



Public Use File Documentation for Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCM-F/RP), School Year 2019–2020

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I. Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCM-F/RP)

A. Background

The demonstration of Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCM-F/RP) allows authorized States and school districts to use information from Medicaid files to identify students eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) contracted with Mathematica to conduct a study of the early years of this demonstration to describe the implementation process and explore the effects on certification, participation, Federal reimbursements, and State administrative costs. The data in this public use file were collected during school year (SY) 2016–2017, SY 2017–2018, and SY 2019–2020.¹

B. Study design and sample

FNS solicited applications and selected 15 States to participate in the DCM-F/RP demonstration. Cohort 1 comprises the six States that began conducting DCM-F/RP statewide in SY 2016–2017: Florida, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.² Cohort 2 includes the eight new States that joined in SY 2017–2018: Connecticut, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada (which did not certify students through DCM-F/RP until SY 2018–2019), Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin.¹ California, which expanded its implementation of DCM-F/RP from 14 districts in the first year to statewide in the second year, is treated as a Cohort 2 State in most analyses (and in the district-level data files).

The 15 States implemented DCM-F/RP in all school districts statewide in SY 2019–2020. The evaluation sample included all school districts, with the following exceptions:

- Districts missing all certification data or all participation data for either the baseline year or SY 2019–2020. Based on their names, the majority of these appeared to be charter schools, private schools, or facilities serving special populations rather than regular public school districts.
- Districts composed entirely of Residential Child Care Institutions (RCCIs) that had no certified students.
- Districts where the number of students enrolled was reported as zero or missing.
- Districts with serious data problems—such as inconsistencies or missing values in key variables—that could not be resolved.
- Districts missing secondary data used as covariates in regressions.
- The 14 California districts that participated in DCM-F/RP before SY 2017–2018. These districts could not be included in the Cohort 2 analysis with the other districts in the State because they had different baseline years, and they could not be analyzed separately due to insufficient statistical power.

¹ The data also include information for a baseline year, which was SY 2015–2016 for Cohort 1 States.

² Two of these States—Florida and Massachusetts—also participated in the previous DCM demonstration. In these States, DCM-F/RP would affect only outcomes related to reduced-price meals.

- Private schools in Virginia. Because Virginia did not initially include private schools in the DCM-F/RP demonstration, they were not included in the evaluation. Private schools were included in the sample in other States.

The evaluation used a pre-post study design. It measured the effects of the demonstration on percentages of students certified, participation (numbers of meals served), and Federal reimbursements by comparing the outcomes in the year before the demonstration to the outcomes in SY 2019–2020.

C. Data collection

To explore the effects of DCM-F/RP, the evaluation collected administrative data on certification and school meal participation for each district. To enable pre-post comparisons, the State child nutrition agency in each demonstration State provided data for a baseline school year and the years of the demonstration, SY 2016–2017, SY 2017–2018, and SY 2019–2020. The baseline year is the year before the statewide implementation of the demonstration: SY 2015–2016 for Cohort 1 States and SY 2016–2017 for most Cohort 2 States (including California), and SY 2017–2018 for Nevada.

Core certification data. We collected data on certification status, method, and basis, including data elements reported on form FNS-742, plus the numbers of students directly certified for free meals and for reduced-price meals on the basis of Medicaid.³ For the baseline year and SY 2019–2020, the reference date for the certification data provided is the last operating day in October, the date used for the FNS-742, because the data for that point in time were most readily available.⁴ The core certification data elements collected include the following:

- Total number of students enrolled in the district
- Number of students certified for free meals
- Number of students certified for reduced-price meals
- Number of students certified by each method of certification (that is, application or direct certification)
 - Number of students certified by application, by basis of eligibility (that is, household income or categorical eligibility)
 - Number of students directly certified on the basis of each program (for example, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] or Medicaid)⁵

³ Not all States were able to provide all requested certification data elements for all districts. Iowa and Wisconsin had to be excluded from the analysis of reduced-price certification outcomes, and we had to estimate some of the key outcomes for Indiana, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. Notable subsets of districts in Indiana and Virginia had to be excluded from analyses because of data limitations.

⁴ The same time point was used for SY 2016–2017 and SY 2017–2018 data in States that had implemented the demonstration by October of the school year. However, States that conducted their first DCM-F/RP match after the end of October in their first year of implementation reported the data certification elements for that year as of about a month after their first DCM-F/RP match.

