UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

February 25, 2014

Dear Chief State School Officers:

As the school year progresses, we would like to thank you for the efforts that you, your staff, and the many dedicated education and school nutrition professionals in your States are making to ensure a healthy nutrition environment in schools. Thanks to these ongoing efforts, children have more nutritious options at lunch, and beginning this fall, will find healthier food and beverage options throughout the school campus. Your efforts are making the healthy choice the easy choice for our Nation's children in schools across the country.

We would also like to take this opportunity to remind you of a key element of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (the Act) and request your support with implementation. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the Act provides local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools in low-income areas with an alternative approach for operating school meal programs. In lieu of collecting individual applications for free and reduced-price meals, the CEP allows LEAs and schools meeting the eligibility requirements to use information from other means-tested programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Temporary Assistance Program for Needy Families (TANF), to determine the level of Federal funding for the school meal programs. Eligible schools are required to pay the difference between the level of financial resources allowed by law and the total cost of operating the programs. The CEP reduces the administrative burden for schools and allows them to offer free meals to all children.

The CEP has been phased in over the past three years. It is currently operating in 11 States, 600 LEAs, and 4,000 schools. The CEP will be available nationwide beginning July 1, 2014.

Benefits of the CEP include the following:

- *The CEP reduces administrative costs and paperwork.* Families do not need to turn in free and reduced-price meal applications, and schools do not need to process applications or conduct verification.
- *More children receive nutritious meals during the school day.* Early-adopting States have experienced increased school meals participation. Access to free, nutritious meals for all students also removes the stigma associated with only providing free and reduced-price meals to low-income students.
- *Creative meal service models are easier to implement.* The CEP can facilitate the adoption of creative approaches to meal service, such as breakfast in the classroom and "grab and go" kiosks.

- *Eliminates student-level meal charges.* The CEP makes meal counting and claiming easier and eliminates the need for schools to collect meal payments from students or to follow up on unpaid meal charges.

Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and not the U.S. Department of Education (ED), administers the Act, there is a connection between CEP and programs operated under Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended, because State educational agencies (SEAs) and LEAs often use free and reduced-price meal data to carry out certain Title I requirements. In particular, LEAs frequently use such data to rank their school attendance areas based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in order to determine a school's eligibility to receive Title I funds, to allocate funds to selected schools, and to calculate the amount of funds generated for Title I services to eligible private school students. For many LEAs, free and reduced-price meal data also are likely to be the best source for identifying economically disadvantaged students for purposes of meeting accountability and reporting requirements under Title I. Given these connections, ED has developed extensive and flexible guidance to show how SEAs and LEAs can successfully implement Title I requirements using free and reduced-price meal data that incorporate CEP data. This guidance is available at www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/13-0381guidance.doc. We strongly encourage SEAs to work with LEAs to develop similar approaches for any State and local funding sources that use free and reduced-price meal data.

Since nationwide implementation begins in the 2014–15 school year, schools and LEAs should begin reviewing the CEP and decide if it is right for them. For more information on the CEP visit www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/community-eligibility-provision. Successful implementation will require support not only from local administrators but also from school nutrition personnel, parents, teachers, and others involved in the school community, and we encourage all of these stakeholders to be engaged. Both the USDA and ED will support your efforts with training and technical assistance.

We appreciate your continuing dedication to creating a healthy school environment and improving children's health, and we encourage you to share this information with your districts and schools. Thank you for your attention to this critically important issue.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture

Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education