

Determining Free and Reduced Price Meal Eligibility

Definitions and Acronyms

Assistance Programs

Receipt of benefits by any household member from certain Assistance Programs conveys categorical (automatic) eligibility for free school meals to all children in the household. The determination is made through direct certification for Assistance Programs or through an application with appropriate case numbers. The Assistance Programs that convey categorical eligibility to all children in the household are:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Automated Data Matching

The most common direct certification method used to directly certify students. Matches are made between student enrollment records and benefit recipient records from Assistance Programs, foster care agencies, or other appropriate State or local agencies to establish categorical eligibility (Head Start, Migrant Education Programs, and runaway and homeless youth programs).

There are two common automated data matching processes:

- Local-level: The State agency distributes relevant data to the LEA and the LEA matches the data to the children's enrollment records.
- State or central-level matching: The State agency is responsible for a system that matches a list of children enrolled in schools in the NLSP with a list of children receiving Assistance Program benefits and then provides relevant information to the LEA to process at the local level.

Carryover of Eligibility

When a child transitions from one standard counting and claiming school to another standard counting and claiming school within the same LEA between school years, the child's eligibility status from the previous school year is carried into the current school year for up to 30 operating days, beginning on the first operating day of school. A child's prior year's eligibility remains in effect until a new eligibility determination is made or, if no determination is made, for up to 30 operating days [7 CFR 245.6(c)(2)]. For more information, see: [Carryover of Previous Year's Eligibility](#).

Categorical Eligibility

Automatic eligibility for free meals or free milk due to a child's (or any household member's) receipt of benefits under an Assistance Program, or a child's designation as Other Source

Categorically Eligible. There are two ways children may be classified as categorically eligible:

- Participation in Assistance Programs: A child or any member of the household receives benefits from an Assistance Program, as determined either through direct certification or an application with the appropriate case number; or
- Other Source Categorically Eligible designation: A child is documented as meeting the applicable definition, as defined in this section, as:
 - o Homeless, runaway, or migratory child;
 - o Foster child; or
 - o Enrolled in a federally-funded Head Start or comparable State-funded Head Start or pre-kindergarten program.

An individual child's eligibility for free benefits under any of the Other Source Categorically Eligible Programs does not convey to other children in the household. Except for a foster child, the household indication of Other Source Categorically Eligible Status must be confirmed through documentation prior to certifying the child's eligibility for free meals. If documentation does not confirm eligibility for an Other Source Categorically Eligible, the household should be asked to resubmit the application and include income information.

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

Rather than collecting school meal applications to make individual eligibility determinations, schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students who are normally certified for free school meals without an application, such as students who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and homeless students. See the Community Eligibility Provision Resource Center:

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/community-eligibility-provision-resource-center>.

Determining Official

An LEA official responsible for determining children's eligibility for free or reduced price benefits. An employee of a food service management company may act as an agent for the LEA in various aspects of the application, certification, and verification processes. The company's employee must comply with all requirements for these processes, including limited disclosure of individual eligibility information. However, the LEA is ultimately responsible for ensuring that all requirements are met and that the information on the application remains the property of the LEA and may not be used or possessed by the food service management company for any use other than to determine eligibility for free and reduced price meals. This also applies when an LEA and/or SFA contracts with an Educational Service Provider to manage these functions. See SP 07-2008: Charter School Involvement in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs,

<https://www.partnerweb.usda.gov/communities/cndpolicy2/School%20Programs/FY08/SP%2007-2008-S.pdf>

Direct Certification

Determining children eligible for free benefits based on documentation obtained directly from appropriate State or local agencies or other authorized individuals. Direct certification of a child's eligibility status should not involve the household. The communication exchange should be between an appropriate agency and the State agency, LEA, or school.

Direct Certification for Assistance Programs

A process conducted through automated data matching or an exchange of information between the Assistance Program agency and the State agency or LEA. No application from the household is necessary. Letters from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations agencies submitted by households are considered direct certification. However, direct certification for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program households must be conducted using an automated data matching process [7 CFR 245.6(b)(1)]. If a household provides a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program eligibility letter to the LEA or school, the letter must be used to establish eligibility, but it is not considered direct certification for reporting purposes.