⁵ Most States provided the number of students who were certified to receive free meals but not subject to verification as a more readily available proxy for the number directly certified. In addition, although we also requested as complete a breakdown as available of the number of students directly certified by program, the information available for the baseline year was typically limited to the number of students certified based on SNAP and the number certified based on all programs other than SNAP.

Supplemental certification data. Only seven States—Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin—were able to provide additional administrative data on DCM-F/RP match results and prior certification information. Specifically, we collected information on the total number of students identified as eligible for free meals—and, separately, for reduced-price meals—on the basis of the DCM-F/RP match, regardless of whether this match was recorded as the basis of their certification status; and for each group, the program used as the basis for their direct certification.

NSLP/SBP participation data. For each district in the evaluation sample, we collected data from State child nutrition agencies on the total numbers of reimbursable lunches and breakfasts served, by reimbursement category (free, reduced-price, paid) in each month during the baseline year, SY 2016–2017 (for Cohort 1 States), SY 2017–2018, and SY 2019–2020. To facilitate analyses of Federal reimbursement costs, we also collected data on the numbers of meals in districts certified as meeting new regulations on school meal patterns and nutrition, which receive an extra six cents per lunch served, and the numbers reimbursed at the slightly higher “needs-based” NSLP rates or “severe-needs” SBP rates for which some districts or schools qualify.

Secondary data. We collected additional types of data from Federal websites. First, to use in computing reimbursement amounts, we collected publicly available Federal per-meal NSLP and SBP reimbursement rates from the FNS website (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/rates-reimbursement>). In addition, we collected information from public sources about district and county characteristics, which we used to control for changes in economic characteristics between the years and to improve the precision of the estimates of demonstration effects. In particular, we collected the following:

- Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE): annual county-level income and poverty rates
- Bureau of Labor Statistics Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS): monthly county-level unemployment rates

D. Key outcome measures

We used these data to construct outcome measures in three domains: certification, participation, and Federal reimbursements.

Certification outcomes. The most direct potential benefits DCM-F/RP offers to students and their families are (1) certification for free or reduced-price meals when they might otherwise pay a higher price for school meals and (2) certification without having to complete an application. Aligned with these benefits, our primary certification measures for each district are the following:

- Percentage of students certified for free meals on the basis of Medicaid
- Percentage of students certified for reduced-price meals on the basis of Medicaid
- Percentage of students directly certified for free meals
- Percentage of students certified for free meals
- Percentage of students certified for reduced-price meals

- Percentage of students attending Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools⁶

Each of these outcomes is measured for a point in October of the baseline year, for points in SY 2016–2017 (for Cohort 1 States) and SY 2017–2018 (except for Nevada) after the State conducted its first DCM-F/RP match, and for a point in October of SY 2019–2020.

Participation outcomes. Because the number of school meals served to students depends on the size of the district, as well as on the certification status and participation behavior of students, we focused on outcome measures that account for district size rather than compare raw numbers of meals served. Our primary participation measures, each defined separately for the lunch and breakfast programs, include the following:

- The percentage of meals served for free, defined as the number of meals reimbursed at the free rate divided by the total number of reimbursable meals served
- The percentage of meals served at a reduced price, defined as the number of meals reimbursed at the reduced-price rate divided by the total number of reimbursable meals served
- Average daily participation, defined as the total number of reimbursable meals served divided by the product of the total number of students enrolled in the district and the number of operating days during the relevant time period

Because the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in substantial changes to school meal program operations in many locations beginning in March 2020, we defined each participation outcome based on the earlier months of the school year. Specifically, we aggregated numbers of meals across months from the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year through February 2020. For comparability, the baseline measures cover the same set of months for the baseline school year.

Federal reimbursement outcomes. Our primary measures of the impact of DCM-F/RP on Federal reimbursements are also defined to control for the size of districts and computed separately for the lunch and breakfast programs, using the same set of months as used for the participation outcomes:

- The blended reimbursement rate (BRR), defined as total Federal reimbursements divided by the number of meals served; the BRR measures the average reimbursement per meal served
- Reimbursements per student per school day, defined as total Federal reimbursements for meals served to students divided by the product of the total number of students enrolled in the district and the number of operating days in the relevant set of months

Both measures also depend on the FNS reimbursement rates, which vary by meal type. Reimbursement rates increase each year, so to control for this aspect of variation that is unrelated to the demonstration in the pre-post analyses, we used SY 2015–2016 reimbursement rates for each meal type in computing these measures for all years.⁷

⁶ Under the CEP, authorized school districts and schools in high-poverty areas do not certify individual students each year but rather serve meals at no cost to all students. CEP districts and schools receive the Federal free reimbursement rate for between 64 and 100 percent of meals served—depending on the percentage of identified students (those certified for free meals through means other than applications)—and receive the lower, paid reimbursement rate for the remaining meals.

