

PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES ON IMPLEMENTING UNIVERSAL FREE MEAL  
PROGRAMS: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

Terene Mullins Stiltner

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this multiple case, qualitative study was to understand the perspectives of the implementation of universal free meal programs (UFM) for participants at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia. The theory guiding this study was Maslow's hierarchy of needs as it describes the need for students to have their basic needs fulfilled before they begin progressing through other levels of the hierarchy. This study will address the central question of: 1) How do participants describe the process of implementing the CEP (Community Eligibility Provision) at the elementary school level? Guiding questions were used to investigate the requirements of the CEP, any related benefits or challenges, and how the CEP has influenced school culture. Data was collected through the administration of an open-ended questionnaire protocol via in-person interviews, written questionnaires, observations, and an exploration of related documents. Data analysis will then be conducted holistically through repeated readings and coding procedures.

*Keywords:* Community Eligibility Provision, universal free meals, hunger, food insecurity, achievement

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### **Dedication**

To my parents, Terry and Irene Mullins, and my grandmother, Betty Phipps: You have continuously encouraged and guided me through this process. You have educated me since day one. Thank you for believing in me and for showing me what a genuine educator is truly capable of, through those you have taught. You are the reason that I am who I am today and I hope you are proud.

To my husband, Joey Stiltner: You have given me love and support throughout this journey. Thank you for having faith in me and for encouraging me through your love. I will always be thankful for the sacrifices that you have made in order for me to pursue my goals.

To my children, Taryn, Reid, and Taylor: You are my reason for being. Thank you for your patience when I was working. Thank you for your love when I felt as though I was failing you. You bring me joy every single day. I am so blessed to be your mother and I hope that I am making you proud.

Thank you to my Lord and Savior for abundant blessings. My faith has grown throughout this process and for that, I am especially thankful. In difficult times and in celebratory times, I know that He is there with me.

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Furthermore, to my participants, thank you for your time and efforts to help me for making my study possible. I was humbled by your willingness to help me with my study. I appreciate your openness to share your personal experiences so that I could better how the CEP is being implemented.

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
Copyright Page.....	4
Dedication .....	5
Acknowledgments.....	6
Table of Contents .....	7
List of Tables .....	12
List of Figures .....	13
List of Abbreviations .....	14
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	15
Overview .....	15
Background .....	16
Historical.....	16
Social.....	17
Theoretical .....	19
Situation to Self.....	21
Problem Statement .....	22
Purpose Statement.....	23
Significance of the Study .....	24
Research Questions .....	25
Central Research Question.....	26
Research Sub-Question 1 .....	26
Research Sub-Question 2.....	27

Research Sub-Question 3 .....27

Research Sub-Question 4 .....27

Definitions.....28

Summary .....29

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....30

Overview .....30

Theoretical Framework .....30

    Physiological Needs .....33

    Human Motivation .....34

Related Literature.....36

    Food Insecurity .....37

    Background on School Meals .....46

    Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).....53

Summary .....62

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS .....64

Overview .....64

Design .....64

Research Questions .....66

Setting .....66

Participants.....67

Procedures .....68

The Researcher's Role .....69

Data Collection .....70

Open-Ended Questionnaires .....	70
Interviews.....	71
Document Analysis.....	75
Observations .....	76
Data Analysis .....	77
Trustworthiness.....	77
Credibility .....	78
Dependability and Confirmability .....	78
Transferability.....	78
Ethical Considerations .....	79
Summary .....	80
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .....	81
Overview.....	81
Participants.....	81
Eric .....	83
Haley .....	83
Veronica.....	83
Georgia.....	84
Cole .....	84
Tanya.....	85
Betsy .....	85
Rose.....	86
Pat .....	86

	10
Alex .....	86
Dorothy .....	87
Shelby .....	87
Jan .....	88
Michele .....	88
Kayla .....	88
Results .....	89
Theme Development .....	90
Research Question Responses .....	116
Summary .....	140
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION .....	142
Overview .....	142
Summary of Findings .....	142
Discussion .....	145
Empirical Discussion .....	146
Theoretical Discussion .....	149
Implications .....	150
Theoretical Implications .....	151
Empirical Implications .....	152
Practical Implications .....	153
Delimitations and Limitations .....	155
Recommendations for Future Research .....	156
Summary .....	157

REFERENCES .....	158
Appendix A: Liberty University IRB Approval Letter .....	189
Appendix B: Consent Form .....	190
Appendix C: School District Approval Letters to Conduct Research Study .....	193
Appendix D: Open-Ended Questionnaire .....	195
Appendix E: Interview Protocol for School Board Members' / Superintendents' Interviews ...	196
Appendix F: Interview Protocol for Food Service Managers' / Food Service Workers' Interviews.....	197
Appendix G: Interview Protocol for Administrators' / Teachers' Interviews .....	198
Appendix H: Observation Protocol UFM Observations .....	200
Appendix I: Template of Observation Prompts .....	201
Appendix J: Permission to Use Figure.....	202

### **List of Tables**

Table 1: Participant Information.....	82
Table 2: Frequency of Codes.....	90

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.....	31
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### **List of Abbreviations**

Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)

Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA)

Identified Student Percentage (ISP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

Point of Service (POS)

Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)

School Breakfast Program (SBP)

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Universal Free Meals (UFM)

West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Food insecurity is a progressive problem in the United States (Ryu & Bartfeld, 2012). Universal free meal programs (UFM) are becoming more common in schools as educators see the value associated with ensuring that students are not hungry and recognize that access to food is a basic human right (United Nations, 1948). These specific programs, initiated through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), offer free breakfast and lunch to each student attending the school to improve various aspects of academics as well as his/her general health. UFM are supported by federal subsidies, through state or local funding, or by grant money that is acquired by the participating school or district (Harkness, Logan, Shivji, Nisar, & Connor, 2015; Ribar & Haldeman, 2013).

There is a lack of research giving a voice to those who implement these programs (Phulkerd, Lawrence, Vandevijvere, Sacks, & Worsley, 2016). This research examined the experiences of multiple participants through a multiple case study approach and allowed the researcher to pinpoint common themes as they emerged through the implementation of UFM through the CEP (Stake, 1995). This chapter details background information on the implementation of the CEP within participating schools in southern West Virginia. This chapter provides the framework for an investigation into how the program has influenced the school and its students from the perspectives of various participants. Following a brief discussion of the background, the researcher is situated within the context of the problem by defining the problem and the purpose for the research. The research questions are identified and explained, and the chapter concludes with a list of defined terms.

## **Background**

Although schools are continuously implementing the CEP, there are still several eligible schools across the United States that have not joined for various reasons. However, with continued research and education on the CEP, more schools will likely participate (Food Research and Action Center [FRAC], 2017b). Multi-case study research could highlight contextual problems of program implementation as well as aid the researcher in building experiential knowledge (Stake, 1995). The focus of this study was to examine participants' perceptions of the UFM implementation within a real-life context, specifically two elementary schools in southern West Virginia (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Stake, 1995).

## **Historical**

The CEP are an extension of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The NSLP was started to nurture and encourage national security because many service members in WWII were found to have nutritional deficits (Gunderson, 2014). Therefore, politicians found that feeding children was a necessity for national defense (Rutledge, 2015). With the passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, schools began to receive federal funding to provide meals for students (Hinrichs, 2010; National School Lunch Act, 1946).

Educators were adamant that lunch alone was not enough and that additional provisions should be implemented for those students from food insecure homes (DiSiena, 2015). Considering this and the success of The NSLP, President Johnson instituted the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 to establish a School Breakfast Program (SBP) (Child Nutrition Act, 1966). The National School Lunch Act was revised in 1970 to place increased emphasis on nutritional value (Public Law 91-248, 1970). In 1994, the Healthy Meals for Healthy Children Act was passed. This mandated that all schools participate in the meal programs while also following adequate

dietary guidelines. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) paved the way for the first major changes to school meals in more than three decades (DiSiena, 2015; Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, 2010). The HHFKA also updated nutritional standards and provided additional funding in order to improve access to school meals through program expansion, including the CEP (Logan et al., 2014).

Food insecurity is an area of interest with the development of the NSLP and with the expansion of UFM programs. In 2010, it was estimated that approximately 14.6% of homes were considered food insecure (Basch, 2011). Around 14 million children under the age of 18 live in these homes (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001). When the HHFKA came to fruition, the CEP was implemented as a three-year pilot program in three states during the 2011-2012 school year (Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act [HHFKA], 2010). West Virginia was added as a pilot state in the 2012-2013 school year (Logan et al., 2014). As of July 1, 2014, the program became available nationwide for eligible schools (United States Department of Agriculture, 2015).

## **Social**

The CEP allows schools to provide free meals to all students while reducing the amount of paperwork that was once required of parents and schools (FRAC, 2017b). Federal reimbursements help the schools by allowing them to focus more of their resources on providing healthy meals to all students so that they better learn and achieve (Hewins, Levin, Segal, & Neuberger, 2014; Robles, Wood, Kimmons, & Kuo, 2013). The CEP allows all students to receive free meals, increasing the social acceptance of free meals and decreasing the level of stigmatization, which benefits the students (Hewins et al., 2014).

The diet of school-aged children could significantly influence their cognitive development and health (Basch, 2011). Children who reside in food insecure homes have

demonstrated delayed development that could increase the likelihood of negative behavior in the classroom (Houston, Marzette, Ames, & Ames, 2013). An effort to alleviate these concerns exists in the creation and delivery of meals served at school. UFM programs were implemented in many high-poverty schools to alleviate issues of hunger in elementary school students (Food Research & Action Center, 2017a). Elementary school children are particularly susceptible to negative outcomes related to food insecurity and the effects of this may lead to social stigmatization which could impact all students and UFM participants (Slack & Yoo, 2005). Students who are hungry may exhibit disruptive behaviors in the classroom because they are unable to focus on anything but hunger and the desire for food. Once physiological needs are accounted for then the educational professionals may begin to address other needs leading to learning and achievement for all students (Burleson & Thoron, 2014).

Family members in food insecure homes often consume low-cost and nutritionally deficient meals on sporadic schedules (Bartfeld, Ryu, & Wang, 2010; Belachew et al., 2011; Franklin et al., 2012). Moreover, meals that do not provide at least 50% of the recommended daily allowances of nutrients are considered low in nutritional value (Kleinman et al., 2002). School meals offer the opportunity for students to gain nutrients that may aid in growth, development, and learning (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Evans, Mandl, Christian, & Cade, 2015).

Schools that have implemented the CEP have seen an average daily increase of 13 percent in students' lunch participation and 25 percent in students' breakfast participation. There is a lack of knowledge surrounding the implementation and delivery of the CEP, and schools may not fully understand the benefits of nutrition in the education setting. The success of the CEP could be evident in the growth of implementation as well. In the 2011-2012 academic year,

665 schools participated and in the 2016-2017 academic year, 20,721 schools participated, indicating the need for a nutritional intervention like that of the CEP (Neuberger, 2013).

### **Theoretical**

Theoretical implications outlined in this research aim to examine aspects of Maslow's (1943) *A Theory of Human Motivation* by addressing how the theory applies to students who come from food insecure homes. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of human needs begins with the most basic needs for life, and food and water occur first. Maslow described the need for students to have their basic needs fulfilled before they are able to begin progressing through other levels of the hierarchy. According to Maslow, people strive to reach their full potential and therefore, research has found that physiological needs become of primary importance in order to move on to a higher level (van Lenthe, Jansen, & Kamphuis, 2015). If a person does not have physiological needs met, then the desire for food will overshadow the desire for any other needs satisfaction (Stephens, 2000).

Numerous fields, including education, have utilized Maslow's hierarchy of needs in order to better understand how to meet the needs of human beings (Mattar, 2012). Research findings have demonstrated that Maslow's hierarchy of needs may be used to classify students' needs related to school meal directives (Tikkanen, 2009). Children who reside in food insecure homes are often found to demonstrate delayed development (Houston et al., 2013). However, children who consume school meals have healthier overall diets (Au, Rosen, Fenton, Hecht, & Ritchie, 2016; Evans et al., 2015; Turner & Chaloupka, 2014) and may be more apt to eat fruits and vegetables at home (Asada, Ziemann, Zatz, & Chriqui, 2017; Golembiewski et al., 2015).

The delivery of free meals for all students is critical to ensuring that students are able to reach their full potential, and participants of the CEP initiatives are important pieces of this

program. When hunger manifests in children, it may result in a lack of desire for learning and in unacceptable classroom behaviors that may be disruptive and distracting for all individuals in the classroom (Burleson & Thoron, 2014; Slack & Yoo, 2005). When nutritious meals are available in schools, a child's growth and development may be positively influenced (Winicki & Jemison, 2003). Therefore, those who implement the CEP are crucial participants in ensuring that students' basic needs are fulfilled so that learning is able to take place (Burleson & Thoron, 2014). Students who partake in school meals may exhibit more positive classroom behaviors (Houston et al., 2013). Furthermore, elementary school children are particularly susceptible to the negative outcomes related to food insecurity despite the efforts of the NSLP (Slack & Yoo, 2005).

Essentially, physiological needs are the most basic and encompass eating and sleeping (Garner & Thomas, 2011; Lygnegård, Donohue, Bornman, Granlund, & Huus, 2013). These needs are a motivation for behavior and a higher level of need is not made evident until the lower level need is fulfilled (Maslow, 1943). When hunger is alleviated, children may demonstrate improved educational, behavioral, and social outcomes (Harvey-Golding, Donkin, & Defeyter, 2016). The CEP has spread rapidly through schools, but there is little research on the program, especially from a qualitative perspective (Trapp, 2018). Further research is needed to add to the existing literature gap on UFM to identify challenges, examine participant perceptions and involvement, examine how child nutrition is often overlooked in education, and document successful implementation strategies and supports (Leos-Urbel, Schwartz, Weinstein, & Corcoran, 2013; MacLellan, Holland, Taylor, McKenna, & Hernandez, 2010; Phulkerd et al., 2016).

### **Situation to Self**

My motivation for pursuing this research was multi-faceted. I was born and raised in southwestern Virginia, about 20 miles from West Virginia. In my youth, I witnessed the effects of food insecurity on my peers and classmates. After college, I returned home and began my career as a special education teacher in Title 1 schools, schools that receive federal funds for the most economically disadvantaged students under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Neuberger & Riddle, 2015). I have witnessed how childhood hunger may manifest itself in students' achievement, behavior, and motivation.

I have witnessed the CEP being implemented in my own school district, and I am interested in understanding how it is implemented in elementary schools. The initial implementation in my community resulted in a great deal of misinformation. I would like to find out more about participants' perceptions and experiences with the CEP in order to offer suggestions for improving implementation and delivery. If others are educated on the program, they may be better able to understand the CEP through participants' perceptions of the implementation of UFM in schools.

As a current teacher educator in southern West Virginia, I have learned a great deal more about this area and the CEP. I have observed the delivery of the CEP during classroom observations in local elementary schools and seen how this may be beneficial and difficult for all students and UFM participants. I used this research opportunity to collect data and interact with study participants, or UFM participants, in southern West Virginia. I used the findings to continue to prepare my students to work with those young people in our area, many of whom come from food insecure homes.

I approached this study using the ontological philosophical assumption as I involved

multiple participants in the study in order to elicit multiple views of reality related to the CEP. Under the umbrella of the constructivist worldview, my aim was to understand the CEP through interactions with the participants in my study. As a non-participant in the research, I limited the assumptions and biases that I hold from my own experiences into that of the research (Creswell, 2007).

### **Problem Statement**

There is a problem in rural elementary schools regarding how UFM offerings could be more easily implemented in order to address students' needs that are influenced by a lack of nutrition, including achievement, health, and behavior (Houston et al., 2013; Imberman & Kugler, 2014; Johnson, Podrabsky, Rocha, & Otten, 2016). Students may experience negative side effects such as stunted growth, delayed development, malnutrition, depression, anxiety, obesity, hyperactivity, and chronic diseases (Cooper, Bandelow, Nute, Morris, & Nevill, 2012; Kaur, Lamb, & Ogden, 2015; Melchior et al., 2012; Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, Lamb, & Flegal, 2010). UFM's may reduce stigma, contribute to healthier eating, and improve learning. The UFM concept also increases time for eating, eases the stress on families, reduces paperwork, and eliminates meal fees (Levin & Hewins, 2014). Despite the growth of UFM programs in schools, little research on the effectiveness of implementing these programs is occurring, and there is a need to understand participants' perceptions of the CEP and how it may address the basic needs of students (Phulkerd et al., 2016).

A qualitative study, utilizing case study methodology, was determined to be most suitable for analyzing the perception of participants involved in a UFM program. Perhaps a study which explored the perceptions of participants who implement the CEP could remedy misunderstandings of UFM implementation (Harvey-Golding et al., 2016; Kairiene &

Sprindziunas, 2016) and support the need for this programming as a way to address areas of students growth, development, malnutrition, depression, anxiety, low achievement, hyperactivity, and obesity in childhood (Cooper et al., 2012; Melchior et al., 2012; Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, Lamb, & Flegal, 2010). The implementation of UFM programs entails the identification of qualification criteria, adjustment of meal service processes, and the documentation of impacts on the school.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to examine the perceptions of school board members, division superintendents, food service managers, school administrators, food service workers, and teachers toward the implementation of UFM programs under the CEP at elementary schools in southern West Virginia. The reason for this study was to gain an understanding of how elementary schools in southern West Virginia are influenced by the UFM through first-hand accounts of participants' experiences in the program. This may allow others to see how implementation is conducted, gain a better understanding of how those involved in the UFM delivery perceive and experience the system, determine how the program influences the school environment, and conclude how it could be implemented in other schools. In this research study, the implementation of UFM programs refers to how meal delivery to all students, regardless of income, is executed (Garner & Thomas, 2011; Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). The purpose of this multiple case, qualitative study will be to understand the participants' perspectives of the implementation of the CEP at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was empirically significant as it provided information regarding the perceptions of participants who share in the implementation of the CEP as it relates to UFM programs. Though these programs are being implemented across the country, there is very little being done to evaluate implementation practices (Phulkerd et al., 2016). There is little information known on how participants perceive the implementation of the CEP in schools (MacLellan et al., 2010). Additional research is needed to identify challenges, examine participant perception and collaboration, and document successful implementation strategies and supports (MacLellan et al., 2010; Slawson et al., 2013). This research could also encourage school leaders to examine their own nutritional practices and policies related to UFM delivery for students.

A qualitative case study approach was the best approach for understanding the perceptions of participants involved in the implementation of the CEP (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016). The case study method is “beneficial in gaining knowledge on governmental interventions by facilitating the exploration of the contexts in which these initiatives operate; highlighting impacts on different groups in the population, and identifying outcomes and factors relating to delivery and organization” (Harvey-Golding et al., 2016). Few studies provide in-depth understanding of the context for participants’ perspectives on the implementation of UFM programs in schools.

This study is theoretically significant in that it may contribute to a growth in UFM participants but also may contribute to an increased understanding of how Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs supports the role of UFM participants and key players in addressing students’ basic physiological needs that must be met before an individual is motivated to pursue other

levels. Students may not reach their full potential for learning and development if they are unable to gain essential nutrients for growth (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2015). Food insecurity may also affect students' behavior and achievement in the classroom (Houston et al., 2013; Imberman & Kugler, 2014; Slack & Yoo, 2005). The needs of students could be satisfied, and these associated issues alleviated with the implementation of the UFM provision if participants understand the importance of nutrition in education (Garner & Thomas, 2011).

This research has practical significance because it may contribute to the existing knowledge base while also giving a voice to those involved in the process of UFM implementation. Establishing how UFM implementation occurs may give other schools and divisions an understanding of program involvement. As rural schools in southern West Virginia continue to implement the CEP, other school divisions could gain an understanding of the implementation process. This is especially important to elementary school children as they are particularly susceptible to negative outcomes related to food insecurity (Slack & Yoo, 2005). This research may encourage other school divisions to pursue the CEP to alleviate food insecurity within their communities. The data from this research study may also be utilized in revising CEP policy and implementation guidelines.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this multiple case, qualitative study was to understand the participants' perspectives of the implementation of the CEP at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia. Qualitative research questions are designed to guide the data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). Research questions are framed in the constructivist paradigm so that the researcher is able to understand how the topic relates to participants' lives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The following questions guided this study:

### **Central Research Question**

How do participants perceive CEP implementation as part of the educational process at the elementary school level?

Participants involved in CEP implementation include school board members, division superintendents, food service managers, school administrators, food service workers, and teachers. It is important to describe these varied perspectives in order to obtain a more complete picture of the CEP implementation and its effects on elementary school children (Yin, 2014). The CEP allows schools with the highest poverty levels to serve breakfast, lunch, and a snack to all students who are enrolled. In doing so, the CEP eliminates the need for individual household applications (Harkness et al., 2015; Levin & Hewins, 2014). My aim was to gain a more insightful view of the perceptions of various participants throughout the investigation by forming a relationship of trust with each participant and examining the factors that contribute to the present situation (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016; MacLellan et al., 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Research Sub-Question 1**

What factors contribute to the processes of qualifying for, implementing, and delivering the CEP?

An effort to address concerns regarding students who come from food insecure homes partially lies within the delivery of meals served at school (Basch, 2011). A district, group of schools, or individual schools with at least an Identified Student Percentage (ISP) of 40% are able to participate in the CEP (Harkness et al., 2015; Logan et al., 2014). Schools that fall below this percentage may still accept applications for those eligible students to receive free and reduced meals. The students are directly certified through data matching as those who receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

(TANF), are in foster care, were enrolled in Head Start or homeless as opposed to the mandatory application process of the past (Harkness et al., 2015; Levin & Hewins, 2014). This question allowed me to focus my interview questions on each setting and each participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Research Sub-Question 2**

What benefits do participants identify from the implementation and delivery of the CEP?

When hunger manifests in children, it may result in a lack of desire for learning and unacceptable classroom behaviors (Slack & Yoo, 2005). When nutritious meals are available in schools, a child's growth and development could be positively influenced (Winicki & Jemison, 2003). Research indicates that participating schools indicated that families with financial burdens may benefit from the CEP and that there was an increase in school meal participation, decreased stigmatization for low-income students, and improved academic performance (Harkness et al., 2015).

### **Research Sub-Question 3**

What challenges do participants identify from implementing the CEP?

Research shows that participating schools voiced concern over how the CEP would influence other funding sources and about United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimbursement rates. There was also concern regarding the period of implementation and that there was a lack of understanding pertaining to the CEP's implementation, fairness, and direction (Harkness et al., 2015).

### **Research Sub-Question 4**

How do participants who implement the CEP describe the influence of the program on the school culture?

The diet of school-aged children could significantly influence their cognitive development and health (Basch, 2011). Children who reside in food insecure homes may demonstrate delayed development that may increase the likelihood of negative behavior in the classroom that may impact learning and achievement (Houston et al., 2013). An effort to alleviate these concerns exists in the creation and delivery of meals served at school because nutritional deficiencies may be linked to behavioral problems (Basch, 2011). Students who partake of school meals may exhibit more positive classroom behaviors (Houston et al., 2013; Waling et al., 2016). The CEP also eliminates the stigma associated with free and reduced meals because all students are served (Hewins et al., 2014) and the burdensome paperwork that is associated with free and reduced meal applications (Levin & Hewins, 2014; Leos-Urbel et al., 2013).

### **Definitions**

1. *Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)* – This component of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act allows eligible schools to provide free meals for all students (Capogrossi & You, 2017). The CEP states that families are not required to submit applications for free or reduced meals. Instead, schools must provide free lunch and breakfast to all students and schools are reimbursed for meals using a formula based on the percentage of students identified as eligible using direct certification (i.e. SNAP, TANF, or Medicaid in some cases) and other measures of eligibility (i.e. Head Start, homeless, migrant, runaway, foster children) (Harkness et al., 2015; Levin & Hewins, 2014).
2. *Percent needy* – The percentage of students who are directly certified for free school meals by means other than a household application and not subject to verification is known as the Identified Student Percentage (ISP) (Kirk, 2014). This number is

multiplied by a factor of 1.6, the USDA approved multiplier established in the HHFKA, to determine the “percent needy” and the total percentage of meals reimbursed at the Federal free reimbursement rate (Hewins et al., 2014; Logan et al., 2014; Long, 2014).

3. *Universal Free Meal (UFM) Program* – This is defined as a program that offers free breakfast and lunch to each student in the school regardless of economic status or qualification (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013).

### **Summary**

Food insecurity is a problem that is occurring in elementary schools, and the CEP was developed to help alleviate this concern. However, there is little research on the implementation of this program (Phulkerd et al., 2016). This research was necessary due to the lack of clarity in the CEP implementation and the impact that the CEP may have on reducing hunger, increasing achievement, and nurturing child growth and development (Cooper et al., 2012; Houston et al., 2013; Imberman & Kugler, 2014).

