



Direct Certification and Best Practices: Subtitle?

Both children and schools benefit from making sure all students receive healthy school meals. While the federal nutrition programs are designed to feed students, they can also involve cumbersome paperwork for schools and parents that make it harder to reach all eligible students. School districts can help alleviate these challenges by effectively conducting direct certification. When school districts maximize their efforts to directly certify eligible children, they can ensure that their most vulnerable students receive healthy meals and also increase their funding to better serve their schools and communities.

Who benefits from Direct Certification?

Direct certification helps students from low-income families who are at a higher risk for hunger.

These are students who have already qualified for need-based programs, where agencies determine eligibility under a rigorous and exhaustive process. Because agencies have already determined income eligibility for those need-based programs, students are also eligible for free meals at school when the local school district certifies them.

Direct certification helps Texas districts better serve their students while also boosting their school budgets. The more directly certified students, the more money schools can claim in reimbursements.

Direct certification is tightly linked to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a related policy that allows students in high-poverty schools to eat school meals (both lunch and breakfast) at no cost and without having to collect school meal applications. Any public, private, or charter school that offers the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program and where at least 40 percent of students are identified through direct certification can use CEP.

Direct certification is efficient for families and for schools. When a district directly certifies a student, schools no longer have to collect meal applications from parents. This saves parents and school administrators time and allows for a uniform and efficient method for determining eligibility.¹ Direct certification not only makes school meal processes less burdensome for schools, parents, and students, it also helps feed eligible students who may have been missed or unidentified under the traditional meal application system.



What is Direct Certification?

Direct certification is a federally mandated electronic data-matching process that determines the eligibility for free school meals based on if a student participates in other need-based programs.

Students are eligible for school meals through direct certification if they meet any of these criteria:

- Live in households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly “food stamps”) benefits
- Live in households at or below 133 percent of the Federal Poverty Level and a child receives Medicaid benefits
- Live in households receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance
- Live in households receiving Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits
- Are enrolled in foster care; migrant, homeless, or runaway programs; Head Start, or state-sponsored pre-kindergarten programs



“Years ago we were on Provision 2, and when we learned about CEP, we decided to make that jump over only because we had a fairly high percentage of students who were meal recipients. It turned out to be the best thing we could have done because the percentage of meals that were claimed as free were a lot higher than when we were in Provision 2.”

– RIO GRANDE CITY CSD

Why Direct Certification?

INCREASES STATE FUNDING/REVENUE FOR SCHOOLS

The more kids directly certified, the more money available to schools.

Texas calculates State Compensatory Education (SCE) funding based on the number of children who are “educationally disadvantaged,” as measured by the number eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Students identified through direct certification are automatically classified as educationally disadvantaged and entitled to the enhanced SCE funding, which is 0.2 times the base level of per-student funding (basic allotment). A school can increase its total SCE funding by accurately identifying all of its directly certified students.

Schools that directly certify more students eligible for free meals may also see an increase in their total school nutrition funding because they maximize the share of students who qualify for the highest meal reimbursement level. Districts that have improved their direct certification rates have been able to spend less effort on collecting applications while increasing their school food revenue. They can use the added revenue to pay staff, buy equipment, or improve the quality of the food served.

BENEFITS EVERYONE

Students and parents: All students get free school breakfast and lunch. Students who have access to better nutrition tend to perform better academically.

Efficient direct certification can allow schools to feed more kids healthy food, ease the burden on low-income parents, and improve focus and learning for all students.

Schools: School administrators no longer have to spend time chasing school meal applications, handling meal payments accounts or tracking whether each meal served was paid, reduced-price, or free. Effective direct certification can increase the number of identified students for nutrition programs like CEP, leading to improved claiming percentages and more state funding for schools.

“It’s been very helpful in comparison to picking up applications. Direct certification has really helped the district get that true number of economically disadvantaged students. I think we benefit.”

– ZAPATA ISD

Recommendations for an Effective Direct Certification process

BUILD CAPACITY

School districts across Texas doing direct certification recommend investing in training and professional development of staff on Excel and the Texas Eligibility

List Management System (ELMS)². These programs are essential to conducting direct certification. Trainings and capacity-building tools on direct certification can be accessed from the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) website as well as from regional Education Service Centers (ESCs).

School districts have also recommended that districts (“Contracting Entities”) have staff members, preferably more than one, within their departments dedicated to working on direct certification processes.

“We need someone who specializes in this area [direct certification] to do this work.”

– RGCCSD

WORK CLOSELY WITH PEIMS AND IT

Although district nutrition departments conduct most of the work on direct certification, there are key actors outside the department that play an integral role in facilitating this process. It is very important to have more than one person in the district who can do direct certification.

School districts have emphasized the importance of having open communication and coordination with their district’s Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS)³ department. Having accurate data on their enrollment rates is essential to getting the maximum benefit from direct certification.

Information and Technology (IT) staff members can also play a significant role in helping districts navigate the technicalities of the programs necessary to do direct certification. Close relationships with the district’s IT department are therefore encouraged.

“The PEIMs coordinator, the Assistant Superintendent and the director of technology also helped us. One of the guys in technology who is good at programming, he went into e-school and made it easier to input data.”

– SAN MARCOS ISD

USE DATA EFFECTIVELY

Successful direct certification for school nutrition programs depends on the effective use of data. When doing direct certification, school districts and TDA recommend that districts:

- Use data provided by the Texas Department of Agriculture through Texas ELMS
- Use the district’s current enrollment data
- Use social security numbers, if available
- Use the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Unique student ID, if available
- Use data from the homeless, migrant, foster runaway, Head Start and Pre-Kindergarten student populations

“Their matches are much better if they use social security numbers. They don’t have to, but if they use the SSN they have a higher match rate.”

– TDA

PROACTIVELY SEEK TO EXTEND CERTIFICATION TO MORE STUDENTS

Successful districts employ procedures to identify additional children who are categorically eligible for free meals because they live in households where at least one student has already been directly certified.

Districts can use their homeless, migrant, foster, and runaway student data as well as the Pre-K and Head Start data to determine categorical eligibility and extend eligibility to all children in a household receiving SNAP, TANF, FDPIR, or Medicaid. This would produce a higher number of directly certified students eligible to receive free meals, and would also increase revenue for schools.

INVEST IN A STRONG MATCHING SYSTEM

Direct certification relies on the use of data systems. School districts that actively engage in direct certification recommend investing in a strong matching system. For many districts, that means that their Point-of-Service (POS), Student Information, and PEIMS systems produce accurate student data that can be

“Our programs [PEIMS and School Nutrition] are integrated and that has helped us greatly. Every morning we get a print out of all the students that have enrolled or withdrawn as of yesterday, any changes and transfers in campuses are also included in this report. This helps us track our numbers.”

– ZAPATA ISD

effectively matched with state data in the Texas ELMS. Integrating the PEIMs system with the school nutrition department’s system has been useful for some districts and is also encouraged.

PERFORM DIRECTLY CERTIFICATION FREQUENTLY

By law direct certification should happen monthly, which is the standard for districts in Texas. However, the Texas Department of Agriculture recommends doing direct certification weekly and if possible, daily, to ensure that the directly certified numbers are current and accurate⁴.

Part of doing direct certification frequently also entails that you have accurate current enrollment data. Various school districts recommended requesting daily reports on current enrollment numbers in order to identify new eligible students.

ENCOURAGE ELIGIBLE FAMILIES TO APPLY FOR SNAP

Eligibility for free meals through direct certification is dependent on a student’s participation in other need-based programs such as SNAP, TANF, FDPIR, or Medicaid. Some districts have found it beneficial to encourage families to apply to such benefits, particularly SNAP. If families belonging to the district are encouraged to apply to SNAP, higher SNAP enrollment data will increase the number of students who are eligible for free meals at their schools/districts.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Texas Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). Texas ELMS: Direct Certification. Retrieved from: <http://www.squaremeals.org/Programs/NationalSchoolLunchProgram/TexasELMS.aspx>
- 2 The Texas Eligibility List Management System (Texas ELMS) is the software system that the Texas Department of Agriculture has made available for school districts in Texas to directly certify their students.
- 3 The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) is a data collection system developed by the Texas Education Agency to provide a system and database for collecting and storing school district information. (Region One Education Service Center, n.d.)
- 4 Dumas, L. A. (2018, August 27). Phone interview.
- 5 Texas Department of Agriculture. (n.d.1). Texas ELMS: Direct Certification. Retrieved from: <http://www.squaremeals.org/Programs/NationalSchoolLunchProgram/TexasELMS.aspx>
- 6 Texas Department of Agriculture. (n.d.2). Texas ELMS Eligibility List Management System: Using Texas ELMS for direct certification and verification. Retrieved from: https://tdaeducationonline.articulate-online.com/p/1071808216/DocumentViewRouter.ashx?Cust=10718&DocumentID=207adb51-bf78-4bf9-ae90-a2b bf5a79595&Popped=True&InitialPage=/story_html5.html&v=16&

“I do have a process every morning. I import our student data every day, and if a new student enrolls in our district, I check the Texas ELMS to claim them. If a student leaves the district, I have to go to the Texas ELMS to unclaim them. The program that we have, it generates a report, once it goes through enrollment, and it tells you within one page who’s new to the district.”

– SAN MARCOS ISD

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Checklist when doing Direct Certification

The Texas Eligibility List Management System (Texas ELMS), formerly known as DCDV (Direct Certification/Direct Verification) is the software system used by school districts in Texas to directly certify their students. The Texas ELMS aims to streamline the process of matching enrollment records with the students in households receiving assistance through need-based programs such as SNAP and/or TANF⁵. It allows school districts (Contracting Entities) to upload enrollment files, download and search matches, download reports, and verify eligibility⁶.

TDA has provided guidelines and recommendations to help Contracting Entities navigate the Texas ELMS system. Specific instructions can be found below:

1. To use the Texas ELMS system working knowledge of Excel is necessary. Properly preparing and formatting the current enrollment Excel file from your districts' POS, SIS, or PEIMS is the first step to using the Texas ELMS system. Specific instructions on formatting your Excel file and inputting data can be found here.
2. Uploading your Excel file

Once you are in the Texas ELMS:

- a. Make sure you are in the "Direct Certification" tab in the Texas ELMS homepage (DC/DV Homepage)