

A Guide to Qualifying Students for School Meals

Key strategies for increasing federal reimbursements and leveraging additional funding

Fighting Hunger While Improving Child Nutrition... and the Bottom Line

School principals, teachers, and staff know how important the school breakfast and lunch programs are to ensuring that all low-income students receive proper nutrition. Not only do school meals help reduce hunger, but they also improve the health of children and their ability to learn.

The federal government reimburses schools for the breakfasts and lunches they serve based on whether a student is qualified for free, reduced-price, or paid meals. School districts may find it challenging to collect school meal applications from families but capturing an accurate free and reduced-price meal percentage will not only optimize a school's reimbursement for school meals, but will also leverage additional funding. For example, free and reduced-price percentages are commonly used as a proxy for the number of low-income children in a school to determine the distribution of Title I funds.

There are two basic ways to certify eligible students for free and reduced-price meals:

1. **Direct Certification**

If a household currently receives benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), or participates in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), the children in that household can be directly certified (without a paper application) for free school meals.

2. **Meal Applications**

If a household's total income is below a certain amount, the children in that household can eat for free or at a very reduced price. The family fills out an application which asks for the total household income in the past month. To receive free meals, the household income must fall below 130 percent of the federal poverty level. For reduced-price meals, the household income must be between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

Significant Benefits from Establishing Accurate Eligibility Percentages

The reimbursement rate for paid meals is substantially lower than the reimbursement rates for free and reduced-price meals. Ensuring that all free and reduced-price eligible students are accounted for can help the food service department's bottom line. Additionally, by failing to qualify all eligible students, school systems also miss the opportunity to draw down fully other federal funding streams that are established based on free and reduced-price percentages, including Title I funding, E-Rate funds, and money for food in outside-school-hours care programs. The chart on page three highlights these funding opportunities and how they utilize free and reduced-price percentages.

If a family is not directly certified or does not complete a meal application, the student is automatically considered "paid," even if the family's income would warrant a free or reduced-price reimbursement. By not capturing all free and reduced-price qualifying households, the school misses out on the higher meal reimbursement level, which can add up to a significant amount of money. For instance, if 100 students



who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals are not qualified, the school system could lose more than \$64,000 in school breakfast and lunch reimbursements during the school year.

Example of Missed Opportunity for Federal School Meal Funding

If 100 students in a school are classified at the paid rate when 75 of them should be classified at the free rate and 25 at the reduced-price rate, the school can lose a significant amount of money during the school year.

Reimbursement When Students are Misclassified

100 students misclassified at paid rate
x \$0.53 daily paid breakfast/lunch reimbursements
x 180 school days

= \$9,540 per year

Reimbursement School Should Be Receiving

75 students at free rate
x \$4.28 daily free breakfast/lunch reimbursements

+ 25 students at reduced-price rate
x \$3.58 daily reduced-price breakfast/lunch reimbursements
x 180 school days

= \$73,890 per year

The school has missed out on \$64,350 in federal reimbursements.

