

Food Research and Action Center



Back to School Strategies: *Improving Access to Healthy Meals*

Introduction

As the nation continues to struggle with the aftermath of the Great Recession, the child nutrition programs—breakfast, lunch, afterschool and summer nutrition—play an important role in ensuring food security for millions of low-income children. Especially for parents with two or more children in school, the meals provide significant economic support to the family food budget. The federal funds for two children eating both lunch and breakfast for the 180 days of a typical school year amount to more than \$1,500.

Schools have been hit hard by state budget cuts and it is in their financial interest to ensure that all eligible students are qualified for free or reduced-price school meals, thus allowing schools to draw down federal dollars from multiple education-related programs. In addition, increasing the number of breakfasts and lunches that are federally reimbursed improves the financial solvency of the schools' nutrition program.

The beginning of the school year is the time that school districts focus on qualifying children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. This is the perfect opportunity to reach out to all children -- the newly eligible as well as those who received free or reduced-price meals last school year.

Schools must overcome several challenges: lack of awareness of the program (some families may have never qualified for free or reduced-price

school meals before), communication barriers between families and schools, and administrative hurdles to distributing and processing applications. Improving the processes and procedures to qualify children for free meals is an important strategy that allows schools to overcome these barriers and qualify many eligible children quickly and easily.

Schools and state child nutrition agencies can implement a number of strategies immediately to ensure that the school nutrition programs are meeting the needs of all of their low-income students, including the ones who have recently become eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

In this paper, we outline five key strategies:

1. Direct certification and categorical eligibility – free meals without paper applications
2. Conducting an application campaign at the start of the school year to ensure that all eligible children are enrolled in the program
3. Frequent outreach throughout the year to encourage families to apply for free or reduced-price meals
4. Providing universal, free meals to all children in school buildings with high percentages of free and reduced-price students
5. Maximizing participation in school breakfast by eligible children

1. Direct Certification and Categorical Eligibility – Free Meals Without Paper Applications

The most common way that students are qualified for free or reduced-price school meals is for a parent (or guardian) to fill out a school meal application. But many students are automatically eligible to receive free school meals without filling out a school meal application. There are two main ways this can happen: “direct certification” and “categorical eligibility.”

Direct Certification

Children from households that participate in SNAP (previously called food stamps), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) can be directly certified for school meals when agencies running these programs provide the names of participating children to schools.

To increase the impact of direct certification and to improve its ability to qualify the growing number of children who became eligible during the recession, schools and state agencies should adopt the following best practices.

- Ensure that *all* children in a household receiving SNAP benefits are directly certified. Federal policy was revised in fall 2009 to allow all children in a household to be directly certified based on one household member’s SNAP participation. Since then USDA has issued [guidance](#) and [revised model application materials](#) to help schools fully implement this policy.
- State agencies should update data monthly and give local school districts easy access to the data. Conducting data matches only three times during the school year misses many children who become eligible each month. For example, SNAP participation has continued to grow at a steady rate throughout 2011. Participation increased by more than four million people from May 2010 to May 2011 – more frequent data updates would ensure that children are also being connected to school meals.

- All schools are required to do direct certification for SNAP, but they should also do direct certification for TANF and FDPIR. Schools that only conduct direct certification for children receiving SNAP should do it for TANF (when eligibility is comparable to SNAP) and FDPIR. By focusing solely on SNAP, schools are not identifying all of the children who are automatically eligible for free meals.

Key Steps to Directly Certify ALL Children in SNAP Households:

- Revise application materials based on the current USDA prototype;
- Make sure all school personnel are up to date on revised policies;
- Update the data matching system to ensure that all children in SNAP households are directly certified;
- Set up back-up systems at the school level to identify and directly certify additional children in the households of individually matched children; and
- Ensure that the notice to parents informing them that a child has been directly certified includes directions if other children in the household have not yet been certified for free meals.

Categorical Eligibility

Foster, Head Start, homeless, runaway and migrant children are “categorically eligible” for free school meals, which means they do not have to complete a paper application in order to receive free meals. Foster children are the newest group to be added to this list and states may or may not have established certification systems with their state’s foster care agencies for the 2011-12 school year.

