

Case Study: Syracuse City School District and the Food Bank of Central New York

A Model for School-Based SNAP Enrollment and Family Support

Overview

The partnership between the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) and the Food Bank of Central New York (FBCNY) demonstrates a nationally scalable, replicable model for addressing food insecurity through school-based SNAP outreach. By embedding benefit enrollment processes within the school system, the collaboration effectively connects students and families to critical assistance programs, reducing poverty-related barriers to academic success and overall well-being.

Schools have unique access to families through trusted relationships and established communication networks, making them able to provide support with assistance programs. This approach has streamlined SNAP enrollment while fostering a broader support system, including programs like HEAP (Home Energy Assistance Program) and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Program).

With 85% of SCSD students eligible for free meals, the district embraced its role as a community anchor, transforming schools into hubs for public assistance.

Why School-Based SNAP Outreach and Enrollment Works

Schools provide a unique platform for reaching families in need because of the trust and familiarity they foster within the community. Families engage with school staff regularly through parent-teacher conferences, school events, and daily drop-offs, creating a natural point of contact for sharing information about public assistance programs like SNAP. This frequent interaction helps reduce the stigma often associated with seeking financial help, making schools ideal for proactive outreach. Schools are also considered safe and supportive environments where families can seek assistance without fear of judgment or discrimination. Families are more comfortable receiving information and referrals through school-based programs because these interactions occur in a familiar setting with trusted staff members.

Partnership Development

The partnership between SCSD and the Food Bank of Central New York (FBCNY) evolved from an existing collaboration around food distribution into a more structured initiative focused on SNAP outreach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, FBCNY needed additional distribution points for fresh produce, leading to regular food giveaways at schools. This strengthened the working relationship between the

two organizations and highlighted an opportunity to expand beyond direct food assistance into SNAP enrollment support. Recognizing that many families receiving free or reduced-price meals were likely eligible for SNAP but not enrolled, SCSD and FBCNY formalized a data-driven referral system that leveraged school records and outreach capacity with NOEP coordinators' (Nutrition Outreach and Education Program) enrollment expertise.

The success of this collaboration was built on open communication, mutual support, and a shared commitment to helping families access vital resources. SCSD designated a staff member to maintain regular check-ins with FBCNY, ensuring alignment and accountability. The partnership also benefited from a strong existing trust between schools and families, making schools an ideal space for outreach. By working together, SCSD and FBCNY were able to streamline the referral process, reduce stigma around SNAP enrollment, and develop a scalable model for integrating public assistance programs into the school system.

Core Strategies and Initiatives

Education and Outreach Campaign

The initial strategy in the SCSD-FBCNY partnership focused on raising general awareness about SNAP. This was achieved through a broad education and outreach campaign led by the food bank and the

school nutrition team. They participated in school events, set up information tables, and distributed educational materials about SNAP. In addition, the outreach included a targeted billboard campaign and radio segments to reach the public.

By creating an open and informative environment, the campaign normalized conversations about public assistance and encouraged families to engage with school-based support systems. This foundational step set the stage for more personalized, one-on-one outreach efforts.

Trusted Staff Relationships

The success of the SCSD-FBCNY partnership hinges on the established relationships between school staff and families. Teachers, social workers, and family engagement coordinators are often the first contact points for families experiencing hardship. These staff members have built long-term relationships with families through regular communication and support, making their outreach personal and credible.



Syracuse City Schools Billboard Ad

School staff are seen as allies, not representatives of external agencies, making families more likely to share their needs. The district leveraged these existing relationships by training staff to recognize signs of food insecurity and initiate conversations about SNAP enrollment. This personalized, trust-based approach led to higher engagement and application completion rates.