⁷ Reimbursement rates for SY 2015–2016 were taken from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/rates-reimbursement>.

E. Data limitations

There are several limitations related to the data available for the evaluation. Specific certification data elements were unavailable for some States or districts; thus, Iowa and Wisconsin had to be excluded from analyses of reduced-price certification outcomes, and other key measures for Indiana, Nebraska, and Wisconsin had to be estimated by combining data sources. In addition, some districts—including notable subsets in Indiana and Virginia—were excluded from the analysis sample due to incomplete or erroneous administrative data, and those omitted districts might differ systematically from districts for which data were available. The data could have other errors that we were not able to detect.

F. Key findings

The findings from the final year of the evaluation, which are discussed in a report published by FNS (Hulsey et al. 2022), are summarized here. Findings from the first two years of the demonstration are discussed in two earlier reports (Hulsey et al. 2019, 2020).

Certification. Substantial numbers of students were directly certified through DCM-F/RP in SY 2017–2018. Across the 13 States that did not participate in the previous DCM demonstration, more than 1.2 million students were directly certified for free meals based on Medicaid data. An additional 240,000 students were directly certified for reduced-price meals through DCM-F/RP in the 13 States where that outcome was measured.

In terms of percentages, 2.1 to 17.1 percent of enrolled students were directly certified for free meals through DCM-F/RP in the 13 States that did not participate in the previous DCM demonstration, whereas 0 percent were directly certified based on Medicaid in the baseline year. (For comparison, 4.5 to 30.2 percent of students were directly certified for free meals based on any program in these States, so DCM-F/RP represents a sizable portion of all direct certifications.) Between less than 0.1 and 6.7 percent of students were directly certified for reduced-price meals based on DCM-F/RP in the 13 States where that outcome was measured. For these two outcomes, because no students were certified through DCM-F/RP in these States in the baseline year, the full change between baseline and SY 2019–2020 is attributable to the demonstration, although experiences in other years or other States could differ.

Although some students directly certified through Medicaid would have been certified for free or reduced-price meals by application in the absence of the demonstration, overall certification rates—including students certified by application as well as those directly certified—improved during DCM-F/RP implementation in a few States, and CEP participation increased in several others. Two of the 13 States that did not participate in the previous DCM demonstration had statistically significant increases (of 2.8 to 3.2 percentage points) in the total percentage of students individually certified for free meals. Four States saw statistically significant decreases in this outcome because there were even larger increases in the percentage of students attending CEP schools. Increases in the percentage of students attending CEP schools ranged from 3.1 to 43.1 percentage points across these four States and three others. CEP schools serve all meals for free, but because they do not certify individual students, increases in CEP participation can drive down certification rates for free and reduced-price meals. The total percentage of students certified for reduced-price meals decreased significantly in six States but increased significantly in two others.

Participation. For States with changes in certification rates or CEP participation between baseline and SY 2019–2020, those translated into changes in at least some participation outcomes. The seven States with increases in the percentage of students eligible to receive free meals—due to increases in CEP or

free certifications or both—all had statistically significant increases in the percentage of lunches served for free (ranging from 1.7 to 12.7 percentage points), and six of those States also had increases in the percentage of breakfasts served for free (ranging from 2.3 to 13.8 percentage points). These increases were typically accompanied by smaller decreases in the percentage of meals served at a reduced price: for lunch in six of the States (ranging from 1.5 to 3.9 percentage points) and for breakfast in all seven (ranging from 0.9 to 4.3 percentage points). For both breakfasts and lunches, in each State where the percentage of meals served for free increased, this increase was larger than any decrease in the percentage served at a reduced price, indicating an increase in the overall percentage of meals served for free or at a reduced price.

