2024 Pennsylvania Summer EBT – Summary of School Participation

Introduction

In December 2022, a bipartisan U.S. Congress authorized a new nutrition benefit called SUN Bucks, also known as Summer EBT. The program which began in the summer of 2024 in 46 states, territories, and tribal nations, provides eligible student families with a benefit of $40 per summer month per eligible student to purchase food from June to August. The program was shown by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), through a pilot program, to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition of children on summer break.

Who is Eligible

Students who were eligible for free or reduced-price meals* at schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP) were automatically eligible for a Summer EBT benefit.

2024 Summer EBT Roles

USDA oversees Summer EBT nationwide. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Human Services (DHS) oversees the benefit issuance process, in collaboration with the Department of Education (PDE), which oversees the data collection from schools and communication to families. Approximately 800 schools in Pennsylvania that are sponsors of the NSLP or SBP are asked to submit student data to assist DHS in the benefit issuance process, and to notify families of the benefit. The Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit-Center for Schools and Communities (CSIU) is contracted to offer school training, support, student data file collection, and secure transmission of the data to DHS.

2024 School Data Collection Process

CSIU prepared schools for Summer EBT by conducting two statewide webinars in April 2024, circulating key program materials to schools (i.e., data collection template, Frequently Asked Questions, family information letters), maintaining a school helpdesk, and establishing a school support and data collection website https://www.pasebt.com.

CSIU built a Summer EBT data validation program to accept school student files of any size and to validate them in real time for data formatting accuracy, duplicate students, and reasonableness of certain data such as building IDs, overall student count, and count of students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

Schools used a data collection template to create a file to capture student name, date of birth, address, parent name, meal eligibility, and enrollment dates of all students covered under their SY23-24 School Nutrition Program (SNP) agreement. Schools used various systems to extract data for their Summer EBT student file. Some schools used their Student Information System (SIS) and/or Point of Service system (POS). Others used Pennsylvania Student Eligibility System (PA-SES**). Schools that were fully integrated with PA-SES (approximately 455 schools known as “Full SES” users) had access to a query in PA-SES which created their Summer EBT student file for them.

Schools accessed the file validation program on CSIU’s school support website to submit their Summer EBT student files in June 2024. Files had to pass the real-time validation checks 100% for successful upload. CSIU conducted final reviews of all files then securely transmitted each to DHS.

Evaluation of Data Collection Process

CSIU conducted a focus group and survey (in August and September 2024, respectively) to obtain feedback from schools on Summer EBT training and support and to discern what parts of the 2024 process were more or less beneficial.

Evaluation Takeaways

There was a high rate of school participation (98%) for this non-mandated process, but it did require extensive prompting and support by CSIU for some. 752 student files were received by CSIU, representing 1,717,756 students. DHS reports there were 1.18 million children eligible for SUN Bucks in 2024. This participation rate, combined with overall positive ratings of Summer EBT from the school survey, demonstrate that schools are willing and able to be enthusiastic partners in Summer EBT.

Schools often expressed preference for a Summer EBT system where student data extraction is done at the state level. But if they are to submit a student file for Summer EBT, they prefer the ability to extract all the data from PA-SES and the elimination of a manual student file upload into a separate standalone system (CSIU's Summer EBT file validation system). This will only work for schools that are fully integrated users of PA-SES. Approximately 310 of 770 sponsor schools are not integrated with PA-SES. Based on school preference for simplification and efficiency in this unmandated process, asking schools to do two Summer EBT student file uploads will likely be a difficult "sell."

The Summer EBT query in PA-SES reportedly worked well for the Full SES schools who used it to create their Summer EBT student file. The query is a viable option to further streamline data extraction and submission for fully integrated users of PA-SES. However, the query did reveal missing data some schools have in PA-SES (e.g. missing guardian names or PA Student IDs). For this reason, not all Full SES schools could utilize the query without also having to extract data from their SIS or POS.

Schools' data error rate was low – .53% of all students reported. The errors were mainly due to file sorting errors. Although low, these errors generate student-by-student manual corrective work for DHS.

CSIU had a good response to the September school survey (443 responses). 73% of respondents were public school employees. Food service personnel represented the highest percent of respondents (38.6%). followed by business/accounting staff (20.8%), administrative assistants (10.8%), administrators (6.8%), and other positions (23%).

Survey results showed that most respondents had an overall positive experience with the Summer EBT program. Many of the findings from specific survey questions back this statement.

