

Office of Research and Analysis

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This report responds to the requirement of Public Law 110-246 to assess the effectiveness of State and local efforts to directly certify children for free school meals. Direct certification is a process conducted by the States and by local educational agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications. The 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act required LEAs to establish systems to directly certify children from households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits by school year (SY) 2008-2009. In SY 2011-2012, 89 percent of LEAs directly certified some children from SNAP-recipient households. These LEAs enroll 98 percent of all students in schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program. States and LEAs directly certified 11.6 million children at the start of SY 2011-2012, 1.7 million more than in the previous school year. The national direct certification rate reached 86 percent in SY 2011-2012, up from 77 percent in SY 2010-2011.*

Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) reimburses local educational agencies (LEAs) for providing nutritionally balanced meals to children in public and private schools and residential child care institutions. Average daily participation totaled 32 million children in fiscal year 2011.

Eligibility for Program Benefits

Children from households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for free school meals. Children from households with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals.

Certain homeless, runaway, and migrant children, and children from households that receive benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) are deemed “categorically eligible” for free school meals.

Direct Certification

Student eligibility for free meals is determined by application or by direct certification. Although direct certification systems vary by State and LEA, all such systems are designed to eliminate the need for paper applications. Effective in SY 2011-2012, LEAs must conduct direct certification three times per year: once at or around the start of the school year, and again three and six months after that initial effort.

All direct certification systems now match student enrollment lists against SNAP agency records and the records of other assistance agencies whose participants are categorically eligible for free meals. The matching process, whether automated or manual, requires no action by the children’s parents or guardians.

Through SY 2011-2012, some States and LEAs relied on SNAP and other assistance agencies to send letters to participant households as an alternative to a match system. The letters served as proof of categorical eligibility for free meals and had to be forwarded by the households to their children’s schools.

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 required all LEAs to directly certify SNAP participant children by SY 2008-2009. Just 56 percent of LEAs directly certified some SNAP participants in SY 2004-2005, one year prior to the phased implementation of the 2004 Act’s direct certification mandate. By SY 2011-2012, that number had grown to 89 percent.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) instituted several additional reforms to strengthen and expand direct certification. These include:

- establishing a multi-State demonstration project to begin directly certifying income-eligible children in SY 2012-2013 with data from State Medicaid systems,
- providing performance awards for States with successful or improved direct certification systems,
- requiring States to adopt improvement plans if their SNAP direct certification rates fall below 80 percent in SY 2011-2012, 90 percent in SY 2012-2013, or 95 percent in subsequent years,
- ending the letter method as a means of direct certification.

State Performance Measures

This report presents information on the outcomes of direct certification for SY 2011-2012. The report estimates the number of school-age SNAP participants and the number of children directly

certified for free school meals in each State. The ratio of these figures is a measure of the success of State and local systems to directly certify participating SNAP children.

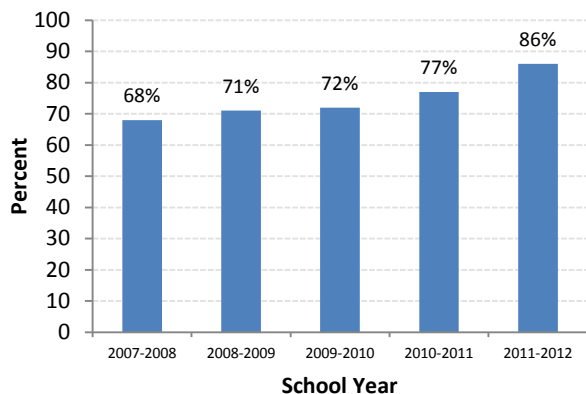
The report also estimates the number of all SNAP, TANF, and FDPIR participants certified for free school meals, either by direct certification or by application. This provides a more comprehensive measure of State success in certifying categorically eligible children for free school meals.

Key Findings

States and LEAs directly certified 1.7 million more SNAP children in SY 2011-2012 than they did in SY 2010-2011, a 17-percent increase.

- Over the same period, the population of school-age SNAP participant children increased 5 percent. As a result, the share of SNAP participant children certified for free school meals without application increased to 86 percent in SY 2011-2012, from 77 percent in SY 2010-2011.

National Average Direct Certification Rate SY 2007-2008 to SY 2011-2012



- The overall certification rate of categorically eligible children, by direct certification or by application, increased to 92 percent in SY 2011-2012, from 86 percent in SY 2010-2011.

The number of LEAs directly certifying SNAP-participant children continued to increase.

- Use of direct certification is nearly universal for larger LEAs; 99 percent of LEAs with enrollments of 5,000 or more students and 98 percent of those with enrollments of 1,000 to

4,999 directly certified some SNAP participants in SY 2011–2012.

- Direct certification is less prevalent among smaller LEAs; about 94 percent of LEAs with 500 to 999 students, and 79 percent of LEAs with fewer than 500 students directly certified some SNAP participants in SY 2011-2012.

Thirty-four States, the District of Columbia, and Guam achieved direct certification rates at or above HHFKA’s 80 percent performance target.

- Seventeen States achieved rates at or above 90 percent.

State Best Practices

LEAs continue to find success with both centralized and local systems. Successful States interviewed for this year’s report perform monthly or even daily matches of SNAP data against student enrollment lists, and have formal processes for handling partial and non-matches.

States and LEAs cited teamwork among program data partners and IT departments, and user friendly systems as important factors in direct certification performance. Leadership within the State Child Nutrition office and in other levels of State government was also seen as an important element to successful implementation of direct certification.

Several interviewed States cited the use of unique student identifiers as key to effective direct certification matching. Others stressed the importance of training and technical assistance provided to LEA administrators who contribute to the direct certification process at the local level.

* WIC is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, “Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, School Year 2011-2012, Report to Congress” by Quinn Moore, Kevin Conway, and Brandon Kyler. Project Officer Dennis Ranalli. Report CN-12-DC. Alexandria, VA: October 2012.

Download full report at:
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/cnp.htm>

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