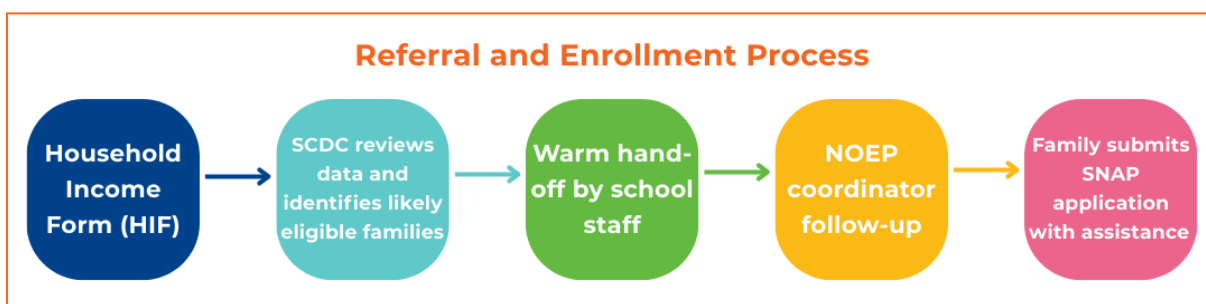
Warm Handoff Referral System:

- School staff used a “warm handoff” referral process to directly connect families to FBCNY’s Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) coordinators. NOEP staff followed up personally, offering support through every step of the SNAP application process.
- Families were never left to navigate complex application systems alone. The personal guidance and regular follow-ups from familiar school staff created a supportive, streamlined process that minimized application errors and increased approval rates.

Utilizing Household Income Forms for Targeted Outreach

A key innovation of the Syracuse model was leveraging the Household Income Form (HIF) process to identify families likely eligible for SNAP. Originally used for school meal eligibility, these forms became a critical tool for targeted outreach.

- **Streamlined Identification:** Families who returned incomplete forms or lacked SNAP case numbers were flagged for follow-up outreach.
- **Proactive Engagement:** The district used this data to identify and prioritize outreach to families most in need, ensuring resources were directed where they could have the most significant impact.
- **Model for Replication:** Many school districts already collect similar forms or Free/Reduced Price Meal applications. Syracuse’s approach demonstrates how this data can be repurposed to improve public benefit access and reduce food insecurity.



Culturally Responsive Engagement

Recognizing that SCSD serves a diverse population, the program prioritized culturally responsive outreach through translation services and multilingual communication. Forms like the Household Income Form (HIF), which are used for determining eligibility for the national school meals program, were translated into five languages, including Arabic, English, Karen, Somali, Spanish, and Swahili, ensuring that language barriers did not prevent families from accessing benefits.

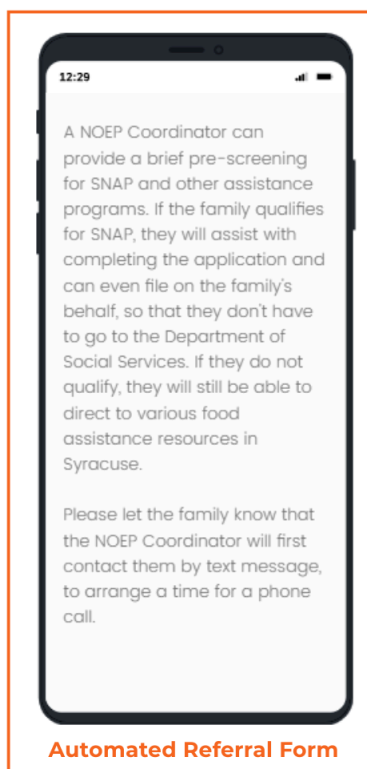
- **Multilingual Staff:** The district recruited multilingual outreach workers as cultural liaisons, enabling personalized communication in families' native languages.
- **Community-Centered Events:** Outreach extended beyond schools to community centers, cultural organizations, and religious institutions. SNAP enrollment tables were set up at community events, including back-to-school nights, parent-teacher conferences, and local festivals.

These culturally competent strategies built trust and expanded the reach of SNAP enrollment efforts.

Direct Referrals

One of the program's core strengths is its streamlined, data-driven referral process that proactively identifies eligible families and connects them with application assistance. The referral process begins when school staff review household income forms and cross-check data with the state's NICEST platform, which tracks SNAP and Medicaid enrollment. Families who appear eligible for SNAP but are not enrolled are contacted by school staff using a standardized call script designed to clearly explain the program, address misconceptions, and offer a direct referral.

