

APPENDIX D
INTRODUCTORY MATERIALS

- 1. Introductory Letter to Child Nutrition Director**

Letter to State Child Nutrition Program Directors

MATHEMATICA
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[DATE]

[NAME]
[TITLE]
[ADDRESS]

Dear [Salutation, NAME]:

Mathematica Policy Research is conducting a national survey for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), as part of a study called the *National School Lunch Program Direct Certification Improvement Study*. The purpose of the study is to provide FNS with a comprehensive picture of the direct certification practices employed by States and districts and to explore the relationship between these practices and overall direct certification performance measures. In addition, the study will seek to identify continuous improvement methods in data matching and tools to increase matching rates for all types of direct certification processes used by States or districts. The attached materials provide more information about the study.

We are asking your agency to help with this important study by completing an online survey which takes approximately [65/60/20] minutes to complete. To access the survey, please log on to www.XXXXX.com. You will be asked for your *Login Identification Number* and *Password*, which are indicated below.

Login Identification Number: «username»
Password: «password»

The survey is designed to be completed by the State Child Nutrition program director or a designated member of your staff who has knowledge of direct certification procedures. We encourage you to circulate the survey among appropriate staff, if necessary, to obtain all responses. Participation is voluntary and the information you provide will be kept private to the extent allowed by law.

We thank you in advance for your important contribution to this research. If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact Kevin Conway, the study director, by email at kconway@mathematica-mpr.com or by telephone at 609-750-4083. You can also contact Joseph Robare, the FNS project officer, by email at Joseph.Robare@fns.usda.gov or by telephone at 703-305-2128.

Sincerely,

2. Project Description

National School Lunch Program Direct Certification Improvement Study

The Issue

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has tasked Mathematica Policy Research to conduct an NSLP direct certification improvement study in an effort to provide a comprehensive picture of the direct certification methods employed across the country. Such information will be useful in helping FNS, State child nutrition directors, and districts recognize promising trends, understand new approaches, and identify steps needed for continuous improvement of their direct certification efforts.

Study Objectives

The key study objectives are to describe current direct certification processes and procedures employed by States and districts; explore the relationship between these methods and overall direct certification performance measures; and identify steps for continuous improvement in data-matching techniques and tools to increase matching rates.

Study Activities

National survey of direct certification practices of all 50 States, the District of Columbia, five territories, and districts in district-level data matching States. The survey design tailors questions based on a State’s data-matching method (State- or district-level) and the level of respondent (State or district). The survey will gather detailed information on key areas of direct certification in order to fully address the study objectives and research questions.

In-depth case studies in seven States and selected districts. In each participating State, Mathematica will conduct site visits to interview program and technical staff involved in direct certification at the State and district levels. The study team will gather technical information about data-matching system characteristics; probe the potential use of Medicaid data for direct certification; and explore the issues, challenges, and potential solutions to barriers that impede efforts to directly certify all eligible SNAP participants.

Exploring records of unmatched SNAP participants. Mathematica will collect SNAP participant data from the in-depth case study States and perform a descriptive analysis of the unmatched participant population. We will also collect NSLP applications from a sample of districts within those seven States and match them to the SNAP participant data that were used for direct certification. The collection of NSLP applications and SNAP participants will form the basis for the analysis of the accuracy of the matches and provide insight into how data matching could be improved.

Analysis and reporting. Mathematica will conduct a thorough analysis of all primary and extant data assembled for this project. The results of our analysis will be synthesized in:

- A final report that will provide an updated nationwide profile of direct certification methods, direct certification rates by method, trends, process improvements, and a discussion of barriers and challenges encountered.
- A metadata repository prototype that will serve as a “one-stop” for the most up-to-date information on data-matching information systems and database characteristics to facilitate improved direct certification systems in each State and LEA.
- A separate report that will describe unmatched SNAP records from in-depth study States, and detail an independent match of SNAP records used for direct certification with children listed on categorically approved applications. The analysis will examine the limitations of direct certification and explore the reasons for nonmatches.

To Find Out More

Contact Mathematica’s study director, Kevin Conway, by phone at (609) 750-4083 or by email at kconway@mathematica-mpr.com.

3. Frequently Asked Questions

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Who is conducting this study?