The purpose of this multiple case, qualitative study was to understand the participants’ perspectives of the implementation of UFM programs at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia. Due to the increasing implementations of UFM and the CEP, it is necessary for schools to gain an understanding of how the programs may be successfully implemented. A case study was determined to be most suitable for analyzing the involvement and perception of participants involved in a schoolwide free meal program and how it impacts those who are being served (Harvey-Golding et al., 2016; Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016). The perceptions of various participants involved in the CEP were examined with regard to their attitudes toward CEP implementation. This chapter has presented a basic overview of the literature while providing a framework for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

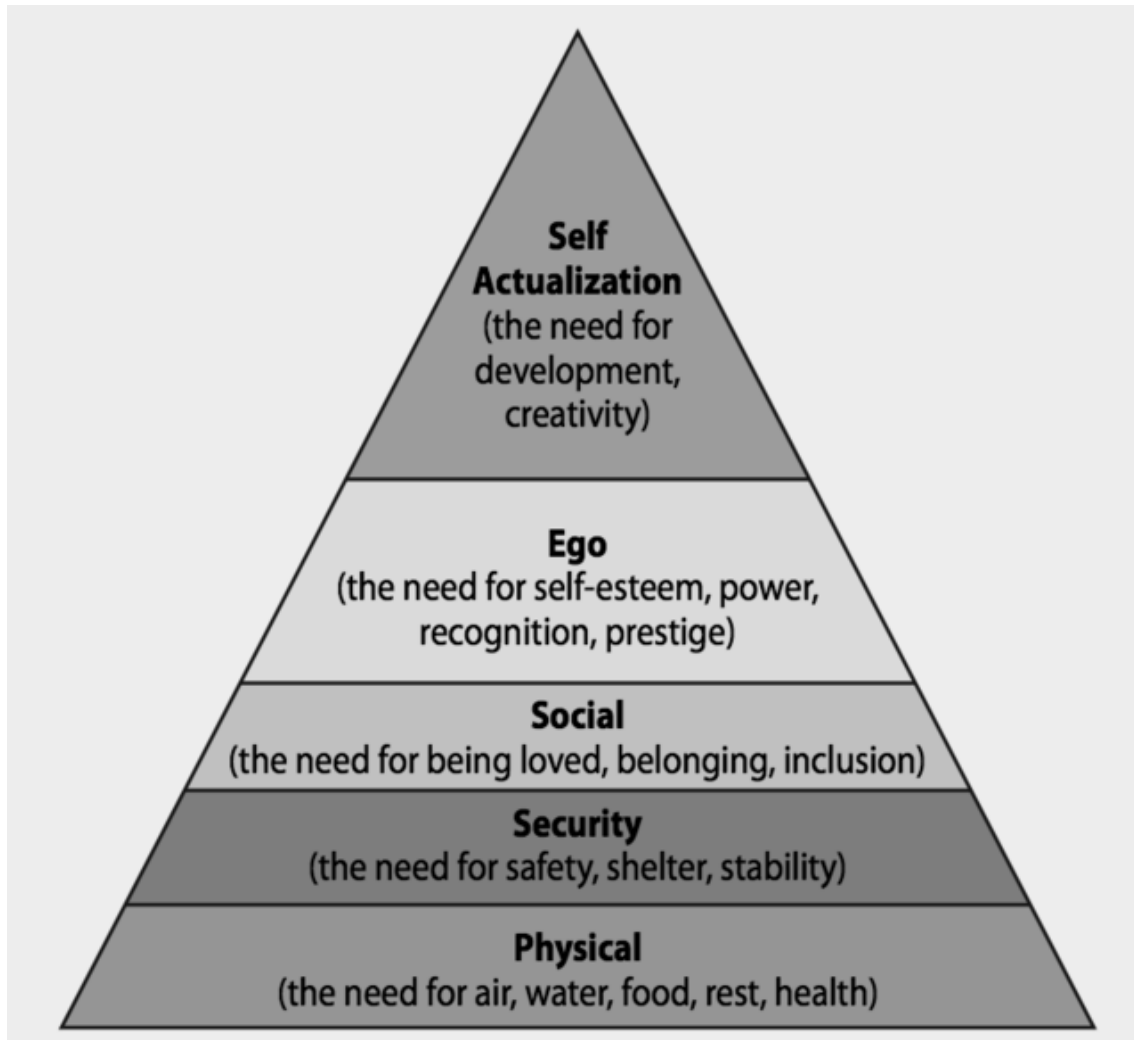
An analysis of the current literature on UFM programs was examined in this chapter. An extensive amount of literature pertaining to the UFM has been published; however, few studies explore the implementation of the CEP (Phulkerd et al., 2016). This chapter includes an analysis of how childhood hunger impacts students' schooling (Evans et al., 2015; Houston et al., 2013; Leos-Urbel et al., 2013). There is also an examination of existing UFM programs and their effects on students (Basch, 2011; Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016) as well as research on the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) and implementation of the CEP (Harkness et al., 2015; Hewins et al., 2014).

This chapter contains the theoretical framework involving Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs as a means to understanding the importance of physiological needs in elementary school students and examining how UFM programs may contribute to meeting the needs of these students by providing meals to all students. The purpose of this multiple case, qualitative study was to understand the participants' perspectives of the implementation of UFM programs at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia. Therefore, current literature was reviewed to provide an understanding of food insecurity and the foundations of UFM in elementary schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs states that all humans have basic needs that must be met prior to an individual's progression to the next level of the hierarchy. The five levels of needs are arranged in a pyramid that begins at the foundation with physiological needs. Individuals may then move to safety needs, followed by one's need for love and acceptance, then advancing to esteem needs, and finally shifting to the need for self-actualization. Maslow (1943)

looked at human behavior and determined that one analyzes the functions and purposes of behavior as an effort to satisfy a need and reach the next level of the hierarchy. He also explored cognitive functioning and how it relates to the satisfaction of each hierarchy level. For the purpose of this research, the focus lies within the primary level, physiological needs (Lygnegård et al., 2013).



*Figure 1.* From “Our hierarchy of needs,” by N. Burton, 2017, *Psychology Today*. Reprinted with permission.

Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs is not a rigid instrument because there are exceptions; however, the theory operates under the belief that it does apply to the majority of

people. Most individuals do typically need to satisfy a lower level of need before they are able to move to the next level of the hierarchy (Berl, Williamson, & Powell, 1984; Lyngnegård et al., 2013). If a person does not have the physiological needs met, then the desire for food, water, air, etc. will overshadow the desire for other needs (Stephens, 2000). Each level does not need to be fully satisfied prior to the development of another level because gradual emergence is likely after a minimum level of satisfaction is accomplished. Maslow (1943) also addressed additional motivations for behavior such as environment and satisfaction that should also be accounted for.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs served as the theoretical framework for this study to address the implementation of UFM programs. Research findings have demonstrated that Maslow's hierarchy of needs may be used to classify students' needs related to school meal directives (Tikkanen, 2009). Children who reside in food insecure homes often demonstrate delayed development (Houston et al., 2013). Maslow's (1943) theory provided a framework to explore and better understand the unique set of challenges that arise from childhood hunger. According to Garner and Thomas (2011),

Maslow described a hierarchy of needs in which basic needs had to be met in order for higher order needs to be present and to motivate the individual. For example, physiological needs such as hunger could be satisfied by the provision of 'breakfast.' ( p. 209).

According to Maslow, people strive to reach their full potential; therefore, research has found that physiological needs become of primary importance in order to move on to a higher level (van Lenthe et al., 2015). This study will allow for a more in-depth look at the impacts of a UFM program through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs on various aspects of CEP implementation and delivery.

## **Physiological Needs**

The most basic needs, physiological needs, are found in the first level of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). In Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, fulfilling one's basic need for survival serves as the primary factor for ensuring that a person is able to move on to higher order needs. The physiological needs for food, water, and air are imperative in order for the individual's ability to move through the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). When children are exposed to healthier foods early on, then they are more likely to accept them as a part of their daily intake (Slawson et al., 2013).

Life stressors may make it difficult to fulfill the physiological needs of children and families. Parents from low-income homes may experience stress in relationship to maintaining employment, meeting financial obligations, and managing household budgets (Wang et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2013). These families also may lack the resources or awareness of services that may be beneficial for their specific needs and are necessary for survival (Divan, Vajaratkar, Desai, Strik-Lievers, & Patel, 2012). Fatigue and hunger may impact an individual's ability to perform necessary tasks and may hinder one's quality of life, whether it be a child or an adult (Giallo, Wood, Jellett, & Porter, 2013). Maslow (1943) stated:

If all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply non-existent...It is then fair to characterize the whole organism by saying simply that it is hungry, for consciousness is almost completely preempted by hunger.

Research has found that primary reinforcers such as food and sleep are innate and are primarily important over the course of one's lifespan whereas secondary reinforcers are learned behaviors (Harrigan & Commons, 2015).

Research has indicated that healthier food choices are often made by people who are in a higher level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (van Lenthe et al., 2015). When hunger remains an unmet need, then the individual is controlled by it while all other functions are also dominated by the need for food thus affecting an individual's ability to perform (van Lenthe et al., 2015; Lygnegård et al., 2013). The individual is unable to focus on any other aspect of life, including hobbies or academics, because those interests become secondary to the satisfaction of hunger (Maslow, 1943).

### **Human Motivation**

Physiological needs make up the first level of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and consist of the most basic needs, including food. This theory remains relevant and is still used in current research for understanding how human motivation may be impacted by poor nutrition (Chinyoka, 2014; Mace, 2016; Ngwaru, 2014). In accordance with the hierarchy of needs, the need that is the least fulfilled is considered the most prevailing need (Berl et al., 1984). Individuals who may be in the physiological stage of the hierarchy must typically have their needs met before the needs of other levels become relevant (Harrigan & Commons, 2015).

If hunger goes unfulfilled, then a child will not be able to move through the hierarchy to ultimately reach self-actualization (Nasir, Khalid, & Shoukat, 2014). However, people who have never experienced food insecurity first-hand are unable to fully understand the gravity of hunger on a child's daily performance and may view food as an unimportant factor (Maslow, 1943). In an effort to address issues of food insecurity and inadequate nutrition, school districts implemented the CEP (Ralston & Newman, 2015). Low participation in school meals is also a concern for school officials because students are often partaking of less nutritious foods (Farris et al., 2015). The development of the program came as an attempt to eliminate childhood hunger

and to ease administrative burdens to school districts (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016).

Individuals responsible for implementing the CEP are ultimately attempting to ensure that basic, physiological needs are being met so that optimal learning may take place for more students (Burleson & Thoron, 2014). The CEP has provided students in high-poverty schools with free meals and lessened stigmatization (Poblacion et al., 2017). However, the CEP has not been thoroughly researched from the qualitative perspective due to its novelty in the school meal arena (Trapp, 2018). By providing students with UFM and pinpointing the root of hunger (Chinyoka, 2014), Maslow's hierarchy of needs supports the notion that issues of food insecurity may be improved (Brasseur et al., 2015).

Maslow (1943) theorized that students' most basic needs must be met before they are able to move on to other levels of the hierarchy. From a physiological standpoint, food insecurity may negatively influence a child's growth and stability, preventing him/her from achieving the next level in the hierarchy and predicting whether or not a child will remain in the cycle of poverty as an adult (Brasseur et al., 2015). In areas where UFM is available, the focus on Maslow's hierarchy shifts to higher levels because lower level needs are already fulfilled (Tikkanen, 2009). Maslow (1943) clearly saw the importance of ensuring that students receive adequate meals when he wrote, "It is quite true that man lives by bread alone—when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there *is* plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled?"(p. 375). With regard to the hierarchy of needs as a motivational theory, Harrigan & Commons (2015) found that higher needs are not motivating until the lower needs are fulfilled. However, when people are surrounded by an abundance of unhealthy foods, making healthy choices becomes more difficult and self-fulfillment is not seen as a priority (van Lenthe et al., 2015).

The hierarchy of human needs was developed by Maslow in response to observations in motivational theory. Maslow stated that when people reach the highest level, self-actualization, they are more likely to be fulfilled and have a sense of purpose (Maslow, 1943). Van Lenthe et al. (2015) found that people at higher levels of fulfillment consume healthier foods more often. However, Maslow (1943) theorized that higher levels will not be reached without first fulfilling the lower levels of the hierarchy. This notion gives researchers the ability to investigate how environment impacts development (Harrigan & Commons, 2015). The first level of the hierarchy consists of physiological needs such as food, water, and air. In other words, if the most basic needs are unmet, then hunger will prevail and other needs will be forgotten and unreachable (Maslow, 1943).

### **Related Literature**

Students are impacted by a lack of nutrition in multiple areas including achievement, health, and behavior (Houston et al., 2013; Imberman & Kugler, 2014; Johnson et al., 2016). Students experience negative side effects such as stunted growth, delayed development, and malnutrition (Cooper et al., 2012). A lack of adequate nutrition could also result in depression, anxiety, and hyperactivity in young students (Melchior et al., 2012) as well as obesity and chronic diseases into adulthood (Kaur, Lamb, & Ogden, 2015; Ogden et al., 2010).

The development of school nutrition programs was designed to combat the negative side effects of malnutrition (Mansfield & Savaiano, 2017; Moore & Littlecott, 2015). As students become more involved in mealtime intake at school, research has shown that they eat healthier and that the risks of food insecurity are alleviated (Bartfeld & Ahn, 2011; Hanson & Olson, 2013). Students desire to have healthy meals available in schools, so it is important to continue examining the federal, state, and local policies that govern school food initiatives (Gosliner,

Madsen, Woodward-Lopez, & Crawford, 2011). Legislation remains in place to ensure that students receive adequate nutrition at school but has also gone a step further to ensure that all students have equal access (Gase, McCarthy, Robles, & Kuo, 2014; Leos-Urbel et al., 2013). The CEP aims to ensure that schools in impoverished areas serve all students free meals with the intention of decreasing childhood food insecurity (HHFKA, 2010; Hewins et al., 2014; Ribar & Haldeman, 2013; USDA, 2015).

### **Food Insecurity**

Food insecurity refers to a person's lack of financial resources needed to purchase the necessary quality and quantity of food for sustenance (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000). Childhood hunger, often associated with food insecurity, is an issue that could have significant impacts on health and this impact on health has increased in recent years (Ryu & Bartfeld, 2012). Food insecurity may cause a number of concerns for children, and this occurs when there is limited access to adequate amounts of nutritious foods (Alaimo et al., 2001; Gallegos, Ramsey, & Ong, 2014; Smith & Morton, 2009). Research has documented that children are often cognitively, emotionally, and physically aware and may even take responsibility for attempting to manage the family's food insecurity (Fram, Frongillo, Draper, & Fishbein, 2014).

Food insecurity affects one in seven American families at some point during a calendar year; this lack of nutrition could result in childhood disease and other concerns (Franklin et al., 2012). Furthermore, families of students with disabilities tend to face issues of food insecurity 10 percent more often than other families (Sonik, Parish, Ghosh, & Igdalsky, 2016). Some programs use a percentage multiple of the poverty guidelines, such as 185 percent, when determining eligibility and is often the result of varying decisions within the organization as

opposed to one unified plan for calculations (Renwick & Fox, 2016). Approximately seven percent of families in the United States with incomes above 185 percent of the federal poverty threshold are considered food insecure (Coleman- Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2012). Many of these students are unable to identify fruits and vegetables due to the lack of exposure to these foods in their homes (Slawson et al., 2013). Research indicates that students who most frequently participate in school meals are likely coming from food insecure homes, and that these meals may be a critical piece of their nutrition (Capogrossi & You, 2017). Twenty percent of children in elementary and middle school experienced food insecurity at some point in those nine years of school (Ryu & Bartfeld, 2012). The result is that many children do not have nutritious food that is readily available in their homes.

In the school setting, many families fall between the 130 percent and 185 percent poverty thresholds. Although these families receive reduced-price meals, it may be impossible for these families to pay these fees. For students whose families are just over the 185 percent mark, paying for school meals is often an obstacle to participation. Some schools have implemented alternative meal programs for student who do not pay for a hot lunch, but this may be stigmatizing and degrading to students. In other instances, schools will often cover the costs of meals for students with unpaid lunches, and this may result in a financial burden to the district or the school (Levin & Hewins, 2014).

**Influence on health.** Children who do not receive adequate nutrition may suffer from a number of health-related illnesses, including malnutrition (Cooper et al., 2012; Franklin et al., 2012) and obesity (Liou, Yang, Wang, & Huang, 2015; Ogden et al., 2010). Studies have found that meal disparities associated with certain school characteristics are prevalent but have narrowed due to the NSLP (Terry-McElrath, O'Malley, & Johnston, 2015). Research has found

that approximately 14 million children reside in food insecure homes (Alaimo et al., 2001) and that 20% of children are now overweight or obese in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including the United States. However, students from food insecure homes may benefit from nutritious school meals. Research has found that when students partake of adequate meals at school, they often profit from timely development and more positive educational results (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Szczepańska, Deka, & Calyniuk, 2013). Research has also noted that students who eat breakfast regularly are less likely to be overweight and have lower body mass indexes (de la Hunty, Gibson, & Ashwell, 2013; Odegard et al., 2013; Rampersaud, Pereira, Girard, Adams & Metzl, 2005). Students who eat breakfast have higher levels of recommended nutrient intake as well (Nicklas, Regar, Myers, & O'Neil, 2000).

Adequate nutrition is viewed as an important component to the healthy growth and development of children (Golembiewski et al., 2015) as well as the formation of healthy eating habits (Williamson, Han, Johnson, Martin, & Newton, 2013). The early development of healthy eating habits is particularly important for children from low-income homes because they are at a higher risk for problems associated with poor nutrition (Biro et al., 2010). Those children who do not receive adequate nutrients for their growth and development may experience poor cognitive function, malnutrition, and other negative side effects (Cooper et al., 2012). Individuals coming from food insecure homes are more likely to eat foods that lack nutritional value but are higher in caloric density thus contributing to poor mental and physical health (Franklin et al., 2012).

In rural areas, residents often cite the reasons for food insecurity as being a lack of adequate transportation to purchase food and a shortage of the food choices for those who have

specific sensitivities or allergies (Fram et al., 2014; Hearst, Shanafelt, Wang, Leduc & Nanney, 2016). Inadequate nutrition in childhood may lead to lifelong issues. One study indicated that eating breakfast (Odegaard et al., 2013) and increasing fruit and vegetable intake (Alcaraz & Cullen, 2014) may lead to a lower risk of developing hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic illnesses in adulthood (Ogden et al., 2010). Students who receive school meals often benefit from increased nutritional values more than those who bring food from home (Farris et al., 2015; Hubbard, Must, Elaisziw, Folta, & Goldberg, 2014; Hur, Burgess-Champoux, & Reicks, 2011; Johnston, Moreno, El-Mubasher, & Woehler, 2012). Students received higher amounts of protein, fiber, and zinc while students who packed a lunch consumed higher amounts of carbohydrates, sugars, and sodium in their meals (Evans et al., 2015). Malnutrition in childhood is linked to chronic issues in adulthood such as obesity and chronic illnesses (Ogden, et al., 2010). Childhood obesity may also lead to early puberty (Biro et al., 2010), a negative self-image (Striegel-Moore et al., 2001), and poor eating habits that continue through adulthood (Williamson et al., 2013).

Reasons for malnutrition in children vary, and food insecurity may result from a number of instances that families are not able to plan for such as illness or home repairs. Students from food insecure homes often experience inconsistent meal choices, times, and amounts. Intermittent food insecurity for these families often results from job loss or cutbacks, and sudden expenses such as car repairs or medical bills may result in decreased funds for food purchases (Elliott, 2013). In other circumstances, low-income families may have to make a choice between medication for chronically-ill members and food for the family (Berkowitz, Seligman, & Choudhry, 2014).

**Influence on social outcomes.** In many instances, families of children in food insecure homes typically recognize the need for public assistance programs in initiating approaches that will help them during hardships (Knowles, Rabinowich, Ettinger de Cuba, Cutts, & Chilton, 2016). However, school meal participation for eligible students is not as well accepted. For instance, low school breakfast participation may be attributed to sociocultural preferences such as eating at home, sleeping patterns, concerns about food choices and quality, and social stigma (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Holford, 2015). However, students from food insecure homes often view school as a place to get food but may be concerned about social stigma or being labeled as “poor” and keeping their food insecurity a secret (Fram et al., 2014; Levin & Hewins, 2014). This makes it difficult for students to freely take part in available services such as free and reduced meals that may make their hunger known and lead to feelings of shame.

**Influence on behavior.** Children from food insecure homes typically exhibit more behavioral issues at school than they do in other settings (Houston et al., 2013). This misbehavior manifests in a variety of ways. Food insecurity may result in increased levels of depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, and inattention in young children (Melchior et al., 2012). Children who are hungry may also display hyperactivity, higher rates of absenteeism, and poor academic skills (Houston et al., 2013). Students from food insecure homes often lack adequate social-emotional skills and often experience higher stress levels and increased school suspensions (Dalma et al., 2015). Even students who are withdrawn may internalize their feelings and not outwardly exhibit negative behaviors. Children often sense the stressors of living in food insecure homes, and this may affect the parent-child relationships as well as result in aggressive behaviors and poorer mental health in children (Knowles et al., 2016). All of these factors could influence student learning and must be addressed accordingly.

**Influence on achievement.** Food insecurity impacts students in a variety of ways with regard to their education as well. Policy makers at all levels have worked to encourage participation in the SBP as a way to increase cognitive performance (Kleinman et al., 2002; Rampersaud et al., 2005; Odegaard et al., 2013), school attendance (Kleinman et al., 2002; Mhurchu et al., 2013; Murphy, 2007), and positive classroom behaviors (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Kleinman et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2016). Kleinman et al. (2002) also found that six months after the implementation of a universal free breakfast program, students displayed an increase in math scores. Alternatively, students who take responsibility for managing their family's food insecurity do not typically have time to fulfill their homework requirements and participate in extracurricular activities (Bernal, Frongillo, Herrera, & Rivera, 2014). Likewise, parents are less likely to participate in school activities if the basic needs of the family are unmet (Ngwaru, 2014). Students may then fall behind in their studies and harbor feelings of resentment.

Research has found that hunger may influence a student's ability to function in the classroom. Achievement is positively correlated with breakfast and lunch consumption (Acham, Kikafunde, Malde, Oldewage-Theron, & Egal, 2012; Imberman & Kugler, 2014; Levin & Hewins, 2014). Along these lines, Andersen (2004) found that UFM offers one explanation for Finland's remarkable scores when compared with other countries. Other research even suggests achievement scores are positively affected when schools provide breakfast for students (Imberman & Kugler, 2014). Similarly, Schröder et al. (2015) found that when students partake of school lunch, it may improve their working memory. Conversely, children who experienced food insecurity during kindergarten showed a 13% decrease in reading and math scores by the time they were in third grade (Alaimo et al., 2001; Houston et al., 2013). Research has found

that breakfast consumption and classroom behavior are positively correlated (Johnson et al., 2016) regardless of socioeconomic status (Adolphus, Lawton, & Dye, 2013). Students have demonstrated that they are better learners, test-takers, and school participants who display more positive and attentive behaviors in the classroom when they consume school meals (Alaimo et al., 2001). Alternatively, hungry students often have lower math scores and are more likely to repeat a grade (Alaimo et al., 2001). These students are also less likely to get along with other students and more likely to have served suspensions from school (Levin & Hewins, 2014).

**Impoverished schools.** Poverty may make it difficult for students' physical and social needs to be met because the stressors of living in in this environment may prohibit caregivers from tending to their children in meaningful ways (Lygnegård et al., 2013). Impoverished communities are often recognized through specific characteristics and segregated based on housing and public transportation accessibility (Anderson, 2015). Children in impoverished areas do not often have access to fresh produce due to finances and location; therefore healthy eating is considered unimportant or often overlooked (Payán, Sloane, Illum, Farris, & Lewis, 2017). These communities also contain children with a higher incidence of disabilities and nontraditional families, such as grandparents raising children (D'Silva, 2009; Kristjansson et al., 2015) or children from minorities who most often participate in school meal programs (Hernandez, Francis, & Doyle, 2010).

Impoverished children face difficulties in school that may hinder them from being successful (Lygnegård et al., 2013). In areas where at least half of the residents are living in poverty, this may be especially challenging due to the limited resources available for students' well-being and the schools that they attend (Turner & Chaloupka, 2014; Wilson, 2012).

Adjustments to existing food service environments and meal-delivery programs in impoverished

schools may be more difficult to achieve (Gase et al., 2014; Turner & Chaloupka, 2014; Williamson et al., 2013) but are essential to improving the nutritional offerings (Cummings et al., 2014).

Over half of all students who reside in rural counties live in poverty. In West Virginia, 17% of students qualify for special education (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Impoverished families often feel disconnected from those who do not exist within a similar culture, and fulfilling their basic needs is their primary focus (Lygnegård et al., 2013; Rosine, 2013). The dynamics of the impoverished family have led to an academic gap; therefore, improving the education for students from these areas is an important issue (Rosine, 2013). Two specific elementary schools in southern West Virginia have identified the “percent needy” levels at 117.93% and 107.46% (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018). This indicates that both schools receive 100% reimbursement at the free rate because reimbursement is capped at 100% and all other meals are reimbursed at the paid meals rate (Levin & Hewins, 2014; Logan et al., 2014). In the CEP, “this percentage serves as a proxy for the share of students who would be certified for free or reduced-price meals if applications were still taken” and allows for a comparison among other schools (Hewins et al., 2014, p. 3). In other words, by multiplying the number of students eligible for free/reduced lunch in a school by 1.6 (the USDA approved multiplier established in the HHFKA), one is able to ascertain the percent needy level (Logan et al., 2014; United States Department of Education, 2015). If a school were under 100% needy, then it would receive reimbursement at the paid meals rate for that remaining percentage up to 100%. Evaluation of the provision indicates the CEP results in about a 13.5% increase in the total reimbursement per student when compared to the traditional free and reduced reimbursement rate (Logan et al., 2014).

In southern West Virginia and other areas of rural Appalachia, residents often live a sedentary lifestyle with around only a third of children meeting the national guidelines for physical activity (Kristjansson et al., 2015). On the other hand, Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo (2013) found that students who qualified for free and reduced lunches were more likely to experience anxiety, indicating that physical and mental health may be impacted by poverty. Students in rural schools may not often consume nutritious foods (Tovar et al., 2012), and parents may not have the resources to encourage such behavior (Smith & Morton, 2009).

**Equalizing opportunity.** Students in impoverished schools are subject to several distinct challenges that may be overcome by quality school professionals. Children who come from families considered low-income are more likely to attend low-achieving, impoverished schools with fewer resources (Gardner & Mayes, 2013; Hanson & Olson, 2013). Academic excellence may be affected by the quality of teachers in these classrooms, and this may be a more distinct challenge in impoverished schools (Simon & Johnson, 2013).

However, quality veteran teachers serve as a significant source of knowledge for new teachers and administrators by sharing their experiences of working in impoverished schools (Rosine, 2013). Administrators and school personnel should devise strategies and follow best practices that focus on how these students learn while building a mutual trust among the administration, faculty, families, and students (Li & O'Connell, 2012; Merlo et al., 2015; Prokop & Galon, 2011; Rosenberg, 2012; Slawson et al., 2013; Wilkins et al., 2014). Being culturally aware is a critical piece to success for all students in impoverished schools (Rosine, 2013).

Factors like the food environment (Cummings et al., 2014; Mobley et al., 2012), public policy (Pilkerton & Bias, 2015), and limiting caloric intake (Anderson & Butcher, 2006) may be used to combat obesity (Robles et al., 2013). Therefore, researchers and policymakers should

consider the cultural impacts (Jones et al., 2014) and health disparities of those living in poverty in order to more effectively work with these communities to develop intervention programs (Turner & Chaloupka, 2014). In turn, the USDA created the CEP, making it available to all states in 2014 to allow high-poverty schools to provide free meals for all students, regardless of income (Capogrossi & You, 2017).

