



Direct Certification:
Simplifying the school meal program by
utilizing technology, reducing paperwork, and
making sure eligible students receive meals

Produced 2012



Planning Grant Overview

Direct Certification (DC) is the process by which children are deemed “categorically eligible” for free meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The 2008-2009 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Report to Congress, noted there were twenty-six States with DC rates at or below the national median DC rate of 71%. Wisconsin was included in this group. In 2011, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) was awarded a Planning Grant from the USDA to help learn why Wisconsin’s DC rate remained lower than other states. This grant project was carried out by Covering Kids & Families-Wisconsin (CKF), based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. CKF worked with DPI and the Department of Children & Families (DCF) to explore current DC practices and challenges experienced by School Food Authorities (SFAs). Analysis was informed through four data and information collection activities: surveys, site visits, interviews and reviews of others states’ DC processes. A survey of SFAs in Wisconsin resulted in a tremendous response rate from both public and private agencies and provided valuable insights into how well SFAs are handling DC in Wisconsin. The survey found SFA staffs are well-versed in and supportive of the reasons why DC has been put in place and mandated. Additionally, the survey found that:

- Nearly 9/10 survey respondents were aware that DC can be run more than once per year
- Most SFAs typically produce their first DC run from July through September
- More than two-thirds of SFA staff running DC have 2-5 years’ experience and come from a wide variety of positions within the SFA

CKF staff visited with 71 SFAs located in 11 of 12 regional Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs). Despite challenges agencies faced successfully completing the process, many believed that the process was going well and were surprised that Wisconsin was not achieving a higher certification rate. Overwhelmingly, interviewees said that DC is:

- Worthwhile
- More efficient than paper applications
- Much improved via the introduction of an online submission process

CKF staff compared Wisconsin DC practices to those carried out in nine other states: Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, and North Carolina. Many of the DC enhancements found in other states were often also suggestions generated through the project survey, site visits, or meeting with DPI and DCF staff.

Recommendations for Implementation

Through the planning grant, CKF and DPI identified several improvements that could be made to capture more eligible children with the DC process and further improve Wisconsin’s DC rate. Taking into consideration all findings, CKF and DPI developed recommendations for inclusion in an Implementation Grant proposal to USDA. Broadly, recommendations can be categorized under the following three objectives:

1. Develop, modify, and implement **informational trainings, resources and support** that better address existing DC challenges experienced by SFAs as well as be able to more quickly respond to new challenges as they emerge.
2. Explore, test, and integrate **new technology** that can address existing DC challenges by simplifying the workload of SFAs.
3. Develop or more fully implement means by which to provide **additional support and accountability** to SFAs.

Direct Certification is intended to remove administrative barriers that may prevent eligible students from receiving free meals at school. By using the web-based matching for DC, schools have a quick way to enroll eligible children in free meals, reducing paperwork for both schools and families and getting children started with benefits as soon as possible. Improvements will help SFAs increase their capacity to consistently run DC as efficiently and frequently as possible, ultimately improving Wisconsin’s DC process and increasing the statewide certification rate.

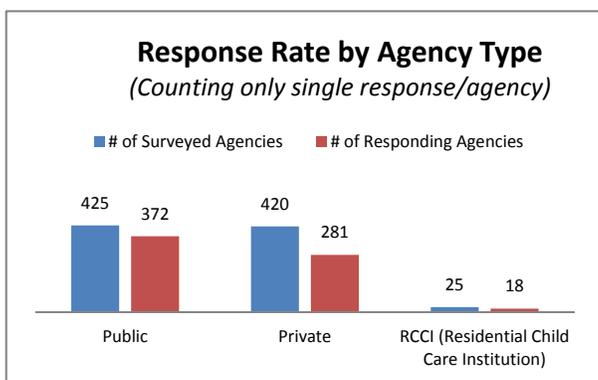
Wisconsin's Direct Certification (DC) System

Children in households receiving benefits through the Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and, in some cases, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) are categorically eligible for an SFA's free meal program. Directly certifying categorically eligible children ensures they receive free NSLP and School Breakfast Program meals without further need for the household to submit an application. The components of and processes for DC systems vary by state and even by local School Food Authority (SFA) within the state. This contributes to variation in the extent to which all eligible children are actually certified to receive free school meals.

Largely, individual schools and districts make local decisions about how they would like to administer school meal programs. As a result, contracts with DPI often include SFAs that are comprised of a variety of public school districts, individual private schools, and agencies serving school-age children (i.e. residential child caring institutions, juvenile detention centers). In Wisconsin, SFAs may conduct DC as often as they wish, as long as the process is run, at a minimum, during federally required time periods each year. The number of times an SFA runs the DC process varies widely throughout the state. In order to capture the greatest number of eligible students, SFAs have been instructed by DPI to wait to conduct their first direct certification run after July 1 of each year—but before the first day of school.

The State of Wisconsin's DC system is primarily supported by DPI and DCF. These agencies collaborate to assist schools in conducting the DC process via a web-based system. DPI administers the NSLP and provides support and training on the policies related to DC; whereas DCF provides technical assistance to users and maintains the State's DC web-based system.

Assessment of Existing DC Processes in Wisconsin



DPI worked with CKF to explore current DC practices and challenges experienced by SFAs and state agencies, including DPI and DCF. Analysis was informed through SFA surveys and site visits, along with interviews and reviews of other states' DC processes. **An electronic survey** was distributed to persons identified as the DC contact for all 870 SFAs participating in the NSLP in Wisconsin. The survey received responses from one or more staff in 671 of the 870 SFAs in Wisconsin, a response rate of 77%. Schools of all sizes were well represented, though a relatively larger percentage of public school and RCCI representatives responded to the survey compared to private schools.

