

Head Start Eligibility

This memorandum provides guidance regarding amendments to the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA) that extend automatic eligibility for free meal benefits to all children enrolled in Head Start and participating in child nutrition programs.

On December 12, 2007, the President signed The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (Public Law 110-134) which contains several significant revisions to the Head Start program, including amendments to the eligibility criteria in section 645 of the Head Start Act (42 U.S.C. 9840). Public Law 110-134 also amends sections 9(b)(12)(A)(iii) and 17(c)(5) of the NSLA to correspond with the new eligibility criteria.

Head Start serves primarily children from families with household incomes at or below the Federal poverty level. However a small proportion of children in families with household incomes above the poverty level may be served. In the past, only those children who were income eligible for Head Start were considered automatically eligible for free meals in the child nutrition programs.

Public Law 110-134 makes any child enrolled in Head Start automatically eligible for free meals without further application or eligibility determination. Therefore, even a child who is not from a household with an income at or below the poverty level is automatically eligible for free meals if they are enrolled in Head Start. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) may now establish eligibility of all Head Start enrollees through documentation provided by the Head Start program.