### **Background on School Meals**

The concept of school meals has a long and complex history. School meals were once prepared by mothers and community groups, but with the onset of the Progressive era, there was a significant increase in school enrollment and this became an increasingly difficult task to accomplish (Mintz, 2004). As more children began to attend school, the importance of good nutrition became realized as a critical stepping stone for learning and achievement (Hunter, 1965). The concept of free meals for children from poverty first came to fruition in Paris in 1879. Other European countries and the United States followed suit throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gunderson, 2014). In 1909, the first Conference on Children was held and in 1912, the Children's Bureau was established to promote the philosophy of the "whole child" (Mintz, 2004).

However, it was not until national security became a concern that progress was made in the area of school nutrition. At the start of World War I, much of the nation's population consisted of immigrants, and school meals were seen as a way to Americanize immigrant children. At the same time, 33% of servicemen who attempted to enlist in the war were refused due to malnutrition-related disease, and nutrition became a national concern (Levine, 2008). In the 1920s, larger urban school districts began to advance their school meal programs (Gunderson, 2014). The Great Depression led the government to begin working in conjunction

with farmers to obtain surplus products and meet the needs of school nutrition programs, and they solidified this agreement with the Commodity Donation Program in 1936 (Roberts, 2002; USDA, 2014).

Due to economic factors and changing student populations, the NSLP was first initiated. In 1946, President Truman signed Public Law 396, making the program official. However, the first several years of the program saw child nutrition as a secondary cause to relieving farmers of their surplus (Levine, 2008). With the implementation of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, the nutrition programs began to take shape (Child Nutrition Act, 1965). The federal government realized the role of proper nutrition in health and learning (USDA, 2010). In 1970, the National School Lunch Act was amended to set guidelines for students' eligibility for free and reduced meals and reimbursement rates were clarified (Gunderson, 2014).

In the early nineties, researchers found that while school meals were providing adequate nutrients, they were also high in fat. As a result, the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act of 1994 came to pass, requiring schools to conform to the 1990 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans, 1993). The 1995 School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children was also introduced to ensure that school lunches were providing a third of the recommended dietary allowances (Mirtcheva & Powell, 2013). In 2010, the HHSFKA was implemented as a means for increasing school meal participation through various mandates (HHSFKA, 2010). In 2011, approximately 31.8 million children were served by the NSLP with costs exceeding \$10.1 billion for the federal government (USDA, 2012). The USDA continued to improve nutritional standards by increasing the availability of nutritious foods and decreasing the levels of sodium and fats in school meals (USDA, 2012).

Reforms to food policy are designed to increase the nutritious foods that are available to school children, particularly those who live in food insecure homes (Johnson et al., 2016). However, these reforms have the potential to affect the health and nutrition of over 30 million students who eat meals in schools, regardless of their income levels (USDA, 2015). Developers of school meal programs originally intended for students who came from food insecure homes to consume healthy meals with adequate nutrients (USDA, 2014). Research has found that participation in school meals has indeed led to students eating healthier meals (Hanson & Olson, 2013) while also addressing concerns of families at risk of food insecurity (Bartfeld & Ahn, 2011; Arteaga & Heflin, 2014; Huang, Barnidge, & Kim, 2015). Current policy makers have concentrated on the implementation of school meals as a means for improving nutrition and achievement in children from low-income homes (Leos-Urbel et al., 2013). Policies and interventions related to school meals are successful (Mansfield & Savaiano, 2017), particularly when implementation is carried out in a way that involves essential participants (Weir & Sharma, 2016).

**School nutrition.** Poor nutrition may impact a child's ability to learn, and school meals serve to benefit the areas of academic achievement and positive behavior for students from food insecure homes (Houston et al., 2013; Imberman & Kugler, 2014). Studies have found that if school meals were made more popular among all students, then children would be more likely to participate (Cullen, Thompson, & Watson, 2012; Ferguson, Munoz, & Medrano, 2012) and benefit from the estimated 23% daily allowance of caloric intake supplied by school lunches (Liou, et al., 2015). Socioeconomic factors could impact meal choice, future health decisions, and the ongoing outcomes of students throughout adulthood (Moore & Littlecott, 2015; Tikkanen, 2009).

Minimal research has taken place with regard to how modern meal deliveries are occurring within schools. Other governments around the world have implemented policies regarding health and nutrition, but very few of these are being evaluated (Phulkerd et al., 2016). With the increased implementation of school meal programs, research is needed to examine the perceptions of participants, challenges of the program, and successful strategies and supports for others who are interested in similar implementations of meal delivery systems (MacLellan et al., 2010). In order to gain a clearer perspective on the school cafeteria mechanisms and nutrition, a direct examination is needed (Vine, Elliott, & Raine, 2014).

Though there are a number of food-related policies in place, there are research-based best practices that should be applied for the benefit of all participants (DiSiena, 2015; Garner & Thomas, 2011; Rutledge, 2015; Vandevijvere & Swinburn, 2015; Weir & Sharma, 2016; Williamson et al., 2013). Specific interventions could reduce childhood food insecurity and might promote health and well-being (Ryu & Bartfeld, 2012). Most students prefer healthier foods and educators are able to help students learn how to maintain a balanced diet (Gosliner et al., 2011; Tikkanen, 2009). Government policies may also spur action on the country's food-related health crises (Vandevijvere & Swinburn, 2015). However, writing policies as well as ensuring that they are followed through is equally important, yet difficult, for some school districts. Without adequately written policies or follow-up on procedures, there is no accountability for ensuring that policies benefit students (Schwartz et al., 2012). Food service workers have also reported that greater collaboration among administrators, teachers, and themselves is fundamental to the success of nutritional programs (Slawson et al., 2013).

Nutritional programs that are instituted within the cafeteria may be beneficial in encouraging students to make healthier food choices (Hanks, Just, & Wansink, 2013; Williamson

et al., 2013) and serving as a primary source of healthy food (Payán et al., 2017). One study found that students who did not participate in the school lunch program consumed no fruits, vegetables, or milk and very little whole grains when compared with those students who did participate (Cullen, Watson, & Dave, 2011). Policies that ensure health and social equality are essential to today's schools (Buck-McFadyen, 2015). Allowing students to take ownership in the meal program encourages them to partake in those meals (Williamson et al., 2013). Research has shown that students are willing to select and consume healthier foods when varied options are available (Mobley, et al., 2012; Schwartz, Henderson, Read, Danna, & Ickovics, 2015; Turner & Cahloupka, 2014). Research has indicated that additional time for school meals and mobile carts that serve nutritious snacks may also increase student participation and be beneficial for students' nutritional intake (Olst, 2013). Modifying the school food environment may lead to students consuming more healthy foods when their preferences are considered (Gosliner et al., 2011). With additional research and experience, best practices will evolve to better serve students in school food environments (Vandevijvere & Swinburn, 2015).

Specifically, there are certain nutritional guidelines and recommendations that food service personnel must follow with regard to students' meals. For instance, cafeteria workers must serve certain items in specific quantities to students to ensure that they are receiving adequate daily values (Blondin, Djang, Metayer, Anzman-Frasca, & Economos, 2014). Food service workers report they are working harder, and they are willing to do so in order to bring children more nutritious meals (Alcaraz & Cullen, 2014). Research also recommends providing students a wider variety of fresh produce choices as they may be more likely to consume these nutrient-rich foods that are unavailable at home (Hakim & Meissen, 2013; Hanks et al., 2013).

There are also recommendations for how future research should be geared in order to explore how school meals function. Experts in the field of nutrition have questioned dairy recommendations due to the changing needs of students (Ludwig & Willett, 2013). Knowles et al. (2016) stated, “educators and healthcare participants who recognize behavioral issues in children must consider how household food insecurity, financial stress...are affecting children’s health and development, and must seek ways to help parents address hardships” (p. 31). Other recommended research includes an examination of the effects of UFM on student empowerment (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013).

**Free/reduced meals.** Free and reduced meals were once viewed as a way to level the field for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status (Houston et al., 2013). Additionally, research has indicated that adequate nutrition is essential in order for a student to have optimal physical, mental, and emotional development (Szczepańska et al., 2013). However, research has also indicated that the delivery of such meals may violate children’s rights with respect to their health and privacy when adequate discretion is not used (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016). In the public school setting, this lack of privacy is often present. There is also the consideration of families whose children qualify for reduced price meals. These families, often just above the cutoff line, may be unable to pay the fees charged and students’ nutrition may suffer (Levin & Hewins, 2014).

There are several advantages noted as a result of students who participate in school meal programs. Those students consumed more vegetables, pasta, fish, rice, and grains and were more likely to drink water throughout the day (Evans et al., 2015; Merlo et al., 2015). Adequate nutrition spurs positive changes in student attentiveness and temperament thereby benefiting students’ levels of concentration and motivation (Adolphus, Lawton, Champ, & Dye, 2016;

Murphy, 2007). Mental health issues and social inequalities could also be alleviated by reducing the burden of childhood food insecurity (Melchior et al., 2012). Researchers also found that students who do not eat breakfast often perform lower academically (Boschloo et al., 2012). Children residing in homes where mothers did not complete high school or where the mothers work full-time were more likely to take part in free and reduced school meal programs (Hernandez et al., 2010). Research has also found that higher lunch prices were positively correlated with a decrease in childhood obesity (Taber, Chriqui, Powell, & Chaloupka, 2013) due to the high quality of food that was offered (Liou et al., 2015), and this cost may be alleviated with the CEP.

There are also barriers to providing free and reduced meals as schools have in the past. Students (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016) and parents (Golembiewski et al., 2015) often felt that their portion sizes were inadequate or that they did not have ample time to eat their meals. Students who participated in the free and reduced meal program also experienced increased anxiety (Smokowski et al., 2013). Teachers felt that healthy options were not consumed because students were unfamiliar with them at home. Teachers and students recognize that there are issues with social inequality among students because those recipients of free and reduced meals felt ashamed or attempted to avoid mealtimes at school (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016). Parents and students have voiced a desire to participate in menu planning and food selection as a way of encouraging students' participation in school meals as well (Alcaraz & Cullen, 2014; Bailey-Davis et al., 2013). School policies may need to be implemented to give students the tools needed to familiarize themselves with new foods and to see the advantages of eating more nutritious foods (Gase et al., 2014).

For the implementation of any school policies or changes to be widely accepted, there should be collaboration among individuals at various levels within the system (Cohen, Richardson, Parker, Catalano, & Rimm, 2014; Graber, Woods, & O'Connor, 2012). School nutrition programs are more beneficial to students when the community, the parents, the government, and the media collaborate on implementation efforts (Harvey-Golding et al., 2016). Specific marketing strategies, such as the use of social media, may be used to improve all participants' awareness of nutritional content and availability (Bartfeld, Kim, Ryu, & Ahn, 2009; Ferguson et al., 2012; Lambert, Raidl, Carr, Safaii, Tidwell, 2007). It is also suggested that widening the scope of school meal programs, as it is done through the CEP, could make school nutrition more readily accepted among all students (Bartfeld et al., 2009). Research has shown that school administrators once reported that students voiced complaints regarding meal policy changes, but those gradually decreased (Terry-McElrath et al., 2015; Turner & Chaloupka, 2014).

### **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)**

The CEP was created as a grant-funded program under the HHFKA and provides impoverished schools with an alternative way to receive reimbursements for breakfasts and lunches served under the school meal program while eliminating much of the administrative costs (HHFKA, 2010; Levin & Hewins, 2014). For the purposes of the CEP, students are directly certified through a process called data matching (Levin & Hewins, 2014). In other words, students who are in foster care, homeless, or migrant, were enrolled in Head Start, or whose families receive SNAP or TANF are considered identified students. From there, any school or group of schools with at least an ISP of 40% is eligible for participation in the CEP for a four-year cycle (Hewins et al., 2014; Logan et al., 2014; USDA, 2015). The CEP allows for all

students to receive free meals regardless of income and will likely increase the number of participants because research has found that participation decreases when the provision is removed (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). This may be attributed to long lines in the cafeteria caused by the keying of students' personal identification numbers and shortened lunch periods that may be eliminated with the CEP (Levin & Hewins, 2014).

Schools that choose to implement the CEP, which became available nationwide for the 2014-2015 school year, may not require the household applications as they must serve breakfast and lunch to all students (Harkness et al., 2015; Levin & Hewins, 2014). Therefore, administrative processes that may inhibit school meal participation are removed, lunch lines and payments are eliminated, verification measures are abolished, and all students are served equally (Hewins et al., 2014; Levin & Hewins, 2014). Research demonstrates that when all children receive UFM, participation is increased, and positive results are amplified. This is especially true for students from low-income homes (Hewins & Burke, 2014).

Schools are reimbursed at the federal free reimbursement rate for a percentage of meals served, and the rest are reimbursed at the federal paid rate with the school sponsor paying any remaining costs (Harkness et al., 2015; USDA, 2014). The reimbursement rate is set by multiplying the number of qualifying students by a factor between 1.4 - 1.6 in order to determine the federal free rate (Hewins et al., 2014; Long, 2014; Ralston & Newman, 2015). To this point, 1.6 has always been used as a proxy for identifying the number of children who would have received free and reduced meals under the traditional system (Levin & Hewins, 2014). Data reviewed at the time of the HHFKA implementation showed that for every 10 children directly certified, an additional six children were eligible for free or reduced price meals based on applications, so the 1.6 multiplier was determined to demonstrate an accurate correlation of the

two values (USDA, 2016b). The USDA retains the right to change the multiplier within the given range on an annual basis. However, schools already within the four-year cycle have the option to retain their current rate if it is altered. Currently, it is set based on research indicating that there are, on average, six out of 10 students who qualify for free and reduced meals based on income (USDA, 2015). The reimbursement rate may increase for schools because students who received reduced price meals may fall into the federal free reimbursement category with the use of the 1.6 multiplier. The CEP offers all students two federally-regulated meals per day (USDA, 2015).

**Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.** Prior to 2010, the guidelines for school nutrition had not been updated in 15 years (Turner & Chaloupka, 2014). The HHFKA was designed to increase school meal participation through kitchen upgrades, meal requirements, school wellness policies, and grant-funded initiatives states (HHFKA, 2010). Specifically, schools were required to reduce the levels of sodium and fat in foods while also offering more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain products (Asada et al., 2017; Hager & Turner, 2016; Turner & Chaloupka, 2014) while also strengthening school wellness policies and promoting nutrition education, therefore, the HHFKA made \$4.5 billion available for additional child nutrition efforts (HHFKA, 2010). Research has shown the policy measures effective in increasing the nutritional quality of meals as well as students' access to healthier food options (Cohen et al., 2014; Gase et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2012; Turner, Ohri-Vachaspati, Powell, & Chaloupka, 2017; Williamson et al., 2013). Interventions such as the HHFKA (Gortmaker et al., 2015) and the NSLP (Mirtcheva & Powell, 2013) are effective methods for the treatment and prevention of obesity in elementary school students.

The HHFKA first initiated the concept of the CEP allowing schools to offer free breakfast to all students regardless of income (Harkness et al., 2015). This legislation “aims to expand enrollment in the school meals program by allowing qualifying schools in high-poverty areas to provide free meals to all students without requiring students to demonstrate eligibility” through paperwork or other means (Leos-Urbel et al., 2013, p. 89). Students, regardless of income, who attend eligible participating schools receive free breakfast and lunch daily (HHFKA, 2010).

Initial perceptions of the HHFKA were not all positive, but parents’ (Golembiewski et al., 2015) and students’ (Turner & Chaloupka, 2014) concerns have lessened with time. A gap remains, however, in what policy mandates and how local school divisions interpret and comply with those standards. Schools continue to experience difficulties with expenses, food waste, and meal planning. The issue of acceptance is particularly noticeable in older students as they are more resistant to the changes and may benefit from having familiar foods altered as opposed to eliminated (Golembiewski et al., 2015).

Meal options that are accessible for all students may increase student participation in the program (Haesly, Nanney, Coulter, Fong & Pratt, 2013). Participation rates were found to increase when universal free breakfasts were implemented, particularly for those students who were not eligible under previous policies (Leos-Urbel et al., 2013). Long-term interventions may make lasting impacts on children’s food preferences and nutrient intakes (Hendrie, Brindal, Baird, & Gardner, 2013). Researchers found that school meals were more nutritious and that students made healthier meal choices after the HHFKA was implemented (Bergman et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2014; Smith, Bergman, Englund, Ogan, & Barbee, 2016) and that students consumed more fruits and vegetables, regardless of household income (Longacre et al., 2014).

Students reported a significant reduction in short-term hunger as well, thus allowing them to focus more on school-related tasks (Mhurchu et al., 2013).

The psychological and behavioral well-being of children may be significantly impacted by food insecurity (Melchior et al., 2012). By providing free meals to all students, those in need will experience less stigmatization, and the family budget at home may be adjusted because these families will not need to provide breakfast or lunch on school days (Khan, Pinckney, Keeney, Frankowski, & Carney, 2011). Policy changes brought forth through HHFKA, such as changes to school vending, are estimated to bring forth a dramatic decrease in obesity (Gortmaker et al., 2015). Other countries such as Finland, Estonia, and Sweden have previously implemented UFM, and other countries such as Latvia and the United States are continuing to explore various models in schools (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016).

**Universal free meals.** The CEP was first implemented in West Virginia as a pilot program offering a breakfast provision over a three-year period in 10 states, including West Virginia. The program became more popular and more states became interested in developing their own implementations. During the 2012-2013 school year, West Virginia formally implemented the CEP statewide. The CEP became a nationwide option in 2014 (Harkness et al., 2015; USDA, 2015). Researchers expect that the delivery of UFM will result in substantial educational, financial, and health-related benefits for children from the most impoverished households (Holford, 2015).

As with the implementation of any new educational policy or program, planning is important for success. A variety of participant perspectives is needed to begin formulating implementation strategies that will be beneficial for students but manageable for school districts and food service participants. Policymakers at all levels should continue to encourage healthy

school environments from nutritional choices to participant input through funding, training, and support (Alcaraz & Cullen, 2014; Turner et al., 2017). It is important to ensure that adequate infrastructure and resources are available as well as strong and supportive leadership in the implementation process to safeguard student nutrition (Holthe, Larsen, & Samdal, 2011; Terry-McElrath et al., 2015).

Universal meal practices are affecting social change for students who live in impoverished areas and are positively affected by the active engagement of educators (Dalma et al., 2015). Research has shown that school meals offered to all students at no charge may result in increased participation, leading to decreased obesity and increased nutrition specifically for low-income students (Levin & Hewins, 2014). Administrators viewed the CEP as having a positive effect on finances due to federal reimbursements and decreased paperwork (Harkness et al., 2015). However, research has found that any lost revenue that might incur from the offering of UFM could, in part, be recouped by a decrease in the administrative costs that are eliminated in the CEP (Leos-Urbel et al., 2013).

**Benefits and challenges.** Benefits may come from the implementation of free, nutritious school lunches while schools have less administrative work with increased revenue. Parents are also free from submitting paperwork and maintaining frequent checks on meal account balances (Harkness et al., 2015). In a similar program, administrators and teachers found the universal aspect beneficial because it served all students and positively influenced the school climate by decreasing negative behaviors (Johnson et al., 2016) and increasing student camaraderie (Dalma et al., 2015).

Researchers note that students who bring food from home tend to consume less fruits and vegetables (Hur et al., 2011) and less milk (Hubbard et al., 2014). Meanwhile, those students

who chose to eat school meals selected more nutritious foods which included more calcium, fiber, (Clark & Fox, 2009) and vegetables (Gosliner et al., 2011) with less plate waste observed (Cohen et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2015). Students also ate foods with fewer calories (Johnson et al., 2016) and less fat but with an increase in dairy and fruit intake (Au et al., 2016; Condon, Crepinsek, & Fox, 2009; Johnston et al., 2012). Students have reported that serving ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables, offering free samples, and encouraging healthy eating through advertising and raffles could increase the students' consumption of school meals (Alcaraz & Cullen, 2014).

School personnel noted an increase in student attendance and concentration on their studies in the classroom as well as a decrease in food insecurity and social stigma among peers (Harvey-Golding et al., 2016; Leos-Urbel et al., 2013). Free meals for all students may reduce social stigma and overcome other issues regarding school meal participation. Participation rates in school breakfasts, regardless of previous eligibility, was shown to increase 12-16% with the implementation of UFM programs (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). Parents have also noted that students' eating behaviors at home have improved as they are introduced to healthier eating and nutritious food at school (Asada et al., 2017; Golembiewski et al., 2015; Gosliner et al., 2011; Ogden et al., 2010). Food service workers reported receiving positive feedback from students and teachers on the nutritional changes and meal delivery system (Alcaraz & Cullen, 2014). Universal free breakfast programs also resulted in a significant reduction in the number of students who skipped breakfast in schools that serve a majority of children from low-income homes (Moore & Littlecott, 2015). Families also took note of the convenience and nutritional advantages that are offered by school meals (Farris et al., 2016).

Specific challenges to the CEP implementation have also been observed. It is essential to have the involvement of all participants in the implementation of UFM programs (Cornish,

Askelson, & Golembiewski, 2016; Golembiewski et al., 2015; Weir & Sharma, 2016). Several participants, particularly those in the foodservice branch, have expressed concerns over program sustainability and the lack of healthy food choices (Harvey-Golding et al., 2016). Participants have expressed concerns that school food reform is a way to blame schools for children's poor health (Asada et al., 2017; Cornish et al., 2016). Schools also expressed concerns over a loss of funding due the lack of data collection associated with the CEP (Harkness et al., 2015).

Initially, foodservice managers were concerned about food quality and how to accommodate students' food preferences and dietary restrictions (Day et al., 2016). The qualifications and in-service training of foodservice managers might also impact the implementation of nutrition policies within the school division (Asada et al., 2017; Liou et al., 2015; Mincher, Symons, & Thompson, 2012). Partnering with local chefs, nutrition educators, and college students who study food and nutrition might also be beneficial in designing school food choices (Cohen et al., 2012). Research found that schools who serve the healthiest meal options employed college-educated food service managers (Liou et al., 2015; Thomson, Tussing-Humphreys, Martin, LeBlanc, and Onufrak, 2012). Many food service managers, especially in rural areas, lack any training beyond high school (Cornish et al., 2016), but they may have a unique understanding of the areas in which they serve (Golembiewski et al., 2015). Research also found that policy implementation was more successful for those food service managers who had marketing experience, were risk-takers, and could tolerate uncertainty during the initial stages (Weir & Sharma, 2016).

Studies found that school foodservice personnel desired to have more knowledge of adequate nutritional guidelines and best practices for elementary-aged students (Perera, Frei, Frei, Wong, & Bobe, 2015; Weir & Sharma, 2016) while also having more freedom to make

decisions in their own school meal programs (Cornish et al., 2016). Foodservice personnel must also look for ways to be creative in meal planning with the addition of spices and flavorings because other food environments, such as fast-food restaurants, are not altering their meal options (Asada et al., 2017; Weir & Sharma, 2016). Food service workers also desire to have enhanced communication among school professionals to enhance implementation of the CEP (Slawson et al., 2013). School lunch provisions may effectively serve poor and rural areas by alleviating obesity (Liou et al., 2015; Taber et al., 2013).

Other participants expressed concerns relating to other aspects of the CEP. Initially, there were concerns about the financial effect of the program and how it could be economically viable while maintaining longevity (Cornish et al., 2016; Harkness et al., 2015). Adequate training for associated personnel (Asada et al., 2017), parents, and students (Byker, Pinard, Yaroch, & Serrano, 2013) is beneficial and contributes to support of the program, but should be a consideration in costs of program implementation (Weir & Sharma, 2016). Students in one UFM program expressed their desire to have more choices in their meals as well as concerns over mass preparation and the unavailability of fresh foods (Day et al., 2016). All participants have observed that there is a significant amount of food that goes to waste, in some instances because students do not like what they are being served (Asada et al., 2017; Blondin et al., 2014; Cornish et al., 2016; Woo Baidal & Taveras, 2014).

Research has found that rural school districts tend to have less stringent policies than urban areas, suggesting that they may have a better understanding of the health concerns that often plague low-income students (Schwartz et al., 2012). Concerns are also expressed regarding the poorer treatment of CEP participants that are housed in the same school district as CEP non-participants and how supportive the surrounding communities may be (Harkness et al., 2015).

These smaller districts may benefit from additional education about the importance of improving nutrition and health as it is impacted by the school environment (Schwartz et al., 2012).

Participants involved in policy creation need to carefully monitor schools, provide support when needed, and ensure that the desired results are being achieved (Mâsse, Naiman, & Naylor, 2013). Students may also benefit from specific interventions when changes are occurring to aid in their adjustment and acceptance of new or revised food policies (Gase et al., 2014). When the opportunity for change is distinctly communicated to participants, then they may be more accepting of the CEP implementation (Asada et al., 2017; Cornish et al., 2016; Golembiewski et al., 2015). Participants have noted specific difficulties with regard to menu planning, increased costs, and plate waste; however, they have also demonstrated their support for changes in the school food environment (Cohen et al., 2014; Turner & Chaloupka, 2014). Some schools and districts have expressed concerns about losing other types of monetary assistance because state funding formulas utilize the data from free and reduced meal applications in designating funding (Levin & Hewins, 2014). School and teacher accountability measures may also suffer because student achievement data is not disaggregated by income levels (Croninger, Rice, & Checovich, 2016). More research and experience with the CEP may help to alleviate such issues.

### **Summary**

UFM programs are becoming more commonplace in the nation's schools. In an attempt to ensure that students have the greatest opportunities for learning, schools have decided to address the notion that food insecurity is prevalent in many educational environments.

Childhood hunger may contribute to several negative consequences such as malnourishment and

inconsistent eating patterns that affect children's health, behavior, and achievement (Chiuve et al., 2012; Cooper et al., 2012; Houston et al., 2013; Imberman & Kugler, 2014).

A review of literature was conducted on how school meal programs, particularly UFM programs, are successfully implemented in an effort to improve various aspects of a student's health and education (Evans et al., 2015; Houston et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2016; Leos-Urbel et al., 2013). This research will add to the existing literature by examining how child nutrition is often an overlooked aspect of education and by evaluating the implementation of a school meal program from a qualitative standpoint (Leos-Urbel et al., 2013; Phulkard et al., 2016).

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this multiple case, qualitative study was to understand the participants' perspectives of the implementation of UFM programs at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia. This chapter explores the various components of the study through the case study design, research questions, setting, and participants. A qualitative, multiple case study design allowed insight into the authentic experiences of participants (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). The research questions provided a framework for guiding the study into an in-depth look at the implementation of the CEP from the perspectives of multiple participants. Selected UFM participants were crucial participants in the implementation of the CEP and participated in the administration of an open-ended questionnaire protocol via one-to-one and in-person interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The role of the researcher was also discussed as were the techniques for data analysis and ethical considerations. An exploration of related documents and observations of the UFM program also contributed to the research findings (Stake, 1996; Yin, 2014). Data was analyzed for common themes using open coding and axial coding to best answer the research questions (Patton, 2002).