How Well are States Doing Direct Certification?

USDA publishes an annual report* on the effectiveness of states' efforts to directly certify for free school meals children that receive SNAP benefits. The 2010 report is based on data from the 2009-2010 school year when direct certification of SNAP recipients became mandatory in all school districts. The report found that states varied greatly in the effectiveness of their systems. The top states directly certified all or nearly all children who participate in SNAP, while the poorest performing state certified only 47 percent.

The poorest performing states:

New Hampshire: 47%
Arizona, New Mexico and South Dakota: 49%
Massachusetts: 51%
Connecticut, Montana and North Dakota: 56%
Nebraska: 58%
New Jersey: 62%

The highest performing states:

Alaska: 100%+
Hawaii and Tennessee: 91%
Minnesota: 89%
Wyoming: 88%
Nevada: 86%
Delaware and Maryland: 85%

* <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/DirectCert2010.pdf>

Families who have lost their homes and are staying with family or friends temporarily while they re-establish their economic stability are considered homeless. (Families that take in homeless families frequently become eligible for free or reduced-price meals because of the increased size of the household and should be encouraged to submit a school meal application.)

In order for the children to be automatically qualified, the school district's Head Start, Homeless Education, or Migrant Education Coordinator must confirm their status with the school nutrition program. The Coordinator sends a list of names of the qualified students to the school food service director. Too often, this step is neglected for homeless and migrant families who are left to navigate the paper application process, which takes longer and frequently is hindered by communication challenges with schools.

- School administrators should lead efforts to connect and build communication between the school food program and the migrant and homeless education programs. Frequent and regularly scheduled communication between

these administrative areas within the school district is crucial.

- School administrators also should put in place clear procedures for teachers to report on children's status, since teachers are likely to be the first to know about a change in a child's situation. Teachers and all staff must know the definition of "homeless," as well as how to inform the appropriate coordinator so that no child slips through the cracks.

Defining "Homeless" in the School Nutrition Programs

Children are considered homeless (and therefore categorically eligible for free school meals) if they lack an adequate regular nighttime residence. This includes children: in families which are sharing housing with other families; living in motels or camp grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; living in emergency or transitional shelters; awaiting foster care placement; and living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings. The McKinney-Vento Act defines the term homeless for school meals purposes.

New Rules Make Certification Easier for Foster Children and their Foster Families

Foster children are now automatically eligible for free meals. Guardians with foster and non-foster children may include the foster child as a household member on their household application to streamline the application process and help the foster family's non-foster children qualify for free or reduced-price meals based on household size and income. States and school districts should take the following steps to implement the new rules:

- Directly certify children in foster care for free school meals by matching data from foster care agencies;
- Revise school meals applications to reflect the automatic eligibility for free meals of foster children and allow foster families to include both foster and non-foster children on the same application;
- Notify foster parents that their foster children are eligible for free school meals and explain how to apply for benefits for their foster and non-foster children; and
- Maintain foster children's certification for free meals if they change schools by transferring foster children's certification for free meals to their new school.

2. Conducting an application campaign at the start of the school year to ensure that all eligible children are enrolled in the program

School districts should conduct a comprehensive application campaign before and in the first weeks of the upcoming school year to ensure that all eligible students can begin receiving free and reduced-price school meals.

- The enrollment package that all families receive prior to or at the beginning of the school year should include school meals applications, as well as a cover letter, postcard or sticker that alerts families to the importance of completing the application.
- The application should be translated into all languages that are spoken by families in the district. Schools should make clear that the information cannot be used for any immigration-related purpose. Parents need to know that if they do not have a social security number, there will not be any negative consequences.
- Districts can revise the school meal application to make it easier to read and fill out. Also, posting the application on school websites and allowing parents to submit a completed copy electronically makes it easier for families, and those assisting vulnerable families, to get the application form returned to the school.
- School districts should involve school-level personnel, community partners and parents in the campaign and set a goal for a return rate for applications. Many school districts report that they can achieve a 90 percent or higher return of applications system-wide. The campaign can offer incentives for families and schools. For example, families that submit applications could be entered into a drawing to win a prize (such as a gift card at a local supermarket), or the school that collects the highest percentage of applications could be eligible to receive a prize (such as new computers).
- Schools can provide assistance with filling out applications at back-to-school nights and other school-wide events in the first weeks of the school year.

