

## **Background**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) sponsored the NSLP Application/Verification Pilot Projects to test ways to improve the process for certifying students for free or reduced-price meals. This report presents findings on the impacts of two alternatives to the current application-based certification process—Up-Front Documentation and Graduated Verification—that were tested in 12 public school districts over a three-year period.

Millions of U.S. children participate in the National School Lunch Program each day, receiving free or reduced-price lunches that make an important contribution to their overall nutrition. But concern has mounted that many of the children approved as eligible for free or reduced-price meals may in fact be ineligible because their family income is too high. Under the existing eligibility process, families are required to state their income on the application for benefits but do not need to submit any additional documentation. Districts select a small sample of applications for income verification, which is done later in the year.

To address the question of whether the eligibility process could be made more accurate, the U.S. Department of Agriculture sponsored pilot projects testing two new approaches to certifying eligibility: (1) Up-Front Documentation, and (2) Graduated Verification. Districts using Up-Front Documentation required families to document their income or receipt of public assistance at the time they submitted their application for free or reduced-price lunches. Districts then used this documentation to make an eligibility determination, but did not verify any approved applications later in the school year.

Districts using Graduated Verification allowed families to use the standard application process, which does not require income documentation, but changed key aspects of the usual verification process. After verifying a small sample of approved applications, these districts verified additional applications if 25 percent or more of the applications in the initial test resulted in benefit reduction or termination.

## **Study Design and Methodology**

The study used a comparison design to select additional districts not participating in the three-year pilots but with similar economic characteristics and geographic locations. Researchers then compared the two types of districts to estimate impacts on the accuracy of the certification process, as well as to what degree it deterred ineligible families or discouraged eligible families from applying. Data for the study came from telephone and in-person interviews with about 3,000 households with children enrolled in the study districts in fall 2002, and from administrative records provided by the schools.

## **Key Findings**

**Deterrence of Ineligible Families:** Neither Up-Front Documentation nor Graduated Verification resulted in observable deterrence of erroneous certifications. The rates of erroneous certification among ineligible students were less than 5 percent in Up-Front Documentation comparison districts and less than 10 percent in Graduated Verification comparison districts. Neither Up-Front Documentation nor Graduated Verification had a statistically significant negative effect on the rate of erroneous certifications. In other words, neither pilot had a statistically significant deterrent effect.

**Barriers for Eligible Families:** Both sets of pilot procedures caused barriers among some eligible students. Rates of certification among each group of eligible students examined were lower in pilot districts than in comparison districts. Some of these differences were statistically significant, indicating that Up-Front Documentation and Graduated Verification led to increased barriers among eligible students.

**Accuracy Among Certified Students:** Compared to current procedures, neither set of pilot procedures changed certification accuracy at a level that could be detected in the study. Overall, about 18 percent of students certified for free meals were ineligible for the benefits they were receiving. However, the estimated impacts of Up-Front Documentation and Graduated Verification on certification accuracy were small and not statistically significant.

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