

Eliminating Paper Applications for Free School Meals

Millions of children rely on school meals each day, but millions more are eligible yet not participating. To access this important resource, most families must complete paper applications which can be confusing for them and burdensome for schools to collect and process. The system can and should be modernized so that it moves away from relying on manual eligibility determinations and file cabinets full of paper applications. There is no policy or budget reason to maintain a paper application process that is far from perfect, especially in schools or districts where the vast majority of students qualify for free or reduced price meals. Not only will low-income children and their families benefit from a modernized system, but schools also will benefit by reducing administrative costs while drawing down increased federal funds for added children in their nutrition programs.

Enrollment Process for the School Meal Programs

There currently are two ways generally for children to qualify for free or reduced price school meals:

1. **Direct Certification** - Children who currently receive SNAP/Food Stamps, TANF, or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations are automatically eligible for free school meals. Schools have the option to certify these children without a paper application and are required to do so for children that receive Food Stamps/SNAP. Direct certification is a process whereby school districts and the state education agency work with the State SNAP/Food Stamp agency to match enrollment data to determine which children can be certified for free school meals without paper applications. Homeless, runaway and migrant children also are automatically eligible for free school meals but are qualified based on documentation from school districts' Migrant and Homeless Education Coordinators.
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 reduced price. To receive free meals, household income must fall below 130 percent of poverty. For reduced-price meals, household income must be between 130 and 185 percent of poverty.

Congress should improve the enrollment process to expand access to child nutrition programs by:

- **Creating a data-based reimbursement system.** Schools with a high proportion of low-income children should be allowed to offer meals and snacks free to all students and be reimbursed based on reliable data sources (e.g. U.S. Census data) rather than individual applications. This would dramatically reduce paperwork and facilitate offering meals free to all children, which has been proven to increase participation. One such data-based approach has been implemented through a USDA pilot project and has operated successfully for more than 15 years.
- **Improving direct certification.** USDA research indicates that 22 percent of all districts are not complying with the requirement that they conduct direct certification, and many children who could be directly certified are missing out on this important simplification. Some children are missing out on free school meals altogether. Thirty states fail to directly certify 25 percent or more of their SNAP recipient children for free school meals, with ten of these states missing 40 percent or more. Current requirements have resulted in a patchwork of state data-matching systems, many of which perform poorly. Systems don't work because they rely on outdated student enrollment data, infrequent data matches, onerous requirements on understaffed school districts, and outdated computer databases that lack adequate identifiers to make matches easily. Child Nutrition Reauthorization can make significant improvements by requiring the following:
 - Utilization of Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) data for direct certification, along with SNAP. Many more eligible children could be qualified without paper applications by matching school and Medicaid/SCHIP enrollment data of children with household incomes up to 133 percent of poverty. In fact, when combined with the use of SNAP data, using Medicaid/SCHIP data for direct certification could reduce the number of paper applications by as much as 45 percent.
 - A performance standard for states (95 percent of eligible students should be directly certified) with incentives given to high-performing states. States can take steps to improve their direct certification processes to reach more eligible children, and should be encouraged to continually improve and innovate to solve challenges.
 - Elimination of the "letter method" whereby families are required to return a letter from the SNAP agency to the school for direct certification. An effective data matching system should be required so that families do not have to make any further application, as required by current statute.