### **Design**

This is a qualitative study utilizing a case study design. A qualitative study allows the researcher to see a more holistic picture of the relationships among the factors that are being studied and analyzed in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is characterized by its interpretive, experiential, situational, and personal nature (Stake, 1995). The qualitative research design lets the researcher understand how factors are intertwined through a more in-depth look into the perspectives of those who have lived the

experience (Creswell, 2013). This study will allow for a deeper exploration of the experiences of those who implement UFM programs.

The case study approach is best suited to gain insight into the experiences of those who have lived the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A multiple case study was used for this study, because the design is recommended when the researcher wishes to utilize multiple sources of evidence to discuss a topic over broad terms (Yin, 2014). With the concept of UFM becoming a more common practice in real life, the case study design is appropriate (Gall et al., 2007; Yin, 2014). Multiple cases will be studied to answer the questions of “how” and “why” the phenomenon occurred (Yin, 2014). The schools will provide bounded systems based on CEP participation, high “percent needy” levels, and geographical situation in southern West Virginia. Data obtained through the multiple cases will allow for triangulation of data, maintaining the study’s focus, and increasing the transferability of findings (Patton, 2002). Using multiple cases aids the researcher in the discovery of contextual issues surrounding program implementation while also helping to build experiential knowledge (Stake, 1995). This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of those involved in the implementation of UFM and to examine those findings across the cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

The focus of this study was on the UFM programs implemented via the CEP in southern West Virginia. A qualitative study was determined to be the most suitable for analyzing the involvement and perception of participants who were purposefully selected due to their participation in a schoolwide free meal program (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016; Patton, 2002). A case study design was selected in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of each participant and how it was significant (Merriam, 2009).

Case studies that are well thought out and implemented involve multiple types of evidence for data analysis (Yin, 2014). Multiple case studies often utilize data collection and analysis through interviews, questionnaires, archival documents, and observations as was conducted in this research (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Data was triangulated to enhance trustworthiness (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The researcher aimed to tell the story through the perspectives of the participants in order to have a more thorough and holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 1995).

### **Research Questions**

**CRQ:** How do participants perceive CEP implementation as part of the educational process, at the elementary school level?

**RSQ1:** What factors contribute to the processes of qualifying for, implementing, and delivering the CEP?

**RSQ2:** What benefits do participants identify from the implementation and delivery of the CEP?

**RSQ3:** What challenges do participants identify from implementing the CEP?

**RSQ4:** How do participants who implement the CEP describe the influence of the program on the school culture?

### **Setting**

Juniper Public Schools (pseudonym) and Frasier Public Schools (pseudonym) are two school systems located in southern West Virginia. Juniper Public Schools (School A) is located in Juniper County (pseudonym). As of April 2018, 228 students were enrolled with 164 students identified as eligible for free and reduced lunch. The student body is approximately 64% white and 30% African-American, and about 15% of students qualify for special education. Frasier

Public Schools (School B) is located in Frasier County (pseudonym). As of April 2018, 218 students were enrolled with 143 students deemed eligible for free and reduced lunch. The student body is approximately 88% white and 7% African-American and about 20% qualify for special education (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018). Each school system is governed by a five-member school board and led by a school superintendent. I selected these schools because they have documented ISPs of 71.93%, and 65.60% respectively, indicating the percentage of the student population that is eligible for free or reduced meals. These schools are located in southern West Virginia so they are similar in culture and also comparable in size and composition of the student population (WVDE, 2018).

### **Participants**

The individual participants for this study were selected from two school divisions in southern West Virginia and are referred to as participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Two schools, or cases, will be used to achieve literal replication as results are sought to be similar within and across cases (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The first school, or case, is in Juniper Public Schools (pseudonym) and the second school, or case, is in Frasier Public Schools (pseudonym).

Participants were purposefully selected based on their involvement within the school division and their potential to make informed contributions based on their varied viewpoints, and upon recommendation of the administrator with regard to their knowledge of implementation of the CEP (Patton, 2002). Participants included a school board member, division superintendent, food service managers, school administrators, food service workers, and teachers based on his/her involvement in the program and on recommendation of the administrator. Through snowball sampling, administrators were asked to make recommendations of food service workers

and teachers within the schools who would make informed contributions to the study (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). The sample size consisted of 15 participants (Creswell, 2013).

### **Procedures**

Once the research proposal was approved by the research committee and initial Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted, I obtained site approval by utilizing the appropriate chain of command beginning with the division superintendents and moving to the school principals for guidance in following through with other participants. At this point, purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used to secure participants (Yin, 2014). Initial documents contained a consent to participate along with a description of the study, details on how participant data would remain confidential, a statement of risks and benefits, and an option to withdraw (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Once these documents were completed, I asked participants to complete a questionnaire based on CEP implementation. I then conducted individual interviews that were recorded and transcribed, and explored documentation related to the topic (Patton, 2002). Documentation related to the CEP was explored, and I conducted and took field notes on observations of the CEP in action. Observations examined food preparation and food distribution within the regulations of the CEP (Yin, 2014). I increased trustworthiness through member checking, audit trails, and by including a rich, thick description of the data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). Member checking was conducted by asking participants to review the data for accuracy and credibility of the findings and interpretations. By including a rich, thick description of the data, I was able to provide significant details about each case and themes found within the research (Creswell, 2013).

### **The Researcher's Role**

In serving as the human instrument and a non-participant in this study, I limited my own experiences in an attempt to limit bias (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). I am a teacher educator and a former special education teacher. I was a public school teacher for five years before moving into the field of higher education. I saw first-hand the effects that inadequate meals have on students' learning. Now, in supervising my students in the field, I see that many schools are coping with hunger in ways that are equally accommodating to all students through free meal programs. I want to prepare my students to work with these children who often come from low-income, food insecure homes. Personally, I also wanted to interact with research participants, or UFM participants, and collect data in southern West Virginia through interviews, questionnaires, documents, and observations. These programs are relatively new in many areas, and it is important to assess the influence that they are having on school culture.

I believe that children are a gift from God; they are to be nurtured and loved as He loves them. All people have basic needs, and children's needs for food and shelter are to be addressed by those adults who care for them. I believe that educators should strive to give students every advantage, including the assurance that their basic needs for nutrition are met. For this reason, I want to understand the perspectives of participants who work to implement the CEP programs in schools. With increased understanding of the implementation procedures, there may be a desire to expand the CEP in schools.

My role as a qualitative researcher involves creating the design for the research as well as collecting and analyzing the data. Throughout the research, I set aside my own feelings and experiences to understand the perceptions of the participants and the phenomenon being studied. To do this, I also acknowledged my own assumptions throughout the research (Creswell, 2013).

I also collaborated with the dissertation committee to avoid bias in the investigation and writing. I limited bias by bracketing myself from the interview process and following the proper protocol (Appendix A) (Patton, 2002). While I did have second-hand relationships with the sites as I serve as a student teaching supervisor, I had no prior relationships with the participants as this is important to the case study design (Yin, 2014).

### **Data Collection**

Different methods of data collection were employed to gain a clear picture of CEP implementation. First, participants completed questionnaires based on their experiences with CEP implementation (Yin, 2014). Second, open-ended interviews were conducted with each of the selected participants (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Third, documents related to the program implementation were explored (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Lastly, observations of the CEP in classrooms and the cafeteria were conducted (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). I believe that this sequence of events gave the clearest picture of how implementation occurs because it moved from the more specific data to less specific data.

### **Open-Ended Questionnaires**

Open-ended questionnaires were used as the initial method of data collection. Open-ended questionnaires contributed to the triangulation of data and provided useful information to the study by facilitating further discussion of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2014). Open-ended questionnaires were delivered to the participant in the school where he/she is employed or via e-mail.

Questions were researcher-developed and were reviewed by others in the field who are familiar with the CEP and its application (Yin, 2014). Open-ended questionnaires were utilized for this qualitative case study with the following questions:

1. Tell me about your position within the school and how long you have served in that role.
2. Describe, in as much detail as possible, what you know about the implementation of the CEP in your school.
3. Describe any experiences that you have had in relationship to students' food insecurity.
4. Describe any outcomes you have personally noted in regard to the CEP.
5. Tell me about any feedback, inside or outside of the school, that you have received regarding the implementation of UFM.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were used because multiple instruments are essential to conducting qualitative research (Yin, 2014). One-to-one interviews provide for the in-depth questioning that is critical to case study research (Yin, 2014). Utilizing individual interviews allowed participants to contribute as much information as they desired and gave me the opportunity to ask probing follow-up questions (Gall et al., 2007; Turner, 2010). Additionally, interviews gave more insight and perspective into individuals and their stories (Seidman, 2013). Interview questions were framed in a way that allowed for a better understanding of how the topic related to participants' lives without leading the individual to answer in a specific way (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews consisted of open-ended questions and followed a semi-structured format that lasted approximately 25 minutes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Yin, 2014). Semi-structured interviews are important data collection tools for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Interviews took place in the school where the participant was employed. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for purposes of data analysis and to identify themes and compare

the data within and across cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Memoing was utilized to better understand the meanings behind the participants' thoughts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This data collection continued until saturation was reached (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The data collection methods for this study aimed to generate common themes and when no new themes emerged and there was a depth of information to allow for replication of the study, then data saturation for this qualitative case study was reached (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012).

#### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (School Board Members / Superintendents)

1. What is your role in the school system and how long have you served in this capacity?
2. Tell me about your experience with the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), or universal free meals.
  - a. What are your thoughts on the origin of the CEP?
  - b. What benefits do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - c. What challenges do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - d. Why do you believe that the program is successful?
  - e. In what ways do you believe that the program is not successful?
3. Explain the process for implementing the CEP in the district.
  - a. Explain the qualifications for participating in the CEP.
  - b. Please walk me through the implementation timeline.
  - c. Tell me about the collaborations that you had with others regarding the CEP implementation.
  - d. How were those collaborations initiated?
  - e. What significance, if any, do believe the collaborations had on the implementation of CEP?

4. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on overall school success?
  - a. Describe the influence of CEP on school meal participation.
  - b. Describe the influence of CEP on attendance.
  - c. Describe the influence of CEP on achievement.

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (Food Service Managers / Food Service Workers)

1. What is your role in the school system and how long have you served in this capacity?
2. Tell me about your experience with the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), or universal free meals?
  - a. What are your thoughts on the origin of the CEP?
  - b. What benefits do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - c. What challenges do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - d. Why do you believe that the program is successful?
  - e. In what ways do you believe that the program is not successful?
3. Explain the process for implementing the CEP in your school?
  - a. Please walk me through the implementation timeline.
  - b. Tell me about the collaborations that you had with others regarding the CEP implementation.
  - c. How did the food service routine need to be adjusted to accommodate the implementation of the CEP?
  - d. How, if at all, has the implementation of the CEP influenced your workload?
4. How do you perceive changes in school culture related to the CEP?
  - a. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on school meal participation.

### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (Administrators / Teachers)

1. What is your role in the school system and how long have you served in this capacity?
2. Tell me about your experience with the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), or universal free meals?
  - a. What are your thoughts on the origin of the CEP?
  - b. What benefits do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - c. What challenges do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - d. Why do you believe that the program is successful?
  - e. In what ways do you believe that the program is not successful?
3. Explain the process for implementing the CEP in your school?
  - a. Tell me about the collaborations that you had with others regarding the CEP implementation.
  - b. How did your classroom routine need to be adjusted to accommodate the implementation of the CEP?
  - c. How, if at all, has the implementation of the CEP influenced your workload?
4. Describe the influence of the CEP on the overall school culture.
  - a. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on school meal participation?
  - b. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student attendance?
  - c. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student tardiness?
  - d. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on disciplinary referrals?
  - e. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student achievement?
  - f. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student behavior?
  - g. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on the overall school culture?

There were three interview protocols created to understand the implementation of UFM based on various roles within the CEP. The first protocol (Appendix E) was created to explore the experiences of school board members and school superintendents. The second protocol (Appendix F) was used to explore the perceptions of food service managers and food service workers. The third protocol (Appendix G) was used to explore the perceptions of administrators and teachers who are involved in the CEP implementation.

Questions for each type of participant were similar but were customized to the unique position of the participant within the school system. Question #1 was an exploratory opening question to make the participants feel comfortable and to collect basic information (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Question #2 was an open-ended question used to gauge immediate perceptions with probing questions used as a means of continuing the investigation (Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016; MacLellan et al., 2010). Question #3 explored the processes related to the CEP with probing question to elicit more detail. These processes may vary but have specific guidelines to ensure that standards are met (Blondin et al., 2014). Question #4 examined the perceptions of the participant with regard to how the CEP has impacted the school environment. Leos-Urbel et al. (2013) suggested that policy makers view nutritional improvement as a way to impact student achievement in children from low-income homes. Interview questions were developed to coincide with the research questions and to allow for a clearer picture of the CEP implementation as well as the effects of the CEP on the school culture.

### **Document Analysis**

Several documents were analyzed to better understand the research topic. This included, but was not limited to, informational documents, policies relating to the CEP and/or its implementation, and letters to schools/parents/other participants explaining the CEP. Document

collection took place in the school or through the Internet. Data analysis took place in my home or at my office. An examination of this related documentation supported the research by providing insight and information on the phenomenon under study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

### **Observations**

Observations of the participants before, during, and after the CEP breakfasts and lunches were used to evaluate how the program is implemented and were included in the data collection (Slawson et al., 2013). Observations examined food preparation and food distribution within the regulations of the CEP and were conducted in the cafeteria and classrooms (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Informal observations of each site, two visits for each site, allowed for identification of specific procedures related to the implementation of the CEP (Stake, 1995). Observations included note taking of the event in order to capture the perceptions and attitudes of any participants present during the cycle (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008). As an unobtrusive, or non-participant, observer, I recorded observations in a double-entry notebook to avoid bias and separated personal feelings or thoughts from direct observations (Lowe & Zemliansky, 2011; Yin 2014).

#### **Observation Protocol (Appendix H)**

1. Avoid interrupting the flow of activity.
2. Document only what is observed and actions that are occurring.
3. Begin each recording with the date, time, and place of the data collection.
4. When taking notes, keep them brief and be sure to indicate the date and time to correlate with recordings.
5. Use pseudonyms for all participants and schools.
6. Stay long enough to observe the event in its entirety.

7. Document conversations, body language, attitudes, etc. (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Analysis**

Four types of data were utilized for this study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Questionnaires were coded accordingly (Yin, 2014). Observations were accompanied by field notes and reflections. Archival documents were also sorted and coded accordingly with the use of the Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) NVivo to aid in data analysis (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

As the data was collected, I utilized holistic data analysis and repeated document review in order to recognize emerging themes (Stake, 1995). Open coding was used to organize data into categories and identify important themes for categorization (Creswell, 2013). Themes were coded so that repetition was easily identified and categorized. Axial coding was utilized to organize data from an open coding theme into specific categories to allow for an in-depth look at the conditions (Creswell, 2013). Themes and evidence were placed into the NVivo matrix for further examination and to determine which themes best answered the research questions (Yin, 2014).

Individual cases helped to identify important themes prior to cross-case analysis. The use of rich, thick descriptions in individual cases allowed for a more thorough comparison across cases (Creswell, 2013). After an individual analysis of each case, the two were compared and similar themes recognized. Through the cross-case analysis, similar themes were identified to strengthen the findings of the research (Yin, 2014).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness may be achieved through specific steps to address credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in a research study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln &

Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is equivalent to a measure of validity and reliability in quantitative research (Patton, 2002). By maintaining transparency, employing proper research procedures, and effectively utilizing the evidence, trustworthiness may be achieved (Yin, 2014). There are multiple methods used to ensure aspects of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are addressed in the research design and data collection and analysis of this study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

### **Credibility**

Multiple sampling methods, repeated data readings, member checking, and external audits enhanced the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Member checking was used to ensure that participants have the opportunity to review the material for accuracy and potential misinterpretations (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Stake, 1995). The use of interviews, questionnaires, documents, and observations contributed to the triangulation of data, therefore enhancing the dependability and internal validity of the study results. Triangulation indicates that multiple sources of data lead to more thorough and in-depth understanding of the research (Barbour, 2001; Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

An audit trail of all procedures and data were kept in a notebook for documentation purposes. Peer reviews were utilized as an external check in debriefing sessions (Creswell, 2013). All digital recordings of interviews were transcribed by a professional, and transcriptions underwent member checks to further increase confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). I ensured dependability in this study by documenting data analysis using the QDAS, NVivo.

### **Transferability**

The study used thorough descriptions of data throughout the analysis. A multi-case design was the most appropriate approach for supporting the transferability of the research findings (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The rich, thick description of the data collection techniques, procedures for analysis, and research findings allowed for transferability to other schools and school districts (Creswell, 2013).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers must be aware of their behavior and maintain certain ethical standards throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013). First, I sought approval for my research proposal. Next, I applied for approval to conduct the study with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University, and I awaited approval prior to taking any further steps in the research process (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Finally, prior to contacting UFM participants who participated in the study, I gained site approval from the school divisions where the research was conducted.

In serving as the human instrument in this study, I was responsible for securing informed consent and protecting the confidentiality of UFM participants (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I had no prior relationships with the participants as this is important to the case study design (Yin, 2014). I used pseudonyms for all UFM participants and schools or school districts. In the beginning stages of the research, it was most pertinent to acquire informed consent from the participants while ensuring the protection of their confidentiality in accordance with IRB standards (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). All personally identifiable information was omitted and specific contributions were conveyed in a manner that also protected anonymity (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All raw data was stored in a locked cabinet and electronic data was stored on a computer that was password protected.

Member checking was used to confirm all findings (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation was also be utilized to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2013).

### **Summary**

This study examined the implementation of UFM programs and how participants describe the effects of implementation as instituted under the CEP. The research focused on two elementary schools situated in southern West Virginia identified for their implementation of the CEP. The research was conducted with the use of interviews, written questionnaires, observations, and an exploration of documents related to the CEP.

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the methodology involved in this research study. The methods described aim to answer the research questions. The research design involved a multiple case study to examine the perspectives of various participants in the CEP implementation, an authentic situation in a real context (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). The setting for each method of data collection is described and the discussion of ethical considerations, particularly with regard to UFM participants, is explained. Data analysis and the triangulation of data is addressed. I addressed the issues of trustworthiness through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). I also spoke to specific ethical considerations that were relevant to this research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

This qualitative multiple case study examined the perceptions of multiple participants' perspectives of the implementation of UFM at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia. This chapter begins with a brief description of each study participant. As a matter of confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and research sites. All participants were employed in school systems in southern West Virginia but may have held different positions.

The results in this chapter were based on the analysis of the data collected from one-to-one, semi-structured interviews; open-ended questionnaires; cafeteria observations; and artifacts related to the CEP. The one-to-one interviews were professionally transcribed. I read the transcripts from the interviews as well as questionnaire responses, observation notes, and artifacts several times each to immerse myself in the research. Each participant's experience with the CEP was the focus of the study, and quotations from participants were used to provide rich descriptions of the study's research questions and support the development of the themes.

After the participants' experiences are described, the results are discussed to develop the themes. The findings are then used to provide responses to the research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Participants**

A total of 15 participants agreed to participate as indicated by a signed consent form (Appendix B) and completion of an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix D). Participants were identified through purposeful sampling of their role in the school system and through snowball sampling or asking the administrators for recommendations of suitable participants. To better

understand the participant perspectives, Table 1 organizes information concerning participant attributes. Participants' roles are coded with an indication of service area, Juniper (J) School Division or Frasier (F) School Division. Most of this information was gathered during the initial open-ended questionnaire.

Table 1

*Participant Information*

Participant	Gender	Role/School Division	#Years in Role
Eric	Male	Administrator-J	16
Haley	Female	Administrator-F	9
Veronica	Female	Administrator-J	8
Georgia	Female	Administrator-F	7
Cole	Male	Administrator-J	6
Tanya	Female	Administrator-F	3
Betsy	Female	Food Service-J	11
Rose	Female	Food Service-F	8
Pat	Female	Food Service-J	7
Alex	Female	Food Service-	6
Dorothy	Female	Food Service-J	5
Shelby	Female	Food Service	4
Jan	Female	Teacher	13
Michele	Female	Teacher	10
Kayla	Female	Teacher	9

### **Eric**

Eric was a white male who had taught core subjects at the middle and high school levels for several years before becoming an administrator. After being in the school system for several years, Eric was hesitant to talk about the program because he could not remember a lot about the original implementation of the CEP. Eric was a bit reserved in his one-to-one interview; however, he did express his view of the benefits by sharing the following: “We have a number of students in this area that if they did not get a breakfast and a lunch at school, what they did get would be much less, if any.” He also stated that he felt an additional benefit to the program came with the elimination of unpaid lunch bills which could lead to poor publicity for the school system.

### **Haley**

Haley was a white female who had been her position as administrator for nine years. Haley was anxious to participate in the study as indicated by her enthusiasm for the program and her prompt response to participate and her willingness to discuss the program at length. Haley stated: “Even before the implementation of CEP, if a student was tardy, I would allow him/her to eat breakfast in the cafeteria before going to class in an attempt to meet this need.” However, she also stated concerns over the lack of meal application collection and how it was affecting the allotment of Title I staff at her school. She attributed this to alternative data collection methods and “a history of high achieving students and more affluent families in this area and I think that there's still that sense of pride in the...community.”

### **Veronica**

Veronica was a white female with eight years of experience as an administrator and several years of experience in education. Veronica’s concern for her students’ well-being was

evident in the one-to-one interview, and she was obviously passionate about taking care of her students. Veronica expressed her satisfaction with the program: “I’m very happy with the program that we have here..., because our kids do get a hot, nutritious breakfast and lunch.” She talked about students who had once been so hungry that they would try to put food in their pockets to save for later or share with family members, or students who would eat crumbs from the floor to satisfy their hunger. In response to being asked about the success of the CEP, she added, “I think it’s a fantastic program. Of all the programs that we’ve put in schools, this, that, and I think this one is the most important.”

### **Georgia**

The next participant was Georgia, a white female who has been in education for many years but has served in an administrative role for seven years. Georgia thinks the program has been a positive addition to the educational system in her school division and said that the CEP, “brings lots of joy...it’s been a tremendous, a tremendous up” for students. Georgia was proud of the efforts that her school has taken to ensure that the program is successful, even in the academic realm with morning read-aloud during breakfast in the classroom (BIC). She also recognized the impact that the program has had on the school faculty and staff when she stated, in her one-to-one interview that the program “heightens the awareness of all the staff that there are children that have food challenges.”

### **Cole**

Cole was a white male who has served as an administrator in his school division for six years and was preparing for retirement. He was hesitant to participate in the research due to time constraints but eventually agreed. Cole was in his position when the CEP originated in his school division and was heavily involved in the implementation. His perception of the program

was that “it really wasn't something that was earth shaking or shattering here...because most of our students were eligible for free lunch.” However, he also noted that there was a decrease in the amount of time spent on billing and collections so he believed that was a positive of the program. He has also received feedback from the community related to how appreciative families are to have free meals for students.

### **Tanya**

Tanya was a female who had been in the role of administrator for was years. While Tanya stated: “I'm actually not familiar with where it [CEP] originated, when I was teaching...that's the first time that I ever heard of all kids eating 100% for free. And so I was very shocked cause I didn't know anything about that.” As an advocate for families in the local community, Tanya felt as though this program allows parents to have one less concern: “Our parents needs to be supported in so many ways.” She was also involved in innovative activities as a school administrator and her enthusiasm for the program was evident in her one-to-one interview, “...and it's just, it's been great!”

### **Betsy**

Betsy was a white female who had worked in food service for 11 years. Betsy was timid and appeared unsure of her responses at the onset of the one-to-one interview. She worked closely with the students in her position and when asked about the CEP, her response was, “I just think it's all around a great program... if they didn't have this program, I'd probably be bringing it out of my own pocket...I don't want the child to go hungry.” Betsy also used her own experiences growing up as support for the program:

Back when I went to school, I always had to pack my lunch. And the kids, like I said, I'm from the middle class. I wasn't poor enough to get nothing, wasn't rich enough to afford

it. My parents were just middle class. My parents always packed my lunch and everything. The other kids would eat at school, a hot meal, when I'm eating a cold sandwich. And you know, they would make fun of me.

### **Rose**

Rose was a white female who had worked in school food services for fourteen years and had served in her current position for eight years. Initially, she was hesitant to correspond with me, but she eventually allowed me to be involved in all aspects of her work day. Rose enjoyed interacting with students and wanted students to be well taken care of while at school. Rose said that she remembered the CEP being implemented and that "everybody was pretty excited about it." When asked about how the program implementation affected her workload, she did feel as though it had increased, but she said, "It's worth it... If a child can have food, that's what counts in my book. That's my true opinion...I think it is successful."

### **Pat**

Pat was a white female who had worked in food services for seven years, and she was in her position when the program originated. Pat was uncertain about participating in the research, and she appeared to be guarded with her responses, but she had recently participated in a federal review of the food service program. When questioned about the CEP, Pat stated in her one-to-one interview: "It's successful because we're feeding more people, more kids are able to eat. At this point in time, billing wise and so forth, most of our kids' parents aren't working, so that means that they are eating during school."

### **Alex**

Alex was a white female who had worked in food services six years and was a sub cook for two years prior to coming into her current position. Alex was passionate about the CEP as

evidenced by her willingness to participate and her excitement when discussing the program. Alex stated that her role involved placing orders and paying bills, along with other tasks. She also stated that she loved being directly involved with the students. Her enthusiasm for the program also took on a personal tone: “I do not have any children. I consider those 9,000 students my children. I wanna make sure they’re fed.”

### **Dorothy**

Dorothy was a white female who had been in food service for over five years. She came into her position after the initial implementation of the CEP which makes her insight unique, considering she has no comparison model. Dorothy was cautious about participating in the study and had prepared responses to the interview questions ahead of time. However, her input was valuable and her appreciation of the program was evident:

Some students when they come to school, that’s the only meals that they’re getting throughout the day and so that’s a big deal. And you want to serve something that’s healthy and hot, not sandwiches or something that’s super quick.”

### **Shelby**

Shelby was a white female who had been in food services for four years. She stated that the primary objective of her job is “food safety” with an emphasis on following the rules of the federal reimbursement program, or CEP, to ensure that the reimbursement continues. She sees food service as an essential piece of the puzzle: “We’re just a part of the school day. I mean that’s really what we are.” Shelby was visibly enthusiastic about her job and ensuring that the CEP runs smoothly to ensure that all students benefit: “...to know that we made sure that day he had a meal that was a good meal and he enjoyed it. That’s the good stuff. You hate why it’s the good stuff, but it’s the good stuff.”