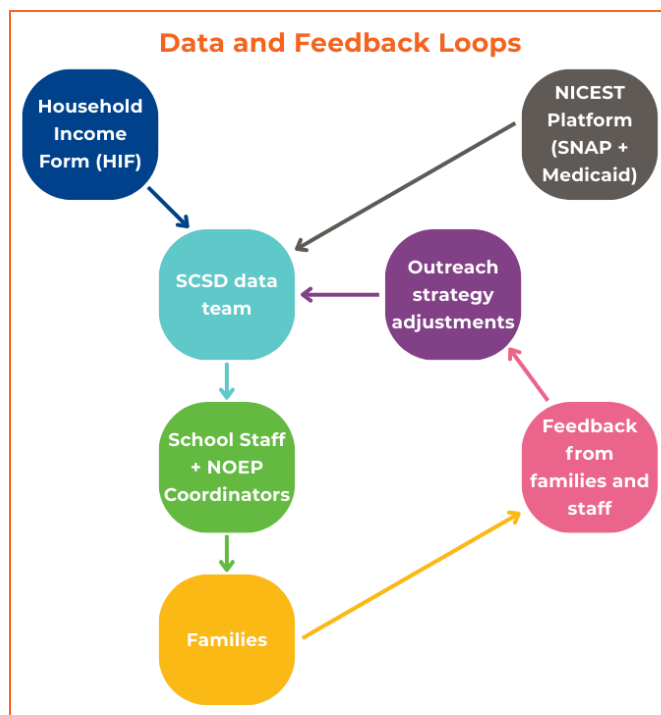
If a family agrees to the referral, their information is immediately shared with NOEP coordinators at the Food Bank of Central New York, who oversee the application support process. Recent improvements have eliminated the need for verbal consent in every case, as families can now pre-authorize data sharing by checking a box on the school's household income form. This change has significantly reduced delays and increased referral efficiency.



- **Proactive Follow-Up:** NOEP coordinators conduct personalized outreach through calls and texts to guide families through application requirements and deadlines.
- **Application Assistance:** Coordinators help families gather essential documents, complete forms, and submit applications, ensuring fewer delays due to missing or incorrect information.
- **Workflow Standardization:** A three-step process ensures efficiency: (1) identify families through data matching, (2) conduct outreach using a consistent, stigma-free call script, and (3) transfer the referral to NOEP staff for direct application support.

By eliminating the burden on families to initiate contact themselves, this approach removes common enrollment barriers such as confusion about eligibility, privacy

concerns, and hesitation about engaging with external agencies. The partnership between SCSD and the food bank has created a seamless bridge between eligible families and critical food assistance programs, ensuring more children and households receive the support they need.



Data-Driven Adjustments and Feedback Loops

Data-driven strategies played a central role in improving the partnership's outreach efforts. SCSD regularly monitored family engagement metrics and used real-time insights to adjust its approach, ensuring that outreach efforts remained targeted and effective. These adjustments were informed by direct data analysis, feedback from families and staff, and collaboration with the Food Bank of Central New York.

Impact Tracking: SCSD monitored the effectiveness of its SNAP outreach by tracking family engagement, referral outcomes, and application progress. They used

multiple data sources to identify eligible families, track referrals, and adjust outreach strategies based on real-time insights from the following sources:

- NICEST Platform (New York State System) identified students already enrolled in SNAP or Medicaid to find those eligible but not participating.
- Household Income Forms (HIFs) used for self-reported income data and referrals after adding a consent checkbox.
- School Census/Data Systems provided student enrollment records and contact information for outreach.
- Referral Tracking Logs were maintained by school staff and NOEP coordinators to track outreach, referrals, and family responses.
- Food Bank of Central New York (NOEP Coordinator Reports) provided preliminary follow-up data on families who proceeded with SNAP applications.

Feedback Integration: Insights from frontline staff and families were used to refine outreach strategies. For example, after recognizing it as a significant barrier, the district eliminated the Social Security number requirement on HIFs.

Iterative Improvements: Regular data reviews helped SCSD identify trends and refine its outreach efforts continuously, making its SNAP enrollment process more effective and efficient.

Expansion Beyond SNAP

While SNAP enrollment was the primary goal, the partnership also expanded its efforts to include other critical social services:

- **Multi-Program Referrals:** Families were referred to additional programs such as WIC, HEAP, and Medicaid as needed. This integrated approach helped address multiple aspects of poverty and food insecurity.
- **Systems Advocacy:** SCSD is advocating for improved state-level data-sharing systems that could enable automatic referrals based on shared eligibility data. This systems-oriented approach aims to streamline benefit enrollment and reduce administrative burdens.

