

A Guide to Collecting School Meal Applications: Key strategies for increasing federal reimbursements and leveraging additional funding opportunities

Collecting School Meal Applications Benefit School Budgets

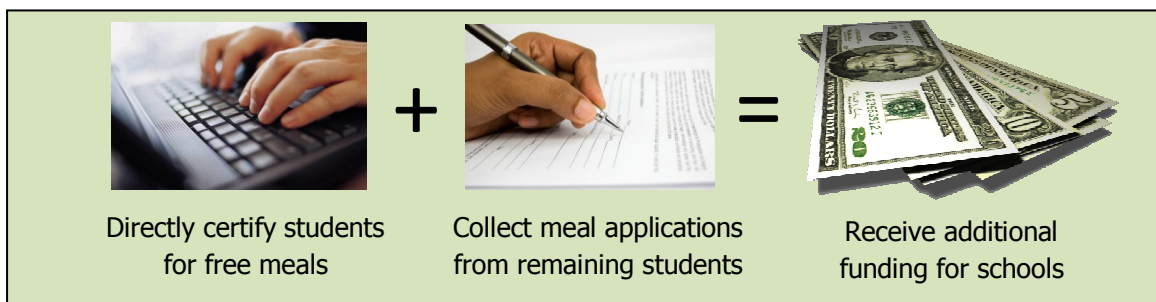
School principals, teachers, and staff know how important the school breakfast and lunch programs are to ensuring that all low-income students receive proper nutrition. Not only do school meals help reduce hunger, but they also increase the health of children and their ability to learn.

Through the National School Lunch Program, the federal government reimburses schools for the meals they serve based on whether a student qualifies 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 (F/RP) 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 and as a basis for the distribution of Title I funds.

This guide explains the two most effective strategies for maximizing the certification of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals:

1. Directly certify as many students as possible.
2. Use a series of best practices to collect meal applications from the remaining student population.

The guide concludes by discussing alternatives to the standard paper application process and meal claiming procedures for schools and districts serving high concentrations of low-income children.



There are Significant Benefits to Establishing Accurate Free/Reduced-Price Percentages

There is a substantial difference in the reimbursement rates between paid and free 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 other federal funding streams that are established based on F/RP 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 F/RP 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 F/RP reimbursement. By not capturing all F/RP 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 F/RP meals are not qualified, the school system could lose more than \$67,000 in school breakfast and lunch reimbursements during the school year

A High Application Return Rate Makes it Easier for 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 at <http://www.frac.org/pdf/provision2.PDF>.

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

$$\begin{array}{r} 100 \text{ students misclassified at paid rate} \\ \times \$0.51 \text{ daily paid bk/lunch reimbursements} \\ \times 180 \text{ school days} \\ \hline = \$9,540 \text{ per year} \end{array}$$

Reimbursement School Should Be Receiving

$$\begin{array}{r} 75 \text{ students at free rate} \\ \times \$4.44 \text{ daily free bk/lunch reimbursements} \\ + 25 \text{ students at RP rate} \\ \times \$3.74 \text{ daily RP bk/lunch reimbursements} \\ \times 180 \text{ school days} \\ \hline = \$76,770 \text{ per year} \end{array}$$

The school has missed out on \$67,230 in federal reimbursements.

Free and Reduced-Price Percentages (F/RP) Leverage More than School Meal Funding

Free and Reduced-Price Percentages Are Often Used to Determine the Following Funding Streams

Title I Funding provides money to help schools with high percentages of low-income children meet state academic standards. To establish eligibility for this funding, one common measure states use is the F/RP rate of the Local Education Agency.

E-Rate is the discount that schools and libraries receive for the acquisition of telecommunication services. Eligible schools and libraries can receive discounts of 20-90 percent on telecommunication services, depending on their F/RP rate and location (urban or rural).

Afterschool Snacks help children get the most out of the activities at their afterschool programs. Afterschool programs that are located in low-income areas (where at least 50 percent of the children in the local elementary, middle, or high school are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals), receive the free (highest) reimbursement rate for all snacks served through the National School Lunch Program.