**Jan**

Jan was a white female who had been a teacher for 13 years. Jan was obviously passionate about working with students in the area that she calls home. When asked about the implementation of the CEP in the one-to-one interview, she stated: “Well I think it's a great experience for [Juniper] County children...it's been great for our school in particular and our county in particular actually.” Jan found that the program has been beneficial for all students who may be struggling with food insecurity at home. She believed that the program is helpful for families and the school setting alike.

**Michele**

Michele was a white female who had been teaching for 11 years, but 10 years in her current school position. Michele's care for her students was evident, but she admitted that the population of her school could be difficult when she responded: “The kids here are rough. They come from rough backgrounds. A lot of them. But they're the most giving kids you'll ever see in your life.” Michele spoke of a time when a student was denied treats due to misbehavior, but the students made sure that their peer did not go without. Michele was the only participant outside of food services who indicated that she had background knowledge on the CEP in the one-to-one interview when she stated: “...it seems just to be a really good program. I know how to operate it, and I know the rules behind it.”

**Kayla**

Kayla was a white female who had been a teacher for twelve years, but had been in her current position for eight years. She spoke very highly of the CEP and the influence that the implementation has had on the school that she teaches in during our one-to-one interview: “I feel like it's definitely helped us a lot. I feel like it's definitely made us more positive.” Kayla

works with a variety of students and families in her position so she has seen the impact on various students. She also does lunch duty on a daily basis, so this gives her a unique look at how the program is affecting students and their eating habits.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of various service providers toward the implementation of UFM programs under the CEP at elementary schools in southern West Virginia. The research questions were developed to explore the execution of the UFM program as well as its impacts on participants and the school. The results of this qualitative case study on participants' perspectives on implementing UFM programs are reflected in the theme development section. The theme development is reported in narrative, which includes participant quotes.

Several themes emerged from the data collection. Codes were developed from the questionnaire responses, the one-to-one interview responses, observations of implementation, and associated artifacts. The codes are represented in Table 2 and led to the development of themes in response to each research question.

Table 2

*Frequency of Codes*

Codes	Code Appearances	Themes
Food insecurity	3	Need for Programming
Eligibility	9	
Program outline	8	Executing the Program
Initial implementation	12	
Need help	34	
Training and collaboration	31	Program Participation
Delivery method	16	
Share / extra	8	
Continuing requirements	10	Advantages Related to the Program
Increased efficiency	24	
Meal participation	37	
Healthy communities	12	
Reduced food insecurity	13	Difficulties Related to the Program
Family financial burden	33	
Achievement	11	
No challenges	6	
Clean up / messes	5	
Workload	13	
Food selection	4	
Waste	8	Impacts
Reporting impacts	8	
Fear of termination	3	
Attendance	7	
Behavior	10	
Positive interactions	10	
Reduced stigma	11	
Thankful / appreciation	6	

**Theme Development**

Several themes emerged from interviews, documents, observations, and artifacts from each of the school sites and the respective participants. Holistic data analysis and repeated document review was used to immerse the researcher in the data (Stake, 1995). Using the qualitative software, NVivo 12 Plus, I stored and utilized the primary research documents. After

importing my data, I then used open and axial coding to sort findings into codes with the use of NVivo to determine which themes best answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). After the coding phase and member checking, codes were organized into six major themes: need for programming, executing the program, program participation, advantages of the program, disadvantages of the program, and impacts.

**Need for programming.** Several participants indicated that there is a significant need for the CEP within their schools and communities. Participants spoke favorably of the program and the processes for qualifying. Specifically, participants referred to food insecurity, program eligibility, and program regulations.

**Food insecurity.** The need for programming like the CEP first arose within the topic of “food insecurity.” In the interviews, seven participants emphasized the importance of the CEP as a way of ensuring that students do not go hungry. For instance, Pat stated, “It’s all about our kids, it’s about how we can make sure that none of them go hungry.” Participants indicated that food insecurity was a dominant issue in the homes of many students. Shelby stated, “We feel that this [the CEP] is important due to the fact our students come from homes that are higher poverty. Every student goes home with a full stomach and not hungry.” Tanya echoed that sentiment:

Many of my students come from low-income households. Therefore, I have several students who have food insecurity. Their parents are unable to provide them with healthy and nutritious meals, so many times the foods that the students receive are processed and do not contain much nutritional value. We noticed that on Monday morning a lot of our students are very hungry, so we try to provide them with a little extra.

Georgia had also observed students who came to school and were concerned about not receiving breakfast due to lateness and students who were especially hungry after the weekend. Pat's questionnaire indicated that she believed that "children who live in larger families may not have enough food to last them throughout the month." Participants also referenced specific instances of food insecurity that they have observed in their professions. Haley referred to a student who ran away from home because there was no food in her house:

She's a quiet child, not a behavior problem at all. She was respectful. I never would've flagged that she was struggling so badly...now I have that assurance that...she's being fed. She's at least getting something here, even if she can't get anything at home. So it's kind of a peace of mind for me, for those out there that you think are fine, but they're not...Many of our students have a questionable amount of food in the home. Home visits have proven a wide range of food insecurity. Many of our students have a high level of food insecurity.

**Eligibility.** The need for UFM was also found within eligibility regulations of the program. The direct certification aspect of the CEP uses record-matching with SNAP, TANF, and FDPIR as well as homeless, runaway, and migrant students and children in foster care to capture an accurate picture of identified students, or those who are eligible for free and reduced meals (Logan et al., 2014). Dorothy's understandings of the guidelines was compatible with the artifact findings, "Every school, every student in Juniper County gets free lunch. All of our schools are CEP."

**Program outline.** Finally, the program itself outlined the need for the CEP in counties with high poverty rates, like those in Frasier County and Juniper County. The USDA requires CEP-eligible schools to have an ISP of at least 40% and participation in the SBP and the NSLP

in order to participate in the program (USDA, 2016b). When asked about the initial implementation of the program, Haley stated, “It was pretty smooth.” The CEP allows students at participating schools to receive breakfast and lunch at no charge. Dorothy’s take on the program is positive, she said, “I think the program was created with the best intentions to feed students. That was the goal, to feed students.”

**Executing the program.** Participants indicated that there were some misconceptions when the CEP was initially implemented and the continuing need for increased staff. However, participants suggested that the program runs smoothly with annual re-implementations. Training and collaboration was also suggested as a pertinent part of ensuring that the program continues operating with fewer complications.

**Initial implementation.** The first code that arose involved the initial implementation of the CEP in the schools and districts. Cole said that the school was “unsure at the beginning of the implementation how that [CEP] would affect us with our reimbursement rates for the meals from the federal government.” However, he said that the rates were virtually unchanged and the program has continued since that time. Shelby stated that the annual implementation period takes “a couple months getting everything going because you go from one day we have no students and the next day you have 9,000” and that this period is “super super super busy” as they “look at getting our trucks in order...finalize the first couple months’ worth of menus...and get everything kind of really ironed out and everybody going. It’s a lot.” However, Pat added that the work is worth it “just to see kids come through the line and at the point of service (POS), when you’re sitting there monitoring the lunch program and they have food on their plate.”

**Need help.** Participants indicated that there were differing perspectives on the need for additional help in implementing the program. From my observations of the meal programs, I

saw that the cafeterias and preparation areas seemed to be very well cared for. The employees took great care of their areas and supplies which appeared to be very clean and organized. One cook made efforts to save all food labels incase a child got sick so they could review what had been served that day. The food service routine was well-received by employees and students alike. The cafeteria environment also gave the staff and students an opportunity to interact and I was witness to many of these positive interactions.

Employees within the realm of food service spoke about how adjustments needed to be made when the program was initiated. Alex stated that routines did not need to be adjusted, she said, “They still serve the same meals, basically. It just didn’t affect how the cooks do anything. It really didn’t affect the secretaries...we just have to make sure the numbers get in correctly.” Pat agreed with the sentiment, “I don’t see any difference. I really don’t. When I first started, I guess it was about seven years ago...they started this and it’s been real smooth.” However, Betsy indicated, “We have to order food. We have to clean our kitchen thoroughly. We have to wash everything, as far as utensils, trays, so on and so on.” This could be difficult for a workforce of only two individuals, and during my observation in Juniper County, I saw that the food service staff was busy the entire time and made no conversation with each other; there were only two cooks who were responsible for all food preparation and paperwork.

***Training and collaboration.*** Another code that arose regarding program execution was training, including collaboration among stakeholders of the program. Shelby admitted that the program can be confusing, especially for those who are unfamiliar: “Not only do we have to educate our cooks what our rules are, but anybody that has anything to do with our lunch program, we have to educate them as well because there’s just so much to it.” The formal process for executing the implementation, or election, of the CEP begins with a notification from

state agencies that makes school divisions aware of their eligibility and provides them with the guidelines for participation (USDA, 2016b). Cole stated that the program began in West Virginia, due in part to the state superintendent at the time:

[She] was very interested in us providing that to the entire county so we talked about it and we implemented it so that was kind of the process. We did let the parents know and of course the faculties know and everyone knows through communication that there would be no charges for the lunch for the students... Collaboration's always important, people have to understand ... I would say communication is probably more important than the collaboration in something like this in that you need to communicate what you're doing and why you're doing it and that's pretty simple with programs such as this.

Food service employees collaborate with administrators because they have a clearer picture of what is happening and what is effective in their schools. Shelby stated:

They know their students so we can kind of come up with maybe a better way to do something in their buildings because they know their kids...I also work a lot with my head cooks because again they know their kids as well, and I listen to their feedback on maybe how the lunch line went serving these particular items that day. If it's just something that's really hard say for a smaller school versus a high school. I keep that in mind when I write a menu that I can't overwhelm these guys with two cooks where this school with eight cooks is no big deal. So I like to listen and work with everybody out there because it's a team effort to get it done.

Pat also said that she communicates with several individuals regarding CEP practices. She is involved in a co-op which includes members from CEP and non-CEP schools. She said it is also discussed at state meetings, but that the State Department is the primary means of

communication to schools and divisions. Shelby added that she still attends meetings and finds out new information, even after she thought she had a pretty good handle on it. Dorothy added that there are certain standards that have to be met, for example: the number of vegetables per day and how that aligns with different age groups. She also mentioned that “a lot of the manufacturers had to change a lot of their ingredients...Some of your major companies had to go in and change their stuff to accommodate food service...it has to be a child nutrition product.” Pat added that food services communicates with families and students to ensure their understanding of the program as well. At the beginning of each school year, she said, “We put in their student handbooks that we are a CEP school, that no one will be charged. We have to put something on our webpage...Schools put it out in their newsletters saying that we’re a CEP.” I witnessed collaborations among the food service workers and other school employees during my observations. The staff was somewhat guarded of their environment and their students, but they were welcoming. Eventually, they were open to letting me share in the routines. The staff took great pride in their work as demonstrated by their commitment and attention to task. The staff appeared to genuinely care about the students, but they were also concerned about meeting and following guidelines.

Training is an essential part of ensuring that the CEP is implemented in accordance with federal rules and guidelines. Pat indicated that most trainings may be delivered by the state, but they are passed down from the federal government. Dorothy, Shelby, Tanya, Pat, and Rose mentioned annual food service trainings involving the point of service (POS) system, food safety, guidelines for reimbursable meals, and production records. Veronica mentioned that some component of food service was included in monthly administrative meetings and that trainings are frequent. Dorothy and Alex stated that anyone who works with the POS has to have

specific training to ensure that reimbursable meals meet the federal guidelines. Alex also alluded to specific trainings for that come from the Office of Child Nutrition. Trainings are also provided as needed when changes occur within the program, but a bulk of the training relates to the POS system.

Alex also indicated that as an offer versus serve school, “students get to pick what they want. They have to take so many items, but they don’t have to take all the items,” and there is training on that as well. Tanya also mentioned that they would “sometimes have to explain ...why our kids get to eat free, why our kids ... have to have this portion or why we have to have so many things on our plate when they’re served.” Rose said that the food service employees try to accommodate students’ likes and dislikes as far as food choices go so that the kids will get more of what they like to eat. She even indicated that they had revised a recipe within the guidelines so the students would increase their reception and “to get a good menu for these kids.” Georgia also indicated that the meals offer options for the students, but the students can’t get multiples of the entrée:

They cannot get second servings of that or milk unless they paid for it. That's a bummer.

If you're a boxed lunch though and you want a meal, if you take two sides with it and we can count it, then they can have their meal.

School divisions are encouraged to communicate the implementation of the CEP using their traditional methods of communication as well as maintaining open lines of communication among all stakeholders. This should include a notification to families and students that breakfasts and lunches will be served daily, to all students, free of charge. Michele stated that letters were sent home to families, and Tanya similarly said that there is a letter that can be shared with parents if they question how eligibility for the program is determined. Community

involvement continues to be important to the CEP implementation even through direct food service. Rose and Dorothy indicated that the community will donate foods and the school's food services will locally source produce as well. Dorothy actually stated, "I think probably just being able to do stuff with people local, trying to get the produce and stuff, has been the biggest change."

**Program participation.** Program participation has been very positive in the schools. Although program participation may appear differently in school settings, the continuing requirements for participation are strictly adhered to. The discussion surrounding program participation seemed to gravitate toward three specific areas including the delivery method, sharing food, and participation requirements.

**Delivery method.** As for delivery, there were variations among the two school districts. One school district uses the traditional model of delivery in the cafeteria, therefore, there was no alteration to the food service routine. Jan indicated, "There was no adjustment because when they come off the buses, they go straight to the cafeteria, so it didn't affect the classroom," and Veronica added that all students are served in the cafeteria due to "our hour long breakfast schedule." During my observation, I saw that the hour long breakfast schedule was needed because students travel from a large area and arrive within about an approximate 45-minute time period. Michele said that the school had once tried the breakfast-in-the-classroom model, but they had problems with insects, "We wanna stay sanitary and so now it works out really well...All the kids as soon as they get off the bus in the morning, they go straight to the cafeteria...They eat before instructional time begins."

Conversely, the other school district finds that the breakfast-in-the-classroom model is very effective and efficient. Tanya indicated that this model was mandated by the

superintendent, and Georgia added that the model is in coordination with a literacy program, “It’s our breakfast time, but in the school and in the community, it’s our literature time.” Haley stated that the benefits of this model include the literacy piece:

While the students are eating breakfast, then have read aloud as well. So they have that opportunity to hear a story and to hear fluency and have that model for how to be a good reader. So it’s a win, win situation, academically and to battle against hunger.

She also believed that the benefits extend beyond that as well, “since breakfast is delivered, a lot of the teachers keep breakfast in there [the classroom] so that if students do come in tardy, they can grab something and eat while they’re working.”

*Share / extra.* As a way to combat waste, the school divisions recently adopted share, or community, tables where students can place unopened food for other students who may still be hungry. Pat explained the share table:

Kids who don’t want their meal or don’t want something that’s prepackaged can put [it] on a shared table and another student can come up if they want another milk or another yogurt, or maybe an apple...because they may want seconds. They just started the shared table this year in the state of West Virginia, so you know, you think about, well, some of these kids are going home hungry and if they want two milks and so forth, we can’t provide them with two milks. We can provide them with one, but if they can pick it up off the shared table, it’s already been a reimbursable meal, so let somebody drink it, because you can’t put it back in the cooler.

Veronica and Jan also mentioned the use and benefits of the share table. Jan said, “We had a family that we know lived in poverty, so all the extra food we would make sure that those

children would get the extra...It's been great for them." During my observations, I noticed that students took all of the food off of the share tables.

Interestingly, students who pack their meals are also able to benefit from the CEP. Alex mentioned, "If a child has packed their lunch and when they get down there and they see they want the lunch, they are free to go ahead and go through the line." This can be beneficial for students from a nutritional aspect and ensuring that they are getting enough to eat. Tanya also added that, in an effort to avoid waste, "if there is that extra food, it's split up, or sometimes kids don't want it, and we know that we have another kid who's hungry."

***Continuing requirements.*** Participants were quite aware of the guidelines of the CEP and emphasized the importance of adhering to the guidelines in order to keep the program. Michele, Betsy, and Haley underscored the importance of ensuring that all students receive a free breakfast and lunch at school and that each must be composed of at least three items. Shelby indicated that students can pack their lunch as well, but because they are an "offer versus serve" school; students are not required to take the meal.

There are also guidelines for the program that do not pertain specifically to the delivery itself. During an observation, I saw the food service staff complete the Hazard Analysis Central Point Procedures documentation that is required monthly. Shelby indicated that the program requires that certain foods be served in specific portions:

You have to do the math to make sure that you keep the calories in with the sodium and everything as well so I have to write it to make sure I get everything in there, and then I have to double check my math to make sure that I'm within the content guidelines.

She also indicated that the program is monitored by the state periodically to ensure that schools “are meeting that criteria. So there is some checks and balances of that, too. And that’s way more time consuming.”

**Advantages related to the program.** There are a number of advantages to the CEP as indicated by the participants’ experiences with the program. Schools do not have to worry about collecting applications or meal fees, and this allows schools to focus more on what they can offer students. This can also open a line of communication between families who may be unable to pay for meals, and school staff, who no longer has to carry the financial burden (FRAC, 2016a).

**Application efficiency.** A common code that appeared throughout the research was that of increased efficiency. Georgia added, “it takes a lot of pressure off our secretary too. I mean there was a lot of accounting that went along with that and money and that’s been removed so it’s been nothing but a benefit here.” Alex stated, “it would take them a good six weeks to get everybody in the system. And they always had to get help...to get those numbers and kids in that system for them to see who was qualified for what.” Pat said that CEP implementation has been a great benefit for the school system:

I guess it was more trouble when they had applications, they had to go through the applications and look at the money and do this and that and whatever, and try to get the applications back within a certain time. This has been really painless, not to have to do all of that. It’s been, I guess in some way, it’s a blessing.

**Meal participation.** CEP implementation has demonstrated benefits in the area of school meal participation as well. Several participants indicated that they had observed increases in meal participation. Pat mentioned that “because all kids get to eat... we have seen an increase in all areas [of the school district].”

Meal participation is also important for student nutrition. Rose indicated that students “need to be given a chance to eat the food instead of being packed all the time...we will let them taste test some and that helped, but we also, because it is a free lunch...It [meal participation] has increased.” I observed many students who packed a lunch also get a tray. This increased participation also allows students more opportunities to eat fresh produce and whole-grain foods (Jackson, 2016). Interestingly, Kayla also talked about the kids trying different foods because of peer influence:

Just today, we had meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy. Some of the kids immediately were like, ‘Eww, I don’t want to eat that,’ and some of the kids were...over here gobbling it up, ‘Oh, this is really, really good.’ They’re like, ‘It is good? Well, I will try one.’ I think that’s really cute...I think that’s definitely changed, too, because in the past, I don’t feel like it’s really been like that. A lot of our kids used to bring their meals from home, and I feel like now more kids are actually eating the school lunch.

***Healthy communities.*** Several participants emphasized the importance of improving the health of students and how that can impact the community, such as trying new foods and sharing those experiences with others. The CEP is identified as “a proven and successful approach to ensuring that children in low income communities have access to healthy school meals” (Kline, 2015). Kayla supported this when she indicated, “I feel like the food is proportioned well, and they get good items every day.”

Kayla indicated, “I feel like because so many students are actually eating, the meal has opened up conversations about eating healthy, proportions, and even trying foods that they may have never had before.” During my observations, I also saw that students were encouraged to try new things and sometimes were rewarded for doing so. In turn, many students found foods that

they were previously unfamiliar with to be something they enjoyed. Tanya also added, “Our kindergarten students are always curious about their meals the first nine weeks because they have not had some of the foods that are served during lunch.”

***Reduced food insecurity.*** Reducing food insecurity is a primary objective of the CEP as the program is only available to schools and districts where poverty is most prevalent.

Food insecurity was clearly evident as participants recalled experiences prior to CEP implementation. Veronica recalled:

When I first started here...there would be times that I would see kids eating food off the floor, or kids that would try to put food down in their pants to take home. And now, I'm not seeing that, because kids have plenty to eat, where they're getting more food in the morning and even for lunch. So, I'm not witnessing that like I did when I first came here.

Tanya spoke about a specific student that she had encountered as well, “She gets all this food to eat right now and she doesn't have to worry about anything...and so that helps a lot of families.”

Rose remembered students who would be hungry after eating their packed meal, but with the CEP, students can still get that free meal as well. Jan also stated, “A lot of our children come to school just to eat. I know that sounds sad, but it's true. Sometimes we're the only meal they get.” Alex also added, “It may not taste like you've home cooked it. But, when it's the only meal you get, it's good.”

The CEP may influence students' eating behaviors. Shelby mentioned seeing students that “don't know what spinach is or they don't know basic fruits and vegetables” and the CEP is exposing them to a variety of foods. Georgia indicated that efforts are made to ensure that students eat all of their meals in order to gain the nutritional benefits:

We encourage children to drink their milk to the bottom. We have made ‘cheers’ in the

school to try new foods. I think a heightened awareness that children are challenged with food makes us just more cognizant of you know, you need to eat your apple. Let's try to eat all of it, because that nutrition is preventative for down the road.

***Family financial burden.*** The CEP may decrease the financial burden on the family.

Pat mentioned the difficulty that the school had on collections, "We tried to feed all of our kids anyway, and really they ate and some of them charged and that's where we got into the situation where...we're still carrying some of those kids." On the other hand, Georgia discussed how busy and stressed parents often are, but Shelby specifically addressed families of southern West Virginia:

Financially, southern West Virginia has been hit hard by the loss of coal mines so I don't know where we would be without the program. A mine was idled again the other day...That could impact this county. So taking that financial pressure off of our parents, I think, is the best thing.

Jan also added, "It's great for families...for the school to provide free meals to the children so the families are not held responsible...This program has relieved the stress of parents having to pay for breakfast and lunch."

The financial burden for middle-class families was also highlighted in participants' responses. Michele believed it is especially helpful for those students who did not already qualify for free lunch, "It's one less thing that they have to pay for. And so I think it's really benefiting those kids the most...It's the ones whose families are working, but still struggling to pay the bills." Betsy recalled her personal experiences when she said, "The ones that suffers is not the poor kids and it's not the rich kids. It's the middle class. They're the ones falls in through the cracks. And I think it helps them a whole lot." Tanya referenced the expense of

food, especially nutritious foods, and she recalled students from middle to upper class homes who “wouldn't eat just because it was overpriced and...[they think] my parents have another lunch bill [so] I don't want to eat...Anything that we can do to help a family regardless of their income level is great.” Michele recalled a family where both parents worked, but they were financially strained. She said “They had three kids...and they refused to get any kind of assistance 'cause they didn't want that. They wanted to be able to provide for their family...they were so happy [when] we talked about runnin' this pilot program.”

Participants also indicated that students and families have expressed their gratitude for the CEP. Rose said, “We had a lot of parents tell us they were glad because it did help. It even helped the ones that got their food and would bring it and buy. It helps them too, as far as money-wise.” Michele said that the middle-class families are the ones who are going to be the most appreciative because they are most impacted. She recalled a specific instance in which a single, working mother was struggling to make ends meet:

She made enough to make a living, but they didn't have extra. Getting something like this [the CEP], you gotta look, even if it is just a dollar or \$1.50 for lunch, but you gotta figure if it's let's say \$1.50 for lunch, 50 cents for breakfast, that's \$2 every day... You're talking \$40 right there. That can be the difference between gas in the car to get to work and you know, so what do you pick? I can't get to work, I can't do my job [or] I don't pay the bill, my kid can't eat. I don't get paid for another three days, I don't have any groceries in the pantry to make him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a bologna sandwich to send to school with him and so I mean it's those struggles, it's those people that it really helps.

Veronica also mentioned those middle-class families, “Parents are very happy, that had to pay for lunch before, that their child gets to participate.” Tanya believes that most families will not outright express their appreciation, but she says that she “can tell just in their eyes and just talking to them that they’re so thankful that they don’t have to worry about that [paying for school meals].” She stated that families that move in from another area “are stoked, they’re like ‘You mean we don’t have to pay?’ and I’m like, ‘Nope, its free’ and it is almost like a relief for them... I think that it puts them at ease.”

***Achievement.*** Adequate nutrition is an essential component for students to perform academically (Kline, 2016a). Several participants stated that they had no specific data correlating the CEP to achievement scores, but research and participants’ experiences indicate that there are positive impacts. Eric stated that he has “read studies that proper nutrition adds to a student’s performance.” Haley emphasized the importance of integrating the CEP and academics, “Students eat BIC while listening to a read aloud by their classroom teacher or a guest reader....So that makes a difference, just because they’re not losing that instructional benefit just because they haven’t eaten breakfast yet.” Tanya added that with the program, “we make sure they get their breakfast just to stimulate their mind, but I feel like kids work better when they’re full, as far as they have the energy that they need to perform throughout the day.”

**Difficulties related to the program.** Participants have mostly positive comments regarding the CEP. Very few difficulties were reported with regard to program implementation.

While minimal challenges were discussed, participants' concerns primarily pertained to clean up, the variation in workload, food selection, and waste.

**No challenges.** When the question of challenges relating to the CEP was posed to the majority of the participants, they had difficulty devising responses. Jan, Tanya, Cole, and Betsy indicated that they did not perceive any challenges related to the program. Cole stated:

I don't see any challenges really with it. We were concerned about the reimbursement rate. Of course, we use those funds to help us run the county school system and the food system here, but those stayed and maintained about the same because of our high poverty rate. So really there are no challenges that I'm aware of."

Kayla did not specify any challenges to the program, but she did suggest that she believed any problems could be remedied.

**Clean up / messes.** A couple of participants mentioned problems relating to cleanliness after the implementation of the CEP. Haley and Michele indicated that the crumbs and spills in the classrooms initially invited pests. They also mentioned the excessive messes in the classrooms, but said that those problems had been alleviated by working with the students on being responsible and cleaning up after themselves.

**Workload.** Another challenge that presented itself was that of the workload. However, most participants indicated that the increase was minimal and worthwhile when it comes to feeding hungry students. Shelby acknowledged the workload as part of her job:

It's time consuming just to make sure that you meet those guidelines...sitting there and doing my checks and balances like a day versus a week, I think that's a pretty significant change in the workload. So I don't mind doing it, it's just part of the job. It's the only thing I know...There's so much to it and there's so many different components of it.

