



STRATEGIES TO MAXIMIZE COMPLETED SCHOOL MEAL APPLICATIONS DURING COVID-19

Effective outreach to collect school meals applications, sometimes called “free and reduced-price meals applications” or “household income reports,” is critical to the successful operation of school nutrition programs. While always challenging to collect, COVID-19 has made this process even more difficult. This resource provides emerging best practices for school nutrition departments to maximize the number of completed school meal applications submitted by families.

Benefits of School Meal Applications

- Free and reduced-price (F/R) meals are a critical resource for families facing financial strain and food insecurity, both of which have been exacerbated during the pandemic.
- Many school districts’ food services budgets are stretched due to pandemic challenges, and the more students who are eligible for F/R meals, the greater the federal reimbursement to aid in financial recovery.
- Students certified to receive F/R meals are eligible for Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) benefits. Learn more [here](#).
- Many state education funding streams rely on the number of students who qualify for F/R meals to distribute funds to schools and districts. View [FRAC’s chart of state education data policies](#) to see each state’s approach.
- Students who qualify for F/R meals may also be eligible for waivers for SAT, ACT, and AP exams. (Note that students can qualify for these benefits even if they do not fill out a meals application. Learn more about fee waivers for [SAT/AP](#) and [ACT](#) exams.)

Direct Certification

Students automatically qualify for free school meals without completing an application if they live in households that participate in SNAP, TANF, FDPIR (and, in some states, Medicaid), and/or if they are migrant, in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or enrolled in Head Start. This process, known as direct certification, should be conducted as often as possible to reduce paperwork for both schools and families, and to ensure that students receive the benefits they deserve.

Strategy #1:

Consider Edits to the Application Itself

The format and layout of the application itself can be modified to help ensure that it is easy to understand and simple to complete.

Here are some strategies:

Change the Title of the Form

A name that invites all households to apply and draws connections to broader educational benefits beyond school meals may result in more families turning them in. Consider 'Education Benefit Form' instead of 'Free and Reduced-Price Meals Application.'

Ensure Confidentiality

Clearly explain that information provided is confidential and will not be shared outside of the school district's office. Stress that this information does not get passed along to US Citizenship & Immigration Services or Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Consider including a "confidential" stamp on any mailing sent to families.

Include Referrals to Medicaid/CHIP, SNAP, and WIC

Consider including the language in the column to the right on the application itself so families can request more information about enrolling in Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), SNAP, and WIC. (See page 86 of [USDA's Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#).)

Note that, by law, schools are allowed to share families' information with Medicaid and CHIP administrators if families are given prior notice and the opportunity to decline disclosure. However, families must *opt in* for schools to be able to share identifiable information with SNAP and WIC agencies.

Partner with local SNAP outreach partners and Medicaid, CHIP, and WIC offices so that they can follow up directly with families who request more information about these programs. If families request information for any of these programs, it is important that someone follows up.

Increase Accessibility with Online Application Format

Offering online applications may increase the number of families who complete them. If online applications are available, make a paper application easily available, too, as many families may not have consistent internet access. Make sure the application is available in all languages spoken in the school district.

Offer Multiple Response Options

A school cannot require families to submit a school meals application, but some schools do ask families to respond in some way – if not with a completed application, with a marked checkbox indicating that the household is declining to complete the application. Please seek approval from the state agency if considering this approach.

Copy and paste this language onto your applications:

Medicaid & CHIP

If your child(ren) are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, they may also be eligible to receive free or low-cost health insurance through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). The law allows us to inform Medicaid and CHIP about your child(ren)'s eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, unless you tell us not to. Your decision will not change whether your child(ren) are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. If you **do not** want information to be shared with Medicaid and CHIP, check the box below.

- No, I **do not** want my information to be shared with Medicaid and CHIP.

SNAP & WIC

Your family may be eligible to receive food assistance benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and/or the Women, Infants, Children (WIC) Program. We must have your permission to share your information with SNAP and WIC. Your decision will not change whether your child(ren) are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. If you would like to receive more information about SNAP or WIC and consent to sharing your information, check the box(es) below.

- Yes, I want my information to be shared with SNAP.
- Yes, I want my information to be shared with WIC.

Strategy #2:

Use Multiple Outreach Strategies

□ Streamline communications

Sending the form alongside other school forms, like the school health form, that have higher return rates.

□ Utilize all channels

Provide multiple reminders to families through robo-calls, parent newsletters, emails, and memos. For students attending school in-person, distribute printed applications and reminders; for students schooling from home, include applications and reminders in take-home meals and school materials.

□ Partner with local leaders

Whom do families trust? Principals, superintendents, school board members, community leaders? Ask them to amplify the message about the importance of completing school meals applications.

□ Provide targeted, personalized follow-up

Follow-up with families who have not yet turned in an application; prioritize families with more than one child in the district. Consider having school staff make personal phone calls to families who have not yet turned in an application. With many schools distance learning, schools may have parent's email addresses. Utilize them! Regardless of the channel, ensure that communication is in the household's preferred language.

□ Engage school staff

Encourage teachers to be part of the process; ask if they would consider offering incentives to those who return applications, such as extra credit, and/or give a short lesson on the importance of meal applications to school funding. Ask principals to consider offering a reward to the classes with the most applications returned.

□ Present at staff meetings

Consider teaming up with the school business official to inform staff about the importance of school meals applications to families and to district finances.

□ Team up with community organizations

Share the application with community organizations and provide language on the importance of completing the application so that they can use their communication channels to spread the word. Consider partnering with faith communities that can share the paper application during services and community gatherings, as well as food banks, housing agencies, grocery stores, etc.

□ Engage local media

Ask local radio stations, papers, and blogs to help get the word out!

□ Leverage food assistance operations

Meal distribution sites, community pantries, and food banks can provide applications to parents and caregivers.

□ Utilize social media

Consider posting on the school's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Stress that when families submit school meals applications, they are helping the school.



Laredo Independent School District school nutrition staff operating a grab-and-go meals site.