Summer Meals provide nutritious food to low-income children when school is out. To be eligible to receive funding to serve meals, sites must be located in a low-income area (where at least 50 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals) or serve primarily low-income children (at least 50 percent of the children enrolled in the program are eligible for free or reduced-price meals).

Foundation Support for school-related funding decisions are often based on how many low-income students a school serves. The F/RP rate can act as a proxy for that determination.



There are Two Ways to Qualify Students for School Meals

To establish the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price (F/RP) meals, schools must verify a student's household income either through direct certification or the collection of school meal applications.

1. Direct Certification

If a household currently receives SNAP/Food Stamp benefits, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), or participates in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), the children in that household are eligible for free school meals. Homeless, runaway, and migrant children are also automatically eligible for free school meals. This is referred to as categorical eligibility. If children are categorically eligible, they do not need to complete paper applications.

2. Income-based Eligibility

If a household's total income is below a certain amount, the children in that household can eat free or at a very reduced price. To receive free meals, household income must fall below 130 percent of the federal poverty level. For reduced-price meals, household income must be between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

The following charts show the maximum monthly household income student's families can receive to qualify for free or reduced-price meals in the 2009-2010 school year.

Household Size	Maximum Monthly Household Income for Free Meals (130% of Poverty)	Household Size	Maximum Monthly Household Income for Reduced-Price Meals (185% of Poverty)
1	\$1,174	1	\$1,670
2	\$1,579	2	\$2,247
3	\$1,984	3	\$2,823
4	\$2,289	4	\$3,400
5	\$2,794	5	\$3,976
6	\$3,200	6	\$4,553
7	\$3,605	7	\$5,130
8	\$4,010	8	\$5,706

The following chart provides an overview of the federal meal funding available to schools based on whether a student qualifies for free, reduced-price, or paid meals.

School Year 2009-2010		
Type of Reimbursement Rate	School Breakfast	School Lunch
Free	\$1.46 (\$1.74)	\$2.68 (\$2.70)
Reduced-Price	\$1.16 (\$1.44)	\$2.28 (\$2.30)
Paid	\$0.26 (\$0.26)	\$0.25 (\$0.27)

The numbers in the parenthesis are the rates that schools receive if they have a high need level. Schools that have a 60 percent or higher F/RP participation for lunch and a 40 percent or higher F/RP participation in breakfast receive the higher rate. The National School Lunch Program reimbursement rates are adjusted annually. For a listing of rates, visit:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/notices/naps/NAPs.htm>.

Effective Strategies for Collecting School Meal Applications

There are two primary strategies for collecting school meal applications to maximize the certification of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

Strategy 1:

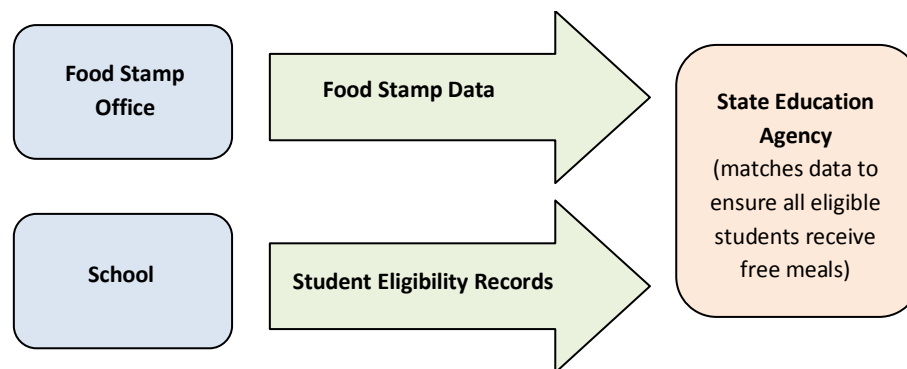
Use Direct Certification to Qualify Students for Free Meals

The most promising method school systems can adopt to capture the number of students eligible for free meals is a rigorous direct certification process.

Overview of the Direct Certification Process

Direct certification is a federal requirement to enroll all students receiving SNAP/Food Stamp benefits or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for free school meals. This automatic enrollment happens through a data exchange between the food stamp office, the school food and nutrition services program, and the state education agency. The food stamp office and the school both remit their enrollment information to the state education agency, and the agency matches the student record with the food stamp record.