As far as meal creation and delivery, there were some areas of concern regarding the workload as well. During my observation, I witnessed the controlled chaos of breakfast delivery. In both instances, delivery went smoothly, but two cooks working on a tight schedule were working against the clock. Rose said,

It's a lot more work, but ... I don't really know how to word it, but it is a lot more work because more kids are eating, but it's good just to have these kids, so it's worth it. It is...I think there needs to be, as far as the food serving, there needs to be more cooks. Even if it's just a half a day, it would make such a difference...so my concern, mainly is having enough cooks.

Kayla echoed a similar thought, "[Our cook] talked a lot about just needing more help, like as far as prepping the meals and such...I think that was a little bit of reason why she left maybe this location was that she didn't have enough help."

***Food selection.*** Another code that presented itself was that of food selection. During my observations, I was surprised by the lack of fresh food during the school breakfast routines.

Dorothy said that the CEP requirements can make meal planning difficult:

It's sometimes hard to plan things that students really enjoy. A lot of the kids are used to ... I'm even guilty of it myself ... I'll go home and fix chicken nuggets or something fast, to where in the schools we try to encourage a more sit down homemade meal, lasagna, meatloaf, stuff like that. And so the kids aren't always excited to try those things.

Rose believed that the meals could be made more appealing to students, "I think they could do away with the wheat thing. A lot of the children don't care for these wheat breads and things, so I think they need to do away with that." Kayla has also experienced difficulty with the requirements, "I feel like sometimes there's a little bit of leniency in some things, but not in

others...I feel like the cooks are a little bit more strict on it, but some cooks are a little bit more strict than others.”

**Waste.** The CEP provides free meals for all students with specific requirements for reimbursable meals which can create food waste. During my observations, I saw a great deal of food discarded because students were required to take certain foods. Specifically, I observed students who appeared to be unfamiliar with kiwi and oranges; many of the students did not know how to peel and eat the fruits so much was discarded. The staff also informed me that there are restrictions on what can be done with leftover food so there was some waste left at the end of meal times as well. Kayla added that fewer regulations on what to do with remaining food would be helpful in addressing issues of food waste:

We weren't being wasteful...we can always pack it up and send it home. We know kids that we can pack it up and send it home with every day if it were there. I think little things like that if we're looking at it from a big perspective would make it better.

Michele also said that the food service staff is very good about preparing only enough food to feed the students, “She's really good about cooking what's needed. She really watches to try not to have, to try to make just enough and...she's really good about not having waste. She's really good with it. And they always have been.”

The teachers and staff do make efforts to ensure that students do consume much of the food. Tanya felt that the morning routine helped to eliminate breakfast waste, “During that time they do have a read aloud; however, I feel like part of that is also just to give them a comfortable spot to make sure everyone is eating. Because you do not want to waste food.” Michele added that she would alter the requirements for reimbursement, “That would be the one thing I would change about the program, is that, it's there for the kids if they want it. But they don't have to

take it if they don't."

**Reporting impacts.** Participants discussed the impacts that the CEP reporting practices have had on other areas of educational programming. Financial concerns and the impact on other educational resources were found to be concerns for some participants. It could be for these reasons that Shelby stated, "[the CEP] has a very negative perception to it...but man it's huge and it's complicated and it confuses people that do it every day."

Participants specifically mentioned concerns regarding Title I funding. School divisions now use direct certification to provide eligibility data for the CEP, but as Michele mentioned, "they always went by the number of free and reduced lunch. Well now, we don't have that and they're not collecting that data every year...That would be maybe a downside of it is the schools lost that piece of data." Haley made a similar comment, "The biggest challenge is our Title I staff. The reason for that is before this, we would look at our free and reduced lunch percentage and that would determine how many Title I staff we would get. Now it's gone."

**Fear of termination.** One aspect that immediately stood out with regard to the CEP was the participants' fear of program termination. Veronica said, "I'm afraid one day it will end and that all kids won't be able to eat a free lunch...So, I'm happy that we have the program, and I hope it never goes away." Alex similarly stated that the job outlook could improve, and if people are able to go back to work, then the poverty level could improve and CEP eligibility could be eliminated. Betsy voiced her concerns as well, "There's a lot of kids gonna suffer. And like here in this county... if this program was to go away, these kids would go hungry. And that's the reason that I pray it never does." Pat's concern is that the federal program would cease to exist with no warning, and that would be detrimental to some families. Michele wonders where the continued funding will come from, "Thinking about it from an economic standpoint,

how is this going to continue to be funded?...And so that would be a challenge I see is the higher-ups being able to make this a continuing process.”

**Impacts.** Participants discussed how the CEP had impacted the school culture in a number of ways. All participants implied that the program had made impacts in positive ways that they believed would continue to be beneficial for the school. Kayla pointed out the benefits, “We’ve just built a lot of stuff off that time, and I just feel like that’s definitely helped start our days off on a better note and everybody seems a little bit more positive in the morning.”

**Attendance.** As school accrediting bodies continue to emphasize the importance of school attendance, the CEP appears to have helped in this area as well. Tanya said that their school does have good attendance, and she believes the CEP is a factor:

A lot of times I feel that parents do send their kids to school just so they have a meal.

Anytime we have a snow day, I’ll have some parents who will message me ...because they wanna know if their kid is coming to school, they wanna know if their kid is gonna have a hot meal.

The CEP appears to have helped curb student tardiness as well. Haley did not believe that the CEP had necessarily helped habitual offenders, but she did say, “In spotty situations where it’s like, ‘Oh gosh, I can’t let you go yet. We woke up late and I’ve gotta feed you first. We can’t rush out the door.’ It’s probably helped in those situations.” Georgia mentioned students coming in tardy and they, as well as their families, are concerned about receiving the school breakfast. She tells families that students can have breakfast even when they are late to arrive:

It doesn’t matter what time you come. You have breakfast...If we’re getting ready to have lunch, there’s an amount of time that we are regulated not to feed children so they’ll

eat their whole lunch, but it's up to the minute. We'll stop and we'll always feed the child.

Tanya mentioned a specific student's situation:

There was a situation that took place that morning [and]...she came in here and she was like I didn't have breakfast and I didn't eat dinner last night, and I'm like you know after I got over my initial upset and you know all that I was able to go right to that kitchen and get food. Multiple, like a lot [of food] to make sure that she was taken care of and she knew it wasn't a big deal for her to ask. That happens a lot.

Participants acknowledged how the CEP can influence student behavior. Kline (2016b) found that, with the CEP, behavior problems decrease because students are well fed and prepared for learning. Tanya said that there are not a lot of behavioral issues at her school, but she acknowledged that there could be more problems if the program was not available:

Without the program, we might see other issues that would stem from it, or stem from not having it. When I look at how they come in in the morning, they're eating and they're reading a book and they're starting their day very positive with food in their system they're set and ready to go for the day. That's not how they started the day when kids got to pick and choose whether or not they wanted to eat. I think we may have some more discipline problems...I don't know if they would realize oh I'm agitated, or angry or upset, or don't wanna participate in this assignment because I'm hungry...Our students can't function if their basic needs are not met.

Veronica added that, in her experience, students who are hungry often become irritable and more likely to instigate fighting behaviors. Kayla also indicated that the students she has observed are eating well each day, and that this has appeared to cut down on the negative behaviors.

***Behavior.*** Strategies like the CEP may encourage several positive outcomes for students. Michele said that students who are less hungry are happier, less agitated, and could experience decreased fatigue. She said that students that have this need met will be more ready to learn. Betsy added that students who are well-fed have more energy. Haley stated that she has seen impacts of the CEP on behavior, “I don’t know if that is because they’re fed and they’re happier and they’re not as grumpy, and they’re, you know, more on task...in recent years there’s been a decrease in discipline.”

***Positive interactions.*** The CEP allows the food service staff, teachers, and students time to interact during meals, thereby building positive relationships. During my observations, I observed faculty, students, and food service staff conversing and interacting during meal times. Kayla reports that the program implementation has resulted in noticeable changes:

The neat part about the implementation at our school is that students are eating breakfast as a class/family every morning. During this time everyone gets to eat and participate in a morning read aloud...This has changed the culture in our school in that students are building a learning family and it starts our day off on a positive note...That’s a time that the kids kind of get that family atmosphere, they get to sit together, have their meal. Haley also found positive effects of the students and faculty eating together: “It has also allowed the classes to bond because they’re able to eat together. They’re able to have that time together ...I’d say it probably brought everybody a little bit closer for those reasons.” Kayla also added that the CEP allowed for an important time for the kids to be able to share, “They talk about good things that's going on in their lives, so that’s a great way to start the day.”

***Reduced stigma.*** Multiple participants commented on the reduced stigma experienced by instituting free meals universally. Prior to CEP implementation, Haley reported that about half

of her student population received free or reduced lunches but now, “We don't have those kids that are pointed out anymore, so you don't know who's struggling and who's not, financially.” Cole echoed this sentiment as well, “If you have everybody having free meals, everybody's basically the same, and there is no class differentiation between the students...Students are not looked down upon for having free or reduced lunches.” Georgia said, “In regards to the students, it's kind of a level playing field. I think that's kind of the main thing. There's just no pressure. It takes away social stigma.” Similarly, Rose said that she sees more students eating because “they're not singled out...Nobody's being criticized or being humiliated...Parents have felt like this is good due to the fact children aren't singled out as not being able to afford this.” Tanya also mentioned the impact on parents, “because every kid gets it, no parent feels weird or they feel like well I don't want them to have reduced lunch or...free lunch...I think anytime every kid is treated as an equal, that's a plus.”

Pat considered the impacts of stigma without the CEP to be detrimental for students as well as the school climate. Alex had similar concerns with regards to students who qualified for free meals in the past:

You could tell that there was some that really didn't wanna eat because they couldn't afford it. And they didn't want to be embarrassed...And even though that they might qualify as free, if they don't want their friend to know that, then it may hinder them from eating.

Georgia added that the breakfast in the classroom model, implemented with the CEP, also aided in eliminating negativity, “The breakfast is now served in the classroom. It used to be downstairs in the cafeteria which lent itself to stigma.” Betsy reflected on her own youth in regards to the now decreased stigma, “When I was made fun of 'cause I was eating a bag lunch

and they had a hot meal, but they qualified and I didn't. I think that's great here, it's not singling the child out...Everybody's being treated equal." Shelby had similar remarks, "Because of not having to ask anyone to pay. I remember growing up it was this child paid full price, this child paid reduced price, this child was free, and it takes away that stigma so I like that."

***Thankful/appreciation.*** In this study, participants suggested that they were thankful for such a program and that parents and other had expressed how appreciative they were as well. Jan simply stated, "I think it's [the CEP] been great" and Alex said, "I am fully thankful that whoever come up with this idea did...And I just think that it's a good program." Veronica had similar thoughts, "I'm very happy with the program that we have here...because our kids do get a hot, nutritious breakfast and lunch."

Even stakeholders outside of the school have voiced their appreciation of the CEP. Dorothy believes that people are appreciative from a nutritional aspect, "People love that the kids are getting healthier options and that it comes from local farmers." Cole believes that students are appreciative as well, "I think that many of our students are thankful for it. I mean, they would not just come right out and tell you they're thankful for it. I have been told by parents that they're thankful for it." Georgia said that she hears all praise from anyone involved in the CEP and Haley specifically said, "All of the feedback about the implementation of UFM, both inside and outside the school, has been positive." Betsy indicated that parents have commented on how the program allows them to have one less financial burden, and Eric said, "I have heard good reports or appreciation on the universal food service." Rose said that parents have mentioned how good this program is, and Michele said, "The parents are appreciative. Especially working class families who would normally have to pay." Similarly, Pat also said that families and students "are excited about being able to eat a healthy breakfast/lunch, twice a day." Alex said

that several community members have “expressed to me they are glad our kids get free meals while at school.” Interestingly, Tanya commented that families new to the area are often very surprised that all school meals are free.

### **Research Question Responses**

Individual cases allowed for the identification of important themes prior to cross-case analysis for a comparison of the approaches to CEP implementation in southern West Virginia. In this qualitative multiple case study, each of the schools implemented the CEP during the 2012-2013 school year and followed the regulations for the CEP as required. Previously, both schools had operated under the traditional rules for free/reduced meals under the NSLP. I selected these schools because they have a documented ISPs of 73.71% and 67.16%, respectively, of the student population is eligible for free or reduced meals. These schools are located in southern West Virginia so they are similar in culture and also comparable in demographics (WVDE, 2018).

The research was aimed at further investigating the perceptions regarding the implementation of the CEP at two elementary schools in southern WV. Using the codes created within NVivo, the cross-case analysis explored the relationships between schools and their implementation practices, perceptions of the program, and awareness of impacts on the school. The roles of the participants across cases were also analyzed in order to investigate how the perceptions varied among those in different roles. Through cross-case analysis of six administrators, six food service employees, and three teachers, findings were analyzed. While each school district had its own procedures and practices related to the CEP, there are similarities and differences among the two, and those will be discussed in terms of each research question.

Individual interviews provided the majority of information for this study. Interviews

began with participants from the Frasier County and were followed by participants in Juniper County. Each interview was transcribed and coded for analysis. The codes and themes that emerged during analysis are presented in Table 2. Questionnaires, documents, and observations provided further insight into the implementation of the CEP. The questionnaires allowed me to collect basic demographic information and initial insight on the CEP implementation. The documents included guidance documents, school data, sample letters of CEP notification, and other materials from the USDA surrounding the implementation of the CEP. These documents assisted in creating case descriptions and determining the guidance that each district receives and uses in implementing the CEP. Documents and observations were also used to confirm participant statements during the one-to-one interviews and on the questionnaires. The following section provides answers to each of the research questions; responses were based on the data that was collected.

**CRQ: How do participants perceive CEP implementation as part of the educational process, at the elementary school level?** When the CEP originated under the HHFKA, it enabled schools to have another resource in fighting childhood hunger. The implementation of the CEP can be viewed differently based upon the role the person serves within the school system, but all participants had a positive outlook on the impact of the education process in a variety of ways. Haley stated that the CEP “has really, really helped with kids coming in hungry and staying hungry in class. If a student would come in tardy, I would always try to go ahead and send them to the cafeteria and let them eat.” Some participants are concerned about the level of food insecurity in the community. Jan said, “Unfortunately, some children come to school hungry, and school food is the only food they receive for the day,” while Alex also indicated that “There are several, unfortunately, in the area that the only meals they get are the ones we feed.

Those who go home on the weekends may not have a meal until they come back on a Monday morning.”

Other participants indicated a variety of reasons that the CEP has become a part of the educational process. Shelby indicated that, in her experience, students may not be familiar with many nutritious food items, and the CEP allows them to have this exposure, “Often when we are serving vegetables such as spinach, students ask what it is.” I also observed students who were unfamiliar with how to eat certain items, such as kiwi. The CEP also makes the school more aware of the challenges that students may be facing. Georgia said that she believes the CEP is “very successful...and also it heightens the awareness of all the staff that there are children that have food challenges and there’s just a lot more attention paid to that.” Interestingly, Tanya’s perspective indicated that the school simply needs to do more for students:

I think it’s great. I don’t think that kids should have to pay for food. I do not think... as a public school we do so much anyways, but I feel like as far as them having food and clothing, we have to make sure our kids have that. They have to feel comfortable...I feel like feeding them and clothing them to the best of our ability are things that we can do, and it’s an unwanted situation that we don’t have to deal with because we know that the kids are coming here, they’re eating, they’ve got food...[and] it helps the parents out. Coming from low income, you do not want parents to feel like this is an additional thing that they have to do as far as providing food for their kids, and so it has been positive for this environment.

**RSQ1: What factors contribute to the processes of qualifying for, implementing, and delivering the CEP?** The basic premise of the CEP allows schools that participate in the CEP to offer free meals to students without the use of applications (Kline, 2015; Maskornick,

Wolf, Corke, & Young, 2015). Additionally, the CEP requires direct certification as “the process through which States and local educational agencies (LEAs) establish school meal benefits for children based on information provided by Federal assistance programs [SNAP, TANF, FDPIR, homeless, migrant, foster, Head/Early Start, and Medicaid in states where participants meet 133 percent of the Federal poverty level]” (USDA, 2016a). Individual schools or groups of schools can receive reimbursement based on calculated ISPs (Kline, 2015). The ISP is calculated using this formula:  $(\text{Identified Students} \div \text{Enrolled Students}) \times 100 = \text{ISP}$ .

The calculation can be rounded to four decimal places, but not fewer than two decimal places, and the end result must be at least 40.00% to achieve eligibility (Hopwood, Becker, & Utting, 2017; USDA, 2016b). Finally, the ISP multiplied by 1.6, the USDA approved multiplier, equals the percent of total meals served that will be reimbursed at the federal free rate with remaining meals reimbursed at the federal paid rate. Those meals must be paid for through non-federal sources (Hopwood et al., 2017; USDA, 2015). An ISP of at least 62.5% indicates that all meals will be served at the federal free rate (USDA, 2015).

Interpretations of the qualifications for the CEP appeared to vary among those who served in different roles within the schools. While many teachers and administrators were not familiar with the program origination or implementation from the federal level, food service employees were the most knowledgeable of these processes. State agencies are required to ensure that school districts who wish to participate in the CEP are indeed eligible per the guidelines including accurate ISP calculations. Along these same lines, Dorothy mentioned:

We get all of our data from the State Department and they work with the DHHR to come up with the numbers that we have. And so based on your percentage, if you have over 50% poverty it's pretty much ... They go by schools. That's why all of our schools are

CEP because they're all 50 percent or higher. And so they give us that information and then that's pretty much it for us.

However, Cole overtly said, "I don't know what the qualifications were at the time. I'm assuming it was based on free and reduced lunch. With us being the 10<sup>th</sup> most impoverished county in the country, it was probably a given at that point," and Eric added, "I think we received 75 or 80% within the guidelines for free lunches anyway so we were used to that [free/reduced meal offerings]." When asked about initial implementation, Rose stated that the program was "grant-funded" and Michele also said, "I don't really know where it came from. I know at one point in time we were a pilot school, and so...I think it was a grant that served our county...we piloted the program." Georgia indicated that the CEP "occurred a few years ago in the state of West Virginia, and we now serve all students, regardless of any circumstances, free breakfast, free lunch." Pat indicated that the program "began with hunger free ... I can't remember the exact name of it, and it was to be used for kids that were a percent poverty." Tanya, Jan, and Veronica demonstrated a basic understanding of the program by indicating that all students receive "free breakfast and lunch."

The implementation of the CEP is understood in various ways based upon the role of the individual in the school system. CEP implementation began with the FNS advertisement to states of the available programming. Cole stated that the program started about six years ago in his school district and it was a quick implementation:

We had talked about it probably for a week or so and chewed on it with the chief financial officer because that was our biggest concern...could we afford to do this as a county and would we lose money through federal reimbursement by doing this so the timeline was probably no more than a week. We thought we'd give it a shot. If we lost a

lot of money and couldn't afford to do it, we wouldn't do it. But after that first year, we recalculated and we were fine with the monies that we had received.

Alex spoke favorably of the program implementation, "I think it's an awesome thing that our state and our county met that need [food insecurity]. And we were one of the first pilot programs of it."

Communication is an important part of ensuring that CEP implementation is successful. Georgia agreed that the implementation happened quickly, "It came from higher administration, and we just got basically told how it was going to be and what we were going to do, so that's what we did." Haley said that the program was discussed at administrators' meetings. There, they would brainstorm about shared problems and solutions at the initial implementation. Implementation at the start of each school year has been eased by the continuing requirements of the CEP. Shelby stated, "You have to write the...like sign the MOU...where we're continuing; it's the easiest thing in the world. So literally it's like a sheet of paper that you sign and you send in."

Participants indicated that there were differing perspectives on the need for additional help in implementing the program. In most instances, food service personnel and administrators indicated that the CEP did equate to more work. Georgia's perspective indicated that the program was more work on all of the school employees, "That's [meal delivery and cleanup] a challenge. Service personnel is here early getting that done, but we do it, and people that sign up for this school know so...It's a big process, but we do it." Similarly, Veronica indicated that her role is ensuring that guidelines are followed:

[I] make sure that we provide hot, nutritious meals to all students...As far as ordering the food, I do not take care of that. My head cook actually oversees all of that. I do go in the

cafeteria every day for both lunch duties. I help kids open their milk. I encourage them to eat or try something on their tray...And I don't know, as far as paperwork. I don't have to take care of anything. My head cook takes care of that.

Haley stated that the program "had impacted the workload of the kitchen staff, and Tanya added that the program "is mostly coordinated by the Director of Child Nutrition and my cooks. The cook is responsible for ordering food supplies and ensuring that all meals served are well balanced." However, Rose stated, "It's put more work on us to a degree, but it's okay as long as the kids are eating. But again, I want to reiterate, we need, you know maybe more cooks, even be it half a day."

Alternatively, other participants indicated that there was not a lot of change in the workload or expectations regarding CEP implementation. Shelby stated, "It was not too difficult on our cooks because the State of West Virginia has had child nutrition policies in place that made the transition a lot easier." Kayla indicated that she thought "it was kind of a smooth transition. I didn't really see it as being a hard thing to start, but now that we're here, it's just like part of the story."

The training and collaboration involved in the CEP implementation is on-going. Participants indicated that it is important to involve stakeholders in the implementation so that everyone is aware of changes in child nutrition and programming. The USDA provides sample letters for collaborating with elected officials, division superintendents, and CEP workgroups in order to get all parties involved (USDA, 2016b). The nutritional aspect is an important piece of understanding as well. As Rose stated, "We still have a guideline on what quantity and what the ingredients and what things that we should have or should not have, which makes it healthy for the kid."

Delivery of the CEP is regulated by federal rules and guidelines, but allows for flexibility in the delivery model that is used to serve students. In this study, one district varied from the other in terms of the delivery model for breakfast; however, this is not uncommon. Logan et al. (2014) found that schools participating in the CEP often used the breakfast-in-the-classroom model more often in an effort to increase meal participation but were less likely to offer a variety of choices. Along these lines, Haley mentioned, “For breakfast what we did was you could only have white milk [instead of a choice of chocolate or strawberry]. It just made it easier. They’re also offered a juice. So if they didn’t like milk, they had a juice too.” During an observation, I also noted that the pre-packaged breakfast foods were heated for delivery and the food service staff voiced dissatisfaction with the model because they would prefer to fix hot meals for the students. Kayla, Georgia, and Tanya expressed their satisfaction with this model; Tanya stated, “When they get to their classroom and are in a more comfortable environment they’re able to eat in there, they’re able to socialize with their friends, they’re a little more comfortable eating in front of their peers.” Haley added that once the school readjusted the schedule, the implementation became easier.

Conversely, the other school system had tried the breakfast-in-the-classroom model, but felt it was unsuccessful in meeting their needs. Veronica, Betsy, and Michele felt that serving meals in the cafeteria was in the students’ best interests. Veronica indicated that students and food service employees were not satisfied:

At first, we tried some things like BIC (Breakfast in the Classroom). And we wanted to try different things to see what would best suit our kids. And when we tried the little bags that were premade that consisted of the graham crackers and cereal with the milk and juice and this, my cooks and I, we met and they were upset. My cooks cook every

morning. They feel like the kids that we have, they don't get a hot breakfast, ever. So, we went back to the traditional hot breakfast with waffles and sausage biscuits. That's what the kids wanted. When we went to the BIC, our breakfast count went very low. They can get that stuff at home and they just didn't like it. So, we went back to our traditional breakfast where they come in the cafeteria, they sit down, they get to talk to their friends and our breakfast count went back up to 100%. So, it's been trial and error, and I think you have to go through those things to see what works best for your kids.

Michele added that "the kids are getting better meals with it being in the cafeteria. Because before, it was a whole lot of that bag and go stuff...because it was just too much trouble to make sausage biscuits and wrap 200 of them and make sure that they're put in baggies and get 'em where they need to be."

One of the components of the CEP allows for school divisions to implement share tables, or tables where students can put extra food that is un-opened for others to take. During my observations, I saw that students were required to take a certain number of items from the regular meal line, even if they were unwanted, in order to count the meal as reimbursable. Several students even commented that they would not eat certain items. However, with the implementation of the share table, unopened items could be shared with those classmates who may want more food. One school did try especially hard to encourage the students to try new, unfamiliar foods and gave incentives for doing so.

The school divisions are very aware of the requirements necessary for continuing the program and make every effort to ensure that those are followed. This begins with ensuring that students get all required items in order to meet the meal pattern requirements. Rose said that the meals served must meet nutritional guidelines meaning that "Everything is in its proper category.

Everything has a certain amount of calories, a certain amount of carbs, a certain amount of sodium. All that. It's all done in accordance with the law.” During my observations, I saw that the guidelines stated that students must take at least three components and one of those must be a fruit or vegetable, and Veronica verified this in her interview. Dorothy also said that students are required to take three items from different food groups for the meal to be reimbursable. Alex added clarification:

There's five components that we have to make sure that we offer, which is a grain, a meat/meat alternative, a vegetable, a fruit, and a dairy, being the milk. If they just wanna take the main entrée and a vegetable and a milk, that's considered reimbursable meal from the Office of Child Nutrition. And they can eat that. They can have all the fresh fruits and vegetables that they want. They cannot get seconds on the main entrée, or the grain, or the bread, the grain. They can only get the one of that. But, the fresh fruit and vegetables they can get all they want... You can go in and take all five items. Or you can get three out of the five items to meet the standards that we have...they're not required to eat. But, they are free to eat any time.

Georgia also added that food has to be served in accordance with nutritional guidelines with controlled temperatures. Michele continued by saying, “I know that the stipulations for it are pretty strict, like you had to make sure that all of the kids got their breakfast, all the kids got their lunch if they were present in the building.” Continued reimbursement also includes an accurate meal counting system, typically a reliable POS system, but none specifically mandated (Kline, 2016a). Rose clarified that the POS is used in “documenting but it's also making sure the child gets each product they get to make it a reimbursable meal.” Michele added that students are counted in the POS by their lunch number for monitoring: “I know for monitoring they're really

picky about it. The number has to be in after they take their tray...If it's an after point of service, then you can make sure they have everything that's required for their meal."

**RSQ2: What benefits do participants identify from the implementation and delivery of the CEP?** In each case and with several participants, the benefits of CEP implementation were discussed. Alex, Jan, and Michele indicated that one of the biggest benefits is the elimination of the meal application process. Jan said, "When this program was implemented they no longer had to fill out the forms because it was automatic. That was a plus." Alex added that the process is much easier now after "getting everybody in there, at the point of service" and that this has simplified meal delivery. Michele also indicated that the workload has decreased, "think about finances and having to worry about those lunch charges and tracking down the money and things like that." Tanya echoed a similar sentiment with regard to the workload:

We no longer have to collect lunch bills, we no longer have to send out lunch notices...we use our point of service computer. They come in, we count the kids that are eating, the computer generates that report, we send it off. So, there's not a whole lot to it.

