
There IS such a thing as a free lunch

**Effective direct certification and direct
verification to ensure adequate nutrition
for California's children**

Executive Summary

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All children should have adequate nutrition in order to learn in the classroom – no matter what their family income. Children that can't afford to pay full price for school breakfast or lunch can apply for free and reduced price lunches, but paperwork hassles often make it difficult to get enrolled. Recently, Congress, the California state legislature, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell have created exciting opportunities to decrease paperwork and get meals to the kids that need them. These opportunities involve direct certification and direct verification, processes that use information from other means-tested programs to confer and check eligibility for school meals. Improving direct certification, implementing direct verification and including Medi-Cal information are all steps that California can take to ensure healthier and smarter kids at school.

We hope that this paper may serve as an informative guide for administrators and advocates at the district, county, state and federal level looking to enroll more children in school meals with less paperwork. By understanding the process and barriers to fulfilling its full potential, we can all collaborate to ensure that children are not missing out on the important nutrition they need.

CFPA's recommendations for effective direct certification and direct verification:

Direct Certification

- LEAs should switch to the state match or use the state match in addition to the county match.
- Comprehensive testing of criteria options should be conducted to identify the match criteria that will match the most eligible children while not matching ineligible children.
- A benchmark of match coverage, such as the percent of eligible children matched to school enrollment, should be set and monitored. If match coverage does not reach the benchmark, action should be taken to identify and remedy the problem.
- The match criteria should be loosened by eliminating any identifiers, such as address, that limit the number of LEAs able to participate and result in eligible children not being matched.
- A multiple match process should be implemented to increase the number of eligible children matched.
- Additional action should be taken with unmatched children on the FS and CalWORKs list, such as making the list available to LEAs and creating a sibling match.
- CDE should continue with plans to increase the match frequency to monthly and CSIS should provide freedom to access the match list in a variety of ways.
- CDE should increase communications regarding the availability and continual improvements of the state match. Both CDE and CSIS should provide additional outreach and trainings.

Direct Verification

- Direct verification should be used when a system is in place to make use of Medi-Cal and Healthy Families data.
- Communications to LEA staff should clarify that direct verification can be used for both categorical and income application.

Adding Medi-Cal and Healthy Families

- CDE should pursue the inclusion of income information for Healthy Families children in the statewide database to facilitate direct certification and direct verification for those children.
- CDE should use the design and implementation efforts of the Medi-Cal and Healthy Families direct verification system to implement direct certification with Medi-Cal and Healthy Families in California as a pilot program or, if and when federal authority is clarified, as a permanent statewide effort.