Four States without changes in the percentage of students receiving free meals had a statistically significant change in at least one participation outcome. In Iowa, the percentage of lunches and breakfasts served for free increased between baseline and SY 2019–2020, and in Virginia these two outcomes decreased during the same period. The percentage of breakfasts served for free also decreased in Indiana, and the percentage of lunches served at a reduced price decreased in Utah. Because DCM-F/RP was only expected to influence participation outcomes through effects on certification outcomes (including CEP), the inconsistent findings in these four States likely reflect factors unrelated to the demonstration. As noted above, although the statistical model used to estimate changes accounts for the influence of included time-varying characteristics and any time-invariant district characteristics that might affect outcomes, regressions cannot control for unmeasured time-variant factors, such as other changes to school meal procedures or changes in student preferences for school meals.

Changes in the overall school meal participation rates were somewhat less common than changes in the distribution of meals served. The average number of lunches served per student per day increased in two States between baseline and SY 2019–2020 and decreased in two others. All four of those States had increases in CEP or free certifications, or both. The average number of breakfasts served per student per day increased in seven States (including four with increases in CEP) and decreased in one. Again, because DCM-F/RP was expected to influence participation only through effects on certification, the inconsistent findings across outcomes in some States likely reflect changes unrelated to the demonstration.

Federal reimbursement costs. Federal reimbursements largely increased between the baseline year and SY 2019–2020. For States with changes in both Federal reimbursements and participation outcomes, these changes were generally consistent. For the NSLP, 11 States experienced statistically significant increases in the BRR (ranging from 4 cents to 26 cents), and eight of these States—including six of the seven with increases in CEP participation—also had increases in reimbursements per student per day (ranging from 3 cents to 26 cents). However, the BRR decreased (by 6 cents) in one State, and reimbursements per student per day decreased (by 3 to 6 cents) in two others.

Fewer States saw statistically significant changes in SBP reimbursements. The SBP BRR increased (by between 3 and 18 cents) in six States but decreased (by between 4 and 13 cents) in two States. SBP reimbursements per student per day increased—by between 3 and 17 cents—in eight States, and saw no significant changes in other States. Similar to the participation findings, the changes between the baseline year and SY 2019–2020 that were not driven by changes in certification outcomes likely reflect changes in factors unrelated to DCM-F/RP.

II. Description of the Public Use Data File

The public use data consist of one data set, `analysis_cert_part_y0y1y2y3.sas7bdat` (a CSV file, `analysis_cert_part_y0y1y2y3.csv`, is also available). This file contains a public use version of the data collected and analyzed for the final year of the DCM-F/RP demonstration, including both variables collected from the States and variables constructed for use in analysis. The file contains one observation for each of the districts in the analysis sample.

A. Variables

Each record contains variables for four school years. Suffixes in the variable names indicate the year (Table 1). Every variable, with the exception of `state`, `districtid`, `sfa_private` and `sfa_public`, has a `_Y0`, `_Y1`, `_Y2`, and `_Y3` version. However, Cohort 2 States have missing values for some years.

Table 1. Years of Data

Variable name suffix	Corresponding school years	States with nonmissing values
<code>_Y0</code>	Baseline year: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• SY 2015–2016 for Cohort 1 States• SY 2016–2017 for most Cohort 2 States• SY 2017–2018 for Nevada	All States
<code>_Y1</code>	SY 2016–2017 (the first year of the demonstration for Cohort 1 States)	Cohort 1 States (Florida, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia)
<code>_Y2</code>	SY 2017–2018 (the first year of the demonstration for Cohort 2 States, except Nevada)	All States except Nevada
<code>_Y3</code>	SY 2019–2020	All States

A complete list and more information about the variables—including variable names and labels, variable distributions and means, and amount of missing information—is available in the codebook: `DCM-FRP SY 2019-2020 Codebook.pdf`. Table 2 lists the variable names for the outcomes discussed in Section I.D of this document.

