COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION

INCREASING YOUR ISP WITH DIRECT CERTIFICATION

Direct certification is the process through which States and local educational agencies (LEAs) establish school meal benefits for children based on information provided by Federal assistance programs.

Children determined eligible through direct certification are certified to receive free meal benefits without the submission of a household application, reducing burden on families and school officials. Certain foster, migrant, runaway, and homeless children may also qualify in this way and become certified for free meals, based upon documentation submitted to the State or LEA by an appropriate State or local agency.

Categorically Eligible Federal Programs
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)
- Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)

Other Source Categorical Eligibility
- Homeless children
- Migrant children
- Foster children
- Head Start and Early Head Start
- Medicaid, in States where participants meet 133 percent of the Federal poverty level

Direct Certification and CEP

Directly certified students make up a CEP school's identified student population. The number of identified students is multiplied by 1.6 to determine the school's identified student percentage (ISP), which is then used to calculate the school's free and paid meal claiming percentages. Schools with higher ISPs receive reimbursements at the free rate for a greater percentage of their meals, making direct certification an important factor in the financial viability of CEP.

Improving Direct Certification Systems

Improving direct certification systems will provide a more accurate assessment of a school or district's poverty level, enhancing program integrity and also the viability of CEP. States and LEAs can both make efforts to improve their direct certification systems.

State Level Improvements:

- **Incorporate new data sources.** Expand direct certification systems beyond mandatory SNAP matching to capture students participating in other programs.
- **Increase matching frequency.** Match more often to reach students who become categorically eligible for free school meals during the school year.
- **Improve the match engine.** Refine the match engine to account for errors in birthdates, the use of nicknames, and address variations.
- **Provide the potential match list in order of probability.** Use a confidence score to prioritize records most likely to result in a "match" when sharing non-matches with LEAs.
- **Monitor the data.** Monitor the data carefully, and correct any errors as they become apparent.
- **Provide training.** Offer training to ensure school district staff members understand proper procedures for their direct certification tasks.
- **Develop partnerships.** Maintain strong, productive relationships with agency partners to promote reliable access to assistance program data.

MORE ➡

LEA Level Improvements:

- **Organize records.** Make sure the system properly records the type of certification and can select, sort, and count the records by type.
- **Stay current.** Keep school enrollment data as up-to-date as possible, and check the status of new students as they enroll.
- **Code SNAP matches correctly**. Code students that show up on the SNAP direct certification list as SNAP students, even if they have already been certified in another way, so long as the coding is done before the last operating day in October.
- **Follow up when students move.** Whenever students transfer, send their SNAP direct certification status to the new school.
- **Ask for help.** Arrange for additional assistance during heavy certification times, if possible.

Success Story from Nevada!

A successful direct certification system partnership between the Nevada Department of Agriculture (NDA), Nevada Tribes, and Nevada's Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools helped the State reach an additional 160 students in SY 2014-2015.

Every month, NDA combined FDPIR participant information from the State database with information received from Nevada Tribes and BIE schools to identify children eligible for direct certification. These improvements helped to increase direct certification rates for traditionally underserved students in rural, sparsely populated areas.

USDA and Partner Resources

Community Eligibility Provision: Planning and Implementation Guidance

Provides an overview of CEP, including detailed information about calculating the ISP.
http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cn/SP22-2016a.pdf

Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program Report to Congress

Assesses the effectiveness of State and local efforts to directly certify children for free school meals.
http://www.fns.usda.gov/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-report-congress-state-implementation-progress

Eligibility Manual for School Meals

Outlines the requirements for participation in the school meal programs, including an overview of direct certification.
http://www.fns.usda.gov/2015-edition-eligibility-manual-school-meals

Improving Direct Certification Will Help More Low-Income Children Receive School Meals

Provides an overview of strategies to improve direct certification systems.
http://www.cbpp.org/research/improving-direct-certification-will-help-more-low-income-children-receive-school-meals

Direct Certification for Free School Meals

Outlines the benefits of direct certification and shares best practices for improving direct certification systems.
http://www.frac.org/pdf/direct_cert_facts.pdf

Direct Certification Improvement Grants

Lists 2015 USDA Direct Certification Improvement Grant recipients. Click "Grants" on the left hand side of the page to learn how to apply next year.
http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/2015-direct-certification-improvement-grants