



UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MEDICAID AND SCHOOL MEALS

Medicaid increases students' access to free and reduced-price school meals by removing the barriers associated with application and approval for free or reduced-price eligibility.

Rather than requiring families to complete and schools/districts to collect and process free and reduced-price (FRP) school meals applications, a process called **direct certification** can be used to identify students who are participating in federal, means-tested programs and approve those students for FRP meals without completing an application. In [most states](#), Medicaid is one of the programs that can be used for direct certification. Starting in the 2023-2024 school year, 39 states will be participating in direct certification through Medicaid (DC-M). [1]

At the state level, direct certification through Medicaid (DC-M) has increased eligibility for free meals by up to 17.1% and reduced-price meals by up to 6.7%. [2]

During the Medicaid “unwinding” process, millions of children are projected to lose access to Medicaid, decreasing the number of children directly certified for FRP meals.

Medicaid “unwinding” removes the **continuous enrollment** requirement that kept millions of people enrolled in Medicaid throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. [3] States have begun the process of requiring households to reapply for Medicaid, a process expected to result in 5 million children losing access to Medicaid. [4] Consequently, many school-aged children may lose their direct certification for FRP meals.

Increasing access to school meals through DC-M can improve school/district finances.

Increased access to school meals has positive impacts on funding for school nutrition programs as well as other operational areas. A study of schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), an option for schools and districts to provide meals to all students at no cost, found that this elimination of cost resulted in significant increases in both school breakfast and school lunch participation, which can increase revenue from these meal programs. [6] Increased direct certification numbers leads to reduced or eliminated co-payment for school meals, decreasing the likelihood and magnitude of unpaid school meals debt. The proportion of students verified for FRP meals has implications for the accessibility of federally reimbursed out-of-school-time child nutrition programs, including afterschool and summer meals. Increasing the number of students verified for FRP meals may also increase the funding that schools receive through federal programs such as [Title I](#) and [E-Rate](#).

During the Medicaid unwinding, you can support access to school meals by encouraging families to ensure that their household information is up to date with state Medicaid offices and look for and complete renewal forms.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has a [Back-to-School & School-Based Outreach portal](#) to support Medicaid renewal. Resources are available in multiple languages and include fact sheets, social media templates, and printables.

Here are some ways schools/districts can help students and households maintain their Medicaid coverage:

- **Send Medicaid information to families** through resource packets and newsletters, and at back-to-school nights and other events.
- **Work with state Medicaid staff and community-based organizations** to provide Medicaid application assistance.
- **Share information wherever parents and caregivers go**, including public places such as libraries, grocery stores, and other community sites.

References

- [1] USDA: "National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program Demonstration Projects to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid." <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/direct-certification-medicaid-demonstration-project>
- [2] USDA: "USDA Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCM-F/RP) Demonstration, School Year 2019–2020." <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/NSLPDirectCertification2019-2020.pdf>
- [3] Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services: "Unwinding and Returning to Regular Operations after COVID-19." <https://www.medicare.gov/resources-for-states/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/unwinding-and-returning-regular-operations-after-covid-19/index.html>
- [4] Georgetown University Center for Children and Families: "New CBO Estimates of the Impact of Unwinding on Medicaid Enrollment, Uninsured." <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2023/05/31/new-cbo-estimates-of-the-impact-of-unwinding-on-medicaid-enrollment-uninsured/>
- [5] Schirm, A.L. & Kirkendall, M.J. (2012). Using American Community Survey Data to Expand Access to the School Meals Programs. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/13409>.
- [6] USDA: "Community Eligibility Provision (CEP): Planning & Implementation Guidance." https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/cn/SP61-2016-CEP_Guidance.pdf