

Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) Data Collection FAQ

1. What is the P-EBT Project?

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 includes a provision called “Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer,” or “P-EBT. “That section allows states to issue benefits to families with children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals and who would have received them if not for the school closures associated with COVID-19.

2. Who is coordinating the P-EBT project?

The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) is coordinating the project and will be providing the benefits to families. DESE will assist by collecting data on all students that are currently eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

3. What if my district or school is participating in the Community Eligibility Program (CEP)?

This is the most frequently asked question. Please continue reading with a particular focus on question #12.

4. What type of benefits will families receive from DTA?

Families of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals will receive a benefit of \$199.50 to cover the months of March and April. The value of the benefit is equal to the cost of the Federal reimbursement for school breakfast, lunch, snack and special milk at the free rate, as specified by USDA. Students that are current clients of DTA will have the benefits added to their existing EBT card while students who are not current DTA clients will have a pre-loaded EBT card mailed to them.

5. What period of time do the benefits cover and how long are they active?

The first round of benefits will cover the school closure time period from March 16th to May 1st. Should the Governor extend the school closure period, additional rounds of benefits may occur. The first round of benefits would be sent out in the coming weeks and would be eligible to be used for one year.

6. Why do districts need to provide data to DESE?

Districts need to help with this project because DESE does not know which students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals and even if we did, we do not have the mailing addresses for these students. DTA and DESE investigated having districts submit data directly to DTA but ultimately that was going to involve technical work resulting in delays on the project.

7. Are there legal impediments to sharing this data with DESE and then DESE sharing it with DTA?

No. The recently enacted emergency pandemic legislation, United States Public Law No: 116-127, explicitly authorizes the sharing of this information. This allows the data sharing consistent with both state and federal privacy laws.

8. Can districts and families be assured that DTA will not use these data for any other purpose or share the data with anyone?

We have received written assurance from DTA that they will not use these data for any other purpose and they will destroy the data upon completion of the project.

9. Is the P-EBT benefit considered a “public charge” as it relates to the immigration status of a student?

DESE has been assured by DTA the P-EBT benefit is NOT considered a “public charge.”

10. Who is responsible for submitting data to DESE?

All districts are required to submit data to DESE. If a district submits data to DESE regularly then it is responsible for supplying the requested data for the P-EBT project. Collaboratives, private schools and out of state schools will not be providing data to DESE.

11. What is the universe of students districts should be considering for this project?

The universe of students that districts should be considering for this project is any enrolled student that the district would normally submit to DESE in SIMS. That means that districts should be considering all enrolled students for whom they are financially responsible and would normally report in SIMS. There are no exceptions to this rule. DESE has received a lot of questions about this item with specific scenario and the easiest way to answer all of them is to ask, “would we normally submit this student to DESE in SIMS?”

12. Within the universe described in #11, which students should be submitted by districts.

Districts should submit all students that are currently enrolled as of April 15, 2020 and are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. There are different requirements for schools participating in the USDA Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) non pricing meal service option. If a district is not sure about its CEP status, the Food Service Director in each district will be able to confirm the status.

A. FOR CEP DISTRICTS WHERE ALL SCHOOLS IN THE DISTRICT ARE PARTICPATING IN CEP

Districts in this situation will submit all **enrolled** students as of April 15, 2020 within the universe described in #10. This includes outplaced students and other students that would normally be reported in the district SIMS submission.

B. FOR NON-CEP DISTRICTS WHERE NO SCHOOLS ARE PARTICIPATING IN CEP

Districts in this situation will submit all enrolled students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals as of April 15, 2020. This eligibility can be determined through direct certification, categorical eligibility (homeless, head start, migrant) or paper household meal benefit applications. Submission of this data is an affirmation on the part of the district that these students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals and the district should be prepared to be able to provide evidence of eligibility upon request. Professional judgement alone is not an acceptable form of determining student eligibility for free or reduced-price meals.