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.
- 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 2007-2008, 27 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 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. **Improve the data matching process** by assessing and testing the match criteria. States can use a variety of criteria to match the food stamp record with the school enrollment record (name, date of birth, TANF case number 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.
2. **Increase the frequency of the matches to monthly** to catch students as participation in the SNAP/Food Stamp Program rises. Especially in this economic downturn with families experiencing unemployment and reduced work hours, food stamp participation is growing each month. This means that many more families will become eligible for free meals through direct certification over the course of the school year than may have been eligible when the school year began in August. This makes it critical that schools and state agencies work together to ensure that data is matched

¹ 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* by Dennis Ranalli, Edward Harper, Rosemary O'Connell, and Jay Hirschman. Dec. 2008. Pg. 16.

monthly, and eligible students are added to the program throughout the year.

3. **Match siblings as a way of verifying that all students have been properly certified** because, sometimes, one sibling gets certified but others in the household do not. Oregon has implemented a system where the state goes back and tries to identify and qualify those students.
4. **Provide training and outreach to local education agencies** as many of them are unaware that they can use direct certification.
5. **Certify homeless, runaway, and migrant children.** Like SNAP/Food Stamp and TANF families, families of homeless, runaway, and migrant children also do not have to complete meal applications since the children are automatically eligible for free meals. It is critical that the school system's homeless services office provides its student records to school food services so these students are enrolled for free meals. It may be helpful to discuss certification of homeless, runaway, and migrant children in conjunction with an evaluation of the direct certification process since many of the same partners and data sources will be involved.

Direct Certification Resources

FRAC Facts: Direct Certification for Free School Meals
www.frac.org/pdf/direct_cert_facts.pdf

Data Matching in the National School Lunch Program
www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/DataMatchingGuide.pdf

An analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: USDA Study Shows States Failing to Connect Many Needy Children to Free School Meals
www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2701

There IS Such a Thing as a Free Lunch: Effective direct certification and direct verification to ensure adequate nutrition for California's children
www.cfpa.net/School_Food/Free%20Lunch%20-%20Effective%20DC%20and%20DV%20in%20California.pdf

Strategy 2:

Use Best Practices 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. D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) has used several of them to increase its return rate. For school year 2008-2009, DCPS established a 69 percent F/RP rate, up four percent from the prior year. **This four percent increase translated into more than one million additional dollars in federal school meal reimbursements, as well as increased Title I and E-Rate funding.** Additionally, in school year 2008-2009 DCPS collected school meal applications from 87 percent of its student body, its best collection rate ever. These efforts provide a model that other school systems can replicate when seeking to improve the meal application return rate.

The following is a list of best practices for collecting meal applications along with information on how DCPS have used several of these approaches.

✓ **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 F/RP classifications will be.

DCPS in Action For school year 2008-2009, DCPS conducted a training for school liaisons including detailed information on how to accurately complete applications; why meal applications are important; and a quiz on meal application procedures, with prizes awarded to the participant with the most correct answers.

✓ **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 should also be included as an item on a checklist of paperwork that should be turned into the school before the start of the academic year.

DCPS in Action For school year 2008-2009, DCPS included school meal applications in their pre-enrollment packets and included the application on a checklist of items that needed to be turned into the school.

✓ **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 separate from day-to-day school functions, there is often a vacuum of responsibility regarding 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 school meal application return rate.

DCPS in Action: In DCPS, the Chancellor's Office made it a priority to collect meal applications and communicated that consistently to the schools. This encouraged principals to reach out to families - through robo calls, announcements, etc. - to achieve the highest possible 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 remit over 90 percent of their meal applications. Or, individual schools could offer sporting event tickets to classrooms with a high percentage return rate.

DCPS in Action: DCPS and Chartwells/Thompson, the school food service management company, ran a very successful incentives program where the school with the highest return rate received a \$1,000 Staples gift card; students were also entered for a drawing with a grand prize of sporting event tickets and dinner and fifty runner-up prizes of \$50 iTunes gift cards.

