

Connecting MediCAL and School Meals – Without Paper

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» ISSUE

Most families are required to fill out paperwork each year to enroll their children in the Free or Reduced-Price lunch and breakfast programs at school. However, in order to reduce paperwork, families who receive welfare or food stamps are automatically enrolled without paper into free schools meals, as these other programs have already verified household economic status.

Thanks to CFPA-sponsored legislation in 2005, the state developed a statewide computer matching system to automatically enroll children participating in food stamp and CalWORKS into free school meals. This system has been successful but it is not used to enroll children in MediCAL (our state's Medicaid program) households in to school meals nor is it utilized to verify the enrollment of children on MediCAL whose families applied for subsidized school meals.

» NEED

Good nutrition is the cornerstone of good health. School meals can play an important role in improving health – if children are eligible and participate. Some families can't afford school meals, but schools often are not equipped to determine economic hardship. Some of these same families have provided information to their county in order to receive health insurance. Given limited resources at schools to assess need and process applications for school meals, it makes sense for schools not to duplicate efforts already made by the county.

Federal law allows school districts to use Medicaid data to *verify* that an enrolled child is indeed eligible for school meals. California does not exercise this option. In addition, the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act allows for pilot programs to test using Medicaid data for automatically *enrolling* a child into the program. California could be the first state to test this opportunity and technology.

» REQUEST

CFPA requests the Governor and the Legislature take the following action:

Action: **Establish MediCAL Verification and a Direct Certification Pilot**

Give the California Department of Education the authority to use MediCAL data to verify school meal eligibility. Additionally, give CDE authority to test usage of this data for enrollment as well. Require CDE to seek any available federal funds for this purpose.

» OUTCOMES

This modern approach to school meal enrollment has the potential to enroll many needy, working families. It can help remove more paperwork and feed more kids, while informing federal nutrition policy development.