



## FRAC Facts: Direct Certification for Free School Meals

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All children living in households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Food Stamp benefits, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance can bypass the standard application process and be “directly certified” for free school meals. With direct certification, families do not have to fill out a paper application to be processed by the school for determination of eligibility. Instead, agencies share information with schools, through data matching that must occur at least three times per year, to identify eligible children and automatically enroll them for free school meals. All school districts are required to directly certify children that receive SNAP/Food Stamp benefits.

While research shows that direct certification is an effective, efficient way to enroll eligible families in the school meals program, improvements in implementation are needed to connect more children to those meals. Current data show that direct certification is missing about 30 percent of the eligible children. Recommended state and local level efforts to improve direct certification systems are outlined below. Advocates who undertake these and other strategies can inform state policy makers about additional efforts and resources necessary to increase the number of eligible children included in the direct certification process.

### **BENEFITS OF DIRECT CERTIFICATION**

- Reduces paperwork burden on families and schools by removing the need for a paper application.
- Increases the likelihood that eligible children receive school meals benefits – studies have shown that direct certification is effective in ensuring that more eligible children are enrolled for school meals.
- Removes families that are directly certified from further application verification procedures, which is beneficial because this can result in families losing their benefits due to communication barriers.
- Strengthens the school meals programs – studies have found direct certification to be a highly accurate enrollment method, so expanding direct certification can help build support for the programs.

### **BEST PRACTICES**

- **Data matches are conducted at the state level with easy access by local school districts.** Creating electronic centralized matching systems is recommended to maximize the success of direct certification.
- **Data matches are updated at least monthly and school districts regularly check for newly eligible students.** A data match conducted only three times each school year misses children in families that move or start receiving food stamps during match intervals. Updating matches monthly can assure access for the very vulnerable families who experience temporary housing problems or other hardships during the school year.
- **Families are notified of their enrollment for free school meals for all children in the household.** When districts notify families that children have been automatically certified for free meals, they should alert them that the eligibility includes all children in the household and provide instructions for how to notify the district if additional children in the household were not automatically certified.
- **USDA’s direct certification guidance is on-line:**  
[www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2011/SP13-2011\\_os.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2011/SP13-2011_os.pdf)  
[www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2010/SP\\_25\\_CACFP\\_11\\_SFSP\\_10-2010\\_os.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2010/SP_25_CACFP_11_SFSP_10-2010_os.pdf)  
[www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2009/SP\\_38-2009\\_os.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2009/SP_38-2009_os.pdf)  
[www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Policy-Memos/2008/SP\\_27-2008.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Policy-Memos/2008/SP_27-2008.pdf)



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## ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

- **Assess the current system** by comparing the number of children directly certified to the number of children in households receiving food stamps. This information is collected by USDA and reported annually. The most recent report can be found at: [www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/DirectCert2010.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/DirectCert2010.pdf).
- **Facilitate a joint meeting with the State agencies that administer the SNAP/Food Stamp and school meals programs** to review current systems at the state and local levels. Having a third party, such as an advocate, request such a meeting can be helpful in pushing it higher on busy agendas. The agencies are required by federal statute to have a written agreement which establishes procedures for direct certification. A USDA memo detailing the contents of the agreement can be found at [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Reauthorization\\_Policy\\_04/Reauthorization\\_04/2005-04-19.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Reauthorization_Policy_04/Reauthorization_04/2005-04-19.pdf). A review of the agreement is a good place to start for this meeting. Look at what systems are in place and what still needs development. Use this opportunity to review or obtain data from the different agencies and for developing a common understanding of the current situation and goals for system improvement. An annual or bi-annual meeting of this group could help monitor progress during the phase-in period for direct certification at all school districts.
- **Advocate for improved data matches and matching processes.**
  1. Update the data matching system to ensure that all children in SNAP households are directly certified:
    - a. Set up back-up systems at the school level to identify and directly certify additional children in the households of individually matched children; and
    - b. 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.
  2. Improve the data matching process by assessing and testing the match criteria. States can use a variety of criteria to match the SNAP/food stamp record with the school enrollment record (name, date of birth, TANF case number, etc). Limiting the criteria used may cause missed student matches. States should choose broad and multiple match criteria that captures all of the students eligible for free meals.
  3. Provide training and outreach to local education agencies as many of them may be unaware of the best ways to use the direct certification system.
- **Obtain funds from state or federal sources for improved data management systems.** Funding could be discussed in a state advisory committee meeting or an individual meeting with the state agencies. Funds may be available at the state level through a variety of sources. Generating outside stakeholder support to advocate for funding could make the difference in getting a state appropriation. On the federal level, USDA has grant funds available to help states improve their systems. For more information on the USDA grants, go to [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/grants.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/grants.htm).

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