- 60% of respondents were highly or very satisfied with Summer EBT overall.
- Most respondents found the Summer EBT webinars very or somewhat helpful.
- Across five support categories 95% of respondents rated helpdesk support as excellent, very good, or good, with communication as the highest (98%) and help with the template the lowest (91%).
- Respondents indicated that key Summer EBT tasks were manageable, with most tasks requiring two hours or less. The most time-consuming activity was gathering internal data, but only 9% of all respondents needed 10 or more hours to complete said activity. There were no significant differences in time to complete tasks between DC Only users and Full SES users of PA-SES.
- Additionally, respondents expressed high confidence in their ability to complete necessary tasks, though some noted that certain procedures, like creating upload files, could be improved.

The majority of respondents are satisfied with the Summer EBT program overall and believe it is supportive of their students, however there are some notable differences based on the respondents' school type. Charter schools report the highest levels of satisfaction with SUN Bucks processes and tend to rate the benefits of the program higher overall than traditional public and private schools. This could prove that school type may influence the user experience of the program, including feelings of satisfaction, importance, quality, and perceived benefits.

It is important to note that 73% of survey respondents were from public schools. Given that, if school type correlates with the perceived benefits and satisfaction with the program, then almost three quarters of program users are being negatively influenced due to unrecognized factors associated with school type. Based on these results, further evaluation of the relationship between school type and the SUN Bucks program could be warranted.

Action Steps

Although USDA does not require a new or distinct system for Summer EBT, CSIU recommends that PDE and DHS continue working toward a one-system Summer EBT solution, at least for schools (i.e., PA- SES). This will increase process efficiency, data integrity, and school goodwill. Ultimately, if proven, it could evolve into a directly-accessed system not requiring separate manual data submissions from schools through the CSIU data validation system to DHS.

CSIU has applied for a FY25 No Kid Hungry/Code for America Technology/Data grant. CSIU's grant workplan defines steps to collaborate with PDE, its partners, and a School Task Force to:

- Expand existing efforts to analyze data integrity in PA-SES.
- Conduct a new school survey to assess data quality issues, feasibility of integrating their SIS/POS with PA-SES, and schools' willingness to participate in the process.
- Create best practices and new training materials for school data management in PA-SES.
- Work with schools to identify and fix incomplete data in PA-SES.
- Encourage remaining sponsor schools that are not integrated with PA-SES to do so.

PDE should consider making all data fields that are mandatory for the Summer EBT student file mandatory in PA-SES. For example, parent/guardian and PA Secure ID fields are not mandatory in PA-SES but are required for Summer EBT. Making these data fields mandatory will help close the gap that some schools found in their data when they used the PA-SES query to create their Summer EBT file.

It is anticipated that 2025 Summer EBT will operate similarly to 2024 with CSIU receiving student files from schools. CSIU will implement more enhancements to the file validation program and school support processes, many based on feedback from DHS after they aggregated 2024 school data into their system and ran the benefit issuance and family support processes. Examples include:

- Work proactively with schools that have demonstrated recurring challenges with submitting correct and complete P-EBT and Summer EBT data files.
- Monitor files of all schools with students that are outside their normal K-12 enrollment but that they claim meals for; make sure these students are included in their Summer EBT files (e.g., students that are pre-K, Head Start, or from other LEAs).

- Discourage schools from sorting their student files. Also, implement a school file checklist that includes an item to spot check the data for 10-20 students throughout their file immediately prior to file submission, to catch sorting errors.
- During 2024, DHS at times had difficulty matching a student's school based on exact text name matching. In 2025, they plan to match a student's school based on the school's reported Administrative Unit Number (AUN) and building/site IDs to eliminate the shortfalls of text matching.

Notes

**Students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals if they are 1) directly certified (DC) as recipients of SNAP, TANF, or Medical Assistance with qualifying income, 2) eligible via a free/reduced meal application (income), or 3) being in another categorically eligible group (foster, homeless, runaway, Head Start).*

***PA-SES is a web-based system that PDE provides for free to schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP). All participating schools must use PA-SES to conduct Direct Certification (DC) student matching against the state's list of benefit recipients. Some schools only use the system for DC and manually upload student data into the system ("DC Only" users). Other schools ("Full SES") integrate their internal systems with PA-SES and use it to track all student meal eligibilities. Their student data is updated automatically.*