This study is being conducted by Mathematic Policy Research with funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

2. What is this study about?

The purpose of this study is to describe current direct certification processes and procedures employed by states and districts; to explore the relationship between these methods and overall direct certification performance measures; and, to identify steps for continuous improvement in data-matching techniques and tools to increase matching rates, no matter the direct certification method employed. This study will build on the knowledge already accumulated from previous studies by examining current methods of direct certification used by states and districts and will also address topics such as planned changes to direct certification procedures, experiences interacting with State data systems, characteristics of the systems used, and challenges in attaining high matching rates.

Under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, FNS has authority to conduct this study under its responsibility for the development and implementation of national policy for the National School Lunch Program, including the promulgation of regulations, monitoring State operations, review and reimbursement of State and local expenditures, and program evaluations. States and districts, as well as schools and other institutions, participating in the NSLP are expected to cooperate with officials and contractors acting on behalf of FNS, in the conduct of evaluations and studies under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966.

3. How will data be collected for this study?

This study includes three primary data collection methods: (1) a National Survey of Direct Certification practices; (2) in-depth case studies in seven States, and (3) a review of records of unmatched SNAP records and NSLP applications from a sample of States and districts within the seven in-depth study States.

4. How were States and districts selected for this study?

A key aim of this study is to obtain a national census of NSLP direct certification practices. As such, the study includes all 50 States, the District of Columbia, the five territories and every districts in States that are using district-level matching. The national census will be conducted via a web-based survey. The survey will make effective use of “skips” to ensure each respondent is answering questions that are relevant to the direct certification methods that they employ. Doing so will help to reduce the overall burden on each respondent.

A more in-depth study will take place in seven States that were selected using an NSLP direct certification index. Two districts will be selected within each of the seven States for a site visit and interviews; while other districts will also be randomly selected for participating in the unmatched records analysis component of the study.

5. What will the final product of this study be?

The study team will produce two final reports. The main report will provide the results of the national survey and the information collected from the in-depth study States. It will provide a background of NSLP direct certification and data matching; discuss the results of the national survey; provide details from each of the in-depth study States; and, conclude with a discussion of best practices and lessons learned. The second report will be focused on unmatched SNAP records and the data matching of categorically eligible NSLP applications using the State/district matching algorithm, as well as probabilistic matching. In addition to these findings, we will identify key strengths and weaknesses of current data matching practices, and provide recommendations for improving direct certification practices.

In addition, the study may include two additional short reports. The first report would include an estimate of the national and State direct certification rates to identify the critical factors that influence higher matching rates. The second report would develop a matrix to categorize States based on their data matching processes and develop model plans for each type of State to lay the groundwork for continuous improvement.

6. Will anyone find out about what I say in this study?

The results of the study will be synthesized in a final report. The information that you provide to this study will be kept private to the extent allowed by law. Results will be reported only at the State level, and the names of participating districts will not be revealed. It is possible that informed individuals may be able to infer the identity of respondents at the State level from the types of information provided, but we will not report names of respondents.

7. Why am I being asked to participate?

In order to meet this study's objectives the majority of the data will be collected through the national survey of States and districts. Without your participation, we would not get a clear picture of the data matching efforts in your State and/or district, and would lose valuable information that can help other States develop and refine data matching initiatives in the future.

8. How long will it take to complete the survey?

The length of the survey depends on the respondent and, for districts, whether the district was randomly selected for a longer version of the survey:

State Child Nutrition Agencies	65 minutes
Districts (in States with District-level matching): Long form Short form	60 minutes 20 minutes

9. Do I need to get permission from FNS to participate in the study?

This project is being funded by FNS. They are aware that we are asking for your participation in this study. If you would like to contact them about this study, you may contact, Joseph Robare, the Project Officer at FNS, at Joseph.Robare@fns.usda.gov or by telephone at 703-305-2128.

10. Do I have to participate in the study?

Your feedback is appreciated by and informative to FNS but is not required. Mathematica and FNS have made efforts to minimize the burden that collecting this information will place on you and other respondents in an effort to make your participation as easy as possible.

11. Is there someone I can call to get more information?

Yes, for more information you may contact Kevin Conway, the Project Director at Mathematica, at 609-484-4523 or kconway@mathematica-mpr.com, or Joseph Robare, the Project Officer at FNS, at 703-305-2128 or Joseph.Robare@fns.usda.gov

12. Does this project have OMB clearance?

Yes, this study obtained OMB clearance on [MONTH XX, 2012]. The OMB approval number is 0584-0529, and clearance expires on [MONTH XX, 2012].