Direct Certification for Other Source Categorically Eligible Programs

A process conducted through an automated data matching or an exchange of information between appropriate State or local agencies and officials from Other Source Categorically Eligible Programs, such as the LEA's homeless liaison. Direct certification also may be conducted using lists of eligible children provided to the State agency or LEA from appropriate officials of these programs. Letters and contacts from officials of these may also be used as direct certification. [7 CFR 245.6(b)(2)]

Direct Verification

The use of public records as a means to verify children's eligibility for free or reduced price benefits. Direct verification may be conducted with Assistance Program agencies or appropriate officials of Other Source Categorically Eligible Programs to confirm eligibility for free meals. Direct verification with Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) may confirm eligibility for either free or reduced price meals, depending on the Medicaid or CHIP eligibility criteria in the State. Direct verification may be used for applications included in the verification sample or those verified for cause. [7 CFR 245.6a(g)]

Error Prone

Applications within \$100 per month of the applicable IEGs

Extension of Categorical Eligibility for Assistance Programs

A child or other household member's receipt of benefits from an Assistance Program automatically extends eligibility for free benefits to all children who are members of the household.

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations is a Federal program that provides United States Department of Agriculture foods to low-income households living on Indian reservations, and to Native American families residing in designated areas near reservations and in the State of Oklahoma. Children from households that receive benefits from the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations are deemed categorically eligible for free school meals. See Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdpir/food-distribution-program-indian-reservations-fdpir>.

Food Service Management Company

A Food Service Management Company is a commercial enterprise or a nonprofit organization that may be contracted with by the SFA or LEA to manage any aspect of the school food service.

Foster Child

An Other Source Categorical Eligibility Program designation for a child who is formally placed by a court or a State child welfare agency. Whether placed by the State child welfare agency or a court, in order for a child to be considered categorically eligible for free meals, the State must retain legal custody of the child. This definition does not apply to informal arrangements or permanent guardianship placements that may exist outside of State or court-based systems. [7 CFR 245.2]

Free Meal

A meal served in the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program to a child eligible for such benefits under 7 CFR Part 245. Neither the child nor any member of the household pays or is required to work in the school or in the school's food service to receive a free meal. [7 CFR 245.2]

Free Milk

Milk served in the Special Milk Program to a child eligible for free milk under 7 CFR Part 245. Neither the child nor any member of the household pays or is required to work in the school or in the school's food service to receive free milk. [7 CFR 245.2]

Head Start

An Other Source Categorical Eligible Program, which refers to Federal Head Start and any State-funded pre-kindergarten program that use eligibility criteria that are identical or more stringent than Federal Head Start. [7 CFR 245.2]

Homeless

An Other Source Categorical Eligible Program designation for a child who is identified by the LEA's homeless liaison or by an official of a homeless shelter as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. [7 CFR 245.2]

Household

A group of related or nonrelated individuals who are living as one economic unit. The term “family” has the same definition as “household” under 7 CFR Part 245.2.

Income Eligibility Guidelines (IEGs)

The family-size income levels prescribed annually by the Secretary of Agriculture for determining eligibility for free and reduced price meals and free milk. The free guidelines are 130 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines. The reduced price guidelines are 185 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines. See School Meals - Income Eligibility Guidelines: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/income-eligibility-guidelines>.

Local Educational Agency (LEA)

The term “local educational agency” refers to:

- A public board of education or other public or private nonprofit authority legally constituted within a State for the administrative control of public or private nonprofit schools in a political subdivision of a State;
- An administrative agency or combination of school districts recognized by the State;
- Any other public or private nonprofit agency with administrative control and direction of public or private nonprofit schools or residential child care institutions; or
- The State educational agency that, in any State or territory, serves as the sole educational agency for all public or private nonprofit schools.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

A limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English. Local educational agencies, schools and other entities that receive Federal financial assistance, including reimbursements for meals from United States Department of Agriculture, must take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access to their programs and activities by persons with limited English proficiency. See SP 37-2016: Meaningful Access for Persons with Limited English Proficiency in the School Meal Programs: Guidance and Q&As, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/meaningful-access-persons-limited-english-proficiency-lep-school-meal-programs-guidance-and-qas>.

Migrant

An Other Source Categorical Eligibility designation for a child who is enrolled in the Migrant Education Program as determined by the State or local Migrant Education Program coordinator or as documented by an appropriate LEA official, such as the homeless liaison. [7 CFR 245.2]

Mixed Households

Those households that include children designated as Other Source Categorically Eligible and other children who are not. [7 CFR 245.2]

Operating Days

The days on which reimbursable meals or milk are provided by a school or another program sponsor. [7 CFR 245.2]

Other Source Categorically Eligible

Categories that make children automatically eligible for free benefits, either through direct certification or application. A child's eligibility for free benefits under Other Source Categorical Eligibility does not extend to any other child in the household. A child is Other Source Categorically Eligible if they are:

- Enrolled in Federal Head Start;
- Enrolled in State-or Indian Tribal Organization-funded pre-kindergarten programs that use eligibility criteria that are identical or more stringent than Federal Head Start;
- Determined to be homeless by the LEA's homeless liaison or by an official of a homeless shelter;
- Determined to be a migrant by the State or local Migrant Education Program coordinator or homeless liaison;
- Determined to be a runaway who is identified by the local education liaison as receiving assistance through a program under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act; or
- Determined to be a foster child whose care and placement is the responsibility of the State, or who is formally placed by a court with a caretaker household through which the State retains legal custody of the child.