Table 2. Key outcome variables

Variable	Description
pct_dcm_Y#	Percentage of students certified for free meals based on Medicaid
pct_rp_y#	Percentage of students certified for reduced-price meals based on Medicaid
pct_dc_f_y#	Percentage of students directly certified for free meals
pct_free_y#	Percentage of students certified for free meals
pct_dc_rp_y#	Percentage of students certified for reduced-price meals
pct_cep_y#	Percentage of students attending CEP schools
adpart_rt_b_y#	Average daily participation in the SBP
adpart_rt_l_y#	Average daily participation in the NSLP
pct_meal_free_b_y#	Percentage of breakfasts served for free
pct_meal_free_l_y#	Percentage of lunches served for free
pct_meal_red_b_y#	Percentage of breakfasts served at a reduced price
pct_meal_red_l_y#	Percentage of lunches served at a reduced price
rpsd_b_y#	SBP reimbursements per student per school day
rpsd_l_y#	NSLP reimbursements per student per school day
brr_b_y	SBP blended reimbursement rate
brr_l_y	NSLP blended reimbursement rate

B. Missing values

In the data file, special missing value codes distinguish some sources of missing data. The three special missing codes used in the data file are .C, .M, and .X. Missing code .C is used for _Y1 variables for Cohort 2 States, which do not have data for Year 1, and for _Y2 variables for Nevada which only has baseline and SY 2019–2020 data. Missing code .M indicates data elements that are missing for all districts in a State, because they are not available or not relevant for that State. Examples of State-specific missing data include the following:⁸

- Year 1 certification variables equal .M for all districts in Massachusetts, because that State did not provide certification data for a point in SY 2016–2017 after implementation of DCM-F/RP.
- numdcfreemedicaid_y0, numdcfreemedicaid_y1, numdcfreemedicaid_y2, numdcfreemedicaid_y3, and numrpdcmecaid_y1 (and the corresponding percentage variables pct_dcm_y0, pct_dcm_y1, pct_dcm_y2, pct_dcm_y3, and pct_dc_rp_y1) equal .M for all districts in Florida, because that State did not provide that information.
- Match results variables (variables ending in “match_y#”) and variables beginning with the prefix “sup_” equal .M for districts in California, Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, Nevada, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia (and _Y2 match result variables for Texas and Washington) because those States did not provide supplemental data.⁹

⁸ Code .C takes precedence for _Y1 variables for Cohort 2 States, even when the condition described in one of the .M examples also applies.

⁹ Indiana also did not provide _Y2 supplemental data but provided match counts used to construct variables for the core certification analysis.

- Variables related to direct certification (or matches) based on programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and foster care equal .M for all districts in States that did not report certifications (or matches) based on those programs for a given year.

Missing code .X indicates that a value has been masked for reasons discussed in the next section. Other missing values are uncoded, indicating that a data element was not provided or could not be computed for the district.

C. Data masking

The public use files can be shared with a larger research community. Consequently, there is a higher risk that a district's or school's identity can be deduced from the file contents. For this reason, in constructing the public use data file, we implemented several types of edits to protect the confidentiality of respondents:

- Identifying information such as district names and addresses were omitted from the public use data files.
- All ID variables were replaced with a randomized version.
- All percentage variables (those with names that start with a pct_ prefix, laus_unemployment_rate_y#, and saipe_pov_pct_all_y#) were rounded to the nearest tenth.
- For continuous variables representing numbers of schools, students, meals, or dollars:
 - First, values below the 3rd percentile or above the 97th percentile were coded to the special missing code .X. For a few variables that originally had values of zero for the vast majority of records (such as numrccis_y#, the number of RCCIs in the district), this top-coding results in no records with non-missing, non-zero values.
 - Then, values were rounded based on the maximum values.
 - For variables with a maximum value greater than 10,000, values have been rounded to the nearest 100.
 - For variables with a maximum value less than 10,000 but greater than 1,000, values have been rounded to the nearest 10.
 - For variables with a maximum value less than 1,000 but greater than 100, values have been rounded to the nearest 5.
 - For variables with a maximum value less than 100 but greater than 10, values have been rounded to the nearest 1.
 - For variables with a maximum value less than 10 but greater than 5, values have been rounded to the nearest tenth.
 - For variables with a maximum value less than 5, have been rounded to the nearest hundredth.

For variables that were masked in any of these ways, we have added “M:” to the original variable label in the SAS version of the analysis file.¹⁰ Due to these data-masking steps, analyses using the public use file will yield numbers that are different from those presented in the DCM-F/RP SY 2019–2020 report (Hulsey et al. 2022).

¹⁰ The CSV version of the analysis file has only variable names and not labels. Users of the CSV file can find the variable labels in the codebook: DCM-FRP SY 2019-2020 Codebook.pdf.

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