Cole also added that the reduction in billing is noticeable, "Just on the logistical end, in the offices, is the billing...which actually took up more personnel manpower here and a lot of time trying to collect on past due bills...It eliminated a lot of the headache and frustration and paperwork."

Another benefit that participants implied as a result of the CEP is increased meal participation. Alex said that it took some time to increase participation rates because students and families were not clear on what the CEP allowed. However, Shelby added that the participation rate continues to increase now because students went from bringing their meals to

eating the hot meals in the cafeteria and that the CEP helps participation rates because no student is turned away. Veronica and Dorothy also indicated that meal participation rates have increased despite the decrease in school enrollment.

Meal participation rates are important to ensure continuation of the CEP. Haley and Georgia underscored the importance of keeping participation rates high because the program could be withdrawn. Haley aimed to keep participation rates high by encouraging students to eat; however, she acknowledged that some kids will always pack their lunches due to the “mental block about school food,” and she eats the cafeteria meals each day to encourage her students to do so as well. Tanya also mentioned that some kids do bring their own lunches, but they will also get the tray because it’s free and “everyone eats, everyone feels like it's kind of the norm here.” To sum it up, Betsy simply said, “We’ve got more kids eating, and no one goes home hungry.”

Creating healthy communities is an important aspect of the CEP as it strives to enhance students’ experiences with food and nutrition, creating improved health outcomes. Veronica mentioned the importance of “a hot, nutritious breakfast every morning.” Tanya, Kayla, and Shelby indicated that a very important part of the program is the inclusion of fruits and vegetables. Two participants mentioned specific health benefits. Alex said, “If they eat right, they’re gonna sleep good....But, I think that overall that their well-being and their health, it’s helped considerably,” and Betsy said, “[The CEP] makes healthier kids...they stay sleepy, they stay sick. It keeps them healthy and everything...and I think that's great ‘cause it'll make a difference in our kids.” Kayla and Shelby mentioned the benefits of educating students on healthy portions and unfamiliar foods. Kayla believes the program is successful, not just for the

students, but for the families as well. Pat concluded with, “It’s successful because we’re feeding more people, more kids are able to eat.”

Food insecurity is a primary concern in the high-poverty schools where the CEP has been implemented. Haley highlights several benefits related to food insecurity, “There have been many more positive outcomes due to implementing CEP such as reduced hunger in our students...and the guarantee that all students have an opportunity to eat two meals per day free of charge.” Under the CEP, Pat said that everyone is more aware of the fact that all students are eating a nutritional meal at least two times each school day. Kayla made a similar comment regarding the community mindset:

A lot of people are struggling, and I think this changes people’s mindsets, too, on the school atmosphere, too, because they feel like, well, they’re providing ... they really do care about our education because we want them fed and obviously, we want them [to learn]...that’s one of the needs that needs to be met before they can learn. I feel like that helps us, too, with our community efforts with our families as well. I think that makes a good connection and makes it seem like we’re doing a little extra.

Tanya said that the CEP simply allows students to eat more food, “We know the parent can’t provide, and so having... and I don’t say extra like that like we have a surplus but it’s free.”

The CEP provides more food for students as indicated by Betsy’s comment that students are able to get more food and are often cleaning their food trays. Rose agreed, adding that students can get second servings of fresh fruits so they are eating more:

I can give you an instance of a child, which I could probably give you a lot, but this one has always stood out in my mind. The kid came and he explained that he hasn’t had supper. He didn’t get supper the night before, so the child was hungry...So, what we did,

you are allowed seconds on fresh stuff, and he took a little bit off of everything that we had on that bar. Plus, we had, I think it was cucumbers or celery sticks and he got to get him extra of that to help him, to fill him up.

Veronica said straightforwardly, “I mean, the more kids that you have eating, the less kids are hungry. So, it’s been beneficial, as far as our school.” Dorothy reiterated, “I think it does what it was intended to, and that’s to feed students. In this area there’s a lot of students that go without, and so we’re reaching those students.” Haley alluded to the focus of the CEP in battling food insecurity, “It fights against hunger.”

Participants indicated that families are able to redirect funds that may have once been required to pay for their children to eat at school. Cole recalled instances in which students were previously denied food due to lack of payment, “We had students that had past due bills but it was no fault of the student, yet we were being told you can’t feed that student certain things if they didn’t pay the bill.” Veronica says that students from more financially-stable families are eating as well:

The middle-class kids were left out. And a lot of times they suffered, because it’s like the working poor. Parents who worked, but actually could not afford to provide a good, hot, nutritious lunch. They would send their kids with a bag lunch that didn’t meet the nutritional guidelines, but they couldn’t afford a hot lunch. So, those are the kids that needed the food, but they couldn’t afford it.

When asked about specific instances where the CEP had benefitted students, Michele added a personal note and said that the program has been great for her own family:

Teacher's children?...The families with the multiple kids in school and that would have to pay anyway, it’s really, it’s a God send. I’ll go ahead and say it, even for me, I’ve got

three kids in school. Right now I'm a teacher, my husband's a teacher, but I mean we bought a house, and we have vehicles to get back and forth to work in...What if I had to pay that bill? 'Cause right now I'm goin' paycheck to paycheck as it is. And so I'm thinkin' Lord if I had to pay that, what would I have to get rid of so that I could pay that?

The burden on families who are already concerned about money can be somewhat relieved with the CEP. Michele said that she wished a similar program had been created when she was in school to relieve the financial burden from her own mother. Jan said that families in the area have enough financial strain, and "parents have discussed that the program has relieved them of financial burden of having to pay for breakfast and lunch." Similarly, Tanya explicitly stated the need for a program like the CEP, "I believe it's successful because it's free. And in our area, our parents need to be supported in so many ways."

Students' preparation for academic achievement was commonly identified as a benefit of the CEP. Eric referred to the research, "There have been several educational studies also that tell us that a well-fed student is a much more efficient student who is more open to learning." Veronica similarly added, "The research connects being able to eat and not feeling hungry and the ability to learn the curriculum in the classroom. You can't learn if you're starving to death...I know that there's a huge correlation with student achievement and eating." Haley confirmed this idea, saying that it has to help students stay focused and not concentrate on being hungry. Shelby's hope is that all students benefit from the hot meals, "I would hate for a kid to go through a seven-hour day and not eat because we want them to be successful in the classroom."

Participants connected their own observations with achievement. In Kayla's experience, she has found that kids are "more ready to learn [and] students are certainly performing better in

the classroom.” Betsy mentioned the energy that children get from nutrition and how that helps them concentrate and complete their work. Michele also mentioned the impact of hunger on learning, “A hungry kid’s not gonna worry about learnin’...I think that helps that situation a lot. Being able to focus, having the nutrition that they need, and then being able to function at a higher capacity.” Jan mentioned a similar perspective, indicating that children need to eat breakfast to help their brains become active and to be ready for learning. Georgia also believed that “a well-nourished brain is integral to students being able to work.” Alex even alluded to benefits that extend beyond the current classroom, “They’re gonna do better in their scoring...They’re apt to do better outside of the school world. Of being able to go on to college and get degrees maybe, because of scholarships and better testing. And, better themselves.”

### **RSQ3: What challenges do participants identify from implementing the CEP?**

Several participants were unable to identify any challenges arising from the CEP. When asked specifically, Betsy said she didn’t know how to answer and Jan said, “Honestly, I really don’t see any challenges with it. Kayla didn’t acknowledge specific challenges but said that she thought any challenges could be resolved. Tanya added, “I don’t perceive any challenges only because our kids come to school hungry...I have not had any challenges whatsoever. And it could be because this has been an ongoing thing in the county.”

Conversely, participants indicated that there were some, although minimal, challenges from implementing the CEP. The concern came from having the food in the classrooms resulting in spills or pests. This resulted in one school moving away from the BIC model, while the other school maintained the model and spent time teaching the students more effective protocols for having food in classrooms. Haley said that the food would often be left in the building, resulting in mice, but that they have since resolved those issues. She continued, “It was

just really trying to train the kids on not making a whole lot of spills. It's gotten a lot better."

Michele agreed that they also had difficulties with spills in the classroom, and she said that she appreciates the flexibility of the program because "for some schools, eating in the classroom might not be a big deal. For some schools it can be a big hassle."

Most participants agreed that the workload had increased due to the rise in the number of students who partake in school meals. From the teachers' perspective, there were some differences of opinion. Jan said that her workload had not changed, but Kayla said that the implementation of the BIC "was definitely a problem for us as far as the change because we were used to not eating breakfast in the classroom." Administrators alluded to the amount of documentation, scheduling, and clean up as factors leading to the increased workload. Haley said, "just like with anything else, documentation that you have to keep." Veronica recalled the initial implementation, "The schedule changing was tough, trying to move things around, but it hasn't been bad as far as, I've had to make some schedule changes and we do what's best for our kids. So, it's not that bad. I mean, it's worth it. If our kids are eating and they're happy, then I'm happy." Haley said that it did take some time for the teachers and students to adjust to the BIC schedule as well. Georgia and Haley also mentioned the increased clean-up that was required; Georgia said there was more physical labor involved and when that the workload "increased a lot because I have to manage about six people that do the bulk of it in the morning and then all those bags have to be down by a certain time because now those bags have to be sanitized. It's a big production, but I will say it's a production that's well worth it."

Food service staff more frequently indicated that the workload had increased. Although Betsy believed that it was just the norm for her, Rose said that it is challenging when they are "serving as many children as we are when there's quite a bit of food on the menus. That has

challenged us because, again, some of the kids are eating more so than what they were.” Pat and Shelby also mentioned that maintaining the guidelines for the reimbursable meals required more work. Shelby said, “It is challenging when it comes to meeting all those guidelines. That’s kind of the hardest part is it’s a strict program and you got to meet that ...The rules. They’re hard...It’s very complicated.”

Participants indicated that the food selection required by the CEP posed a challenge for students and employees. Ensuring that students get the required number of items and the correct items to ensure that the meal meets reimbursable guidelines could be a difficult task for some, as Pat explained. Dorothy said that the requirements can be “a little confusing because students think they just have to take three things; it doesn’t matter what it is.” Rose added that several students still bring food from home, and “I think, really, the child needs to be able to learn to eat more of the school [food] because it’s more nutritional.” Dorothy also went on to say, “A lot of students don’t like trying things they have not heard of. We try to keep the menu familiar so that they will eat.”

Food waste was a challenge that several participants identified as a challenge of the CEP. Kayla said that parents have expressed their concern over the waste, “I have had parents say that they feel students should be able to have seconds if they wish. Many do not ask, ever. So, I agree. For the three or four that might ask daily during a lunch period, I think this would be a small change in the program that could impact even more.” Georgia had a similar thought:

I really wish that the boys and girls could have seconds of entrees. There is a very big difference on how the students behave about food on Monday than there is on Tuesday, and they come in hungry and we have to throw a whole tray of grilled cheese sandwiches

in the trash, and we can't cut them in half and even give them. Half a sandwich to a little one is a lot. In front of them, we have to throw it away, and I think that's sinful.

Michele said that the waste is one of her primary concerns with the CEP:

That's one thing that I might have a little bit of a beef with, is the waste...if they don't want it, why do they have to take it?...There's a lot of waste with this program...I don't understand why they have to take so many items. It has to be a required three items...Wouldn't it be more fiscally and not even fiscally but socially responsible to not waste so much? And so I think that some of the stipulations on the program are creating a lot of unnecessary food waste.

Participants reported some concerns with regard to the academic program due to the elimination of household meal applications. Participants reflected upon experiences with Title I funding. Georgia stated that the Title I funding is impacted annually due to the lack of free and reduced meal applications, "What's changed is our Title personnel is based on child protect services so every year, we gain or lose personnel, and that is very difficult for scheduling and continuity of the school...That was a challenge." Pat indicated that Title 1 service personnel may not see as much benefit to the CEP, "because they think that they're not getting the money that they need to get because of this. That's a difference too." Haley also mentioned the effect on Title 1 programming by comparing her school to neighboring schools, "We're just right smack dab in those two communities who have this [Title 1] help and...it [CEP data] doesn't really have a true reflection of our need as much as it used to."

Participants demonstrated great concern regarding the termination of the program.

Michele considered the program to be effective, but she was concerned about ongoing support:

I don't see any downside to it yet except for the economic burden on the...like I don't know where the money is coming from right now; I guess it's federal...There's an old saying that there's nothing more unreliable than a government program. That would be the only downside is being able to see this continue to happen.

Veronica strongly believed in the goal of the program as evidenced by her thoughts, "Of all the programs that we've put in schools, this, that, and I think this one is the most important, and I hope it doesn't go away. I think that for all of our kids' sake." Betsy also saw the benefits for students and desired for the program to continue, "I just hope and pray this program never goes out." Rose also expressed her concerns regarding program elimination, "I think if they were to stop this, there's going to be some issues really. I think it'll be a shame...We'd go back to seeing these kids that can't afford it." Alex said that the program will continue as long as the requirements are met, but should the schools no longer meet eligibility, "that doesn't mean that every child will still be able to afford lunch." This was an overarching concern for several participants.

**RSQ4: How do participants who implement the CEP describe the influence of the program on the school culture?** Participants described numerous aspects in which they felt that the CEP had influenced school culture. They were quick to identify ways in which the CEP had been beneficial. From student attendance and behavior to more positivity in the school environment, there were several points discussed.

Attendance and tardiness have always been an issue for schools, but more stringent accreditation requirements further require an emphasis on attendance. Kayla sees the CEP as beneficial for attendance, "Well, I think for sure you get two meals a day, I think that helps a lot. I really do." Georgia said that there are some students who are experiencing significant food

insecurity, and “A significant amount of children come to school for food.” Veronica believed that the CEP plays a role in maintaining good attendance rates:

Kids are coming, and I think that has a lot to do with the fact that they want to eat. I really do, because it’s not like we can offer them a whole lot. I mean, they’re not coming for the bells and whistles. So, I really think that has a big influence that the kids are getting a hot breakfast and a hot lunch.

Several participants mentioned that the CEP may have positively influenced the rates of tardiness. However, Michele said that students who are tardy get breakfast regardless of their arrival time. Veronica and Tanya said they do not have a lot of tardy students, but Tanya added, “Even if the kid comes in tardy they still get breakfast, and we always make sure you have had breakfast...So we still save that food for that child.” Jan agrees that the families are making more of an effort to get to school on time for breakfast, and that is decreasing student tardies. Georgia added that the school makes an effort to feed every child, and that food is always available.

Behavioral improvements were noted that participants agreed could be attributed to the CEP meeting students’ basic needs. Tanya said that students “have a basic need met and so you’re not going to act out...as far as discipline problems here I can say that there’s a possibility that them eating and having free lunch would help.” Betsy said that she has noticed students having more energy because they are well fed, and Haley said that there have been several positive outcomes including reduced hunger and students who are more focused and able to concentrate. Jan also said, “When your belly is full, you’re not focusing on other things and you’re ready to learn, you’re ready to focus, so you’re ready to get the day started.” Tanya similarly mentioned that starting the day in a positive way with the CEP and BIC has changed

discipline referrals over the years. Veronica added that, “Discipline has declined every year that we’ve had the program, and that is something that I can show with numbers.” Kayla also indicated, “Everyone has met very important needs for learning to occur.” Georgia summed up the program well when she said, “We take away the stress of being hungry and worrying about food because we do have homeless issues where children will steal food, and that’s very typical. It’s a symptom, not really a behavior. Food is available [here].”

Participants mentioned that the school culture has benefited from more positivity in the school environment. Kayla related the changes in the program to an improved school culture, “I feel like it’s kind of changed a little bit of our culture...We talk about it being that restaurant atmosphere, so again, we’re bringing in manners...There’s just so many things that come into it.” Tanya said that the program has been a positive addition to her school as well. Along those lines, Veronica also indicated that the program has impacted students, “I think that kids are more positive and they’re happy...I haven’t had that [students saying that are hungry] since we implemented this program...I haven’t had that in years. So, it’s working.” Georgia also added that the responsibility component in their school has enabled students to explore college and career readiness:

Another thing that’s really cool at this school is for college and career readiness, students have authentically named positions in the classroom...We have sanitation workers in the classroom and so with all the food being in the classroom, then we have an issue with making sure it’s clean so we don’t have rodents and insects and stuff. We have students that clean, only with agents they’re allowed to...Our sanitation engineers in the classroom, all that extra food and trash has to go in the hall...It puts a gentleness and a

joyfulness in the school. People that work here, they know that's our mission. That's what we do. It just makes the environment nicer.

Kayla supported this as well, "I think the classroom routine, some of them have been a positive thing for us. Like, it kind of brought around some extra jobs in the classroom...It just added a little more community in our school." Dorothy also added that the students are able to "get a lot more hands on opportunities as far as seeing where their food and stuff comes from."

Participants reported the positive impacts of reduced stigma related to the CEP. Eric considered how schools have been portrayed in the media as he discussed the CEP, "[It] eliminates a lot of problems...There's been a number of schools that...made a mistake in cutting some students off because they didn't pay their lunch bills, their parents didn't and the publicity was worse than the financial gain." Jan said, "It's [the CEP] made a more positive environment because we know that the children are being fed breakfast and lunch without the parents having to foot the bill and the responsibility of that." Haley also indicated, "You don't really have that embarrassment anymore of some kids not being able to pay for their lunch...Nobody knows who can pay for it and who can't...If kids aren't targeted because of that, that's gonna help your school culture."

The CEP has helped to lessen the impact of food insecurity as well as stigma. As Georgia stated, "Free and reduced lunch was based on parents that filled out required forms that had eligibility...but I think still we were missing a lot of children...so it became universal, and it's been a tremendous, a tremendous up." Shelby went on to say, "We don't have to segregate our students out...Everybody can eat, and we do have hungry students...I mean that's just a reality, and I would hate to have to turn them down because they don't have ability to pay for meals." Michele spoke about cases where they would find students "hoarding food and trying to

take it home. They would try to wrap food in napkins or sneak extra packaged items. Some would even eat half and try to take half home.” While this speaks to the food insecurity, it also speaks to how students might have been ashamed of their circumstances. Michele said it has eased the worries of the school with regard to who may or may not have money to pay their meal funds. Tanya said that the CEP is important to students’ perceptions of the environment as well:

Anytime all kids are treated equally it just makes it better... You [do not] have to have that conversation with the kid, ‘Well mommy and daddy don't make as much.’ Or you know, ‘Mommy and daddy’s income is not this high.’ And then you start to put kids in brackets. And so the fact that we don’t have that here is great.

Cole said that because many students already received free and reduced meals, the culture has not changed greatly, but he did make one observation, “The classifying of students as have and have not... I think it’s eliminated that and made the culture better but it’s kind of an indirect way to make the culture better.”

Several participants also mentioned changes in students’ behavior as a result of CEP implementation. Rose mentioned, “Some children will ask for more, but would not ask when it [a school meal] was only free to some... They’re not singled out. So, they’re not ashamed to come through the line and get their foods and they’re also eating more.” Shelby also said, “I’ve seen students changing over as far as what they take... the longer they’re in the program, they’re pretty smart, the more they realize what they can do unlimited... Seeing a student get excited about a salad bar... that’s the cool thing.” Alex also believes that the program helps the students’ feel more equal, “I think that kinda goes back to the kids not being ashamed to eat. Even if they can’t afford it. So, I think that kinda helps their self-esteem some.” Tanya stated, “It is important that our students know that when they come to school, they will be fed. We do not want any

child to be hungry.” Betsy summed up her feelings on the program, “It seems like everybody’s being treated fairly now.”

Participants had positive commentary on the implementation of the CEP. Georgia believed, “It’s just less stress on everybody...I think it’s a wonderful part of our school culture. We tout it...I praise the staff that makes it happen...It’s just been a grand success.” Kayla said that the CEP contributes to “that community feeling” within her school. Rose and Betsy believed that the interactions with the students speak for themselves. Rose said, “When the kid comes to me and says, ‘I’m full and it was so good.’ There’s your answer.” Betsy went on to say that the students are “always thanking you for preparing it for ‘em and everything. The kids are very happy to get it...And when they’re happy, I’m happy...Every morning, they come in to get their food all smiles...You know, it just makes you feel good.” Veronica said that the food service staff works to meet students’ needs and wants, “They talk to the kids...So, whatever they want to eat is what we provide for them...I think it makes a difference on our school culture. I think it’s a positive for us to have this program in our school.” Tanya is a big supporter of the CEP, “It’s been great. I love it. I wish everybody could do this...I love the program.” Jan also suggested that, “Parents and teachers agree that this program has been great for our county and school.”

### **Summary**

This qualitative study was conducted to explore participants’ perceptions with regard to implementing the CEP. The following research protocols were used to collect data: written questionnaires, one-to-one interviews, implementation observations, and an exploration of related artifacts. Pseudonyms were assigned to the 15 participants in the study to protect privacy

and confidentiality. The study was conducted in two school districts in West Virginia. The research questions guided the data collection.

The themes identified in the study were the need for programming, executing the program, program participation, advantages and difficulties related to the program and the impacts of the program on the schools. The themes aided in answering the central research question and the four additional research sub-questions. In the study, it was found that participants do view the CEP as a piece of the educational process, but they varied in their understanding of the processes of qualifying for, implementing, and delivering the CEP. Participants also identified multiple benefits of the program but minimal challenges relating to the CEP implementation. Participants also viewed the program as having a positive impact on the school culture. Overall, the themes reflected a clearer picture of the CEP implementation in these rural school divisions of West Virginia.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

A component of the HHFKA, the CEP was developed as a way to ensure that children who live in high-poverty areas receive free and nutritious meals. During the 2012-2013 school year, the CEP was piloted by the USDA in the state of West Virginia. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the perceptions of various stakeholders toward the implementation of the CEP at elementary schools in southern West Virginia.

This chapter summarizes the findings by briefly restating the answers to the research questions to detail the findings of the study. The empirical and theoretical discussions are presented and used to identify the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. Delimitations and limitations of the current study are identified, and overall recommendations are made for future studies.

### **Summary of Findings**

This case study was driven by a central research question supported by four research sub-questions. The central research question asked, “How do participants perceive CEP implementation as part of the educational process, at the elementary school level?” All of the participants in the research study agreed upon the importance of ensuring that children are well-nourished as an essential part of the educational process. Many participants indicated that children who receive adequate nutrition can perform better academically and behaviorally in the school setting. They also alluded to the high levels of food insecurity in their communities as well as how stakeholders are made more aware of those concerns and how the CEP addresses students’ needs. Participants discussed the students’ interactions with unfamiliar foods and how exposure to these foods can result in positive habits in the long run. Finally, some participants

indicated that they believe it was the school's moral responsibility to provide food for students who experience hunger from food insecurity. The results of this research were consistent with the findings of studies on school meals and their impact on nutrition and reduced food insecurity (Bartfeld & Ahn, 2011; Hanson & Olson, 2013; Hewins et al., 2014; Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). As Eric pointed out, "We have a number of students in this area that if they did not get a breakfast and a lunch at school, what they did get would be much less, if any." The findings also aligned with current research on children from food insecure homes who receive nutrition at school (Capogrossi & You, 2017). Participants had several similar perceptions of the CEP implementation as a part of the educational process.

The first research sub-question asked, "What factors contribute to the processes of qualifying for, implementing, and delivering the CEP?" The participants considered various aspects of qualifying for the program related to food insecurity, how schools and districts are found eligible through direct certification, and the basic structure of the program. The CEP is seen as an opportunity for schools to feed more students (Raudenbush, 2015). Participants also discussed how the program was implemented from the initial implementation to the need for more help in the food service area as well as training and collaboration that was required for successful execution. Finally, participants reflected upon program delivery through various delivery models, the integration of the share table, and how program eligibility is a continuing process. Betsy said, "Without this program, lots of kids would go hungry."

The second research sub-question asked, "What benefits do participants identify from the implementation and delivery of the CEP?" All of the participants discussed benefits resulting from the implementation of the program. Participants discussed benefits relating to billing efficiency and increases in meal participation rates. Cole said that he believes the program is

successful because participation has increased, “We do have more students eating than we had before we implemented the CEP...there was an increase in the number of students participating in our meal program after we implemented the CEP.” Participants also identified increased health benefits, including a reduction in food insecurity and financial relief for families. Georgia said that students have enough to worry about and “food does not need to be an issue.” Betsy also noted, “A lot of parents are happy that they don’t have to pay for their kids to eat; it’s one less burden.” There was also a discussion of how the CEP could lend itself to improved student achievement.

The third research sub-question asked, “What challenges do participants identify from implementing the CEP?” Georgia said, “With anything that’s new, you get some pushback and you stub your toes a little bit, but that’s okay.” Several of the participants had difficulty answering this question and were not able to identify any challenges related to the CEP but did fear that the program could be eliminated. Several participants voiced concern over program termination due to an improved local economy or an elimination of the funding source. Other participants indicated that clean up and excessive messes could be challenging. Some participants also identified the extra workload as being difficult. Food selection and food waste were reported as participant concerns relating to the program. During observations of the food service routines, there was a great deal of food waste due in part to the requirements of the program, and it could also be attributed to students’ unfamiliarity with new foods. Several participants discussed the perceived impact of the CEP on other school initiatives such as Title I programs. Participants expressed concerns because the free/reduced meals eligibility data was no longer available. Dorothy added that “Pleasing everyone is impossible. We have had some likes and dislikes with the UFM.”

The fourth research sub-question asked, “How do participants who implement the CEP describe the influence of the program on the school culture?” Participants indicated several areas in which the CEP had positively affected the school culture. Several participants commented on increased attendance and improved student behavior. Shelby said, “We believe that by feeding them it just helps them be able to keep their attention better and be more successful.” Decreased levels of stigma were reported by multiple participants. Michele said, “I just know that the kids get free breakfast, free lunch, regardless of income status or anything like that.” Participants indicated that the CEP had improved school culture because students were no longer pinpointed due to their inability to pay. Overall, participants expressed a lot of positive comments about the program and were appreciative of what it had to offer with regards to various aspects of education. Veronica said, “I think it’s one of the most valuable programs that we’ve had in the school system in a long time.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions and feelings of various school employees as they pertain to the implementation of the CEP. The research included open-ended questionnaires, one-to-one interviews, observations, and related artifacts. The one-to-one interviews were transcribed. Extensive coding, interpretation, and analysis of the participants’ responses was implemented. As the information was tallied, themes emerged from the data analysis, and the interpretation of the themes is represented in narrative form and in Table 2 in Chapter Four. The empirical discussion was used to illustrate the similarities and differences among previous research and the current study. The theoretical discussion used the framework of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The components of this theory are discussed in relation to the current study.

