

OFFICE OF NUTRITION DIRECT CERTIFICATION MANUAL SCHOOL YEAR 2023-2024

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1. **Mail:**
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C 20250-9410; or
2. **Fax:**
(833) 256-1665 or (202) 690-7442; or
3. **Email:**
program.intake@usda.gov

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DIRECT CERTIFICATION FACT SHEET

What is direct certification?

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE), Office of Nutrition provides Local Education Agencies (LEAs)/sponsors the opportunity to directly certify enrolled students for free and reduced-price meal benefits in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs.

Section 9 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act mandates all LEAs who collect free and reduced-price household meal applications to participate in direct certification and permits direct verification of children in food stamp households. LEAs that are on the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or Provision 2 must complete direct certification at least once a year in a non-base year.

What is new for school year 2023-2024?

You may have noticed that the above direct certification description includes reduced price meal benefits. The Office of Nutrition was approved by the USDA to partner with the Ohio Office of Medicaid for the Direct Certification with Medicaid pilot project. Accordingly in addition to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Ohio Works First (OWF) free meal certifications, school year 2023-2024 direct certification lists may contain students approved for free meals or reduced meals through Medicaid.

Note that Medicaid free or reduced-price meal program approval is only through the direct certification process. Medicaid numbers are ***not*** approved for consideration on a free or reduced-price household meal application.

Also new for school year 2023-2024 is a new direct certification module for accessing direct certification matches. Instructions for using the new direct certification module are available at <https://wiki.ssdt-ohio.org/x/OgNMCw>.

How often must a LEA process direct certification matches?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires all LEAs who collect free and reduced-price student meal applications to process direct certification matches three times a year. USDA suggests that the process should be conducted at the below intervals. Note that the new direct certification module will complete the match process automatically. Although the LEA is responsible for accessing the new module at least three times a year and processing the students matched for free or reduced benefits, the LEA is highly encouraged to access the system and pull matches weekly or even daily for the most updated match information. Matches are dated from the date of which a student's data was accessed in the module.

- At or around the beginning of the school year (**must occur after July 1 to count for the 2024 school year**);

- Three months after the initial effort; and
- Six months after the initial effort.

Who is eligible to participate in direct certification?

All LEAs who collect free and reduced-price household meal applications must participate in direct certification and process matches at least three times a school year. LEAs that are on the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or Provision 2 must complete direct certification at least once a year in a non-base year.

Where will the information be available to participating schools?

LEAs must complete the direct certification process using an online secure direct certification module. LEAs must utilize the module to complete the direct certification match process. The matches will be updated weekly. Directions for using the module are available at <https://wiki.ssdt-ohio.org/display/oddex/CNDC+Module>.

How do schools access the direct certification matches in school year 2023-2024?

The Ohio Department of Education partnered with the Management Council to develop a new direct certification module. Schools may access the old (legacy) module through the Claims Reimbursement and Reporting System (CRRS) through the end of September 2023 to allow time for transition to the new software.

All users for the new direct certification module must create an OH|ID username and password with a Department of Education Profile (if you don't have one already) for the Ohio Education Directory System (OEDS). Pages 3 to 17 of this [manual](#) provide a step by step process for getting this action step accomplished.

The next step is to ask the OEDS administrator for your school/district to assign you a role. If you are the person at the school/district that will upload data and confirm potential matches, ask for your OEDS Administrator to assign you the Verifier-CNDC role. If you only need read only access for running reports, ask for Data View-CNDC role. The OEDS administrator is usually someone in the superintendent's office or non-public school equivalent or the EMIS coordinator. To identify the OEDS administrator for your school/district visit <https://oeds.ode.state.oh.us/SearchOrg> and search by entering the IRN or district name.

Where can a school find more information about Direct Certification?

LEAs may reference the [USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#), revised July 2017. The USDA has not yet released an updated eligibility manual for school meals. State agencies and program operators should continue to use the 2017 edition for the upcoming school year until further notice.

For instructions on using the new direct certification module, go to <https://wiki.ssdt-ohio.org/display/oddex/CNDC+Module>.

DIRECT CERTIFICATION 2023-2024 SOFTWARE ACTION STEPS FOR ACCESS

The newly developed school year 2023-2024 Direct Certification software is a module of the Ohio District Data Exchange (ODDEX) which is the program used by public schools and districts for student data verification and exchanges. Non-public schools may access the system as well. To use the direct certification module, users must follow the below action steps:

1. Create an OH|ID username and password with a Department of Education Profile (if you don't have one already) for the Ohio Education Directory System (OEDS). Follow pages 3-17 of this OEDS [manual](#) to complete this step. The profile must be completed in full to obtain access to ODDEX.
2. Next request from your school or district OEDS administrator to assign you a role in OEDS. For public schools this tends to be the Superintendent's office or other district administrator. For non-public schools this tends to be the school Principal or equivalent.
 - a. If you are the person at the school/ district that will upload data and confirm potential matches, ask for your OEDS Administrator to assign you the Verifier-CNDC role.
 - b. If you only need read only access for running reports, ask for Data View-CNDC role.
3. Once assigned a role, log into OH|ID (<https://ohid.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/ohid/login>) and select the ODDEX (Ohio District Data Exchange) Tile. You are now logged into the direct certification module. The system will automatically run matches for you weekly based on enrolled students entered into the system by EMIS. You are encouraged to check back frequently for new matches. A step-by-step guide to the new module is available at <https://wiki.ssdt-ohio.org/display/oddex/CNDC+Module>.
 - a. The module will attempt to identify additional enrolled students that reside in a household with a directly certified student. LEAs should also review the matches to identify any other students residing in a household with a directly certified student that may be eligible for direct certification benefits.

SCHOOL YEAR 2023-2024 DIRECT CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES

1. ACCESSING THE SYSTEM

All users must first create an OH|ID account and be assigned a role in the Ohio Education Directory System (OEDS) to access the new module. See the previous page for instructions.

2. DETERMINE STUDENTS THAT ARE FREE OR REDUCED

The new module is set to run matches automatically once the public school EMIS coordinator enters an enrollment list in ODDEX or non-public schools have uploaded an enrollment list. This entry only needs to occur once in the school year. The records are maintained in the system all school year. Newly enrolled students may be added, and students may be marked withdrawn as appropriate.

Users may run reports in the system for download purposes into their point of sale system. Instructions for setting up your report format are available at <https://wiki.ssd-t-ohio.org/display/oddex/Vendor+Export+Configuration>. The data will remain in the module for three school years after the 2023-2024 school year so there is no requirement for LEAs to maintain paper or electronic records outside this module. For audit purposes, the Ohio Department of Education, Office of Nutrition will have access to the system.

3. SEND HOUSEHOLD NOTIFICATION LETTERS

For each matched student/household send the corresponding *Direct Certification Eligibility Notification Letter* to the household, using an approved confidential method based on approval for free or approval for reduced benefits.

- (a) Located on page 10 of this manual, the notification letters inform households that households with students approved for free benefits do not need to complete a paper student meal application, the directly certified student remains eligible for the entire school year and the household has the option to refuse benefits.
- (b) For students approved for reduced benefits, the letter instructs the household that their reduced benefits are applicable to the entire year but can complete a household application if they feel other household information qualifies them for free benefits.

4. RECORDKEEPING

The new system will maintain records of directly certified students for three years plus the current 2023-2024 school year. For audit purposes, the Ohio Department of Education, Office of Nutrition will have access to the system.

If the school completes matches using the legacy direct certification system, LEAs must maintain copies of results reports and screenshots of positive match individual student look-up certifications generated from the direct certification software system

for three years plus the current school year and until audits are concluded and resolved.

5. CONFIDENTIALITY

ODE and the LEA agree that they shall not use any information, systems, or records made available to either party for any purpose other than to fulfill the obligations specified within the agreement. These parties agree to be bound by the same standards of confidentiality that apply to the employees of either party or the State of Ohio. Only authorized School Meal Program personnel will have access to the records.

Every household with students who have been directly certified must be given the option to refuse the benefits.

6. DIRECT CERTIFICATION INFORMATION

The data on which direct certification is based is considered valid for the entire school year. The LEA is not required to update this data during the school year.

7. LEA-APPROVED HOUSEHOLD NOTIFICATION METHODS

METHOD A – Before the start of the school year, letters are mailed to the homes of all students.

- (1) Households with students who have been directly certified will receive a letter indicating that their children have been approved for free or reduced school meals. See the prototype Eligibility Notification letter on page 10.

METHOD B – Before the start of the school year, letters will be mailed only to households with students who have been directly certified for free or reduced school meals. The free meals letter will state there is no need to fill out an application. The reduced-price letter will encourage households to fill out an application if other information may qualify them for free meals. All students, including directly certified students, are given a free and reduced-price school meals application.

METHOD C - At the beginning of the school year all students receive a sealed addressed letter.

- (1) Households, with students who have been directly certified, will receive a letter indicating that their students have been approved for free or reduced school meals (see page 10).
- (2) All other households will receive the *Letter to Households and Free and Reduced-Price School Meals Application*.

The above listed materials must be distributed in a manner that protects the identification of students eligible under direct certification.

NOTE: Additional copies of the *Letter to Household and Free and Reduced- Price School Meals Application* must be available in the LEA's central office and in each school to accommodate new enrollees and students with changes in eligibility.

DIRECT CERTIFICATION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What constitutes a match?

When **(1)** the student is confirmed to be enrolled and **(2)** at least two identifiers match; for example, full name (last name and first name) and birthdate.

2. What happens if I see a partial match?

The new software has matching logic in the system to recognize partial matches. This may happen when some data matches but other data does not fully match. An example being a child that has a birth name of Theodore Smith with birthday of 2/3/2012. The SNAP record might have this student listed as Teddy Smith with birthday of 2/3/2012. The system will show Theodore's record with a yellow exclamation point partial match message. A school official must go into the student record and decide if the match is correct. Additional details are available in the "Student Detail" section of this [training guide](#). If a student already is matched by other data and has a green checkmark, the school does not need to resolve any partial matches for that student unless the match is a reduced-price match and the partial match would be for free meal benefits. In this situation the school should review the partial match and see if it is appropriate to approve the free meal partial match.

3. Does a sibling of a directly certified student need to complete an application?

If the school cannot obtain enrollment records to verify that a sibling lives in the same household as the student that is directly certified, then the family may complete a separate student meal application to verify the children live in the same household.

4. What happens to applications submitted after a student has been directly certified?

Direct certification takes priority over an application. The application should be removed from the files and destroyed unless the application is serving as documentation to prove the existence of other students in the household for the purposes of extending direct certification benefits.

5. Who do I call for help with computer related questions?

Call the ODE Office of Nutrition customer service help line at 1-800-808-6325.

6. Who do I call for help with questions regarding processing Direct Certification lists or processing Free and Reduced-price Student Meal Applications?

Call your assigned Education Program Specialist at 1-800-808-6325.

7. Do directly certified students become eligible for verification?

No, only 3 percent of the number of approved *paper or electronic* applications as of Oct. 1 must be verified. Students approved for meal benefits by direct certification and any siblings extended direct certification benefits are not subject to verification.

8. How long must Direct Certification documentation be kept?

All direct certification documentation must be kept for at least three years, plus the current year.

9. Non-Public Schools Upload File Requirements

Non-public schools must upload an initial enrollment list for the system to conduct matches. The file requirements are available at <https://wiki.ssd.t.ohio.org/display/oddex/Upload>.

Prototype Direct Certification Eligibility Notification Letter
(Put on Sponsor Letterhead)

**NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH AND BREAKFAST PROGRAM
ELIGIBILITY NOTIFICATION LETTER**

Date:

Dear Parent/Guardian:

The National School Lunch and Breakfast Act allows school districts to directly certify students as eligible for free school meals using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Ohio Works First (OWF) or Medicaid information. Each student identified below is automatically approved for free meals based on his or her eligibility for SNAP, OWF or Medicaid or due to the SNAP, OWF or Medicaid eligibility of a sibling in the household. Please do not fill out a Free or Reduced-Price School Meals Application for the following student(s).

<u>Student Name</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Grade</u>
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If any of the information listed above is incorrect, or if you have any questions, please contact the school office. If there are other children in your household who are not listed above, they also qualify for FREE meals.

Please contact [insert name] at [insert telephone number] or [insert e-mail address] if:

- there are other children in your household who are not listed above, and you would like them to receive free meals at school;
- you do not want your children to have free meals; or
- you have any additional questions.

FREE HEALTH CARE: Families with children eligible for school meal benefits may be eligible for FREE health care coverage through Ohio’s Healthy Start & Healthy Families programs. These programs include coverage for doctor visits, immunizations, physicals, prescriptions, dental, vision, mental health, substance abuse and more. Please call **1-800-324-8680** for more information or to request an application. Information can also be found on the web at <https://medicaid.ohio.gov/FOR-OHIOANS/Programs/Children-Families-and-Women>. ***Note: If you have an Ohio Medicaid Card, you are already receiving these services.**

Sincerely,

Local School Official

If you **DO NOT** want your student to receive these school meal benefits, please fill out, detach, and return the statement below to this office.

I DO NOT want my student (student's name) to receive free meals.

Signature of the parent or guardian	DATE:
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SCHOOL INSTRUCTIONAL FEE WAIVER ADULT CONSENT: Your child(ren) may qualify for a waiver of their school instructional fees. Your permission is required to share your meal application information with school officials to determine if your child(ren) qualifies for a fee waiver. Answering this question will not change whether your children will receive free or reduced-price meals.

Please check a box:

- Yes, I agree to have my meal application used to determine if my child(ren) qualifies for a fee waiver.
- No, I do not agree to have my meal application used to determine if my child(ren) qualifies for a fee waiver.

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____ Date: _____

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3. **email:**
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**Prototype Medicaid Reduced Direct Certification Eligibility
Notification Letter**

**NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH AND BREAKFAST
PROGRAM MEDICAID REDUCED-PRICE ELIGIBILITY
NOTIFICATION LETTER**

Date:

Dear Parent/Guardian:

The National School Lunch and Breakfast Act allows school districts to directly certify students as eligible for reduced-price meals using Medicaid information. The Ohio State Department of Education (ODE) has been approved to participate in the United States Department of Agriculture’s *Demonstration Project to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid*. Each student identified below is automatically approved for reduced-price meals based on his or her eligibility for Medicaid or due to the Medicaid eligibility of a sibling in the household. Although your children are eligible for reduced-price benefits, your total household income and household size may make your children eligible for free benefits. Therefore, you may wish to complete and submit the attached meal application. Please refer to the Income Eligibility Guidelines on the next page for more information. Note that your children’s reduced-price eligibility will continue unless an application is submitted and determined to be eligible for free meals.

<u>Student Name</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Grade</u>
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If any of the information listed above is incorrect, or if you have any questions, please contact the school office. If there are other children in your household who are not listed above, they also qualify for reduced-price meals.

Please contact **[insert name]** at **[insert telephone number]** or **[insert e-mail address]** if:

- there are other children in your household who are not listed above, and you would like them to receive reduced-price meals at school;
- you do not want your children to have reduced-price meals; or
- you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,

Local School Official

If you **DO NOT** want your student to receive these school meal benefits, please fill out, and return the statement below to this office.

I DO NOT want my student (student's name) to receive free meals.

Signature of parent or guardian	DATE:
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SCHOOL INSTRUCTIONAL FEE WAIVER ADULT CONSENT: Your child(ren) may qualify for a waiver of their school instructional fees. Your permission is required to share your meal application information with school officials to determine if your child(ren) qualifies for a fee waiver. Answering this question will not change whether your children will receive free or reduced-price meals.

Please check a box:

- Yes, I agree to have my meal application used to determine if my child(ren) qualifies for a fee waiver.
- No, I do not agree to have my meal application used to determine if my child(ren) qualifies for a fee waiver.

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____ Date: _____

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