

## **Opinion Editorial**

### **CEP or not: It should be an easy decision**

by Laurence T. Spring, Superintendent of the Schenectady City School District

Every day, teachers, nurses and school administrators see children in the Schenectady City School District who are struggling with hunger. Not only are hungry children at great risk for health problems, developmental delays and mental illness, but when they show up at the school doors, they are not ready or motivated to learn. Hungry children find it hard to concentrate and are consumed with worry about where their next meal might come from. They are sometimes agitated, angry and irritable. Just getting through the day can be an extreme challenge. Simply put, not having enough food to eat can have a significant impact on a child's academic success.

Schenectady is not the only school district with a high population of children experiencing food insecurity. In the United States, more than one out of five children lives in a household with food insecurity. In New York State, over 17 percent of households lack access to adequate food.

Thanks to National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, high-poverty schools can feed more students and create an environment that is hunger free. Beginning in 2013-14, the Schenectady City School District took advantage of that opportunity and chose to implement the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), in which all students in the district receive breakfast and lunch every day, at no charge. The program, created under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, allows high-poverty schools and districts to eliminate the free and reduced-price meal application process and ensure that every student is fed every day regardless of household income.

Almost a year after the implementation, the district attendance, school discipline and breakfast and lunch participation rates have significantly improved. Attendance rates, in fact, have climbed sharply compared to previous years, with most students coming to school most of the time. The trend started at the beginning of the year and has carried through right up to the last days of the school year. The fact that all the district's children are fed both breakfast and lunch are considered important factors in these improvements. The overall experience of the CEP has been positive.

Eleven states, including New York, have participated in the CEP since it was rolled out three years ago. The good news is that in the upcoming 2014-15 School Year, all 50 states will be able to participate.

Like Schenectady, at the onset, most districts will have questions and concerns about how the program would work, what the quality of the food would be and how income would be assessed in the district without the annual applications. But, knowing that every student would have the opportunity to eat both breakfast and lunch every school day, should be enough motivation to move forward. Schenectady, in a short period of time, has realized the significant impact that an opportunity like this can have on a district with high rates of poverty and child food insecurity.

Beginning May 1, all states were required to publish lists of high-poverty schools and districts that are eligible to participate in community eligibility in 2014-15. Schools have until June 30 to decide if they will participate.

Community eligibility can significantly impact any district, like it has Schenectady. We hope that other high-poverty districts will consider the outcomes that we have realized as they weigh the option to participate in 2014-2015. It should be an easy decision.