

Food and Nutrition Service

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**THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM DIRECT CERTIFICATION IMPROVEMENT STUDY: STATE PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCE REPORT (SUMMARY)**

**Background**

Direct certification increases access to school meals for students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). It also decreases burden on families and district staff by limiting the amount of paperwork they must prepare and process.

States conduct direct certification by matching school enrollment data with data from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other programs that confer categorical eligibility for students. States use one of two different methods – central or local matching. Under central matching, a State agency matches school registration data with SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or other programs' participation data. Under local matching, a State agency distributes SNAP and other relevant data to local education agencies (LEAs), which match these data with their student enrollment lists.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 requires States to meet specific performance targets in their direct certification systems. This is measured as the percentage of school-age children receiving SNAP benefits who are directly certified for NSLP benefits. In school year (SY) 2012-13, the target was 90 percent. States with performance rates below 90 percent must develop and implement a Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP). Beginning in SY 2013-14, the direct certification performance targets increased to 95 percent for all States.

The purpose of this study is to expand the understanding of direct certification best practices and the relationship between State practices and direct certification performance. The report is part of the National School Lunch Program Direct Certification Improvement Study. It also uses data on States' direct certification performance from

*Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, School Year 2012-13: Report to Congress.*

**Methods**

This study collected data in SY 2012-13 through:

- A national survey of direct certification practices administered to all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Guam, and all LEAs in the 14 local matching States. The survey design adapted questions based on a State's prior known practices; and
- In-depth case studies through interviews with program and technical staff in seven States.

This report uses statistical modeling to estimate relationships between multiple direct certification practices and direct certification performance. States that implemented the changes suggested by the model would likely see increases in the direction of the model, but may not experience increases at the same rate.

**Findings**

*There were no significant differences between central and local matching States in direct certification performance.* Thirty-eight States used central matching systems and 14 States used local matching systems. Their performance rates – 87 versus 89 percent, respectively – were not significantly different.

*More frequent matches are associated with a higher average direct certification performance rate.* Central matching States that matched more frequently than monthly had an average performance rate of 92 percent, compared with 88 percent for States matching monthly and 81 percent for States matching less frequently than monthly.

**States using probabilistic matching software had higher matching rates.** Probabilistic matching prioritizes data based on preset data elements indicating the likelihood of a match. It was most useful in matching students with long, less common names with program data. States with greater diversity in students' names and cultural naming conventions (such as use of compound last names) have the potential to increase direct certification rates by adopting probabilistic matching.

States that used probabilistic matching software had an average direct certification performance rate of 89.6 percent, compared to 86.8 percent for States not using the software.

**States extending additional eligibility notification letters to all children in households would likely increase direct certification match rates.** Direct certification notification letters sent by States are used to extend eligibility for free meals to all additional children in households that already have at least one child directly certified based on SNAP, TANF, or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) participation. These letters request that families contact the school if there are additional children in the household who were not named in the notification letter.

Sending direct certification notification letters to inform families that all children in their household are eligible for free school meals was associated with higher direct certification performance rates among central matching States. Because of the study methodology, we cannot conclude that using these notification letters directly resulted in higher performance. However, the large gap in performance associated with their use and the low cost of this practice make it particularly promising for States seeking to increase performance.

**Linking direct certification and point of service systems may also improve results.** Case study data suggest that linking direct certification and point-of-service systems used to manage school meal service and claims is useful in yielding more consistent matching frequencies statewide and might yield more consistent results.

**Vendor-developed direct certification matching software resulted in higher performance.** States conducting direct certification matching with private vendor software had higher performance rates than States using software developed "in-house."

**School administrators felt that Web-based direct certification systems would improve match rates.** Case study data highlighted that Web-based systems can be upgraded and improved in one central location and do not require software upgrades on multiple computers. This suggests that Web-based systems can be less labor- and resource-intensive for States. Additional findings suggest trainings on the Web-based certification systems can help district level staff use system resources effectively.

## Conclusion

The findings from the report's statistical model suggest that certain practices, including conducting matches more frequently than monthly and using probabilistic matching software, could increase States' direct certification rates.

Additionally, case study results indicated that States should consider linking direct certification systems to point-of-service systems, using third-party matching software, and using Web-based direct certification systems.

These strategies hold the promise of improving administrative efficiency and utilizing resources more effectively as States strive to improve direct certification systems and meet required performance targets.

## For More Information

Gothro, A., Moore, Q., Conway, K., Kyler B., (2014). National School Lunch Program Direct Certification Improvement Study: State Practices and Performance Report. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Under Contract No. AG-3198-D-10-0074. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Joseph F. Robare. Available online at: [www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis](http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).