Program Impact: Successes and Lessons

Expanding SNAP Access

- **Success:** Of 1,075 household income applications, 451 (42%) qualified for free/reduced-price (F/R) meals. SCSD also spoke with 226 families, of which 158 requested a SNAP referral, 38 submitted SNAP applications, 19 were approved and enrolled, and 22 were referred to additional services.
- **Lesson Learned:** Personalized, trust-based communication from school staff was instrumental in overcoming stigma and encouraging families to apply. Consistent follow-up increased application completion rates, highlighting the importance of persistent outreach.

Strengthening Community Partnerships

- **Success:** Collaboration between SCSD and FBCNY deepened through regular communication, shared goals, and joint problem-solving, enabling the program to adapt quickly and meet community needs.
- **Lesson Learned:** Each partner brought unique strengths and capacity to the project. School staff leveraged their relationships and the HIF process, while the food bank contributed its SNAP expertise. This complementary approach was essential to the program's success.

Systemic Change and Sustainability

- **Success:** Schools evolved into comprehensive family support hubs, with SNAP outreach integrated into daily school operations. This system created lasting community infrastructure.
- **Lesson Learned:** Institutionalizing outreach through schools ensures program sustainability and scalability, turning temporary support into a long-term community resource. Embedding SNAP outreach within school routines maximized program visibility and normalized seeking assistance.

Building Trust and Reducing Stigma

- **Success:** Families increasingly viewed schools as safe, supportive spaces where they could access assistance without judgment.
- **Lesson Learned:** Culturally responsive outreach and a "warm handoff" referral process helped reduce fears around sharing sensitive financial

information. Familiar school staff played a crucial role in fostering trust and breaking down psychological barriers to enrollment.

Operational Efficiency Through Data Integration

- **Success:** SCSD used data-driven strategies to target outreach efforts, track application progress, and measure outcomes. This improved resource allocation and ensured continuous program improvement.
- **Lesson Learned:** Investing in data infrastructure and analytical capacity is critical to scaling outreach efforts and maximizing community impact. Real-time data enabled the district to identify service gaps, refine its strategies, and increase enrollment rates.

Ongoing Partnership and Future Plans

SCSD and FBCNY have established processes to ensure the partnership remains sustainable and impactful. They added a checkbox to the HIF form, allowing families to opt into automatic referrals to FBCNY for SNAP assistance. This small but significant change institutionalized the referral process and ensured consistent outreach.

The partnership also plans to continue hosting SNAP outreach events, including tabling at school functions and community gatherings. By maintaining regular communication and revisiting their strategies, SCSD and FBCNY ensure that the program remains responsive to community needs while expanding its reach.


Conclusion

The collaboration between the Syracuse City School District and the Food Bank of Central New York is a powerful example of how schools can act as community anchors to address food insecurity and reduce poverty. This partnership succeeded because of its holistic, family-centered approach, combining personalized outreach, cross-department collaboration, and data-driven decision-making.

The partnership effectively reduced the stigma of seeking public assistance by embedding SNAP outreach within the school system. Families received support in familiar, trusted environments, easing concerns about privacy and discrimination. The warm handoff referral process ensured no family was left navigating complex systems alone, offering direct assistance at every step.

Looking ahead, SCSD envisions a future where data systems for programs like SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid are fully integrated, allowing automatic referrals based on family eligibility. This would eliminate redundant applications and reduce administrative burdens on families and school staff. Families could be pre-identified and proactively contacted, streamlining the entire enrollment process.

The lessons learned from this initiative provide a roadmap for other school districts seeking to adopt a similar approach. SCSD's model demonstrates that with the



right partnerships, schools can transcend their traditional educational role to become comprehensive resource hubs supporting the well-being of entire communities.

By investing in cross-sector collaboration, schools can drive long-term systemic change. This partnership proves that addressing food insecurity is about providing immediate relief and building a sustainable, supportive infrastructure that empowers families. As the program grows, its foundational principles—trust, personalized support, and proactive engagement—will remain central, ensuring its impact extends beyond SNAP enrollment to broader community transformation.

This initiative underscores the potential for schools to become catalysts for reducing poverty and improving public health. Through continuous adaptation, data-driven adjustments, and shared community responsibility, the SCSD-FBCNY partnership sets a high standard for how public institutions can create pathways out of poverty while fostering more resilient, healthier communities.