-income students) of 25% or higher to apply to get free breakfast and lunch for their entire school population.



The USDA uses the following formulas to calculate whether or not a school is eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision. The USDA changed the Identified Student Percentage in 2023 from 50 % to 25% to allow for more schools to participate. Graphic created by Lauren Chapman.

According to the USDA, they spent \$17.2 billion on 4.6 billion school lunches in 2023. This averages out to approximately \$3.74 per lunch.

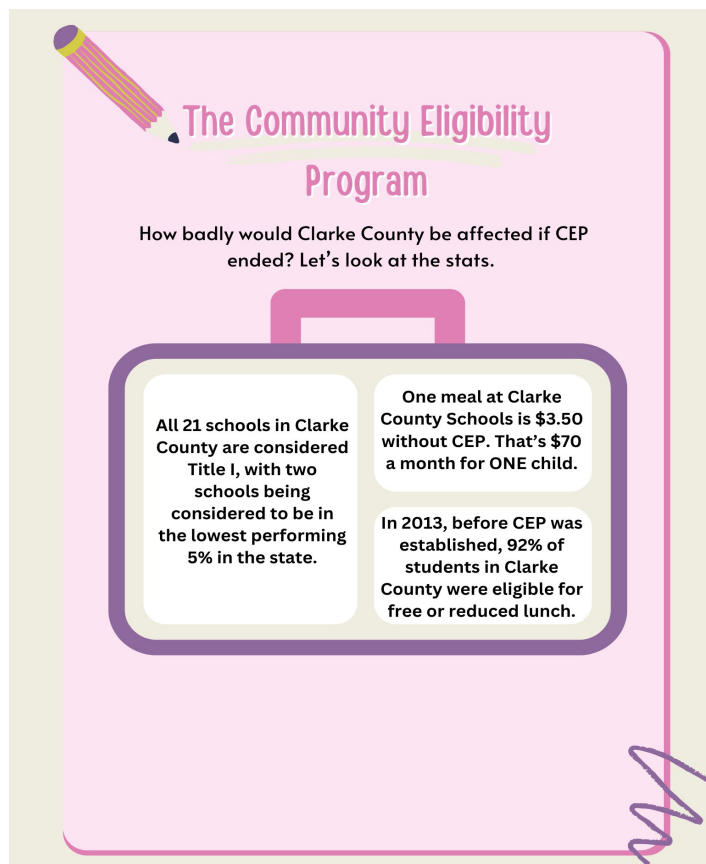
“You go to school, you have to be there all day,” Liz Radford, a former recipient of the program said. “By law you have to be there, and you get lunch. Lunch is provided to everyone.”

The county Radford lived in qualified for the provision, therefore allowing her to receive free lunch. Before she came to the University of Georgia to get her degree, she grew up in the small town of Scott, GA with a single mother.

A Deeper Dive into the Free Lunch Program

Schools are reimbursed for the number of meals they serve and receive an extra six cents per meal served as well. Clarke County schools are just some of many schools across America that adopted this program. However, this program is now in danger of being cancelled due to a series of rollbacks by the Trump Administration.

According to the 2020 census, 26.3% of Clarke County lives in poverty. Every school in Clarke County qualifies for this program, with some having as high as a 92% rate of low-income students.



Children in need possibly losing their only meal for the day is one potential consequence of the cancellation of this program, but there are other consequences as well. One benefit of school lunch programs is that students are guaranteed to eat healthy at least once per day. According to the Food Research and Access Center, children who eat school lunch are more likely to have less diet-related health problems and are more likely to consume necessary foods for their diet, such as fruit, vegetables and milk.

Meg Vanderbilt, a teacher at Clarke Central High School, has over a decade of experience working in Title I schools. Title I schools receive federal funding to help low-income students. Before coming to Clarke County, she worked in New Orleans, which had a similar situation to Clarke County schools. Both school systems are a part of the Community Eligibility Provision.

“I know that there are huge academic benefits as well as socio-emotional benefits, whether that’s food or tutoring or whatever it is,” Vanderbilt said. “They are so much more likely to succeed if they feel like someone cares about them. I just know we will see an increase in behavioral referrals for sure because hungry children are naughty children. Kids in general can’t regulate and function at an adult level, and that’s ok. That’s how they should be.”

Video Element:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gAcSPpXPgX6QPhpnpebCRHQkq3DqZonC/view?usp=sharing>

A Mother’s Saving Grace

While some families may not have an income low enough to be considered living in poverty (which for a family of four in the state of Georgia is \$40,188), many families are still considered low-income and need this program as a financial break. Camille Staley falls into this category. Staley is a mother of two who went through a financial hardship circa 2010-2017 due to the financial collapse of 2008. Her family’s financial situation qualified her first child to receive free lunch, and eventually their financial status helped her child’s school qualify for CEP, which Clarke County adopted in 2015. Staley appreciates the relief and believes that amount of money adds up when having multiple kids and calculating it long-term.

“\$3 a day, five days a week is only \$15,” Staley said. “We probably could have afforded it. But if you added that up for the month, it’s \$60. I mean that pays a bill you know? That’ll cover a household utility or something.”

She also notes that it is already expensive to feed a child at home, so a weight is taken off parents’ shoulders with the free lunch program.

“Our food budget is probably at least \$1000 a month,” Staley said. “So having \$500 a month subsidized is an incredible help.”

Should a Norm for Some be a Norm for All?

Free lunch is also extended to children in the foster care system. Sam Pennington fosters two elementary children. His wife is also a teacher that has some low-income students. He says that the children qualify for free lunch due to their status as a foster child.

“A lot of parents, especially if you’re in a free and reduced lunch situation, you don’t have the opportunity to send your kids to private school,” Pennington said. “You probably don’t have the resources to homeschool them because you’re probably working. Defacto, you are forced into something. The notion that they will not feed the children at public school is ridiculous.”

While Pennington said he and his wife are in the financial position that they could pay for their children’s lunch if the program is cancelled, he said he has no problem paying extra for the program if it means everyone gets fed.

“I think there are a lot of things that taxpayer money is wasted on,” Pennington said. “I do not think school lunches are one of those. I’ll even take it a step farther and say that I don’t think anyone should have to pay for a school lunch.”

Example Social Media Post (Next Page):

