

# QUALIFYING STUDENTS FOR SCHOOL MEALS

## Key strategies for increasing federal reimbursements & leveraging additional funding opportunities in Maryland

### Collecting School Meal Applications Benefit School Budgets

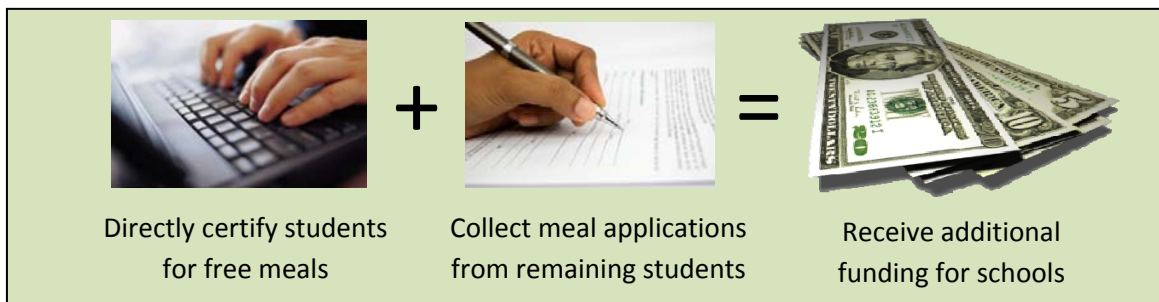
School principals, teachers, and staff know how important the school breakfast and lunch programs are to ensuring that all low-income students receive proper nutrition. Not only do school meals help reduce hunger, but they also increase the health of children and their ability to learn.

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. Direct certification.
2. Increasing the number of school meal applications that families submit.

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 Two Ways to Qualify Students for School Meals

To establish the percentage of students that qualify for free or reduced-price (F/RP) meals, schools must verify each student's eligibility 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 can be directly certified for free school meals without completing an application. 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. School Meal Applications

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, the family fills out an application which asks for the household income. The household's 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. In addition to providing a paper application, some school districts offer the option of completing the application online.

The following charts show the maximum monthly household income student's families can receive to qualify for free or reduced-price meals in the 2010-2011 school year.

Household Size	Maximum Monthly Household Income for <i>Free Meals</i> (130% of Poverty)
1	\$1,174
2	\$1,579
3	\$1,984
4	\$2,289
5	\$2,794
6	\$3,200
7	\$3,605
8	\$4,010

Household Size	Maximum Monthly Household Income for <i>Reduced-Price Meals</i> (185% of Poverty)
1	\$1,670
2	\$2,247
3	\$2,823
4	\$3,400
5	\$3,976
6	\$4,553
7	\$5,130
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 2010-2011		
Type of Reimbursement Rate	School Breakfast	School Lunch
Free	\$1.48 (\$1.76)	\$2.72 (\$2.74)
Reduced-Price	\$1.18 (\$1.46)	\$2.32 (\$2.34)
Paid	\$0.26 (\$0.26)	\$0.26 (\$0.28)

The numbers in the parenthesis are the rates that schools receive if they have a high need level. Schools that have high free and reduced-price lunch participation receive a higher reimbursement rate (called “severe need”) for breakfast. The reimbursement rates are adjusted annually and are based on previous years participation rates. For a listing of rates, visit: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/notices/naps/NAPs.htm>.

## Benefits to Establishing Accurate Free and Reduced-Price Percentages

Reimbursement rates for paid meal is substantially lower than the reimbursement rates for reduced-price 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 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-priced 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 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.

### High Application Return Rates Make 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: 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 \$0.52 daily paid bk/lunch reimbursements  
x 180 school days  
= \$9,360 per year

##### Reimbursement School Should Be Receiving

75 students at free rate  
x \$4.20 daily free bk/lunch reimbursements  
+ 25 students at RP rate  
x \$3.5 daily RP bk/lunch reimbursements  
x 180 school days  
= \$72,450 per year

***The school has missed out on \$63,090 in federal reimbursements.***

*\*Additionally, some schools which receive a "severe need" designation are eligible for a higher reimbursement rate. These numbers are conservative estimates based on the minimum reimbursement rates.*

## 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. This funding is distributed by school districts to individual schools based on their F/RP rate.