Using information collected through the survey, several dozen SFAs were identified and selected for invitation to participate in a site visit. Sites were selected to capture an adequate representation of variation in student population size, geographic locality, urban/suburban/rural locality, public/private funding, ability to run DC at least once and personal assessment of the extent of difficulty experienced with the process. Over a period of seven weeks, **CKF conducted 71 site visits and interviewed 16 additional SFA contacts**. Interview questions were similar to those asked during the survey, but with greater emphasis on understanding the step-by-step process of how each SFA representative handles DC. This approach revealed elements of the process that varied widely among SFAs as well as specific challenges and how they were (or were not) addressed.

To put additional context to the challenges faced by SFAs in Wisconsin and to consider solutions implemented by other states seeking to improve their DC process, **CKF conducted phone interviews with two states, Indiana and Kansas**. These states were selected because they have a similar number of SFAs as Wisconsin as well as a similar procedure for matching student information to SNAP data. In addition, both Indiana and Kansas had higher DC matching rates than Wisconsin as of school year 2009-10.

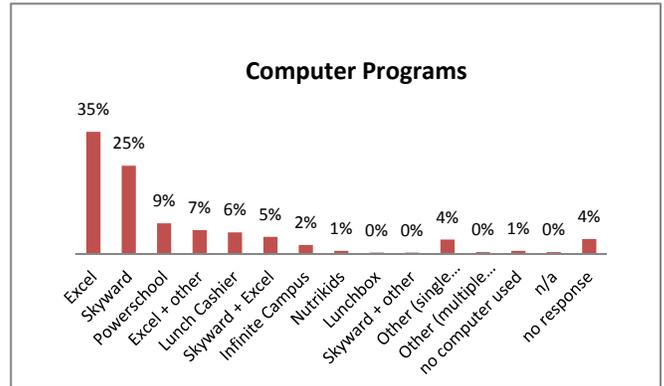
Upon completion of SFA site visits and phone interviews, CKF met with two DCF staff charged with matching SFA student data with state SNAP and TANF participation files to discuss details of the data match process, and possible solutions to challenges that involve database systems and other technology. CKF additionally met with DPI staff to discuss state agency staff perspectives on challenges faced by SFAs, viability of solutions proposed by SFA staff, and additional solutions not yet considered.

Key Findings

Survey

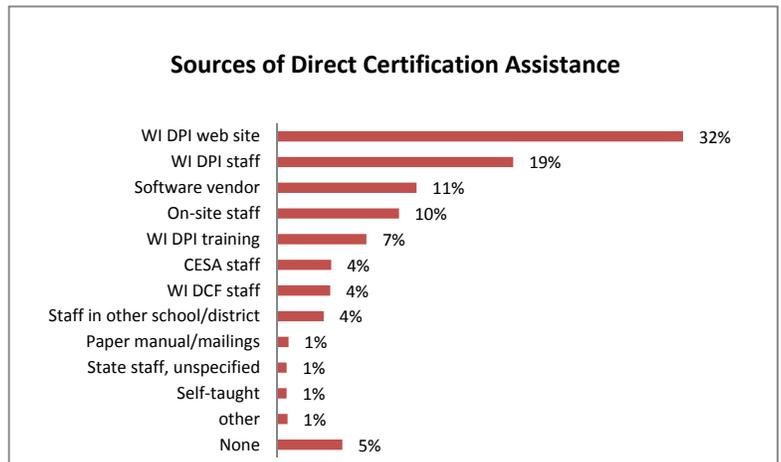
The survey responses provided a relatively clear picture of how DC was working overall in Wisconsin and areas where more details would be needed. In short, DC is relatively well understood and well executed. This is especially notable given that the staffs charged with running DC are highly varied in terms of both position and experience, and they are working with numerous computer programs. More specifically, the survey revealed:

- At least **one-third of SFAs do not currently run the program more than once a year.**
- Running DC is a **one or two person affair** at a given SFA and a **wide variety of positions** are tasked with executing a DC run.
- **Skyward** is the most frequently used DC computer program and close to half (47%) of respondents indicated they use **Microsoft Excel** exclusively or in combination with a school-specific software package.
- Nearly 40% mentioned the **DPI web site and/or DPI training** as their source for information.
- The single most frequently mentioned request for trainings or assistance was to have **in-person trainings and/or webinars** available to SFA staff. Several SFA staff used the survey to indicate they would like guidance on resolving “near-matches.”



Site Visits and Interviews with SFA Persons Responsible for Running Direct Certification

CKF staff visited with 19 private schools and 52 public school districts located in 11 of 12 regional CESAs in spring 2011. Student enrollment in these schools and districts ranged from 44 to 80,000. Overwhelmingly, interviewees said that DC is **worthwhile, efficient and a better process than in the past.** The challenge of **unresolved near matches** was one of the most common problems identified during CKF’s site visits with SFAs. Overall, the site visits allowed CKF to identify commonly experienced barriers which likely delay or prevent students from being appropriately directly certified for free school meals.



Review of other states’ direct certification processes

The final activity of the planning grant included identifying promising DC practices used in other states and the benefits of implementing any of those practices in Wisconsin to boost certification rates. CKF staff compared Wisconsin DC practices to those carried out in nine other states and conducted phone interviews with school nutrition directors in Kansas and Indiana. The conversations covered questions surrounding overall process of generating matches between school and state administrative data; division of labor and workload; the amount of training and technical assistance provided by the state; and which improvement(s) might be most responsible for boosting overall state DC rates.