C. FOR CEP DISTRICTS WHERE SOME BUT NOT ALL SCHOOLS IN THE DISTRICT ARE PARTICPATING IN CEP

Districts in this situation will submit in a hybrid approach. For the schools that are CEP, districts will follow the approach outlined in (A) above and provide a full roster of enrolled students. For the schools that are not participating in CEP, the district will follow the approach outlined in (B) above and submit a roster of enrolled students that are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

13. So all families in CEP districts will receive the benefit regardless of whether they meet the income requirements for free or reduced lunch?

Yes, all families in CEP districts or CEP schools in hybrid districts will receive the benefit. DTA will communicate to all families that if they don't want/need the benefit they are free not to use it and the funds will be reallocated for future use.

14. How should districts submit the data to DESE?

Districts should submit data to DESE using the required template. District data will only be accepted in this required format and will not be sent on to DTA if the data has not been prepared according to the required format. Districts should upload an Excel file into the "P-EBT DATA" dropbox located within Dropbox Central on the DESE security portal with the following naming convention:

"PEBT Data mmddyy_xxxx"

In this naming convention, the mmddyy would represent the date of submission and the "xxxx" represents the four-digit district code for your district. An example of this would be for Fall River, a file submitted today would be named "PEBT Data 041520_0095" and uploaded into the dropbox. Please do not deviate from the file type, template or naming convention. DESE staff will not forward files to DTA that have not followed these protocols.

15. Who has access to the P-EBT dropbox?

DESE has assigned all district staff with the "SIMS Data" role access to the P-EBT dropbox. If districts would like other district staff to have access to this dropbox, a district Directory Administrator needs to provide that staff member with the "SIMS Data" role. DESE staff will not do this for a district under any circumstance.

16. Do districts need to certify the collection in any way?

No. Affirming that all of the students attached are eligible for free or reduced-price meals will serve as the district certification and districts will be responsible for the accuracy of the data as referenced in question #8.

17. Why do districts need to put an indication of free/reduced-price meal eligibility? Isn't everyone on here eligible per your instructions?

Yes. The free/reduced-price indicator is the affirmation from the district that the student listed is indeed eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Files will be returned with any student record containing a "No" in that field.

18. What should we use for the Head of Household/Primary Contact/Parent address?

Districts should approach this portion of the template like they were mailing something to a student's family. Whatever person name and address a district would use is same that should be used in this data

collection effort. Students over 18 that are the head of household, can be used in the mailing address contact fields. We understand that not all addresses are perfect, but we are trying to get out as many benefits as possible in round one and will work with DTA about returned mailings.

19. What about divorced/separated families?

The template only allows for one contact address. DESE would ask that districts use their best judgement in submitting the data.

20. How will families be notified about this project?

DTA will handle the communications around this project but we have stressed the importance of this piece. As a result, they have decided to send a pre-notification letter to families in advance of providing the benefits. This letter will explain the program, the timing of the award and what to do if the family chooses not to participate. We have provided DTA with the top 5 most spoken languages of our students and they are working on translating the letter. DESE will provide school districts with a copy of this letter.

21. Should districts run a direct certification file to the Virtual Gateway prior to submitting their required file to DESE?

There is no requirement to do so, but it is recommended in order to pick up newly eligible students as of April 15, 2020.

22. The current health crisis has changed many family income situations in a short amount of time. How do we account for changes that we might not know about yet?

DTA anticipates that there might be additional rounds of benefits delivered. The P-EBT project is based on the fact that schools are closed and these benefits are meant to cover for the school meal benefits that students would have received if schools were open. Given that Governor Baker has ordered that schools are closed through May 1st, this round of benefits will cover the time period from March 16th to May 1st. If schools are required to be closed for additional time, then there might be another round of benefits and more families would be able to participate.

23. Will DESE staff be available to answer your questions?

Yes. Your data collection support specialist will be available to answer your questions.