

THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM DIRECT CERTIFICATION IMPROVEMENT STUDY: MAIN 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. States use one of two different methods—central or local matching. Under central matching, a State agency is responsible for a system that 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 the Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and LEAs match these data with their student enrollment lists.

The purpose of this study is to describe current methods of direct certification used by State and local agencies and challenges facing States and LEAs in attaining high matching rates.

Methods

This study collected data in School Year (SY) 2012-13 through a national survey and case studies. The national survey of direct certification practices was administered to all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Guam, and LEAs in local matching States. The survey design tailored questions based on a State's data-matching method (central- or local-level) and the level of respondent (State or LEA).

In-depth case studies were conducted in seven States and selected LEAs. Program and technical staff involved in direct certification at the State and LEA levels were interviewed via site visits.

Findings

Central matching is the dominant means of implementing direct certification. In SY 2012-13, 38 States used central matching systems, and at least 4 of the remaining 14 States planned to switch from local to central matching. Interviews with central matching States indicated that some of the appealing characteristics of central matching systems were efficiency, the opportunity to use more sophisticated matching algorithms than districts may be able to develop, the uniform quality of matching across the State, and reduced risk of exposing confidential data.

Although most States used central matching, local districts also played key roles in the direct certification process, including uploading enrollment data, reconciling match lists with local data systems, and processing lists of potential matches. This division of responsibility, particularly in identifying definite matches centrally and reconciling potential matches locally, may have allowed States to take advantage of both the efficiency offered by centrally developed matching algorithms and local knowledge and additional student information at the district level.

States used a variety of methods to communicate with, and provide instructions and training to, local school districts. Some techniques were common across most or all central matching case study States; others were particular to one or two States. In several States, districts also relied on private vendors for training on technical and policy topics. Common means by which State agencies communicated with and provided training to districts included email, webinars, and in-person workshops.

States often do not monitor the frequency or accuracy of districts' use of direct certification systems. Discrepancies between the number of students matched in the central system and the number districts report as directly certified can be a

key indicator of whether districts are using direct certification systems properly. The study States varied on the frequency that they checked the differences between the number of students matched in the central system and at the district level.

In addition, States often do not track direct certification performance statewide, with only 22 percent of central matching States reporting that they calculate the direct certification matching rate for their State.

States and districts draw from a diverse range of funding and staff resources to develop and maintain their direct certification systems. States most commonly consulted IT staff and other State agencies. Almost 95 percent of central matching States and more than 85 percent of local matching States consulted with IT staff. Almost 90 percent of central matching States and almost 80 percent of local matching States consulted with other State agencies.

Successful direct certification systems rely on constructive collaboration among multiple State agencies. Direct certification typically involves the State education agency, the State agency administering programs that confer categorical eligibility, and districts. Productive interagency relationships are important components of effective direct certification systems. In addition, formal data-sharing agreements among participating agencies are nearly universal, although some States noted that they can be challenging to execute.

Enrollment data needs vary based on whether States use central or local matching systems. With direct certification based on central matching, States must identify a means of obtaining information on students enrolled statewide, as well as a means to transfer enrollment data to the entity conducting direct certification matching. Nearly 80 percent of central matching States used a Statewide Student Information System for direct certification in SY 2012–13 (Table 1). In one-third of central matching States and one-half of local matching States, no transfer of enrollment data was necessary because the data were housed at the entity conducting matching.

Table 1. Characteristics of Enrollment Data Used in Direct Certification (percentages)

	Central Matching States	Local Matching States
<u>Source of Enrollment Data</u>		
Statewide Student Information System	79%	29%
Electronic files maintained by State	18%	64%
Electronic files maintained by district	3%	0%
Hard-copy files	0%	7%
<u>Method for Transferring Enrollment Data</u>		
No transfer necessary; data housed at matching entity	33%	50%
Electronic files sent via automatic process	36%	29%
Electronic files sent via Internet and uploaded manually by staff	36%	21%
Hard-copy lists sent via mail	3%	0%
Other transfer methods	19%	0%
Sample Size	38	14

Note: States were able to select multiple responses regarding methods used for transferring enrollment data.

Almost all States have plans to improve their direct certification systems. States noted plans to: add more data elements to their matching algorithms; increase the frequency of data receipt and matching; incorporate additional program data sources; add processes to resolve unmatched or partially matched records; upgrade technological infrastructure; transition from local to central matching systems; and provide improved training to direct certification users.

For More Information

Moore, Q., Gothro, A., Conway, K., Kyler B., (2014). National School Lunch Program Direct Certification Improvement Study. 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.