High Application Return Rate Helps Schools to Utilize Provision 2

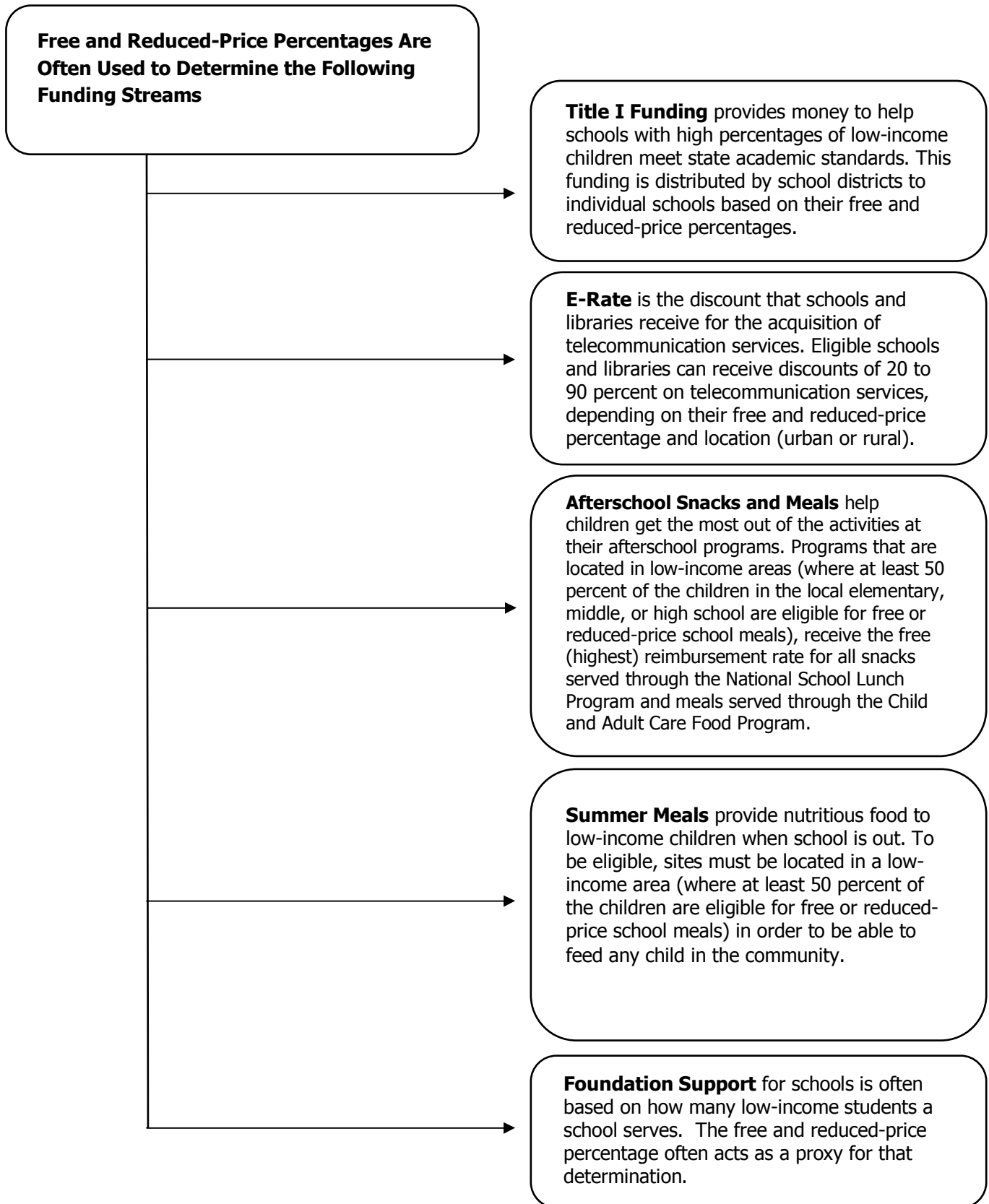
One final advantage to aggressively collecting school meal applications is that it makes it easier for schools to take advantage of Provision 2, an option in the school meal program that cuts down on paperwork, allowing schools to collect school meal applications in a base year and then not collect them for the three following years. Additionally, Provision 2 allows schools to serve free meals to all their students, regardless of their meal eligibility category. Other advantages of Provision 2 include:

- Simplified paperwork: Applications, claims and verifications are only collected every four years.
- Streamlined meal service: Schools no longer need cashiers, pin numbers or lunch tickets, only total meal counts.
- Administrative savings: There are typically reduced labor costs due to the fact that schools no longer have to collect, track, and record applications. Also, more food staff time can be spent on meal preparation and service.
- Increased participation: All children in the school are allowed to eat breakfast and lunch at no cost.

For more information, read FRAC's [Provision 2 Fact Sheet](#).



Free and Reduced-Price Percentages Leverage More than School Meal Funding



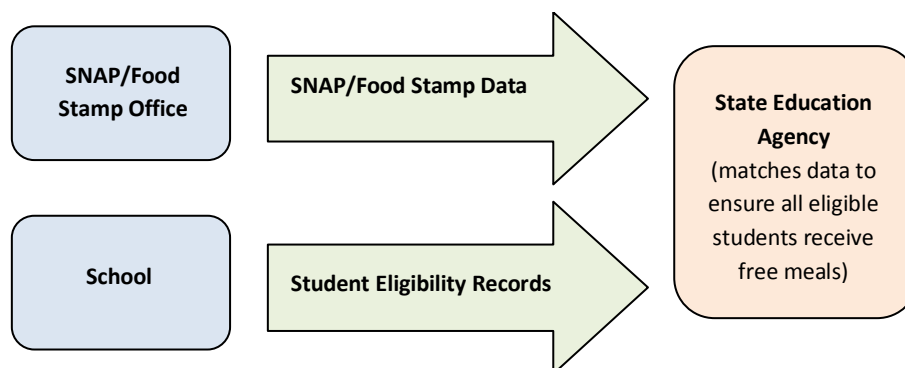
Strategies to Qualify Students for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals

There are two primary strategies to maximize the certification of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals: 1) direct certification, and 2) school meal application campaigns.

Strategy 1: Use Direct Certification to Qualify Students for Free Meals

The most promising method school systems can adopt to capture the number of students eligible for free meals is a rigorous direct certification process. Direct certification is a federal requirement to enroll all students living in households that receive SNAP/Food Stamp benefits for free school meals. This automatic enrollment happens through a data exchange between the SNAP office, the school food and nutrition services program, and the state education agency. The SNAP office and the school both remit their enrollment information to the state education agency, and the agency matches the student record with the SNAP record. Schools can also directly certify children who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits.

Direct Certification Process



Benefits of Direct Certification

The advantages of a thorough direct certification process as opposed to collecting school meal applications are that:

- Struggling families do not need to complete a paper meal application;
- The school system need not process as many applications;
- There is a lower error rate for students that are directly certified; and
- Eligible students can be added throughout the school year through data matches.

Despite the many advantages, many school systems fail to enroll for free meals all students eligible to be qualified under direct certification. According to a USDA study of direct certification for school year 2009-2010, 22 states directly certified fewer than seventy percent of students eligible to be qualified for free meals under direct certification.¹ This translates into a potential loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars in meal reimbursements if the families fail to complete meal applications, as well as a greater burden on

¹ Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, Report to Congress, USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, October 2010, Fig. 5, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/DirectCert2010.pdf>.



the school system to collect those applications instead of using the automatic process. Most importantly, it means that children who should be receiving free meals may be missing out.

Key Steps to Implementing the Direct Certification Process

- 1. Insure 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. Key steps to directly certify ALL children in SNAP households:
 - Revise application materials based on the current USDA prototype;
 - Make sure all school personnel know about the revised policy;
 - 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.
- 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, address, etc). Limiting the criteria used may tend to miss students. States should choose broad and multiple match criteria that captures all of the students eligible for free meals.
- 3. Increase the frequency of the matches to monthly** to catch students as participation in the SNAP/Food Stamps rises. States are now required to conduct a match three times a year but this still misses too many children that could be directly certified. Many families become eligible for free meals over the course of the school year that may not have been eligible when the school year began – especially in an economy with persistently high rates of unemployment. This makes it critical that schools and state agencies work together to ensure that data is matched monthly, and eligible students are added to the program throughout the year.
- 4. 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.
- 5. Certify Head Start, homeless, runaway, and migrant children.** Like SNAP/Food Stamp and TANF families, families of Head Start, homeless, runaway, and migrant children do not have to complete meal applications since the children are automatically eligible for free meals. It is critical that the school system's Head Start, Homeless Services and Migrant Education Coordinators provide student records to school food services so these students are enrolled for free meals.
- 6. Certify foster children** automatically through direct certification by matching data from foster care agencies with student data. Schools also can use the notification they receive from caseworkers of a child's foster status to enroll foster children for free school meals.



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.

Strategy 2: Conduct a Campaign to Collect Meal Applications from the Remaining Student Population

There are a variety of best practices that can be used to effectively collect school meal applications from students and families.

✓ **Train school staff about the importance of meal applications and how to help families complete applications**

It is helpful for a point-person at the school, often times the school registrar, to be trained on why meal applications are important and how to help families correctly complete applications. The training can include what application fields are required, special provisions for homeless children and foster children, and what to do if a family does not wish to complete a meal application. The more quality control there is at the front end interfacing with families, the fewer administrative barriers there are to processing the applications and the more accurate the free and reduced-price classifications will be.

