

Date

Name

Title

Agency

Address

Address

Dear Mr./Ms. Name:

This letter requests your support to assist school districts in your county to directly certify eligible children for free school meals. California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), a statewide nutrition policy and advocacy organization, is coordinating with the California Department of Social Services and the California Department of Education to increase the number of low-income children participating in meal programs in California's schools.

The National School Lunch Act (NSLA) contains a provision that gives districts the opportunity to directly certify students for eligibility to receive free school meals. Under the direct certification provision, a district may contact the county welfare department to obtain information on children receiving either Food Stamp or CalWORKs benefits. When this information is obtained, the school district may then approve free meals for qualifying children; an application for free or reduced price meals is not required if this simplified process is used.

Direct certification has many benefits:

- The number of low-income children obtaining nutritious school meals may increase;
- The nutritious meals benefit the child's health; and
- Research indicates that well-nourished children have fewer behavioral problems in school, lower absenteeism, and better academic performance, including higher test scores.

Currently, there are 14 counties in California where no school districts use direct certification to qualify children for free meals. Of the 44 remaining counties, none use direct certification in all of their school districts.

What can county welfare departments do to help children gain access to free meals?

We encourage you to designate an individual in your office to serve as a contact for implementing direct certification countywide. Your active participation will assist the school districts in your county to certify eligible children. The designated direct certification contact may assist by, for example:

- Contacting your local school districts' food service directors to establish communication and share Food Stamp or CalWORKs enrollment; and
- Establishing an annual protocol for data matching within your agency.

To assist you in this, CFPA can provide you with the following tools:

- A list of school districts that have not implemented direct certification; their enrollments and numbers of free and reduced-price eligible students (the list can be e-mailed to you or accessed via CFPA's web page at www.cfpa.net);
- Mailing labels for each school district (also available via e-mail or web);
- A sample letter to use when contacting your local school districts;
- A fact sheet on direct certification; and
- A list of CFPA staff.

If you have any questions on these materials, would like more information on CFPA's efforts on behalf of direct certification, or would like to request support as you implement direct certification, please contact Claudia Martinez-Concha, CFPA Policy Analyst, at (415) 777-4422 ext. 107, or one of the regional CFPA staff members listed on the attached CFPA list. Please also contact CFPA concerning any changes to your mailing information.

You may also contact the California Department of Education to obtain technical assistance or additional information regarding the direct certification process. Please contact Evonne Morrissey, Program Analyst, School Nutrition Programs Unit, at (916) 322-8315, (800) 952-5609, or emorriss@cde.ca.gov.

Thank you for your assistance and commitment to improving the nutrition and health of California's children.

Sincerely,

Claudia Martinez-Concha, Senior Policy
Analyst
California Food Policy Advocates

Marilyn Briggs, Director
Nutrition Services Division
California Department of Education

Enclosures