

# *Accessing Free and Reduced-Price School Meals*

## *Students Experiencing Homelessness and Foster Students*

**Students experiencing homelessness and Foster Students are categorically eligible for free school meals. School Nutrition Services and district homeless and foster liaisons must work together to provide this service in a timely manner.**

### **Students Experiencing Homelessness Direct Certification Process**

**Who directly certifies a student?** The district homeless liaison or the director of a homeless shelter can share student names with the school nutrition services department to directly certify students for free meals.

**When?** Students become eligible for free meals on the date the student is identified as homeless. It is important to notify school nutrition services immediately so they can begin providing free meals. Students experiencing homelessness are categorically eligible for free meals for the entire year, and up to thirty days into the subsequent year, even if the student finds housing and is no longer considered homeless.

**How?** School Nutrition Services must have documentation on file to support eligibility for free meals. Examples of supporting documentation include:

- A dated email from the homeless liaison with names of students – Maintain the email with a signature block of the homeless liaison or director of a homeless shelter.
- A paper list of student names – Must be dated and signed by a homeless liaison.
- A copy of a verified Student Housing Questionnaire may also be provided. The Student Housing Questionnaire does not require a parent or student signature to be a valid form of eligibility determination.

No further documentation is required directly from the family or student, and services should not be denied because the family or student have not completed a school meal application. Furthermore, the student experiencing homelessness cannot be required to pay for meal charges.

Students must be re-certified every year by the homeless liaison. Frequent and timely communication systems between food services and the district homeless liaison are important to ensure access to free school meals and prevent meal charges.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### When processing students as homeless, what does immediate mean?

Under USDA regulations, students experiencing homelessness must have free benefits made available to them immediately. Directly certify students as soon as possible, but no later than three operating days after the date the LEA receives the relevant documentation (7 CFR 245.6.6.ii). Ideally, if Nutrition Services receives information that a student is homeless or in foster care in the morning, the student should be able to receive lunch the same day.

*Helpful Practice* - If a school administrator knows that a child is experiencing homelessness but is concerned that there may be a delay in obtaining documentation from the local liaison, the administrator may complete an application on behalf of the child, so that the child can begin receiving free meals immediately. The administrator would then follow up with the local liaison to obtain the needed documentation.

### Who pays for meal charges?

*Prior to being directly certified, students may incur meal charges. Who is responsible?*

**These meals must be paid using local funds, by the district.** Including using other district funds, donations from Parent-Teacher Organizations/Associations, or with McKinney-Vento funding. Meal charges cannot delay or prevent the student's access to free meals.

Unpaid fees, including meal charges, may not create a barrier to the enrollment, full participation, or on-time grade level progression or graduation of children and youth experiencing homelessness, and states and LEAs have an ongoing obligation to review and revise their policies to remove such barriers [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(1)(I)].

*A student recently lost housing. We have identified them as homeless and enrolled them in free meals immediately, but they have unpaid meal fees from prior to becoming homeless. Who pays for these meals?*

Similar to the situation above, there can be no delay in providing free meals. The district could pay the fees using the options above, or follow the district's meal charge policy, as long as they do not delay or disrupt the student's receipt of free meals.

Regardless of how the fees are handled, Section 722(g)(1)(I) of the McKinney-Vento Act requires the elimination of barriers to a student's full participation in school. Therefore, unpaid fees and actions taken to collect them may not pose a barrier to the student's full participation in classes, extra-curricular activities, field trips, graduation ceremonies, and other school activities.

### Can Homeless Status be shared for other School Programs?

School nutrition offices may only disclose children's name and eligibility status to persons determined to be "directly connected" with the administration or enforcement of a Federal education program, State education program, State health program, or a means-tested nutrition program, as well as to persons directly connected with the Comptroller General Office or law enforcement for an authorized activity [7 CFR 245.6(f)(3)]. How the student became eligible **cannot be shared**.

For the purposes of McKinney-Vento, a student's housing status is considered part of the student's academic record and should be shared using the standards applicable under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

### Are students in foster care eligible for free school meals?

Yes, like students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care are categorically eligible for free meals without a household meal application. This includes meals during the school year, meals through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and summer meals. Similar to District Homeless Liaisons, Foster Care Liaisons can provide the information to directly certify students in foster care for free meals.

Students in foster care are eligible for free meals for the entire year, and up to thirty days into the subsequent year, even if the student returns to their home and is no longer considered a foster child.

Once a student is in foster care, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) will pay any unpaid school fees or fines due by the student, including past due meal charges. Districts should work with DCYF social workers to arrange these payments.

### How can students in foster care be certified for free meals?

Newly enrolled students in foster care may be verified immediately through third party documentation of their foster status. Acceptable documentation includes:

- Information indicating the state retains legal custody of the child. That documentation can come from the court that placed the child, Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), Department of Tribal Child Welfare, or a local foster agency that administers the foster care program.
- The School Notification Form and Caregiver Authorization Form.

Timely determination of eligibility for free meals is important to avoid potential meal charges. School officials are encouraged to establish good communication systems with the school nutrition office.

## Resources

- [List of School District Homeless Liaisons](#)
- [OSPI Students Experiencing Homelessness Resources](#)
- SchoolHouse Connection – [Educating Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness \(2025 Fact Sheet\)](#)
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth - [The Most Frequently Asked Questions on the Educational Rights of Children & Youth in Homeless Situations](#)
- National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE – [Best Practices for Access to Food for Homeless and Highly Mobile Students.](#)
- [OSPI Foster Care Liaisons/DCYF Contacts](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions on the Educational Stability Rights of Students in Foster Care](#)
- [Paying School Fees and Fines for Students in Foster Care](#)