✓ **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.

DCPS in Action DCPS sent a memo out to principals about this option to encourage them to individually certify high need students.

✓ **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 F/RP 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.

DCPS in Action: For school years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, DCPS, in partnership with D.C. Hunger Solutions and the state education agency, reviewed and streamlined its application. This resulted in a re-ordering of sections, clearer format, and simpler, more user-friendly language. To see a copy of DCPS' form visit,

<http://dcps.dc.gov/downloads/SCHOOLS/Enrollment/SCHOOL%20OPS-ENROLLMENT%20FORMS-FARM%20FORM%20ENGLISH%20FILLABLE%20ON-SCREEN.pdf>.

✓ **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 too since much of the application is already completed.

DCPS in Action: DCPS is in the process of developing a system to pre-populate applications.

✓ **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.

DCPS in Action: The D.C. Language Access Act requires all vital documents be translated into a non-English language spoken by any population consisting of three percent or 500 individuals, whichever is less, of the population served or encountered, or likely to be served or encountered, by the form. The D.C. Office of Human Rights has identified the following six languages as those languages largely served by the District government: Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, French, and Amharic. DCPS translated the meal application into all seven languages and ensured that the forms were available online for download and printing. Schools are responsible for giving applications in the appropriate language to families.

✓ **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.

DCPS in Action: DCPS is developing a form that can be completed online, scheduled for release for school year 2009-2010 application collections.

✓ **Work with local partners to raise awareness about the importance of meal applications**

Collaborating with local community groups such as parent organizations, unemployment service centers, immunization clinics, Medicaid providers, 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 where clients can see them, highlighting the importance of filling out school meal applications and returning them to their child's school. Staff members could also volunteer at schools to help parents fill out the forms.

DCPS in Action: In school year 2008-2009, D.C. Hunger Solutions, in partnership with DCPS Food and Nutrition Services and the state education office, launched a widespread outreach campaign through the Department of Employment Service OneStops, immunization clinics, and other community partners.

Looking Ahead: Federal Legislation Aimed at Making the Process Easier

Improving the accuracy of the certification process for free and reduced-price meals is an achievable goal which can result in huge returns, both in maximizing federal funding and in support to low-income families. With leadership at the central office, school systems can take concrete action steps to improve both their direct certification and meal application collection processes. Accurately enrolling students for free and reduced-price meals results not only in greater federal funding for school nutrition programs, it also results in increased nutrition for children and support for their families in these tight economic times.

While the paper application process will continue to work well in some places, there is no policy or budget rationale to adhere rigidly to an application process where the vast majority of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Not only is the paper application process burdensome, but it is also antiquated. The system can and should be modernized so that schools move away from relying on manual eligibility determinations and file cabinets full of paper applications.

At the federal level, efforts such as The "Hunger Free Schools Act of 2009," (S. 1343), sponsored by Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Bob Casey (D-PA), and Michael Bennet (D-CO) would help more low-income children participate in school meals by improving and expanding direct certification for school meal eligibility, and by allowing more schools in high-poverty areas to provide universal (free to all) meal programs. Specifically the legislation would:

- Allow schools or districts serving a high proportion of low-income children to serve free meals to all students and be reimbursed based on socioeconomic data rather than individual applications;
- Expand access to child nutrition programs by requiring school districts to utilize data from Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program to directly certify more students that are eligible for free school meals; and
- Improve state performance in directly certifying eligible children by setting a performance standard (95 percent of eligible students should be directly certified for school lunch programs) and providing incentives to high performance States.²

To learn more or get involved, visit FRAC's Legislative Action Center at www.frac.org.

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. D.C. Hunger Solutions can help you develop a model for collecting school meal applications in your district or at individual schools. Visit www.dchunger.org or contact Alex Ashbrook at aashbrook@frac.org for more information.

D.C. Hunger Solutions (DCHS), an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center, works to end hunger in our nation's capital and promote the health, nutrition, economic security, and well-being of low-income families.

² For information on how to support "The Hunger Free Schools Act of 2009," visit the Food Research and Action Center website at: http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5118/t/1472/campaign.jsp?campaign_KEY=1787.