Overt Identification

Any action that may result in a child being recognized as potentially eligible to receive or be certified for free or reduced price school meals or free milk. Local educational agencies and school food authorities must assure that a child's eligibility status is not disclosed at any point in the process of providing free or reduced price meals or free milk, including:

- When the child or household is notified of the availability of free or reduced price benefits;
- During certification and notification of eligibility;
- During the provision of meals in the cafeteria;
- At the point of service;
- During the provision of additional services, such as educational services to low income children; or
- When the child pays for their meals.

See SP 45-2012: Preventing Overt Identification of Children Certified for Free or Reduced Price School Meals, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/preventing-overt-identification-children-certified-free-or-reduced-price-school-meals>.

Random Sampling

A sampling process where each application has an equal chance of being selected. A statistically valid random sample is not required. The LEA must determine a selection interval by dividing the number of applications by the required sample size.

Reduced Price Meal

A lunch priced at 40 cents or less, an afterschool snack priced at 15 cents or less, or a breakfast priced at 30 cents or less, served to a child certified as eligible for such benefits under 7 CFR Part 245.

Residential Child Care Institution (RCCI)

Any distinct part of a public or nonprofit private institution that:

- Maintains children in residence;
- Operates principally for the care of children; and
- If private, is licensed by the State or local government to provide residential child care services under the appropriate licensing code.

The definitions of “School” and “Child” in 7 CFR 210.2, 215.2 and 220.2, outline the requirements for eligible Residential Child Care Institutions and eligible residents.

Runaway

An Other Source Categorical Eligibility designation for a child who is identified by the LEA's homeless liaison or a program official as receiving assistance from a program under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. [7 CFR 245.2]

Sampling Pool

The total number of applications approved as of October 1.

Sample Size

The number of applications subject to verification; the minimum and maximum sample size is three percent of the total or 3,000 applications, whichever is less.

SERO

South East Regional Office, based in Atlanta

School Food Authority (SFA)

The governing body responsible for the administration of one or more schools. The SFA has the authority to enter into a legal agreement with the State administrating agency to operate the School Meal Programs. [7 CFR 210.2]

School Year (SY)

The period from July 1 through June 30. [7 CFR 210.2]

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): SNAP offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities. Children from households that receive benefits under SNAP are deemed categorically eligible for free school meals. See Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): A Federal designation for a State-funded program under part A of title IV of the Social Security Act. Each State has its own name and acronym for the program. Categorical eligibility for free benefits is limited to beneficiaries in States with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families standards that are comparable to or more restrictive than those in effect on June 1, 1995. See SP-22- 2010, CACFP 10-2010, SFSP 08-2010: Categorical Eligibility—Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sp22-2010-categorical-eligibility%E2%80%94temporary-assistance-needy-families>.

Without Further Application

“Without further application” means that no action is required by the household of a child who has been directly certified to receive free meal benefits. [42 U.S.C 1758(b)(4)(G)(i)]

Working Days

The days when school is open and teachers or school administration are on-site, but the reimbursable meal service is not in operation.

Glossary of Acronyms

CACFP	Child and Adult Care Food Program
CEP	Community Eligibility Provision
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CHIP	Children's Health Insurance Program
CAN	Child Nutrition Act
DEIP	Deployment Extension Incentive Pay
DOD	Department of Defense
EBT	Electronic Benefit Transfer
FDPIR	Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations
FERPA	Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act
FNS	Food and Nutrition Service
FNSRO	Food and Nutrition Service Regional Office
FSSA	Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance
FYSB	Family and Youth Services Bureau
IEGs	Income Eligibility Guidelines
ISP	Identified Student Percentage
LEA	Local Educational Agency
LEP	Limited English Proficiency
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress

NFIP	National Flood Insurance Program
NSLA	National School Lunch Act
RCCI	Residential Child Care Institution
ROAP	Regional Office Administered Program
SBP	School Breakfast Program
SFA	School Food Authority
SMP	Special Milk Program
SFSP	Summer Food Service Program
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
SSN	Social Security Number
SY	School Year
TANF	Temporary Assistance to Needy Families
WIC	Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture