



KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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KENTUCKY WINS NATIONAL CHILD NUTRITION AWARD

(Frankfort, KY) – The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service has selected the Kentucky Department of Education's Division of School and Community Nutrition to receive an award for outstanding service in child nutrition.

The Direct Certification Performance Award, established under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, goes to states for outstanding performance in directly certifying children for free school meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). To be eligible for the award, states had to meet the federally mandated 90 percent benchmark for direct certification in the 2012-13 school year, be among those with the highest direct certification performance rates for the year and no longer use presentation of a letter as a method for direct certification.

"This award means one of the most basic needs of Kentucky's school children is being met," said Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday. "Hungry children can't learn, and we have an obligation to ensure that all children who qualify receive free meals through the school lunch program," Holliday said.

Children from households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for free school meals. In addition, children who are migrants, runaways or homeless, who are in foster care or who are enrolled in Head Start or Even Start are categorically eligible for free meals. Student eligibility must be verified by application or direct certification.

The 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants And Children) Reauthorization Act required state education agencies to establish systems to directly certify children from households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits without the need for paper applications.

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In the 2012-13 school year, Kentucky was one of 10 jurisdictions to directly certify 100 percent of SNAP-participating children for free school meals. That represents a 24 percentage point increase from the 2011-12 school year. The improvements in state direct certifications resulted from increasing data security and the frequency of the match process.

The national average for direct certification is 89 percent. Nationally, 12.3 million school-age SNAP participants were directly certified for free school meals in the 2012-13 school year, an increase of 6 percent from 2011-12.

Direct certification systems match student enrollment lists against SNAP agency records and the records of other assistance agencies whose participants are eligible for free meals. The matching system requires no action by the children's parents or guardians.

Kentucky uses a local matching system and offers flexibility to districts in the direct certification matching process. Every month, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services provides the Kentucky Department of Education with a file of SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid data as well as a separate file of foster care children. The department's Office of Knowledge, Information and Data Services adds student identifier data elements that allow for matching with local enrollment records. In nearly all districts, this is done by computer; smaller private schools conduct manual matching.

The Direct Certification Performance Award comes with almost \$239,000, which must be spent to benefit the School Nutrition Program. KDE plans to use the direct certification award money to continue to improve the process of directly certifying children.

This is the second year in a row the state has been recognized for outstanding work in direct certifications. Last year, the USDA recognized Kentucky with a Substantial Improvement Award in the amount of almost \$215,000.

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