Income Eligibility for School Meals

All public and nonprofit private schools can participate in the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line, or children who are directly certified or categorically eligible, receive school meals for free. Other children from families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty line receive school meals at a reduced price – the student pays a share of the cost (no more than 40 cents per lunch and 30 cents per breakfast), while the federal government pays for the rest. All other participating students, officially designated as receiving “paid” meals, pay most of the cost for their meal, although schools receive a small federal reimbursement for these meals.

3. Frequent outreach throughout the year to encourage families to apply for free or reduced-price meals

Many families believe that they can only apply for free or reduced-price school meals when the school year begins. In reality, they can apply, or reapply, anytime during the school year.

If a member of the household loses a job or wages, or additional members join the household (thus diminishing resources), students often become newly eligible for free or reduced-price meals. In a time of persistently high unemployment and underemployment, these scenarios are becoming increasingly common.

- Schools should routinely send information home to families in children’s backpacks, give information to local papers and radio

stations, send automated phone messages to all families about the availability of school meal assistance, and include information about school meals at parent events such as back-to-school nights, Parent Teacher Organization meetings, and parent/teacher conferences.

- Schools also should make special efforts to reach non-English speaking families, including translating all outreach materials and applications into the various languages spoken in the community. Schools can work with nonprofits and faith-based groups that serve non-English speakers to encourage families to apply.

4. Providing universal, free meals to all children in school buildings with high percentages of free and reduced-price students

Schools in which at least 70 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price schools usually can offer breakfast for free to all students without losing money. Schools in which at least 85 percent of students are low-income often can provide free lunch to all students. The increased participation often improves the bottom line for food service budgets, because it results in economies of scale and higher federal revenues.

- School administrators should work with the school nutrition staff to identify schools that can provide free breakfast and lunch, or just free breakfast, to all students without losing money. As soon as those schools are identified, school administrators should implement a universal, free program to all students.

- Schools can implement Provision 2 -- an option in the federal School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program -- in schools with large numbers of low-income students to provide free meals to all students and reduce the paperwork and simplify the logistics of operating school meals programs. Under this provision,

schools do not have to collect and process school meals applications, keep track of meal categories, or conduct verifications for at least three out of every four years. The administrative savings and the economies of scale that are realized through increased participation cover the lost revenue from uncollected fees.

5. Maximizing participation by eligible children in school breakfast

Getting children qualified for free or reduced-price meals is a crucial first step, but additional steps are needed to maximize participation, especially by children who are not used to taking part in the programs. This is particularly important for breakfast because of its low participation rate—only two out of every five low-income children who eat lunch at school also eat breakfast. Extensive research shows the positive impact that school breakfast participation has on student achievement, behavior, attendance, and tardiness, and it allows struggling families to stretch their limited resources.

- School administrators should make sure that every school offers breakfast. While virtually all public schools participate in the National School Lunch Program, only 87 percent of those

schools also participate in the School Breakfast Program.

- School district superintendents can provide leadership by including breakfast participation as a measure of success for each school principal.
- Provide breakfast in the classroom at the beginning of the school day to make sure that bus schedules and other barriers do not keep children from participating. Students eat breakfast in their classroom at the beginning of the school day, which is brought to classrooms from the cafeteria by students, or served from carts in the hallways by food service staff.

Conclusion

Schools should act now to make certain that all eligible children are qualified for free and reduced-price meals and participate in the school meal programs. The meals available through the school nutrition programs are a critical support to struggling families, ensuring that children receive a significant portion of the nutrition their bodies need at school, and helping families to stretch limited resources.