



ALTERNATIVE INCOME FORMS: UNDERSTANDING WHAT THEY ARE, WHY THEY'RE IMPORTANT & HOW THEY'RE COLLECTED

What are alternative income forms?

Alternative income forms are completed by families in replacement of free and reduced-price meal applications when a school or district in certain states utilizes the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP allows schools to serve all students breakfast and lunch at no cost without collecting meal applications from families. Nineteen states require schools that elect CEP to collect alternative income forms.¹

Alternative income forms go by many names, including education benefit forms, household information reports, or household income surveys. States and districts can change the form's name to better describe its purpose and use. The forms replace the data lost by not collecting free and reduced-price meal applications.

Alternative income forms are not used to certify students for free or reduced-priced meals but are instead used for programs and funding sources that previously relied on meal application data for other purposes (e.g., assessing a school's poverty level for technology funding or college application discounts). They are often simpler to complete when compared to meal applications.

Four important things to know about alternative income forms:

1. Processing alternative income forms is not an allowable expense from the non-profit school food service account.
 - Another department should process the forms. If deemed necessary that the food services department processes them, the cost of processing forms may not be paid by the non-profit school food service account. The district must pay for the cost of processing forms or reimburse the non-profit school food service account.

¹ States that require collection of alternative income forms include: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Four important things to know about alternative income forms continued:

2. Alternative income forms cannot be associated with school meals.
3. Alternative income forms can be electronic, paper-based, or a combination of the two.
4. Alternative income forms can be required by the district (unlike meal applications).

Learn more about determining student eligibility under CEP:

[Identified Student Percentage \(ISP\) Management: Increasing & Maximizing Your District's ISP](#)

Why are alternative income forms important?

Historically, meal application data has been used to assess the number of students from low-income households for certain programs and education funding streams. However, there are alternate ways to determine a school's poverty level:

- Identified Student Percentage x 1.6
- Most recent free and reduced-price meals application data
- Data from other means-tested programs (e.g., SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, Head Start, etc.)
- Collect alternative income forms

Each state has a different approach and process to replace meal application data in CEP schools. See *state-by-state differences* in this resource from the [Food Research and Action Center](#), and **be sure to connect with your state agency to learn what the requirements are in your state.**

Common Funding & Programs That Utilize Economically Disadvantaged Data

Funding Source or Program	Alternative to Meal Application Data
State education funding <i>Note: Utilizing CEP will not impact the total amount of your district's Title I funding. However, it may affect how your district disburses the funding. Learn more at <u>What School Nutrition Staff Need to Know About Title I Funding</u>.</i>	Distribution differs by state. Reach out to your state agency to learn more. Some approaches include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Identified Student Percentage (ISP) x 1.6● Most recent meal application data● Data from other means-tested programs (e.g., SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, Head Start, etc.)● Collect alternative income forms
E-rate funding	CEP schools use ISP multiplied by 1.6 <i>Tip: Check out USDA's <u>E-Rate Guidance for Schools Electing Community Eligibility</u></i>

Common Funding Streams That Utilize Economically Disadvantaged Data cont.

Funding Source or Program	Alternative to Meal Application Data
<p>SAT, ACT, and AP exam fee waivers</p>	<p>Individual families can request fee waivers. This could be in the form of a letter on district letterhead that states the student is eligible for meal benefits based on family size and income level.</p> <p><i>Note: Do not have families complete a meal application. Instead, determine the family size and income and compare to USDA's eligibility guidelines.</i></p>
<p>Discounts on field trips (e.g., museums, zoos, etc.)</p>	<p>Use each school's ISP. If schools are grouped, do not use the group's ISP and instead use individual school's ISPs.</p>
<p>Discounts on services and utilities</p>	<p>Individual families can request fee waivers and discounts. This could be in the form of a letter on district letterhead that states the student is eligible for meal benefits based on family size and income level.</p> <p><i>Note: Do not have families complete a meal application. Instead, determine the family size and income and compare them to USDA's eligibility guidelines.</i></p>
<p>Discounts on district activities</p>	<p>This is an internal process that districts can control. A procedure should be developed to account for discounts on sports games, dance tickets, etc., using whatever information the district deems acceptable. For example, information on the alternative income form could be used.</p>

Questions? Need additional support?

Check out bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/CEP for more resources, or email bestpractices@strength.org to get in touch.

How are alternative income forms collected?

If your state requires alternative income forms, first remember that processing the forms is not an allowable expense from the non-profit food services account. Another department should process the forms, or if deemed necessary by the food services department, the cost of processing forms may not be paid by the non-profit school food service account. The district must pay for the cost of processing forms or reimburse the non-profit school food service account.

Strategies for collecting alternative income forms:

- Rename the form to make it more understandable for what it will be used for. For example, the “Educational Benefits Form” emphasizes to families that the information will be used to determine educational benefits for the child and school.
- Include an explanation of the form and why it is important.
- Do not mention school meals when discussing alternative income forms, as the two are not permitted to be associated.
- Include the form as a requirement in the yearly registration process.
- Conduct outreach to families. Consider:
 - Linking the form on your district, school, and school nutrition website
 - Posting a link to the form on social media along with why it is important
 - Conducting outreach on back-to-school nights, school events, and PTA meetings
 - Providing information in multiple languages reflective of the students and families in your community

Tip: Frame completing the form as a way for schools to receive important funding for things like books, technology, and school services.

Don't forget to share this resource with a friend or co-worker!

