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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food and
Nutrition
Service

3101 Park
Center Drive
Alexandria, VA
22302-1500

SUBJECT: Categorical Eligibility for Free Lunches and Breakfasts for Migrant Children

TO: Special Nutrition Programs
All Regions

State Agencies
Child Nutrition Programs
All States

This memorandum supplements our Reauthorization Implementation Memo SP 4 (July 19, 2004) by providing additional information on identifying migrant children and on the procedures that school food authorities (SFAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) should use to coordinate with the Migrant Education Program (MEP) in order to document the categorical eligibility of migrant children for free meals.

Background on the Migrant Education Program

The MEP is authorized under Title I, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and provides grants to State educational agencies. The State educational agency, in turn, makes sub-grants to LEAs and other entities to provide supplemental educational and support services to migrant children. A major goal of the MEP is to minimize the disruption caused by migrant children's frequent moves. While the full definition of a migrant child in section 1309 of ESEA is rather complicated, in general under this definition, a migrant child is one who has moved across school district lines, within the last three years, in order to accompany or join a parent or guardian who has moved to seek or obtain temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fishing.

Please note, however, that it is not necessary for local SFA personnel to apply the ESEA definition because there are already State educational agency and local MEP staff who are responsible for identifying (and maintaining supporting documentation) as to who is an eligible migrant child under ESEA.

Local Level MEP Contacts

Most State educational agencies sub-grant MEP funds to local operating agencies (LOAs) to provide program services. These LOAs are typically LEAs; however, in some states, the LOAs may be regional units that administer the MEP in multiple LEAs. When an LOA/LEA receives MEP funds, a MEP coordinator is usually designated. (However, in some LEAs, a Federal program director administers multiple federal programs including the MEP). Each LEA/LOA typically identifies and recruits migrant children in their geographic area and maintains a list of eligible migrant children.

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Documenting Free Meal Eligibility for Migrant Children

SFAs/LEAs should work directly with their LOA/LEA MEP coordinators or, where appropriate, the State MEP director, to identify migrant children and to document their eligibility for free school meals. SFAs/LEAs must accept documentation that the children are migrant children from the LOA/LEA MEP coordinator.

Documentation of migrant status to substantiate free meal eligibility is a dated list with each child's name and the signature of the LOA/LEA MEP coordinator or the State MEP director. This documentation is in lieu of free and reduced price meal applications and must be sought, as much as possible, prior to a household completing an application. Once documentation is obtained, the SFA/LEA must notify the household as soon as possible about the child's free meal eligibility. Any application submitted on behalf of the child would be disregarded.

It is particularly important that newly arrived migrant children in the LEA be documented and certified for free meals as promptly as possible. SFAs/LEAs need to establish procedures with the LOA/LEA MEP coordinator to assure prompt notification when a new migrant child is identified.

Continuing Certification

Public Law 108-265 also amended the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to establish that, once a child is certified as eligible to receive free or reduced price meals, eligibility remains effective for the remainder of the school year. Our policy further allows SFAs to continue a child's eligibility from the previous year for 30 operating days into the subsequent school year or until a new eligibility determination is made, whichever occurs first. Because of this and because the MEP strives to minimize a child's disruption in services and benefits, SFAs/LEAs should attempt to share the child's free meal eligibility status with the new SFA/LEA when a migrant child moves from their jurisdiction if the family knows their new location.

Please contact Rosemary O'Connell in my office if you have any questions on this guidance.

STANLEY C. GARNETT
Director,
Child Nutrition Division