**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 & Meals** 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 and meals served through the Child & Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

**Summer Meals** provide nutritious food to low-income children when school is out. To be eligible, 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) in order to be able to feed any child in the community (called open sites).

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

## Effective Strategies for Qualifying Children for Free & Reduced-Price Meals

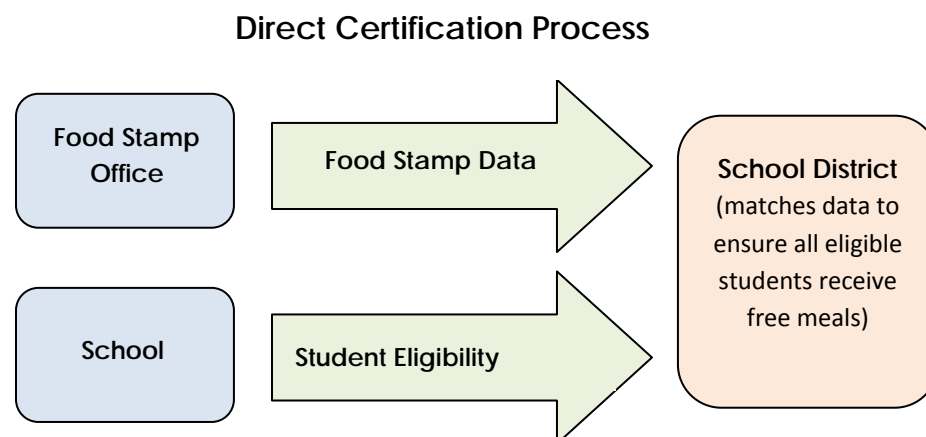
There are two primary strategies to maximize the certification of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals: 1) direct certification, and 2) school meal application campaigns.

### 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. Fortunately, Maryland is ahead of many other states in leveraging the direct certification, registering many students that were previously missed for the program, but there is still more that can be done, especially at the school and district level.

#### 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.



#### 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.

## Key Steps to Improving the Direct Certification Process in Maryland

### 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;
- 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. Maryland

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. Maryland and individual school districts can may also considering in more advanced data matching software that can improve the quality of direct certification matches.

### 3. **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.

#### Direct Certification Resources

FRAC Facts: Direct Certification for Free School Meals  
[http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/direct\\_cert\\_facts.pdf](http://frac.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/direct_cert_facts.pdf)

Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, Report to Congress, USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, October 2009.  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/NSLPDirectCertification2009.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](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 2010- 2011  
[www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2010/SP\\_27\\_CACFP\\_13\\_SFSP\\_12-2010\\_Att.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2010/SP_27_CACFP_13_SFSP_12-2010_Att.pdf)

Data Matching in the National School Lunch Program  
[www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/DataMatchingGuide.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/DataMatchingGuide.pdf)

## **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. The following is a list of best practices for collecting meal applications.

- ✓ **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.

- ✓ **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 separate from day-to-day school functions, there is often a vacuum of responsibility regarding the collection of meal applications. Schools – teachers and principals – should share the responsibility with the food service department, and the central office to increase the school meal application return rate, especially among high school students.

- ✓ **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 over 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 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 (and proving in multiple languages) 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 too 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.

✓ **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, unemployment service centers, churches, mosques, synagogues, afterschool programs, 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.

## **Best-Practice Example:** ***Baltimore City Public Schools***

For school year 2009-2010, Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) launched an aggressive meal application enrollment strategy designed to recapture the dollars lost in previous years due to low application returns. As a result, City Schools increased the number of students enrolled in the free and reduce-priced meal program by 10.6 percent over the previous school year. The strategy included:

- Requiring each principal in the district to identify a meal application project manager in their school. Each F/RP project manager was required to attend a mandatory training;
- Establishing a goal of 90 percent application return rate for elementary schools and 85 percent return rate for secondary schools;
- Launching an electronic application to expedite processing;
- Supplying meal application project managers with school-level data on students homeless during the previous school year, who submitted F/RP meal applications during the previous school year, currently homeless, or other at-risk groups;
- Sending postcards to parents reminding them to complete the meal application;
- Partnering with community-based organizations to assist school-based staff;
- Establishing cross-departmental F/RP meal application workgroup within the central administration that met weekly during the summer to strategize and better coordinate the F/RP meal application campaign for the upcoming school year.