

# Strategies for Improving Direct Certification



Most school districts can take additional steps to increase the number of students they certify to receive free school meals without submitting a school meal application. Strong direct certification processes are a win-win for school districts and low-income families, as they:

- **Improve the financial viability of implementing the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP):** Leveraging direct certification best practices—like those outlined below—can improve the chances of your school qualifying for CEP while also yielding higher reimbursement rates.
- **Reduce administrative work for the district:** Capturing all eligible students on your direct certification list can decrease the number of free and reduced-price school meal applications (and individual household income forms in CEP schools) that you need to collect, process, and verify.
- **Ensure that the most vulnerable students receive free school breakfast and lunch.**

## Understand who belongs on your direct certification list

Many districts overlook students who are not included in the NYS Education Department (NYSED)'s state-level, online Direct Certification Matching Process (DCMP). All children categorically eligible without an application should be included on your school district's direct certification list, including any child who:

- is on the official state-level direct certification list (i.e., Direct Certification Matching Process files)—which includes children who live in households receiving SNAP, Medicaid (at or below 133% of federal poverty guidelines), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF);
- lives in a household that includes a child who is on the official state direct certification list;
- has been formally placed in foster care by a State agency or court;
- has been certified as homeless/runaway by a McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison;
- has been certified as part of a migrant household; or
- is enrolled in a Head Start pre-k program.

## Conduct the state-level online Direct Certification Matching Process (DCMP)

The DCMP provides authorized representatives from school districts with access to direct certification data

(SNAP, Medicaid, TANF lists) and also matches this data to student records through the New York State Student Identification System (NYSSIS). Learn more about the state-wide DCMP on [NYSED's website](#).

The state-level DCMP has three functions to ensure school districts can effectively use these lists: state match, a search function and a bulk search function. The search and bulk search functions allow districts to manually find matches between direct certification records and local student rosters. Often, children can be missed in the state-level match due to simple errors between datasets such as misspelled names, partial social security numbers, or incorrect birthdates. Use the search options to verify students believed to be directly certified, and verify applications submitted with SNAP, TANF, or Medicaid case numbers.

## Extend eligibility to other children in the household

If one child in a household is directly certified to receive free school meals through SNAP or Medicaid (DCMP database), all the other children living in the household can be directly certified—regardless of relation.

Schools can use the parent's/guardian's name, address, or both to identify additional children in the household and extend eligibility for free school meals to them. Schools often have the most success checking addresses to identify all students living in the same household as

students in DCMP files. Keep detailed documentation when extending categorical eligibility to children.

*Note: Eligibility for free school meals does **not** extend to other categorically eligible children in the household (i.e., FDPIR, homeless, migrant, in foster care, or Head Start).*

## Certify ALL categorically eligible children without an application

### For children who are:

**In foster care:** Contact your county Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) each month for a list of foster children in your school district. Foster care children can also be automatically certified for free school meals by indicating their status on an application for free and reduced price school meals.

**Experiencing homelessness or determined to be a runaway:** Check with your school's Homeless Liaison each month to make sure you have added all students certified as homeless to your list. To find your local Homeless Liaison, visit: [nysteachs.org/liasons](http://nysteachs.org/liasons). If an application is submitted indicating homeless or runaway, verify child's status with your Homelessness Liaison.

**Considered migrant:** Connect regularly with your local Migrant Education Program (MEP) coordinator for a list of children in your school district meeting the definition of migrant. If an application is submitted indicating migrant, verify child's status with your MEP coordinator.

**Enrolled in Head Start:** If you have a Head Start pre-k program located in and operated by your school district, add all the children enrolled in Head Start to your direct certification list. In order to include these children, your school district must maintain administrative control over the program.

## Update your list as often as possible

Districts are required to conduct DCMP a minimum of three times per year, while those with districtwide CEP only need to conduct DCMP once per year. However, all school districts should perform this process monthly to be consistent with when NYSED updates this data. New students appear on the list throughout the year as the status of their family changes. School districts report finding great benefit and increased reimbursement directly certifying students monthly.

## Conduct SNAP education & outreach

Increasing student participation in SNAP can raise the number of students on your direct certification list. Students who qualify for free, or in some cases, reduced-price school meals by submitting an application may also be eligible for SNAP benefits. Many low-income families are unaware that if their income meets the guidelines to receive assistance with paying for school meals, they may also be eligible for nutrition assistance at home through SNAP. Schools can inform families of their potential eligibility for SNAP benefits and connect them with resources (see below) to help them apply.

### SNAP Outreach for Schools Toolkit

When low-income students get the nutrition they need beyond the school day, they are more prepared for learning. When more eligible students receive SNAP benefits, schools have higher identified student percentages, greater reimbursements, and fewer school meal applications to process when implementing CEP.

Use our [toolkit](#) to share information about SNAP with families in your district.

## Tips for Success:

- If you have difficulty accessing the state-wide online DCMP, call or email your Child Nutrition Program Representative.
- Students you add to your direct certification list remain on the list for the entire school year.
- Save all documentation pertaining to direct certification to verify a student's eligibility, especially if you plan on applying for CEP.
- **We can help.** Hunger Solutions New York works with schools to improve direct certification practices and implement CEP. Contact Jessica Pino-Goodspeed at [Jessica.PinoGoodspeed@HungerSolutionsNY.org](mailto:Jessica.PinoGoodspeed@HungerSolutionsNY.org) or 518-436-8757 x105 or for more information.