✓ **Include meal applications in enrollment packets and encourage completion during the registration process**

If families receive the meal application along with other required documents such as immunization forms at the beginning of the school year, the application is more likely to be completed. The meal application also should be included as an item on a checklist of paperwork that should be turned into the school before the start of the academic year.

✓ **Demand accountability for the school meal application collection process**

With competing demands on their time, principals often do not see collecting meal applications as a priority. Since school food service operations are typically run by the school food service department as a separate fiscal entity, there can be confusion about who is responsible for the collection of meal applications. Schools should clarify roles between the food service department, administrators, and



the central office to determine who will be primarily responsible for ensuring a high application return rate.

✓ **Incentivize high collection rates by offering prizes**

Offering prizes to schools or individual classrooms with high application return rates is critical to generate interest and enthusiasm to complete meal applications. For example, a \$500 office supply gift card could be offered to all schools that collect more than 90 percent of their meal applications. Or, individual schools could offer sporting event tickets to classrooms with a high percentage return rate.

✓ **Certify high need students**

In addition to families completing a school meal application, students can become eligible if a school official completes the application on their behalf. This can happen at any point during the school year and is an important option in individual high need situations when the school's communication with the student's family is not successful.

✓ **Make applications as user-friendly as possible**

The ordering of the application sections, and the wording of the form, can make a big difference for time-strapped families. For example, sections for families receiving SNAP/Food Stamps or TANF, or for foster children or homeless, migrant or runaway children, should come before the section which asks about household income since these families do not need to complete the income section. The form should also clearly indicate that these families can skip down to the bottom of the application.

Another factor to consider is the placement of the section regarding refusal of benefits. "Refusal of benefits," as the heading implies, enables the family to check a box and sign at the bottom of the form rather than complete their income information. Since many families may believe they are ineligible but actually do turn out to be eligible for free or reduced-price meals, collecting income information is always preferable to receiving "refusal of benefits" forms. However, moving the "refusal of benefits" section higher on the application may result in a higher application return rate, especially in schools serving a wealthier demographic.

Finally, in school systems that serve a large immigrant population, officials should carefully consider the wording for the section requesting a social security number or an indication that the signing adult does not have a social security number. Immigration status has no bearing on a child's ability to receive school meals.

✓ **Pre-populate the applications with as much information as possible**

Pre-populating the meal applications with student names, birthdates, and other available information makes it easier for the central office to review and enter application information. Families benefit also since much of the application is already completed.

✓ **Ensure applications are available in all languages spoken by families at the school**

The more accessible the meal application is to families, the more likely they are to complete it. USDA regulations require that schools make every effort to provide families with a school meal application that is in their primary language. This is especially important in schools with large immigrant communities where clear, understandable communication is especially important to encourage families to apply, despite possible concerns about immigration status issues.



- ✓ **Make the application available online for families to complete**
Enabling families to complete meal applications online makes the process more convenient. The URL for the application can be emailed to families through email blasts at several times during the registration process and during the first few weeks of the school year. It also enables the school to set-up a kiosk or booth for families to complete applications at high-traffic times, such as the first day of school or back to school night.

- ✓ **Work with local partners to raise awareness about the importance of meal applications**
Collaborating with local community groups such as parent organizations, afterschool programs, unemployment service centers, immunization clinics, Medicaid providers, religious institutions, foster care groups, and homeless advocates can be an effective way to increase application return rates. These organizations and agencies can post flyers and posters highlighting the importance of filling out school meal applications and returning them to their child's school. Community members could also volunteer at schools to help parents fill out the forms.

Conclusion

Directly certifying eligible students for free meals and collecting a high percentage of school meal applications from the rest of the student body can benefit school districts significantly. And most importantly, school meals help combat child hunger, promote better health outcomes, and improve student achievement.

Resources

FRAC Facts: Direct Certification for Free School Meals

http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/direct_cert_facts.pdf

USDA Guidance on Frequency of Direct Certification Matching

http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2011/SP_31-2011.pdf

Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, Report to Congress, USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, October 2010.

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

USDA Questions and Answers on Extending Categorical Eligibility to Additional Children in a Household

http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2010/SP_25_CACFP_11_SFSP_10-2010_os.pdf

USDA Prototype Application Materials for School Year 2011- 2012

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/frp/frp.process.htm>