## **Empirical Discussion**

Considering the empirical literature, the results of this study reflected the results of other studies. This research emphasizes the important alignment between policy and resources to ensure that the CEP implementation process can adequately support student nutrition (Alcaraz & Cullen, 2014; Holthe et al., 2011; Terry-McElrath et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2017). Studies of UFM implementation have shown results in social, health, and financial aspects for students, families, and schools (Dalma et al., 2015; Harkness et al., 2015; Leos-Urbel et al., 2013; Levin & Hewins, 2014).

According to Raudenbush (2015), CEP implementation is decided upon by individual school districts who must consider the implications that such programming would have on finances as well as the composition of the student body. Each school's situation is unique, so flexibility is key. That's why districts are given many options for if, when, and how they implement the provision in their schools (Raudenbush, 2015). The CDC (2014) emphasized the importance of partnerships between the local departments of health and education and other key stakeholders to help support the connection among healthy eating, physical activity, and academic achievement. State agencies distribute information from the FNS to food service personnel and those personnel are encouraged to communicate with the FNS via state agencies (Kline, 2015). Early notification and explanation is important for a smooth transition (USDA, 2016b).

The findings of this study support the literature that physiological needs are typically seen as the most basic needs for human life (Garner & Thomas, 2011; Lyngnegård et al., 2013). Studies have shown that providing students with nutritious meals in school has contributed to enhanced growth and development (Winicki & Jemison, 2003). Through the CEP, all students

are provided with free, nutritious meals without the use of household applications (Raudenbush, 2015). Thus, the process for feeding children was streamlined for ease of implementation and use (Maskornick et al., 2015). The primary objective was to feed children in high-poverty areas who may only receive adequate nutrition via school meals (Jackson, 2016). The current study suggested that those implementing the CEP felt as though the program contributes positively to the student experience in school.

The CEP of the HHFKA instituted a specific program for school meal reimbursement in high poverty schools and divisions as a means of fighting child hunger while also improving administrative efficiency (Jackson, 2016). Schools are reimbursed using a formula based on the ISP (Hopwood et al., 2017; Kline, 2016b). Free meals for all students can provide support in ensuring that students are able to reach their full potential. The results of this study demonstrated the impact of the CEP from a qualitative standpoint. Studies confirmed that stakeholders who implement the CEP are vital to ensuring that students' basic needs are met in order for learning to take place (Burleson & Thoron, 2014). Participants eagerly shared their positive experiences resulting from CEP implementation and often struggled to find drawbacks associated with the program.

Previous research has shown that students who receive meals at school are more likely to engage in constructive classroom behaviors (Houston et al., 2013). Also, students who are not focused on hunger may achieve improved educational, behavioral, and social outcomes (Harvey-Golding et al., 2016). Carter & Welner (2013) indicated that "because students' learning experiences and outcomes are deeply affected by many factors that are outside schools' immediate control, schools must become part of a larger effort to address unequal opportunities" (p. 5). Raudenbush (2015) found that the "CEP has significantly contributed to the students'

academic success” (p. xx). Those in support of the CEP “recognized the correlation between access to healthy school meals and academic success” (Jackson, 2016, para. 6). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2014) indicated that high academic achievement is correlated with student participation in school breakfasts and that a lack of specific foods, such as produce and dairy, results in lower student grades, excessive absences, and a lack of focus. Maskornick et al. (2015) found that students’ school performance is better when they have eaten. When students are healthy, it is more likely to result in positive behaviors and educational attitudes and higher levels of education (CDC, 2014). The learning environment is improved simply because the CEP is implemented and provides nourishment, ensuring that students are prepared for learning (USDA, 2016b). Participants echoed similar sentiments as Raudenbush (2015) in that one of the most vital purposes of offering school meals is fighting hunger so kids can focus on learning.

School-based strategies like the CEP may encourage students’ positive behaviors, decreased absenteeism, higher test scores, healthy practices, and college readiness (CDC, 2014). Food insecurity is correlated with excessive absenteeism and grade repetition (CDC, 2014). The CDC (2014) reported that student health is positively affected by eating healthy foods, and this can help schools maintain high attendance rates. Participants in this study shared anecdotes of how the CEP has impacted students’ health, meal participation, and achievement as well as positive impacts on the overall school culture. The CEP has consistently increased student participation in both the SBP and the NSLP (Jackson, 2016; Logan et al., 2014). The financial viability of the program has increased as participation increases as well, enabling school districts to use additional funds to improve meal quality and staff training (FRAC, 2017a). The USDA provides this training and assistance to school divisions through webinars, conference calls with

state agencies, national conferences, and collaboration with professional organizations (Jackson, 2016).

This research provided a qualitative look into how child nutrition should not be discounted as a part of the educational process while clarifying implementation procedures (Leos-Urbel et al., 2013; Phulkerd et al., 2016). This research supported the existing literature regarding the importance of adequate nutrition to student learning and behavior (Basch, 2011; Kairiene & Sprindziunas, 2016). Georgia's perception of the CEP was interesting, "I would think that it's all in place to support a child and is one of the building blocks of creating a safe and nurturing environment, respectful environment. I think that would just influence everything." The participants indicated that the CEP held a place in schools and as helping to improve various aspects of student engagement.

### **Theoretical Discussion**

This study supports the components of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. According to Maslow (1943), the hierarchy of human needs begins with an individual's desire for the fulfillment of the most basic necessities for life. Maslow (1943) addressed the requirement for students to have their most basic needs met before other levels of the hierarchy can be attained. van Lenthe et al. (2015) described the physiological needs as being essential to an individual's progression through the hierarchy. School meal directives may also be guided through the lens of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs (Tikkanen, 2009).

The results of this case study supported Maslow's theory in that food and nutrition are necessary elements for learning. Haley added that "There are many students who come to school hungry, and we know if a student's basic needs aren't met, then they will not achieve academically. Therefore, if a student is hungry, then he can't learn to his potential." The USDA

said, “8.6 million U.S. children lack consistent access to food at home, the availability of nutritious meals at school is more important than ever” (Raudenbush, 2015, para. 2). The CDC (2014) spoke of the importance of a school’s influence on eating behaviors due to the fact that students may eat as many as three meals in that environment. According to Maslow, people strive to reach their full potential; therefore, research has found that physiological needs become of primary importance in order to move on to a higher level (van Lenthe et al., 2015). Many of the participants in this study discussed perceived benefits with regard to the implementation of the CEP.

Maslow’s (1943) research is often used in educational studies to better understand the needs of individuals (Mattar, 2012). The results of this study of the CEP were consistent with the theoretical framework of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. Haley indicated that, “There have been many more positive outcomes due to implementing CEP such as reduced hunger in our students.” Participants drew from their own observations and experiences to justify how the program implementation has been beneficial in providing for students’ basic needs.

### **Implications**

This section outlines the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. The research for this study was driven by the five research questions. In order to gain a better understanding of the CEP, it is important to understand how the program is elected, implemented, and delivered as well as the benefits and challenges pertaining to the program. The theoretical implications relate to the main components of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The empirical implications relate to the implications of this study in comparison to the hierarchy of needs. The practical implications will discuss ways this study can be used to encourage implementation of the CEP in school districts.

## **Theoretical Implications**

From a theoretical standpoint, the results of this study may inform stakeholders on effective practices for CEP implementation as well as the benefits and challenges that schools may experience during this period. The theoretical implications of this study relate to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, indicating that physiological needs are of essential importance prior to succession to any other level of the hierarchy. Basic physiological needs, including those of nutrition, must be met because a person's desire for food will surpass the motivation that one has to reach another level of the hierarchy (Stephens, 2000). Through the lens of this motivational theory, a higher level of need is not apparent until the lower level need is met. Theoretically, students cannot move forward with learning until nutritional needs are addressed (Maslow, 1943). When stakeholders better understand the importance of nutrition in education, then they can better meet the needs of all students (Garner & Thomas, 2011).

Stakeholders should continue to consider the impact that hunger can have on student learning. Elementary age students are especially affected by the impacts of food insecurity (Slack & Yoo, 2005). Carter & Welner (2013) stated that while educators are held accountable for meeting expectations, society must also be "holding policy makers accountable for ensuring the conditions and resources necessary to create and maintain a system of excellence" (p. 4). Food insecurity may also affect students' behavior and achievement inside and outside of the classroom (Houston et al., 2013; Imberman & Kugler, 2014; Slack & Yoo, 2005). Research indicates that hunger can result in a decreased desire to learn and disruptive classroom behavior that may distract students' learning (Burleson & Thoron, 2014; Slack & Yoo, 2005). In turn, students may not be able to reach their full potential (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2015).

## **Empirical Implications**

From an empirical standpoint, the results of this study have implications for current and future participants who may engage in CEP implementation or other UFM initiatives. Schools located in other developed countries have more time and resources to focus primarily on providing education rather than also having to provide meals because they are already providing UFM (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 80). The CEP reduces the time spent by school and food service staff on application distribution and meal payment collections while making it easier for school divisions to balance their budgets by increasing federal reimbursements (Hopwood et al., 2017; Logan et al., 2014; Jackson, 2016; USDA, 2016b). Program implementation leads to decreased administrative work by eliminating the collection and verification of school meal applications (Jackson, 2016; Kline, 2016b; Logan et al., 2014; Maskornick et al., 2015; Raudenbush, 2015; USDA, 2016b). However, Logan et al. (2014) indicated that the CEP could increase staff time due to increased meal participation and meal counting measures. At the same time, the CEP also eliminated application processing errors (Jackson, 2016; Logan et al., 2014). However, if proper procedures are not carried out as required, then the state could prohibit reimbursement to districts (USDA, 2016b).

The CEP improves nutrition for at-risk students and allows students to “spend more of their time eating (Kennedy, 2014; Maskornick et al., 2015). The CEP is being implemented in more and more schools each year, but there is very little being done to evaluate implementation practices. While there are several studies on UFM, there is not much research available on the actual implementation of the CEP (Phulkerd et al., 2016). There also appears to be little information on CEP implementation from the qualitative perspectives of participants in the schools (MacLellan et al., 2010).

Empirically speaking, there is little research provided on the benefits of CEP participants in schools (Phulkerd et al., 2016). According to Raudenbush (2015), “Low-income schools of all kinds – rural, urban, elementary and secondary – recognized the potential impact they could have on their communities by offering meals at no cost to all students” (para. 3). Rothstein (2013) asserted that lower-income children have...poorer nutrition...which [may] result in impaired cognitive ability (p. 62). According to the CDC (2014), “Healthy, successful students help build strong communities...Eating healthy and staying active in school can help you feel better, do better in sports, concentrate, and get better grades and test scores” (para. 3). It is essential for students to see this connection and coordinate positive practices for healthy eating, activity, and achievement (CDC, 2014). The CEP allows for students to try new foods and learn about healthy eating because “CEP schools tended to offer more vegetables” (Logan et al., 2014, p. 6). This supports the notion presented by Kantor & Lowe (2013) that “schools do indeed matter, especially for low-income children” (p. 37). The importance of the CEP to the educational process has not been adequately presented in literature. In this study, data was collected and presented to demonstrate actual impacts of the CEP on various aspects of school and student culture.

### **Practical Implications**

From a practical standpoint, the results of this study may also have implications regarding the contribution that schools can make in responding to students’ needs, like that of hunger (Carter & Welner, 2013). Carter & Welner (2013) indicated the education system asserts that “poor children – who are less likely to possess the family, neighborhood, and material resources that we know improve test scores and other measures of achievement – have no excuses for not performing as well as middle-class and affluent children” (p. 9). In addition, Rothstein (2013)

concluded that the “suppression of awareness of how socioeconomic disadvantage lowers student achievement is morally, politically, and intellectually bankrupt” (p. 69). In giving students equal opportunities at success, programs like the CEP must be in place to ensure that the opportunity gap among students is narrowed (Carter & Welner, 2013). The CEP may reduce stigma within the school as well, thereby increasing participation and nutritional benefits because all students are eating regardless of their income status (Hopwood et al., 2017; Jackson, 2016; Maskornick et al., 2015; Raudenbush, 2015; USDA, 2016b). Additionally, the CEP may decrease the financial burden on the family by providing UFM to participating schools, and unpaid meal fees are no longer a concern (FRAC, 2017a; USDA, 2016b).

Barriers reported by eligible schools revolved around financial concerns and how the CEP could impact food services as well as other aspects of the educational environment (USDA, 2016b). Logan et al. (2014) discussed concerns among the pilot states with regard to understanding and addressing the implications of the CEP for educational programs that use individual student [free and reduced price] meals certification data...All States routinely use FRP data for multiple education-related purposes, so the lack of such data under the CEP represents a widespread challenge. (p. 3).

However, there are continued attempts to demonstrate how school districts may use alternative sources of data for Title I qualification (Maskornick et al., 2015; USDA, 2015). Logan et al. (2014) found that the need for this household income data could create the biggest barrier for increased implementation. Lastly, one intention of the CEP was to allow “any resources freed up by the CEP” (Logan et al., 2014, p. 7) to be used for meal improvement, this has not occurred; however, there have not been reductions in meal quality either.

This research was important as it contributes to the existing literature by giving a voice to those involved in CEP implementation. In the past, the educational system has been limited by policies that focus on inequality, but programs like the CEP can encourage greater opportunity (Kantor & Lowe, 2013). Understanding CEP implementation could be the key to encouraging other schools to elect to participate. The research found that there could be some confusion associated with the program. Cole reported that one of the first misconceptions was, “They thought it was free for everyone, including the teachers and all and that was not the case so we had to communicate that.” However, with additional research on the CEP, more school divisions may be willing to explore how the CEP can benefit students, as well as the school itself. More schools continue to investigate and implement the CEP due to the positive outcomes that electing schools are reporting (Jackson, 2016). This research could be helpful in revising CEP implementation policies and practices.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are used to narrow the scope of the research study (Creswell, 2013). This study had several delimitations. Participants were limited to all public-school employees in two school districts in a geographically-similar, rural setting in southern West Virginia. A case study method was selected to allow for a deeper look into two specific settings. I purposefully selected participants who were most directly involved and had the most knowledge regarding CEP implementation. All participants were over the age of 18 and had multiple years of experience in the public-school system and with the CEP implementation.

This research encountered certain limitations as well. The study participants were predominantly Caucasian women despite efforts to recruit a more diverse participant pool. For generalizability purposes, more diverse research sites could be utilized as well; therefore,

causality cannot be claimed in this type of study. Qualitative case studies may be hindered by the feelings of the researcher (Flyvberg, 2006). Furthermore, an unethical researcher could specifically include data to support the researcher's position (Lincoln & Guba, 1981). Additionally, my lack of expertise in conducting one-to-one interviews was intimidating at the beginning although my skills did improve with each subsequent experience.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The data in this case study focused on educators' perceptions of the implementation of the CEP in elementary schools in southern West Virginia. Recommendations for future research could include replication at middle and high school levels. The case study could be replicated in various school districts to provide greater generalizability and to affirm perceptions across participants. Research sites could also include more urban settings to increase demographic diversity. The participant pool could also be expanded to include nonacademic teachers, students, parents, and school nurses as well as those from more diverse backgrounds.

Topics for future research with regard to the CEP could be conducted to enhance program quality and increase program implementation. Additional research should include a more thorough investigation, regression studies or correlational studies, of the relationships between the CEP and student behavior, attendance, and discipline. Furthermore, research could also include a deeper look into the perceived effectiveness of the program on food insecurity and family finances from a phenomenological perspective. Lastly, I would recommend future research regarding any challenges to implementation and continuation of the CEP and how those might be overcome.

### Summary

This study explored the implementation of the CEP in elementary schools in southern West Virginia. The data for this study was collected from open-ended questionnaires, one-to-one interviews, observations, and artifacts. An analysis of the data revealed six themes: the need for programming, executing the program, program participation, advantages of the program, disadvantages of the program, and impacts. Participants indicated that they favored the implementation of the CEP and found it to be beneficial for their students, communities, and schools.

The results of the study correspond with previous literature suggesting that UFM implementation, like the CEP, can impact students in a multitude of ways (Dalma et al., 2015; Levin & Hewins, 2014). Additionally, the theoretical implication is that participants viewed the CEP as an essential piece of the educational process, which allows students to more effectively reach their potential as their need for food is met. There were implications drawn from the data gathered that pointed to how the CEP positively influenced school culture and how the program has been beneficial for all students. I discussed the limitations of the study in relation to the lack of diversity in the participant sample. Another limitation included the geographic location. Recommendations included additional research on the CEP as a means for identifying challenges to implementation, examining stakeholder involvement, and exploring how child nutrition impacts education.

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## Appendix A: Liberty University IRB Approval Letter

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY<sup>®</sup>

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 25, 2018

Terene M. Stiltner

IRB Approval 3394.072518: Providers' Perspectives on Implementing Universal Free Meal Programs: A Multiple Case Study

Dear Terene M. Stiltner,

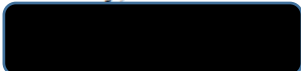
We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
The Graduate School

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## Appendix B: Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

Providers' Perspectives on Implementing Universal Free Meal Programs: A Multiple Case Study

Terene M. Stiltner  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on the delivery of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). You were selected as a possible participant because you serve in a role that is considered to have knowledge of this policy implementation. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Terene M. Stiltner, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of school various service providers toward the implementation of Universal Free Meal (UFM) programs under the CEP at elementary schools in southern WV. The purpose of this study will be to understand the participants' perspectives of the implementation of the CEP as it relates to students' health, behavior, and achievement at two elementary schools in southern West Virginia. The study seeks to understand the experience by using the following proposed research questions:

How do participants perceive CEP implementation as part of the educational process at the elementary school level?

- What factors contribute to the processes of qualifying for, implementing, and delivering the CEP?
- What benefits do participants identify from the implementation and delivery of the CEP?
- What challenges do participants identify from implementing the CEP?
- How do participants who implement the CEP describe the influence of the program on the school culture?

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. **Questionnaire.** You will be asked to complete a 5-item questionnaire regarding your role within the school, experiences with food insecurity, and your basic knowledge of the Community Eligibility Provision. This information will be kept confidential, and will be e-mailed to the researcher. It should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete.
2. **In-person Interview.** This interview will be audio recorded for the researcher's reference. The interview will have a set of questions that are relevant to the participant's role in the school division. The interview should be about an hour in length.
3. **Observations.** The researcher will observe the implementation and delivery of the Community Eligibility Provision. The participant is not asked to provide any additional

assistance outside of regular implementation and delivery. Three observations will be conducted and each should take no more than one hour total to complete.

4. **Relevant Documentation.** The participant is asked to provide any documentation relating to the Community Eligibility Provision, if available. This should take no more than 10 minutes.
5. **Transcription Review.** The participant is asked to review the interview transcripts for accuracy. This should take no more than 30 minutes.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. There are potential societal benefits to participating in this study. Possible benefits to society may include an increased understanding of the Community Eligibility Provision or increased implementation in eligible school divisions.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the dissertation in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data. The steps that will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality include the following:

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer and on an encrypted flash drive for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Terene Mullins Stiltner. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged to**

contact her at 276-202-3645 or [tstiltner@liberty.edu](mailto:tstiltner@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Chris Taylor, at [cwtaylor2@liberty.edu](mailto:cwtaylor2@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

**Appendix C: School District Approval Letters to Conduct Research Study**

June 1, 2018

Terene Stiltner  
Doctoral Student  
Liberty University

Dear Ms. Stiltner,

We are always eager to assist students in pursuing educational careers.

Your request to conduct research in [REDACTED] is approved. We agree to allowing interviews, observations and completing surveys with willing participants. However, we cannot provide documents and/or documentation to you.

We appreciate your interest in [REDACTED]. Please let us know if you have any additional questions.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of the Superintendent.

Superintendent



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June 18, 2018

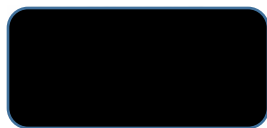
Terene Stiltner  
Doctoral Student  
Liberty University  
[tstiltner@liberty.edu](mailto:tstiltner@liberty.edu)

Dear Ms. Stiltner,

Permission has been granted to you to conduct an educational research on [REDACTED]  
This research, as you stated, will consist of a specific emphasis on [REDACTED] and  
participants (to be included but not limited to) are the food service manager, the school administrator, a  
food service worker, a teacher, the school nurse, and a school board member.

Should you need assistance, please contact me office at 304-436-8441.

Sincerely,



Superintendent

**Appendix D: Open-Ended Questionnaire**

1. Tell me about your position within the school and how long you have served in that role.
2. Describe, in as much detail as possible, what you know about the implementation of the CEP in your school.
3. Describe any experiences that you have had in relationship to students' food insecurity.
4. Describe any outcomes you have personally noted in regard to the CEP.
5. Tell me about any feedback, inside or outside of the school, that you have received regarding the implementation of UFM.

**Appendix E: Interview Protocol for School Board Members' / Superintendents' Interviews**

1. What is your role in the school system and how long have you served in this capacity?
2. Tell me about your experience with the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), or universal free meals.
  - a. What are your thoughts on the origin of the CEP?
  - b. What benefits do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - c. What challenges do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - d. Why do you believe that the program is, or is not, successful?
3. Explain the process for implementing the CEP in the district.
  - a. Explain the qualifications for participating in the CEP.
  - b. Please walk me through the implementation timeline.
  - c. Tell me about the collaborations that you had with others regarding the CEP implementation.
  - d. How were those collaborations initiated?
  - e. What significance, if any, do you believe the collaborations had on the implementation of CEP?
4. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on the overall school culture.
  - a. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on school meal participation.
  - b. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on attendance.
  - c. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on achievement.
  - d. Could you give me an example of a student who has benefitted from the CEP implementation? Your response should not reveal any identifying information about the student.

## **Appendix F: Interview Protocol for Food Service Managers' / Food Service Workers' Interviews**

1. What is your role in the school system and how long have you served in this capacity?
2. Tell me about your experience with the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), or universal free meals?
  - a. What are your thoughts on the origin of the CEP?
  - b. What benefits do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - c. What challenges do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - d. Why do you believe that the program is, or is not, successful?
3. Explain the process for implementing the CEP in your school?
  - a. Please walk me through the implementation timeline.
  - b. Tell me about the collaborations that you had with others regarding the CEP implementation.
  - c. How did the food service routine need to be adjusted to accommodate the implementation of the CEP?
  - d. How, if at all, has the implementation of the CEP influenced your workload?
4. How do you perceive changes in school culture related to the CEP?
  - a. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on school meal participation.
  - b. Could you tell me about an instance when you observed the CEP implementation make a difference for students?

**Appendix G: Interview Protocol for Administrators' / Teachers' Interviews**

1. What is your role in the school system and how long have you served in this capacity?
2. Tell me about your experience with the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), or universal free meals?
  - a. What are your thoughts on the origin of the CEP?
  - b. What benefits do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - c. What challenges do you perceive from the CEP implementation?
  - d. Why do you believe that the program is, or is not, successful?
3. Explain the process for implementing the CEP in your school?
  - a. Tell me about the collaborations that you had with others regarding the CEP implementation.
  - b. How did your classroom routine need to be adjusted to accommodate the implementation of the CEP?
  - c. How, if at all, has the implementation of the CEP influenced your workload?
4. Describe the influence that the CEP has had on the overall school culture.
  - a. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on school meal participation?
  - b. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student attendance?
  - c. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student tardiness?
  - d. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on disciplinary referrals?
  - e. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student achievement?
  - f. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on student behavior?
  - g. How do you perceive the influence of the CEP on the overall school culture?
  - h. Could you tell me about an instance when you observed the CEP implementation make a difference for students?

- i. Could you give me an example of a student who has benefitted from the CEP implementation? Your response should not reveal any identifying information about the student.

### **Appendix H: Observation Protocol UFM Observations**

1. Avoid interrupting the flow of activity.
2. Document only what is observed and actions that are occurring.
3. Begin each recording with the data, time, and place of the data collection.
4. When taking notes, keep them brief and be sure to indicate the data and time to correlate with recordings.
5. Use pseudonyms for all UFM participants and schools.
6. Stay long enough to observe the event in its entirety.
7. Document conversations, body language, attitudes, etc. (Creswell, 2013; Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2006).

### **Appendix I: Template of Observation Prompts**

Observations will be looking at food preparation and food distribution within the regulations of the CEP and will be conducted via walkthroughs, lasting approximately 20-25 minutes (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). I will be recording data before, during, and after the CEP breakfasts and lunches in order to evaluate how the program is implemented will be included in the data collection (Slawson et al., 2013):

During preparation:

1. What is the time allotted for meal preparation and is it adequate?
2. What is the routine for meal preparation?
3. Who is involved in meal preparation?
4. Where are meals prepared? Which foods are pre-packaged?
5. What are the specific challenges related to meal preparation?
6. What are the specific successes related to meal preparation?

During distribution:

1. What is the time allotted for meal distribution and is it adequate?
2. What is the process for meal distribution (breakfast/lunch)?
3. Who is responsible for ensuring that meal distribution is carried out appropriately?
4. Where are meals (breakfast/lunch) served?
5. What are the specific challenges related to meal distribution?
6. What are the specific successes related to meal distribution?

## Appendix J: Permission to Use Figure

**From:** [\(null\) \(null\)](#)  
**To:** [Stiltner, Terene](#)  
**Subject:** Re: Inquiry via Psychology Today  
**Date:** Tuesday, April 24, 2018 10:50:44 AM

---

Hello,

Yes you may use the diagram.

Good luck with your dissertation.

Neel Burton

Sent from my iPhone

> On 24 Apr 2018, at 13:59, Psychology Today <noreply@psychologytoday.com> wrote:

>

> From:

> Terene Stiltner (tstiltner@bluefieldstate.edu)

>

> Reason:

> Other

>

> Message:

> Dr. Burton,

> I am writing to seek permission to use the diagram of Maslow's Hierarchy of

> Needs from your article, "Our Hierarchy of Needs

> True freedom is a luxury of the mind." posted on May 23, 2012. I would like

> to include your diagram in my dissertation entitled, "Providers' Perspectives

> on Implementing Universal Free Meal Programs: A Multiple Case Study". I

> would only be using your diagram for this purpose and I will give you full

> credit. Thank you for your time.